

# **Exploring the Experiences of Ontario Grade 4-6 Teachers with Refugee Students**

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## Abstract

The global refugee crisis has significantly impacted millions worldwide, necessitating the need for effective support systems, especially in education. This research addressed the experiences of grades 4 to 6 teachers in Ontario public schools with refugee students. The study sought to investigate how these teachers support the educational needs of refugee students. It also aimed to identify the strategies teachers use to support the educational needs of refugee students.

Furthermore, the study aimed to uncover support mechanisms and resources currently available to educators, as well as additional resources and mechanisms that teachers believe would better assist them in educating refugee students. Drawing on the Bronfenbrenner bioecological systems theory, the study delved into the interactions shaping the experiences of teachers and refugee students. Using a multiple case study methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants. Data analysis followed the constant comparative method. The research suggested that teachers were dedicated to supporting refugee students despite inadequate training and limited resources. They faced challenges such as language barriers and trauma, which affected students' engagement and comprehension. Teachers employed various strategies to create inclusive classrooms and provide tailored academic and emotional support. However, they felt incapable due to resource constraints and called for more staffing, practical professional development, and enhanced support services to effectively meet refugee students' needs.

*Keywords:* Refugee education, Teachers' experience, Trauma-informed pedagogy, Culturally responsive pedagogy

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This thesis is dedicated to all the educators who strive to make a difference in the lives of refugee students and to the students themselves, whose resilience and courage continue to inspire us all.

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## List of Abbreviations

AEFO: Association des Enseignantes des Enseignants Franco-Ontariens

ARC: Attachment Regulation and Competency

CASEL: Collaboration for Academic Social and Emotional Learning

CRP: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

DI: Differentiated Instruction

ECE: Early Childhood Educators

ELD: English Language Development

ELL: English Language Learners

ESL: English as a Second Language

ETFO: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario

FTE: Full Time Equivalent

HRW: Human Rights Watch

LEAD: Literacy, English, and Academic Development

LTO: Long Term Occasional

MOOCs: Massive Open Online Courses

MLO: Multicultural Liaison Officer

NGO: Non-Governmental Organizations

OECTA: Ontario Catholic Teachers' Association

OTF: Ontario Teacher's Federation

OSSTF: Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation

PD: Professional Development

PISA: Program for International Student Assessment

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

RAP: Resettlement Assistance Program

SEL: Social Emotional Learning

SES: Socio-Economic Status

TIP: Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

UDL: Universal Design of Learning

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

ZPD: Zone of Proximal Development

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

Armed conflicts, natural disasters, and economic hardships have forced millions of people around the world to leave their homes in search for safety and protection (UNHCR, 2023c). Forced displacement of humans is not new. It has been a reoccurring phenomenon throughout human history. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both World War I and World War II caused massive displacements due to conflict, with millions of refugees fleeing war zones and persecution. In more recent times, new and ongoing crises in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar, and other areas around the globe have compelled individuals and their families to seek refuge away from their homes (UNHCR, 2023c).

In 2022, millions of people had to leave their homes due to devastating floods in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Sahel region, as well as enduring severe drought and hardship in Afghanistan, Madagascar, and the Horn of Africa (UNHCR, 2023a). According to the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024b), over 7.5 million people have been forced to escape their homes in Sudan due to deadly conflict. People in Sudan are desperately looking for safety and protection as the violence keeps worsening, both inside the country and in neighbouring nations including Ethiopia, South Sudan, Egypt, Chad, and the Central African Republic.

Despite being one of the most overlooked regions in the world, the Sahel is experiencing one of the fastest-growing displacement crises (UNHCR, 2024b). Millions of people have been forced to escape the region due to intense and indiscriminate violence, both within and across borders. Compounding this worsening humanitarian and protection crises are the effects of COVID-19, food shortages, and climatic change. Also, August 2017 saw more than 750,000

Rohingya leave Myanmar for Bangladesh as a result of brutal military crackdowns in Rakhine State. They came to join earlier waves of Rohingya who left the nation throughout the 1970s and 1990s. Presently, approximately a million Rohingya refugees reside in Bangladesh; most of them are in the Cox's Bazar district, close to the Myanmar border. The local host community's already overburdened facilities and services are under tremendous strain (UNHCR, 2024b).

Afghanistan has endured decades of conflict, economic collapse, drought, and bitter cold winters, leaving millions of people there in a state of suffering and famine (UNHCR, 2024b). Afghanistan is going through its darkest period after enduring numerous calamities. Currently, there are 5.7 million Afghans living in host communities across five bordering nations. In 2024, around 6 million people were internally displaced in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu, and Tanganyika due to ongoing insecurity and an alarming return of violence caused by non-state armed groups in Afghanistan during the previous two years (UNHCR, 2024b). For Syrians living both inside and outside of their nation, life is getting harder after more than 12 years of upheaval. Hopelessness is growing as the crisis persists. For Syrians forced to evacuate, every day is an emergency due to the devastating effects of the earthquakes that have affected Turkey and northern Syria, as well as rising levels of poverty (UNHCR, 2024b).

The Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis stand as one of the most substantial displacement emergencies globally. Unlike other refugee crises rooted in conflict and warfare, the Venezuelan predicament is distinct (UNHCR, 2023c). More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have departed from their homeland due to an unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe stemming from years of economic adversity and political instability. The majority, more than 6.5 million people, are hosted in Latin American and Caribbean countries (UNHCR, 2024b). Hence, the

global refugee situation remains dire, with millions of individuals continuously being displaced due to various crises worldwide.

Refugees are defined as individuals who are forced to leave their homes to escape war, natural disasters, or persecution due to their political, religious, or cultural beliefs (Barrett & Berger, 2021). There are important distinctions between refugees and immigrants. Refugees are often fleeing immediate danger or threats to their lives and well-being. They seek refuge in another country and are often unable or unwilling to return to their home countries due to fear of persecution or violence (Barrett & Berger, 2021). Refugees may receive protection and assistance from international organizations such as the UNHCR. They are often granted asylum or refugee status in the country they seek refuge in, allowing them to stay and rebuild their lives (Barrett & Berger, 2021). Immigrants, on the other hand, are individuals who choose to move to another country for various reasons, such as seeking better economic opportunities, reuniting with family members, or pursuing education (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.). They may leave their home countries voluntarily and often go through legal processes to immigrate to another country. Immigrants may seek permanent residency or citizenship in the country they move to, and they typically intend to settle and establish a new life there. Unlike refugees, immigrants are not necessarily fleeing persecution or immediate danger in their home countries (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.).

According to the UNHCR (2023c), with the ongoing war in Ukraine, the number of displaced people reached 122.6 million worldwide including 36.4 millions refugees. More than 50% of all refugees under the supervision of UNHCR originated from only three countries: Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey both provided refuge to 3.4 million displaced individuals, marking the largest refugee populations globally. Following

closely, Germany ranked third with 2.5 million refugees, trailed by Colombia with just under 2.5 million, encompassing additional individuals requiring international safeguarding. Pakistan accommodated 2.1 million refugees. It is also estimated that 40% of the refugee population were under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2023c).

Canada welcomes thousands of refugees each year. The country is considered an international key player in offering refugees a new place to start their lives (Tweedie et al., 2017). However, the majority of refugees arrive in Canada with limited financial means, often needing to adapt to a new language and culture (Tweedie et al., 2017). Despite these obstacles, the findings indicate that refugees not only benefit from the security Canada offers but also seize the opportunity to forge a brighter future, becoming significant contributors to the nation's economy and cultural richness (UNHCR, 2023d). Refugees have established new homes across Canada, spanning from Whitehorse, Yukon in the north, to St. John's, Newfoundland in the east, and Prince Rupert, British Columbia in the west (UNHCR, n.d.). Recent census figures reveal that newcomers, especially refugees, are more likely to relocate to various regions within the country. Among refugees who arrived between 2011 and 2016, 48% reside in smaller cities and towns, a percentage slightly higher than the 44% observed among all immigrants (UNHCR, 2023d). The country continues to welcome thousands of refugees every year (Government of Canada, 2019).

Ontario takes more refugees than any other province or territory in the country (Ontario Citizenship and Immigration, 2022). In 2014, more than 11,000 refugees settled in Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2022). According to the Government of Ontario (2022), refugees are provided with a range of comprehensive support services to facilitate their settlement in Ontario. This includes access to healthcare professionals for immediate health and mental health needs,

vaccinations, guidance on opening a bank account, budgeting, and understanding the cost of living in Canada. Additionally, refugees receive assistance in applying for government programs and subsidies, including the Interim Federal Health Program and Ontario Health Insurance Plan. Upon arrival, refugees are oriented and informed about their rights and responsibilities, covering aspects such as landlord/tenant relations, family law, and parenting obligations. An individualized settlement plan is developed after assessing the refugees' needs, capacities, and aspirations. This plan includes appropriate referrals to local support services in the neighborhood where the refugee family will reside. To support their initial settlement, refugees are assisted in enrolling their children in childcare, school, or community programs. They can connect with school-based settlement workers, if available, and are encouraged to establish community and social connections. Language training classes, employment assistance, mentoring, training services, occupation-specific language training, bridging programs, and credential assessment are also made available to help refugees understand the labor market and find employment. Furthermore, refugees are guided in finding a family doctor and accessing ongoing health and mental health support (Government of Ontario, 2022).

Across Ontario, there are Newcomer Reception Centers (OCDSB, n.d; TDSB, n.d). They help newly arriving families who speak a first language other than English and who will be residing within the designated service areas. At these centers, staff members meet with parents and students to learn more about the student's past education, answer questions, and help students register for school. The Reception Centre staff also provides educators with resources to understand the various needs of students. They work with multicultural liaison officers (MLO) to help families whose first language is not English. MLOs are proficient in various languages

including but is not limited to: Arabic, Bengali, Mandarin, French, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

After resettling and starting school in Canada, refugee students embark on a demanding journey of integration and adjustment to the Canadian education system. Resettlement in a new country marks the beginning of a challenging journey for refugee students as they navigate the intricacies of integration into the Canadian education system. Ayoub and Zhou (2021) highlight that these students, having endured forced displacement and often residing in refugee camps characterized by precarious living conditions, face major challenges in adapting to the educational norms and practices of their host nation. Disrupted schooling further compounds their difficulties, leaving them with significant learning deficiencies, particularly in numeracy and literacy, both in foreign languages and their native tongue (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021).

Moreover, the lingering effects of trauma from past experiences weigh heavily on many refugee children, requiring a sensitive and nuanced approach to their integration into new schools and communities (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Hence educators should be equipped with the right pedagogical tools to address the unique needs of refugee students (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). However, educators in Canada may find themselves ill-prepared to fulfill this role effectively. The lack of preparation among educators can present significant challenges in facilitating the academic and social integration of refugee students. According to Kanu (2008) and MacNevin (2012), teachers may not possess the necessary training, skills, and knowledge to effectively support refugee students. Kanu's (2008) researched the educational needs and barriers faced by African refugees in Manitoba, while MacNevin's (2012) explored the challenges faced by teachers educating refugee students in Prince Edward Island. In both studies, it was found that most teachers lack the necessary resources and training to implement strategies to support the

educational needs of refugee students. Despite existing literature, there has been minimal policy and practice modification within Canadian schools (Kovinthan, 2016). Consequently, this research aims to delve into the firsthand experiences of elementary teachers in grades 4 to 6 in Ontario educating refugee students. I am especially interested in the experiences of teachers working with this age group because these years are marked by significant physical, academic, and social development, as well as increased engagement with the broader world (Finnan, 2008). Additionally, teachers of this age group can play a vital role in supporting refugee students' academic progress while also helping them navigate their new social environment, fostering inclusion, and providing emotional support. By examining the challenges, strategies, and support mechanisms employed by educators in this context, the research seeks to shed light on the complexities of educating refugee students in Ontario schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Canada is acknowledged for its significant efforts in safeguarding refugees (Tweedie et al., 2017). With thousands of refugees arriving in Canada every year, the number of refugee students is increasing rapidly in Canadian classrooms (Tweedie et al., 2017). High-income nations, such as Canada, typically provide refugees with quick access to education, social, and health services (Fazel et al., 2012). Once resettled and attending school, refugee students face a challenging process of integration and adapting to the new school system (Fazel et al., 2012).

Children with refugee backgrounds may face significant challenges in learning and development (Graham et al., 2016). Due to the exposure to war, forced displacement, living in refugee camps, and disrupted schooling refugee students generally have educational delays in numeracy and literacy in foreign languages as well as their mother tongue (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Many refugee students arrive in host countries with no schooling experience whatsoever

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Hence, they may not be used to the school rules and regulations of the host country. Therefore, understanding the learning problems and educational needs of this group of learners is crucial to support their development and facilitate their inclusion (Graham et al., 2016).

Additionally, refugee youth also suffer from the exposure to trauma requiring careful consideration of their lived experiences while integrating them in schools in host countries (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). These traumatic experiences are due to their pre-immigration, trans-immigration, and post-immigration hardships, placing refugee students at a higher risk of mental health problems and learning delays (Stewart, 2011; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016).

Pre-immigration trauma refers to the complex range of distressing experiences individuals face in their home countries before seeking safety elsewhere (Stewart, 2011). Stewart et al. (2019) and Walker and Zuberi (2020) highlight the various factors contributing to pre-immigration trauma, including exposure to war and violence, residing in refugee camps, and enduring extreme poverty. These circumstances not only cause immediate harm but also leave lasting psychological scars, which can make the journey toward resettlement more challenging for refugees (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021).

The subsequent level of trauma unfolds during the displacement process on their way to the host country, exposing refugees to perilous situations that threaten their lives (Kaplan et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2019). Fazel et al. (2012) highlight how forced displacement can disrupt families, often causing family members to take different paths in search of safety. This separation not only adds to the emotional weight but also makes their journey more complicated, increasing the difficulties they face while seeking refuge. Refugees arrive predominantly from geographically distant and economically struggling countries (Stewart,

2011). Asylum seekers often rely on human traffickers to help them in their long journey to host countries, which may take weeks or months in perilous conditions. Unaccompanied minors sometimes travel alone after losing family members. Some families are forced, along their journey, to take separate ways to safety (Fazel et al., 2012).

Post-immigration trauma emerges as refugees settle in the host country, presenting a distinct set of challenges (Kaplan et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2019 ). Stewart et al. (2019) underscore language difficulties, financial struggles, and cultural shock as key contributors to the trauma experienced in this phase. The struggle to communicate, financial instability, and the profound challenges associated with adapting to a new culture collectively contribute to the post-immigration trauma that refugees grapple with upon reaching their host destination (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020). Refugees also face the stress of proving their asylum claims and going through the long legal process required for this claim (MacNevin, 2012). These lived experiences subject refugee students to higher risks of mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder, seriously affecting their cognitive skills and academic performance (MacNevin, 2012).

Research has shown that the lived experiences of refugee students might have major implications on their classroom performance (Perfect et al., 2016). Traumatic experiences in children are associated with deterioration in school performance since trauma has severe effects on the social, emotional, cognitive, and even brain development of children (Perfect et al., 2016). Childhood trauma also has negative implications on “students’ capacity to practice self-regulation, organization, comprehension, and memorization affecting students academically and socially throughout their school experiences” (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 423). According to McMullen et al. (2020), not all refugee children are traumatized. Many refugee students show

remarkable resilience regardless of their tough lived experiences. Nonetheless, it is indispensable to understand that the lived experiences of most refugee students may impact their development, learning, and integration in new school systems.

The available literature discusses several challenges facing the inclusion of refugee students in Canadian classrooms. These difficulties are related to exposure to traumatic experiences and mental health problems, language barriers, and educational setbacks facing refugees in Canada (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Kanu, 2008; MacNevin, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019; Tweedie et al., 2017). Additionally, a growing amount of literature is focusing on the importance, effectiveness, and sustainability of trauma sensitive practices in classrooms including students exposed to trauma (Berger, 2019; Tweedie et al., 2017). Nevertheless, there has been a scarcity of research focused on investigating the strengths and challenges faced by teachers when educating refugee students (Barrett & Berger, 2021).

This study aims at understanding Ontario grades 4 to 6 teachers' experiences with refugee students. More specifically, it seeks to understand the strategies utilized by teachers to support the educational needs of this group of students. The study also seeks to identify the types of support available for teachers to assist them in performing their job in catering to the educational needs of refugee students. Through an exploration of teachers' experiences, the study also aims to identify areas where additional support and resources may be needed to enhance the educational outcomes and overall well-being of refugee students in the province. Understanding these experiences in detail is crucial for identifying effective strategies and support systems to improve the educational outcomes of refugee students. By capturing the stories of educators, the study offers a platform for teachers to express their unique experiences and share their insights on the complexities they face in the classroom and school environment.

## **Research Questions**

Considering the important role teachers play in supporting the education and development of refugee students, the present study seeks to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the teaching experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools regarding refugee students?
2. How are elementary teachers of grades 4-6 supporting the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools?
3. How do elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee students? What support mechanisms and resources are available to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities? What are the mechanisms and resources they wish were available?

## **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the experiences of grades 4 to 6 teachers in Ontario with refugee students is significant for several reasons. These experiences need to advance the support and training that teachers are receiving. This will subsequently contribute to a successful education journey for refugee students settling in Ontario.

Teachers' voices illuminate the complexities of managing cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity in the classroom, deepening our understanding of how to support the academic needs of refugee students. Moreover, this research provides teachers with opportunities for self-reflection on their teaching methods, fostering ongoing improvement and professional development. Ultimately, this continuous cycle of growth aims to improve education quality for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds.

The results of this study may inform in-service and preservice teachers' training specialists on the types of training required to equip teachers and teacher candidates with the necessary tools to support refugee students. Understanding the unique challenges and needs of refugee students is crucial for educators to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research hold relevance for school policy makers and program developers. The insights gained from the study can play a pivotal role in guiding the formulation of policies that specifically address the educational needs of refugee students. Policymakers can use the study's findings to inform and enhance the design and implementation of educational policies, ensuring they are tailored to accommodate the diverse backgrounds and experiences of refugee students. Program developers can also draw upon these results to create targeted initiatives that provide additional support structures for both teachers and students within the school system.

This research on the experiences of grades 4 to 6 teachers with refugee students also contributes to educational theory in several ways. By examining how teachers support the educational needs of refugee students, the study may enrich theories related to multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, social emotional learning, and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Through understanding teachers' experiences with refugee students, this research may identify effective strategies implemented by the participants for integrating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum. This knowledge enriches theories related to multicultural education. The research provides insights into how teachers navigate cultural differences and language barriers when working with refugee students. These insights may contribute to theories of culturally responsive pedagogy. Additionally, teachers' experiences with refugee students can

inform theories related to social emotional learning. For instance, how do teachers address trauma, build resilience, and promote emotional well-being? Understanding these aspects enriches social emotional learning frameworks. By examining the way teachers support refugee students who may have faced trauma, this research can contribute to trauma-informed pedagogical theories. This includes understanding triggers, implementing coping strategies, and fostering resilience.

Therefore, the study's contributions extend beyond the academic realm by offering practical implications for those directly involved in shaping the educational landscape. By contributing to theory, informing teacher training specialists, policy makers, and program developers, this research aims to facilitate the creation of more inclusive and effective educational environments for refugee students, thereby fostering their academic success and well-being.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by the Bronfenbrenner bioecological system theory of human development. This theory has been used in several studies within the context of refugee education (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2012a; Stewart et al., 2019). The theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding human development within the context of various environmental systems (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). It posits that individuals are influenced by a series of interconnected and nested systems, organized into microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The microsystem encompasses the immediate and direct environments where an individual interacts, such as family, peers, and school. Mesosystems involve the interconnections between different microsystems. Exosystems include external environments that indirectly affect individuals, like a parent's workplace.

Macrosystems involve broader cultural and societal influences (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). Finally, chronosystems consider the influence of time and how developmental processes unfold over the lifespan (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). This holistic approach emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and their surrounding environments, highlighting the complexity of factors that shape human development.

### **Research Approach**

Upon receiving the approval of the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, the researcher embarked on an investigation into the experiences and perceptions of teachers in Ontario, spanning grades 4 to 6, who were educating refugee students. Employing a multiple case methodology, this research leaned heavily on qualitative research methods. The principal approach to data collection involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participating teachers. To ensure the interviews were comprehensive and well-directed, the study's conceptual framework and an extensive review of literature played crucial roles in refining interview protocols and coding categories. The insights gleaned from these interviews formed the bedrock of the study's findings. Each teacher was anonymized with a pseudonym, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Furthermore, participants were given the chance to review the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their experiences and perspectives. They were invited to provide any necessary clarifications or additional information to uphold the fidelity of their accounts. Individual case studies were meticulously crafted for each participant based on the interview data. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify any commonalities or shared experiences among the participants, thereby enriching the overall understanding of the research findings.

## **Dissertation Overview**

In this section of the chapter, an overview of the structure and content of the subsequent chapters of this dissertation is presented. Chapter 2 is divided into three sections context, conceptual framework, and literature review. The chapter begins with describing the context of the study explaining the causes of the global refugee crisis, Canada's historical response to this crisis, and the support refugees receive upon arriving in Canada. This is followed by elaborating on the 1951 refugee convention. Then, the right of education is highlighted followed by an explanation of the Canadian education system focusing on the case of Ontario. The context is then concluded by explaining the difference between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Development (ELD) programs. The second section of chapter two is dedicated to the conceptual framework defining trauma, its types, and traumatic symptoms. This is followed by examining trauma in refugee students and its implications on students' sense of safety and belonging in addition to their ability to learn. The third section of chapter 2 is dedicated for the literature review. This section highlights the difficulties facing the integration of refugee students in Canadian classrooms. Afterward, the literature is reviewed for potential immediate actions and long-term strategies that may support the inclusion of refugee students in mainstream classrooms in Canada. Immediate actions include extensive numeracy and literacy support, appropriate grade level placement, and emotional and mental health support. Potential long-term strategies that could benefit refugee students include Trauma Informed Pedagogy (TIP), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Differentiated Instruction (DI), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These strategies when implemented by teachers can address the different needs of refugee students within their microsystems.

Chapter 3 presents a thorough explanation of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development, along with the rationale for choosing this theory to investigate the experiences of teachers working with refugee children. In-depth discussion of the research design selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and the ethical issues that shaped the entire project are covered in Chapter 4. Constructivism is discussed at the beginning of chapter 4 as the epistemology that informs this study. Subsequently, the multiple case-study methodology is presented as the approach used in this study. The chapter's later sections describe the research methodology, including how the participants were selected via purposeful sampling and the reasoning behind the sample size selection. In addition, the study's ethical considerations, semi-structured interview data gathering techniques, and analysis procedure are described, with a focus on the tactics used to guarantee the study's credibility. Chapter 5 reveals the finding of this study by presenting a detailed case study profile for each participant in light of the different themes and categories identified from the data. Chapter 6 provides a cross-case analysis where the experiences of the participants are compared to identify potential similarities and differences. Chapter 7 provides a discussion around the way the research questions presented in this study are answered in addition to a summary of the findings, suggestions, limitations, and final thoughts on the research.

### **The Researcher**

Every qualitative study takes place within a specific time and location and involves interactions between two or more individuals (Dodgson, 2019). It has frequently been seen as having weak validity evidence (Patnaik, 2013). Many evaluations of qualitative work include complaints such as lack of scientific rigour and methodological precision, difficulties in reproducing the process, and concerns about the generalizability of the findings (Patnaik, 2013).

To help readers understand this context, researchers must explicitly describe each component of the research environment (Dodgson, 2019). This allows the readers to better understand the relevance of the study within their own setting and the potential usefulness of the research findings. In qualitative research, it's widely recognized that the researcher's identity can influence the study's conclusions, meaning complete impartiality is difficult to achieve (Dodgson, 2019). The saying "The researcher is the research instrument" is often used to emphasize this point. Therefore, as readers of qualitative research, we need to understand not only the researcher's stance regarding the study subject but also their background and professional affiliations. Published qualitative studies should adhere to certain standards of quality, including transparency and clarity (Dodgson, 2019).

According to Palaganas et al. (2017), reflexivity involves researchers being aware of their own role in qualitative research. It's both a concept and an ongoing process. As a concept, it's about being conscious of one's actions and involvement in the research (Palaganas et al., 2017). This includes self-awareness and active participation in the research process. It acknowledges that researchers are not separate from the social world they study. Reflexivity as a process involves reflecting on how subjectivity influences the research. It's a continuous examination of researchers' values and an understanding of how their social background and assumptions impact their research practices (Palaganas et al., 2017).

In this research, I delve into the experiences of Ontario elementary teachers (grades 4 to 6) working with refugee students. My approach is characterized by thoughtful reflexivity, which influences every aspect of my involvement. As a former elementary school teacher who has taught refugee students in Lebanon and UAE, my engagement with this topic is deeply personal, rooted in my own classroom experiences. My Lebanese background, coming from a country with

a significant refugee population, adds another layer to my reflexivity. It prompts me to examine how my upbringing and Lebanon's sociopolitical context shape my views. Additionally, my international experiences living in various countries such as the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, and Canada broaden my perspective on education and cultural differences, prompting ongoing reflection on their potential influence.

Moreover, my previous experience of living in a war zone significantly impacts how I approach this research and perceive its subject matter. Having directly encountered conflict and instability, I've gained a deep understanding of trauma, displacement, and resilience. These experiences have sensitized me to the challenges faced by those affected by war and forced migration, fostering empathy and a keen awareness of the complexities of refugee experiences. Reflecting on my own encounters with adversity prompts me to critically evaluate how they may influence my views and interpretations in this study. Thus, my background in war zones adds another layer to my reflexivity, enhancing my ability to empathize with both teachers and refugee students, while also encouraging me to examine my biases and assumptions more rigorously.

This reflexive stance is crucial to the research process, ensuring transparency and ethical rigor. It guides the design of data collection methods, helping me remain aware of my subjectivity and seek diverse perspectives. When analyzing the data, I constantly reflect on how my background may impact the interpretation of teachers' narratives. Reflexivity is a guiding principle in this project, emphasizing self-awareness and critical introspection. By embracing this approach, I navigate potential biases and enrich the study by recognizing the complexity and subjectivity inherent in exploring teachers' experiences with refugee students in the Ontario educational context.

## Chapter Summary

The chapter began by providing an introduction and an overview of the global context of the refugee crisis. Then, the statement of the problem was presented setting the foundation for the research questions, which sought to delve into the experiences of Ontario grade 4 to 6 teachers with refugee students. The significance of the study was underscored, highlighting its potential contributions to educational practices, policy development, and the well-being of refugee students. To frame this investigation, the chapter introduced the Bronfenbrenner bioecological framework as the guiding theoretical framework. This theoretical lens emphasizes the interconnectedness of various ecological systems, providing a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics influencing teachers' experiences within the educational environment. Finally, the chapter delved into the positionality of the researcher. The next chapter will provide an in-depth exploration of the context of the study and the literature highlighting the educational challenges faced by refugee students, in addition to potential strategies that can support their learning.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections. It begins by describing the context of this study followed by the literature review. In the context section, I introduce the causes of the refugee crisis, Canada's response to this global issue, and the support received by refugees arriving in Canada. This is followed by describing the Geneva 1951 Refugee Convention, highlighting the significant rights it provides for refugees, including the right to education. Following this, an overview of the education system in Ontario is presented, emphasizing its commitment to equity and inclusion for all students, regardless of their background. The section then explores the distinctions between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Development (ELD) programs in Ontario schools. The second section of this chapter is the literature review. It begins by defining trauma, its various types, and discusses the implications of trauma on refugee students' sense of safety, belonging, and ability to engage in learning. This section also includes the challenges facing the integration of refugee students in Canadian classrooms, such as psychological difficulties, learning gaps, language barriers, discrimination, and social exclusion, are also addressed. Subsequently, the chapter reviews relevant literature for potential immediate actions and long-term strategies aimed at supporting the inclusion of refugee students in mainstream classrooms in Canada. Immediate actions include providing extensive numeracy and literacy support, ensuring appropriate grade level placement, and offering emotional and mental health support. Potential long-term strategies identified include Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (TIP), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Differentiated Instruction (DI), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This is followed by a literature review on the experiences of teachers with refugee students. The chapter concludes by presenting

the framework for building inclusive and welcoming schools as outlined by Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021).

## **Context**

This section describes the context of this study. It illustrates the root causes of the global refugee crisis, Canada's response to this global issue, and the support received by refugees arriving in Canada. This is followed by describing the Geneva 1951 Refugee Convention, highlighting the significant rights it provides for refugees, including the right to education. Following this, an overview of the education system in Ontario is presented, emphasizing its commitment to equity and inclusion for all students, regardless of their background. The section then explores the distinctions between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Development (ELD) programs in Ontario schools.

### ***Causes of the Global Refugee Crisis***

The global refugee crisis is a complex and pressing humanitarian challenge characterized by the forced displacement of millions of people worldwide. This crisis stems from various factors, including armed conflicts, persecution, human rights violations, environmental disasters, and economic instability (UNHCR, 2023c). As a result, individuals and families are compelled to flee their homes in search of safety and a better life.

The protracted nature of the global refugee crisis underscores its longstanding roots, extending over a span of more than 80 years (UNHCR, 2023c). Throughout most of human history, conflict has been the norm rather than the exception. While there isn't a clear starting point for the crisis, various factors have contributed to its growth. One of the primary contributors to the refugee crisis is war (Bazirake, 2017). Since the late 1940s, violent conflicts in third world countries have resulted in a substantial influx of refugees, with estimates ranging

from 40 to 75 million people (Jenkins & Schmeidl, 1995). The early 1960s played a pivotal role as 24 African nations gained independence from European colonial rule between 1957 and 1962, leading to periods of unrest and violence in these newly independent countries (UNHCR, 2023b). In the early 1990s, the ethnic wars in the Soviet successor states added another 3.6 million refugees to the tally, posing a threat to the stability of Eastern Europe increasing the numbers of asylum seekers in the world. Asylum seekers are people who have left their home country and are seeking asylum in another (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). If they are granted asylum, this gives them a refugee status and the right to stay in the host country (UNHCR, 2024c). Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee, they are known as an asylum seeker. By the end of 1992, the global count included an officially estimated 18.2 million refugees, along with an additional 24 million internally displaced people and an equal number of refugees, at the very least (Jenkins & Schmeidl, 1995). Internally displaced people are individuals who have left their homes as a result of conflict but have not crossed an international border (Orchard, 2016). Additionally, a 40-year conflict has made Afghanistan a major source of refugees, with one in ten refugees originating from there. Following the war in Ukraine, Europe alone recorded 8 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023b).

Conflict is not the sole driver of this crisis, as violations of human rights, famine, hunger, and the effects of climate change have also compelled people to flee their home countries (UNHCR, 2023a). The global discourse has been significantly influenced by the refugee crisis over the years, and the situation seems to be deteriorating. Additionally, the underlying factors contributing to the ongoing refugee crisis worldwide, including warfare, climate change, persecution, political instability, and limited access to essential resources, are often interconnected (Mahmood, 2023). For instance, the Syrian refugee crisis started in March 2011

when the government took violent actions against those who were rioting against it. The situation got worst leading to a civil war. Moreover, the persistent unrest in the region resulted in widespread unemployment and poverty. Consequently, a considerable number of Syrians were compelled to flee their homeland due to the inability to afford basic necessities such as food and water (Mahmood, 2023).

Lately, climate change has emerged as a factor contributing to the refugee crisis (Neef et al., 2023). This makes sense, given that many refugees come from developing nations where agriculture is a key part of the economy. Reports suggest that climate change can have adverse effects on agriculture by causing heat stress in livestock, increasing pest populations, and altering weather patterns (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2020). Moreover, developing countries often lack the resources to address these systemic issues through government assistance (Mahmood, 2023). Consequently, due to the absence of economic stability and financial opportunities, individuals find themselves forced to seek security elsewhere (Neef et al., 2023). This is evident in Somalia, where approximately 2.2 million people have been displaced due to droughts (Mahmood, 2023).

Another significant aspect linked to the refugee crisis indicated by Mahmood (2023) is persecution. This includes religious, social, racial, and political oppression that forces individuals to leave their homeland in search of refuge elsewhere (Jenkins & Schmeidl, 1995). A notable example is the ongoing religious persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Over 900,000 Rohingya Muslims had to escape Myanmar due to deliberate violence conducted by nationalistic militias who oppose their religious beliefs (Mahmood, 2023). Refugee crises caused by persecution often occur in countries where there is significant overall instability. These tensions force many to seek refuge in neighboring countries (Jenkins & Schmeidl, 1995). Unfortunately,

this cycle tends to repeat itself, placing additional burdens on neighboring nations. As a result, local citizens may develop resentment towards refugees, potentially reigniting the process of persecution (Mahmood, 2023).

The refugee crisis in Venezuela stands out as unique, primarily triggered by internal economic collapse (UNHCR, 2023c). Despite having the world's largest oil reserves, the country faces severe economic hardships due to mismanagement of resources (UNHCR, 2023c). Additionally, the country suffers from devaluation of the national currency, leading to hyperinflation, scarcity of food and essential goods, and restricted access to medicines (Kleszczyńska, 2020). Presently, a significant number of Venezuelans are unemployed and struggle to afford only one meal a day (Mahmood, 2023). While many Venezuelans sought refuge in neighboring countries, they continue to experience economic instability due to the ongoing challenges in surrounding nations (Kleszczyńska, 2020).

Hence, the refugee crisis is a complex problem with many different reasons behind it. These reasons are all connected, making it even harder for displaced people and communities everywhere. For instance, events like the Syrian civil war, the effects of climate change on farming, and the mistreatment of religious and ethnic groups show just how intricate the refugee crisis is. Additionally, Venezuela's situation demonstrates how economic breakdown within a country can lead to widespread displacement.

### ***Canada's Historical Response to the Global Refugee Crisis***

Throughout Canada's history, a diverse array of refugees has sought sanctuary within its borders, each wave representing a unique chapter in the country's story. Starting in 1776, when 3,000 Black Loyalists fled the American Revolution, to the late 1700s, when Scots Highlanders sought refuge from the Highland Clearances, and continuing through the 19th and 20th centuries,

refugees from various corners of the globe found solace in Canada (Government of Canada, 2024a). From Polish refugees fleeing Russian oppression in 1830 to the influx of persecuted Jews escaping pogroms in the Pale of Settlement in the late 1800s, Canada has provided refuge to those fleeing tyranny and persecution (Government of Canada, 2024a).

According to the Government of Canada (2024a), the mid-20th century saw significant waves of refugees escaping Communist rule, including Ukrainians, Hungarians, and Czechs. In the 1970s, Canada welcomed thousands of refugees from Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, while also recognizing the rights of refugees through legislative changes and international agreements discussed in the next chapter. The late 20th century and early 21st century witnessed further waves of refugees finding safety and opportunity in Canada, cementing the nation's reputation as a beacon of hope for those in need (Government of Canada, 2024a).

In the 1990s, Canada witnessed an influx of asylum seekers from various regions worldwide, notably Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Government of Canada, 2024a). In 1992, amidst the Yugoslav Civil War's ethnic cleansing, Canada admitted 5,000 Bosnian Muslims seeking refuge. Similarly, in 1999, over 5,000 Kosovars, predominantly Muslim, were airlifted to safety from Kosovo (Government of Canada, 2024a). The year 2002 marked the implementation of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, outlining the core principles of Canada's refugee protection program. In 2004, the Safe Third Country Agreement between Canada and the United States was established to facilitate the processing of refugee claims from third-country nationals. Subsequently, in 2006, Canada resettled over 3,900 Karen refugees from Thailand, followed by the initiation of resettling more than 5,000 Bhutanese refugees over five years starting in 2008 (Government of Canada, 2024a).

By 2010, refugees from over 140 countries found refuge or asylum in Canada (Government of Canada, 2024a). Expanding its efforts, Canada increased its refugee resettlement programs by 20% over three years starting in 2011, alongside significant reforms to the asylum determination system in 2012. Continuing its humanitarian commitments, Canada welcomed close to 6,600 Bhutanese refugees in 2015, in addition to fulfilling a seven-year commitment to resettle over 23,000 Iraqi refugees and beginning the resettlement of 25,000 Syrian refugees (Government of Canada, 2024a).

The Syrian civil conflict, spanning the past 12 years, has significantly increased the number of displaced people. It took several years for Canada to acknowledge the crisis in Syria (Braun, 2016; Dodd et. al, 2021). On September 2, 2015, the picture of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian toddler, whose body washed off a beach in Turkey, took over global media (Braun, 2016). Alan Kurdi became an international figure representing a nation where children have a better chance of survival on a lifeboat in the Mediterranean than in their home countries. The moment Alan Kurdi was photographed, his story swept over the internet. Since that day, a major movement has been launched toward humanitarian aid for every child fleeing the Syrian conflict (Braun, 2016). Back then, federal political parties preparing for the upcoming election promised aid and support for Syrian refugees in their campaigns. When the Liberals won the election in the Fall of 2015, the party kept its promise to facilitate the settlement of 25,000 asylum seekers in Canada by March 2016 (Braun, 2016). The following year, Canada announced historical increases in multiyear resettled refugee admissions targets, as well as new commitments for resettling refugees from Africa and the Middle-East. Additionally in 2018, Canada resettled over 1,300 survivors of Daesh, exhibiting its ongoing dedication to providing refuge and support to those in need (Government of Canada, 2024a). The anticipated number of refugees to be

welcomed to Canada in 2025 represents a decrease compared to previous years. For instance, in 2022, Canada aimed to welcome between **55,000 and** 79,500 refugees and protected persons (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). In 2023, the number of refugees granted asylum was 169,448, which was a 20.5% increase from 2022 (Macrotrends, n.d.). In contrast, the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan sets a target of 23,000 privately sponsored refugees for 2025 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023). This reduction is part of a broader effort to manage application inventories and processing times more effectively (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023)

Since 1980, over one million refugees from different countries have settled throughout Canada “as far north as Whitehorse, Yukon; as far east as St. John’s, Newfoundland; and as far west as Prince Rupert, British Columbia” (UNHCR, n.d., para. 9). These efforts reflect Canada's enduring commitment to humanitarianism and its tradition of providing refuge to those in need (Government of Canada, 2024a).

### ***Receiving and Supporting Refugees in Canada***

Citizenship and Immigration Canada is the federal department that is responsible for receiving and processing refugee applications (Braun, 2016). According to the Government of Canada (2019), the Canadian Refugee System has two programs: 1) Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program, for people who need protection from outside Canada. In this program, individuals seeking refuge in Canada have often departed from their homes, enduring prolonged stays in refugee camps. Upon their arrival in Canada, they are faced with the daunting task of rebuilding their lives. Refugees eligible for resettlement are identified by the UNHCR and private sponsors. Individuals cannot directly apply to Canada for resettlement; rather, the process involves identification and subsequent case processing. The resettlement of refugees in Canada is

not solely the responsibility of governmental agencies. Private sponsors, in collaboration with the UNHCR, play a crucial role in this process. These sponsors, also referred to as Sponsorship Agreement Holders, have formal agreements with the Government of Canada to aid and support refugees. Sponsorship Agreement Holders have the option to sponsor refugees independently or collaborate with community members to facilitate the resettlement process. 2) In-Canada Asylum Program for people making refugee protection claims from within Canada. This asylum program offers refugee protection to individuals in Canada who either experience a legitimate and justified fear of persecution or face the potential of torture or endure cruel and unusual punishment in their countries of origin (Government of Canada, 2019).

The federal government of Canada spends millions of dollars to support Resettlement Assistance Programs (RAP) to help refugees adjust to Canadian life (Braun, 2016). Support includes stipends for the first year in addition to food, clothing, and shelter (Braun, 2016). Upon their arrival in Canada, the refugees are greeted at the airport by RAP resettlement workers who provide immediate assistance with airport procedures, transportation, and temporary accommodation arrangements (Government of Canada. 2024b). They also receive an orientation to their new community and essential services. The RAP provides temporary housing and financial assistance to refugees to meet their basic needs during the initial period of settlement. This includes assistance with finding permanent housing, accessing healthcare, enrolling children in school, and obtaining necessary documentation. Refugees have access to language training programs to improve their English or French language skills, which are essential for successful integration and employment opportunities. Additionally, they receive support and guidance in finding employment, including job search assistance, resume writing, and interview skills training. They also participate in orientation sessions that help them understand Canadian

society, cultural norms, and community resources. These sessions cover topics such as healthcare, education, housing, banking, and transportation, all of which are aiming to empower refugees to navigate their new environment independently. Moreover, resettlement workers provide ongoing support and guidance to refugees as they adjust to life in Canada. This includes assistance with accessing social services, connecting with community organizations, addressing legal and immigration-related issues, and navigating the resettlement process. The RAP also promotes integration and community engagement by encouraging refugees to participate in social and cultural activities, volunteer opportunities, and community events. This helps refugees build social connections, develop a sense of belonging, and contribute to their communities (Government of Canada. 2024b).

### ***The 1951 Refugee Convention***

Following the First World War (1914–1918), millions of individuals left their home countries in quest of safety (UNHCR, 2024d). In response, governments drew up a series of international agreements to grant travel documents to these individuals, who were essentially the first acknowledged refugees of the twentieth century. As millions more were forcibly displaced, their numbers surged substantially during and after the Second World War (1939–1945). As a result, the world community progressively gathered regulations, treaties, and legislation to safeguard fundamental human rights and provide assistance to those forced to escape conflict and persecution (UNHCR, 2024d).

The 1951 Convention, which expanded upon earlier international agreements regarding refugees and remains the most comprehensive set of rules governing refugee rights worldwide, emerged from a process that began during the League of Nations in 1921. Serving as the cornerstone of refugee protection, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its accompanying 1967

Protocol are the primary legal frameworks that underpin the operations of the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2024d).

The 1951 Convention defines a refugee in accordance with international law and specifies the rights, protections, and assistance that a refugee is entitled to. These documents are under the guardianship of UNHCR. The UNHCR also support governments incorporating these documents into their national laws to ensure refugees are protected and can practice their rights. The convention's definition of a refugee is derived from Article 1(A)(2), which outlines specific criteria for determining refugee status. These criteria include a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. This definition has been widely accepted and forms the basis for refugee protection globally. The convention's principle of non-discrimination (Article 3) prohibits discrimination against refugees on the basis of race, religion, or country of origin. This principle ensures that all individuals seeking asylum are treated fairly and without prejudice. The convention also establishes the rights of refugees, including the right to seek asylum (Article 14), protection against expulsion or forcible return (non-refoulement principle - Article 33), access to courts (Article 16), and access to education (Article 22), work (Article 17), and social security (Article 24). Host countries are required to adhere to the provisions of the convention and provide protection to refugees within their territory. This includes ensuring that refugees are not returned to situations where their lives or freedom would be at risk (non-refoulement principle) and providing access to legal assistance and documentation necessary for their protection (Articles 22-24) (UNHCR, 2024d).

Although the convention does not provide specific procedures for refugee status determination, it encourages states to establish fair and efficient procedures for assessing asylum

claims. It recommends that states consider the individual circumstances of each case and provide access to legal representation and appeal mechanisms (Article 16). While the convention does not explicitly require burden-sharing among states, it encourages international cooperation to address refugee crises and provide assistance to refugees. This cooperation can take the form of financial assistance, resettlement programs, or other forms of support to help states manage refugee populations effectively (UNHCR, 2024d).

The convention recognizes the principle of non-arbitrary revocation of refugee status (Article 1(C)(5)) and prohibits the forced return of refugees to situations where their lives or freedom would be at risk (non-refoulement principle - Article 33). This ensures that refugees continue to receive protection until they can safely return to their country of origin or find a durable solution elsewhere. Moreover, the convention allows for the establishment of regional agreements (Article 35) that complement its provisions and enhance the protection of refugees. Regional agreements, such as the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, expand the geographic scope of refugee protection and facilitate cooperation among states in addressing refugee issues (UNHCR, 2024d). These details illustrate the framework established by the Refugee Convention of 1951 to protect the rights and well-being of refugees and ensure their effective integration into society.

Canada signed the convention relating to the Status of Refugees on 4 June 1969, 18 years following its adoption by the United Nations. Ever since, Canada has earned a distinguished reputation as a global frontrunner in safeguarding refugees (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2009). The UNHCR offices opened in Canada in 1976 and works in four areas including protection, solutions, communication, and fundraising (UNHCR, 2024a). The agency upholds the highest standards of protection for refugees and asylum seekers by maintaining Canadian

asylum practices and regulations. Additionally, they provide long-lasting solutions that allow refugees to live peacefully and with dignity. Resettlement, integration, and voluntary repatriation are a few examples. The office also provides information and education to Canadians regarding the plight of refugees and other displaced people, as well as the UNHCR's activities in these areas. They also exhort the Canadian people and government to support UNHCR initiatives across the globe financially (UNHCR, 2024a).

### ***The Right for Education***

In recent years, there has been a significant surge in the global refugee population, with children comprising around half of this demographic (UNHCR, 2023a). The challenges faced by refugee children are multifaceted, often encompassing traumatic backgrounds, interrupted schooling, and the daunting task of assimilating into unfamiliar cultural environments (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Global organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2015) and UNHCR (2011) which focus on human rights and refugee rights, emphasize the significance of education for refugee youth and its capacity to change the lives of those who have the opportunity to utilize it (Thomas, 2016). UNHCR (2011) asserts that “education is a right through which other rights are realized” (p. 18). Additionally, a report published by UNHCR (2018) reminds us that:

...the power of school runs deeper than academic qualifications. Education is a way to help young people heal, but it is also the way to revive entire countries. Allowed to learn, grow, and flourish, children will grow up to contribute both to the societies that host them and to their homelands when peace allows them to return. That is why education is one of the most important ways to solve the world’s crises. (UNHCR, 2018, p. 9).

Since education possesses rehabilitative and restorative qualities, it can result in positive outcomes for individuals, families, communities, and societies alike (Thomas, 2016). UNHCR

further emphasizes that education is a human right that should be pursued in all circumstances, including times of crisis for refugees (UNHCR 2011). Hence, education should not be a luxury that is postponed during times of exile but rather a vital aspect of life for children of refugees (Thomas, 2016). Additionally, refugee children's capacity to contribute to their home and host societies is determined by the quality of education they receive while living in exile (UNHCR, 2011). Hence, education is not only a fundamental human right but also a powerful tool for empowering individuals and fostering social inclusion (Thomas, 2016). For refugees, who often flee conflict, persecution, and instability, access to education may even be more crucial. Beyond providing basic literacy and numeracy skills, education plays a pivotal role in promoting refugees' well-being, resilience, and integration into host communities (Thomas, 2016).

According to UNHCR (2023e), to improve education access and learning outcomes for children and youth affected by crises, civil society and partners are essential in supporting host states. Civil society and partners refer to Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and other entities outside of the government sector that work alongside governments and international organizations to address various issues. UNHCR (2023e), emphasizes that these civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for inclusive education policies, monitoring their implementation, and providing support and resources to ensure that children and youth affected by crises have access to quality education. They collaborate with governments, host states, and international agencies like UNHCR to promote education for all, including refugees, and to remove barriers to education (UNHCR, 2023e).

These civil society organizations should advocate for inclusive national education plans that honor the diverse needs of all young individuals, free from discrimination (UNHCR, 2023e).

Additionally, they can help states monitor and ensure that students gain essential literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills crucial for academic success. Furthermore, these organizations assist in implementing education programs that provide young people with essential life and work skills, including customized training for refugees. Meanwhile, host countries are encouraged to remove existing social, economic, and political barriers to primary and secondary education for all children, including refugees, while adhering to commitments and international laws that guarantee refugees equal access to education as host country nationals (UNHCR, 2023e). Therefore, governments and civil society should provide inclusive, fair, high-quality education and to encourage possibilities for lifelong learning for everyone including refugee students (Thomas, 2016).

### ***Canada's Education System: Case of Ontario***

The Canadian education system is highly regarded globally for its inclusivity, quality, and commitment to providing accessible education to all students (Bunch, 2015). It is a publicly funded system, with each of the 10 provinces and 3 territories responsible for their own education policies and curriculum, resulting in some variation across the country. Canada's provincial and territorial governments are responsible for education (Bunch, 2015). They follow government standards to ensure high quality public education across the country. The structure of the Canadian education system typically includes preschool, elementary (or primary) schools, followed by secondary (or high) schools, and post-secondary education institutions such as colleges and universities. Education is compulsory up to a certain age, which varies by province (Edu Canada, 2023). Over the past few years, the Canadian education system has been recognized as one of the best performing education systems and has proven to be more equitable

than the educational systems of many other countries in terms of students' diversity and students' educational outcomes (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018).

As early as 2024, the population of Ontario is approximately 15,996,989 (World Population Review, 2024.) This makes Ontario the most populous province in Canada. As of the 2021–2022 academic year, approximately 2.03 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in Ontario (Statista, 2025). During the 2021-2022 academic year, there were a total of 127,803.77 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers. This figure comprised 85,574.36 elementary teachers and 42,229.41 secondary teachers. These numbers encompassed long-term occasional (LTO) teachers but did not include teachers on leave or those working in Education and Community Partnership Program facilities. In the same period, there were 7,579.82 FTE administrators, including principals and vice-principals. Among them, 5,574.31 were in elementary education, while 2,005.51 were in secondary education. Additionally, during the 2021-2022 academic year, there were 9,599.48 FTE early childhood educators (ECEs), which also included LTO ECEs (Government of Ontario, 2023).

In Ontario, there are four publicly funded school systems French public, French Catholic, English public, and English Catholic. There are 72 school boards in Ontario, including 31 English public boards, 29 English Catholic boards, 4 French public boards, and 8 French Catholic boards. Generally, all public teachers must be members of the Ontario Teacher's Federation (OTF) and one of four affiliate organizations: the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), and The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). These organizations advocate for teachers' interests in shaping educational policies. They also facilitate discussions and agreements regarding teachers'

working conditions and employment terms among teachers, the province's 72 school boards, and the government (Osmond-Johnson & Campbell, 2018). In the context on this study, the information provided concerns the English system since this is where the data collection took place.

In term of performance, Ontario has gained international recognition for its exceptional performance in education, largely attributed to its outstanding results on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Osmond-Johnson & Campbell, 2018). The most recent PISA results for 2022 show that Ontario students performed exceptionally well in all three assessed areas: reading, math, and science (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). In reading, Ontario ranked second overall internationally and nationally. In science, Ontario's results were among the top 10 internationally and second in Canada. Meanwhile in math, Ontario's results were within the top 15 internationally and second nationally (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). These results reflect the strong educational standards and investments in foundational learning in Ontario.

Ontario is also committed to providing equity and inclusive education “to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 6). Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) indicates a commitment to ensuring that all students have fair and equitable opportunities to succeed, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities. It means addressing systemic barriers and biases that may prevent certain groups from fully participating in and benefiting from the education system. Inclusive education encompasses creating learning environments where diversity is celebrated and respected, and where all students feel valued and

supported (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). This includes accommodating diverse learning needs, providing resources and support services as needed, and fostering a culture of respect and belonging. In Ontario, equity and inclusive education are not only principles but also policy mandates that guide curriculum development, teaching practices, and school policies to create an environment that promotes the well-being and success of every student (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Within the refugee context, Ontario highlights the importance of facilitating the learning of refugee students. The *Capacity Building Series* offers resources aimed at improving leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. Relevant to refugee education, the document *Supporting Students with Refugee Backgrounds – A Framework for Responsive Practice* provides strategies for educators to address the unique challenges faced by refugee students, such as trauma, language barriers, and disrupted schooling. The guide offers strategies for creating inclusive, welcoming classroom environments, promoting social and emotional well-being, and ensuring academic success. It also includes suggestions for building relationships with refugee students and their families, as well as fostering cultural sensitivity (Ontario Educators, 2016).

Therefore, Ontario's education system prioritizes inclusivity, quality, and accessibility. Its decentralized governance structure is designed to provide fair opportunities for various student groups. Furthermore, Ontario is dedicated to promoting equity and inclusive education to create an environment where every student, regardless of their background, can succeed.

### ***Difference between ESL and ELD programs in Ontario***

Refugee students arriving in Ontario may be placed in ESL or ELD programs depending on their previous educational experiences. This placement is part of a broader approach to

inclusivity that acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of students. The rich diversity found within Ontario classrooms serves as a catalyst for the formulation of inclusive policies tailored to meet the needs of all learners. Recognizing the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students, the Ontario education system has developed policies and procedures to support ESL and ELD.

The English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) is a policy document created by Ontario Ministry of Education to respond to various language needs of different students. The policy aims to foster positive outcomes for English language learners by ensuring students learn the language of instruction in English-language schools while progressing towards meeting curriculum standards. Implementing this policy is expected to enhance academic performance among English language learners. Furthermore, it aims at facilitating successful results for these learners upon graduation, aiding their transition to further education or other endeavors. This language acquisition policy is intended to engage English language learners in learning experiences that enable them to develop their abilities, fulfill their aspirations, and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for personal success and meaningful participation in Ontario's society (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Newcomers to Canada come from diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. They may arrive at any point between preschool and Grade 12, either at the start or during the school year. Depending on their age and levels of readiness, they may need varying levels of support to succeed in the classroom. These newcomers can include children who immigrated with their families through a planned process, often having received formal education in their home countries and some exposure to English as a foreign language. However, some may have had limited access to schooling. Additionally, there are children who arrived in Canada due to

crises such as war, facing urgent situations and often traumatic experiences. These children may have been separated from family members and may not have had access to formal education in their home country or while in transit for several years (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Upon arrival in Canada, newcomer students' English proficiency is evaluated by Reception Centers in Ontario. School boards will assign staff members to assess the English language proficiency of all English language learners. This assessment procedure will encompass several components, including a structured interview to evaluate oral communication skills such as listening and speaking, an assessment of reading comprehension, an evaluation of student writing capabilities, and an examination of mathematical knowledge and skills. Depending on their previous educational background and English language levels, newcomers are either placed in standard classrooms or provided with assistance through ESL or ELD classes (OCDSB, n.d.; TDSB, n.d.).

The English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) indicates that ESL programs are designed to support students who speak a language other than English as their first language, or who speak a variety of English that's significantly different from what's used in Ontario's anglophone schools. These students have had chances to develop literacy skills appropriate for their age in their native language. On the other hand, ELD programs are designed for students whose first language is not English or who speak a form of English that is notably different from what's taught in Ontario's anglophone schools. These students typically come from countries where educational opportunities have been scarce, leading to limited language and literacy skills development. Their schooling in their home countries has been irregular, interrupted, or even nonexistent during the years when they would

have been in school. This results in significant educational gaps when they start attending schools in Ontario.

## **Literature Review**

This section defines trauma, its various types, and discusses the implications of trauma on refugee students' sense of safety, belonging, and ability to engage in learning. It also reviews the available literature on the challenges facing the integration of refugee students in Canadian classrooms. Then, it highlights favorable educational practices that can potentially support the educational needs of refugee students. This is followed by explaining several interventions and strategies that can be implemented by educators to support these students. Finally, the literature is reviewed on the experiences of teachers with refugee students.

### ***Trauma, Types of Trauma, and Traumatic Symptoms***

Humans are social creatures continuously seeking to belong and connect (Berscheid, 2003). According to Imad (2022), the human brain is constantly scanning the surrounding environment to predict possible safety or threats. When unpredictable changes occur in the external environment, the brain tries to find a strategy to protect the individual's well-being. If it fails, it becomes stressed. The author elaborates that for human beings to learn and thrive, they need to feel safe, connected, and supported. When individuals are not sure if they belong or if their existence matters, the uncertainty makes them feel threatened, exerting more stress on the brain. Here, we are not referring to regular stress, but to toxic stress. Toxic stress is defined as a powerful and extended activation of the stress response system in the body in the absence of support and protection (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). Toxic stress can cause energy depletion and has negative physiological effects on the entire body (Imad, 2022).

Trauma is defined by Record-Lemon and Buchanan (2017) as “experiences and reactions to experiences that overwhelm an individual’s capacity to cope” (p. 278). Imad (2022) explains that when the nervous system encounters a stressful situation, it spends energy trying to resolve it. The longer the stressful situation persists, the more energy is wasted, until the recovery of this energy becomes extremely difficult. The brain will focus on the stress response to survive and establish the well-being of the individual. Hence, it will prioritize safety and survival over other actions such as learning and problem-solving. The effects of trauma can render the victim helpless (Sitler, 2009). Trauma is mostly marked by violence. Sitler (2009) explains that violence comprises ongoing experiences that cause individuals to lose control and become defenceless and vulnerable. Violence is not always physical. Living in poverty, displacement, and losing parents and family members are considered instances of violence that can cause traumatic stress (Sitler, 2009).

Historically, trauma was classified into two types: Type I and Type II (Solomon & Heide, 1999). Type I trauma, also known as acute trauma, is caused by a single traumatic event, for example a car accident, an assault, a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, rape, or witnessing a murder (De Deckker, 2018). Type I trauma survivors who were 3 years old or older at the time of the experience can hold on to the full memory of the event. These children suffer while trying to comprehend the traumatic event. They may struggle with hallucinations or time distortions (De Deckker, 2018). Type II trauma is also known as chronic or complex trauma (Kira, 2001; Tweedie et al., 2017). This type results from repetitive exposure to the traumatic event, which may occur for a long period of time, causing recovery to become more difficult (Tweedie et al., 2017). Individuals exposed to Type II trauma retain the memory of their experience. Children may “use massive denial, repression, dissociation, identification with the perpetrator, and

aggression against themselves and others as coping mechanisms. These children are often diagnosed as having Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, depression, or a dissociative disorder” (Solomon & Heide, 1999, p. 203). Solomon and Heide (1999) suggested dividing Type II trauma into two separate groups: Type II and Type III. This classification was proposed based on clinical experiences indicating that individuals suffering from Type III trauma suffer from severe psychological difficulties that need specific treatment strategies. The impact of Type III trauma is more drastic. It results from multiple traumatic events that can go on for years, where the abusive event is usually frequent and unpredictable. Children victims may have been threatened with death, torture, or the death of their loved ones (Kira, 2001; Solomon & Heide, 1999).

The psychological and physiological reactions to a traumatic event are called traumatic stress symptoms (Perfect et al., 2016). Such symptoms include intrusive thoughts, irritability, arousal, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating. Other traumatic stress symptoms include dysregulation, aggression against self and others, dissociative symptoms, and agitation. Additionally, extreme stress symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, avoiding traumatic triggers, emotional numbing, hyperarousal such as insomnia, and behavioral problems. When a persistent combination of these symptoms is experienced, it may cause impaired functioning and a formal diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Perfect et al., 2016).

Sitler (2009) points out that trauma can present itself in the classroom. The author explains that students suffering from trauma do not show any long-term interests, are unable to concentrate, and lash out physically and verbally. Students with traumatic experiences are often absent, spacing out in class, and living in a constant state of confusion. According to Dods (2015), trauma elicits intense emotions such as fear, horror, terror, and helplessness, potentially

leading to post-traumatic stress. This condition manifests through intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviors, hyperarousal, and changes in mood and cognition. Some students may outwardly display trauma-related distress through observable behaviors, while others may exhibit more subtle signs. Without disclosure, it's unlikely that trauma would be recognized as the underlying cause of emotional and behavioral challenges in the classroom or the reason for subtle shifts in behavior, appearance, and demeanor. Since clinical signs are often not easily identifiable, changes in behavior, personality, attention, memory, declining grades, peer relationships, compliance, and attendance may be incorrectly attributed to factors assumed to be within the student's control or considered as normal teenage angst (Dods, 2015). Does this mean that every student exhibiting one or more of these symptoms is traumatized? Not necessarily, but some of them may have experienced trauma. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to adopt Trauma Informed Pedagogies to respond to the needs of students experiencing trauma (Sitler, 2009).

### ***Trauma in Refugee Students***

Although trauma is very common among people from refugee backgrounds, chronic trauma is a more common experience than acute trauma (Kira, 2001). Unfortunately, many people who become refugees will have experienced ongoing and multiple traumas. Kira (2001) indicates that refugees generally suffer from Type III trauma due to exposure to multiple traumatic events for extended time, jeopardizing their mental health. Refugee children often experience trauma due to their pre-immigration and post-immigration experiences (Stewart et al., 2019). These experiences comprise living in war zones and/or refugee camps, destruction of homes and schools, difficulties associated with forced displacement in dangerous conditions, separation from family and friends, and the hardships of adjusting to the culture and language of the host country (Kaplan et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2019). McMullen et al.

(2020) assert that not all refugees affected by war are traumatized. Many refugee students are resilient despite their difficult experiences. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that the lived experiences of most refugee students may impact their sense of safety and belonging in addition to their ability to engage in learning. In the following section, I examine the effect of trauma on refugee students' sense of security and belonging to their school community and their ability to learn.

**Sense of Belonging and Safety.** A sense of belonging is defined as the student's level of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief in their school community (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Most of the available literature on trauma in refugee students and their sense of belonging to their school communities examines how levels of connection and commitment to the school community affect students' academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes. The literature suggests that developing a sense of belonging to the school community improves students' self-esteem, motivation, academic achievement, and reduces depression, social-emotional distress, and social rejection. (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Picton & Banfield, 2020). Students' sense of belonging also relates to their feelings of being accepted, respected, included, and supported by everyone in their school (Bozdağ & Bilge, 2022). However, very little research is done to examine whether past traumatic experiences can impact refugee students' sense of belonging to their new schools (Picton & Banfield, 2020). Refugee students suffering from trauma and lacking community connections may have limited access to a social network to support building their sense of belonging (Picton & Banfield, 2020; Stewart, 2011). Although adolescents generally experience difficulties in developing a sense of belonging to their schools, refugee students are faced with more salient barriers to belonging; such as cultural and language

differences and racial discrimination (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Consequently, refugee students may have difficulties developing a sense of belonging to their new school community.

The available research suggests an inverse relationship between depression and PTSD, and refugees students' sense of belonging. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) conducted a quantitative study to examine the relationship between exposure to adversities, school belonging, self-efficacy, and mental health in Somali refugee adolescents who resettled in the USA. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Williams & French, 2011). The participants were 76 Somali refugee adolescents aged 12–19, resettled in greater Boston, Massachusetts, or Portland, Maine. The authors reported that higher levels of exposure to war, violence, and displacement hardships are accompanied by increased levels of depression and PTSD symptoms, along with lower self-efficacy. Additionally, a greater sense of school belonging was associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy, regardless of the level of past exposure to adversities. Allen and Kern (2017) confirmed these findings and explained that a low sense of belonging put adolescents at higher risk of mental health issues. Consistent with this, students with mental health issues, such as refugee children, struggled to establish belonging and acceptance at school.

On the other hand, McBain (2018) indicates that children who experience trauma during war, forced displacement, and resettlement may become distrustful or fearful of authority, including teachers. Refugee students' past experiences may jeopardize their sense of safety around teachers, impeding their inclusion and learning progress. Additionally, children who have witnessed their parents being harmed may feel swamped by the parent's terror and incapacity to defend themselves and thus their children (Reed et al., 2012). Some refugee children may lose their parents at a very young age without the availability of an alternative caregiver, causing

them to lack a sense of safety. Without a sense of safety, children may have low levels of curiosity, which can cause major learning difficulties (Kaplan et al., 2016).

**Ability to Learn.** According to McInerney and McKlindon (2014), “physiological changes to children’s brains, as well as emotional and behavioral responses to trauma, have the potential to interfere with children’s learning, school engagement, and academic success” (p. 3). The brain has essential neural networks that intervene in stress responses (Perry, 2016). Traumatic experiences prevent these networks from working properly, creating learning, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (Perry, 2016). Research indicates that traumatic experiences, abuse, and neglect of children at an early age may cause impairment in cognitive and academic functioning (Kaplan et al., 2016; McInerney & McKlindon, 2014; Nadeem et al., 2014). Kaplan et al. (2016) propose that the duration of the experience, in addition to the age at which the event occurred, affects the cognitive functioning of young children. The authors suggest that in the absence of a caring adult, children can become distressed, anxious, and angry. Such experiences can trigger dissociation of emotions and cognition, in addition to a poor sense of self-control. These powerful emotions can also cause overstimulation and physiological arousal. Without the ability to regulate their emotions, children are unable to cognitively process incoming information (Nadeem et al., 2014). Kaplan et al. (2016) indicate that early experiences of childhood trauma are associated with “developmental impairment of the limbic region of the brain, the prefrontal and parietal lobes, the corpus callosum, and the brain stem” (p. 86). Such dysfunctions may cause difficulties in “learning, verbal declarative memory, visual memory, language acquisition, and visuospatial functioning” (Kaplan et al., 2016, p. 86). Burke et al. (2011) conducted a research study on a sample of high-risk children at a pediatric clinic in California. Children who were exposed to four or more adverse experiences were 32 times more

likely to have learning and behavioral problems than those with no adverse experiences. Another study performed by Delaney-Black et al. (2002) indicated that six- and seven-year-old children who experienced violence and traumatic stress scored significantly lower on IQ and reading ability tests.

In conclusion, recognizing and understanding the impact of trauma on refugee children should be the cornerstone of any possible intervention and holistic support. McMullen et al. (2020) describe the experiences of refugee children as sitting on a “wobbly chair of constant change, instability, and uncertainty” (p. 125). Therefore, educators should adopt the right pedagogical tools to support refugee students develop stronger links with their school community and establish safety and trust to facilitate their learning.

### ***Challenges Facing the Integration of Refugee Students in Canadian Schools***

The integration of refugee students in Canadian schools is a necessity accompanied with major difficulties. The literature indicates the presence of multiple challenges facing this inclusion. These challenges include psychological difficulties, educational gaps, language barriers, discrimination and social exclusion, behaviour challenges, and insufficient academic support.

**Psychological Difficulties.** Refugee students suffer from psychological difficulties mainly due to exposure to trauma (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Refugees students generally have higher levels of mental health difficulties than their non refugee peers (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020; Walker & Zuberi, 2020). As discussed earlier, refugees experience three levels of trauma: pre-immigration, trans-immigration, and post-immigration trauma (Fazel et al., 2012). However, refugee families do not always receive the psychological treatment they need. These lived experiences remain vivid in the minds of refugee students, exposing them to higher risks of

mental health disorders and seriously impacting their cognitive skills and academic performance (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020; MacNevin, 2012). Therefore, refugee students might encounter psychosocial isolation and mental health challenges linked to the traumatic events they've witnessed (Wofford & Tibi, 2018).

Kanu (2008) conducted a qualitative research study using interviews, focus groups, and observations to understand the needs of African refugee students in Manitoba. The author explained that refugee students and their families do not receive the psychological treatment they need. Students' traumatic experiences remained vivid in their minds, interfering with their learning potential. Children ended up trying to adapt to their trauma, in addition to the impact of their parents' trauma, as they navigated the new education system. Feelings of grief and loss may also hamper refugee children's ability to excel in school (Levi, 2019). Kanu (2008) also found that refugee students have a "fear and distrust of authority figures like teachers" (p. 924). This apprehension might stem from various life experiences wherein adults or authority figures were involved in or linked to instances of violence or trauma. Participants in Kanu's (2008) study also reported being scared to speak up in class due to having an accent different than their peers. Consequently, restoring a feeling of safety is crucial for refugee children. This restoration involves not only physical safety but also emotional and psychological well-being, as many refugee children have experienced traumatic events in their pasts.

**Educational Gaps.** Due to forced displacement, refugee students may not have had the chance to attend regular school. Many may have had no schooling opportunities whatsoever. Consequently, these students usually have significant educational gaps (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Children with disrupted formal schooling suffer academically, emotionally, and psychosocially (Wofford & Tibi, 2018). In areas of conflict, children who were learning to

read prior to the start of the conflict might not have attended school or had access to resources for up to five years (Wofford & Tibi, 2018). Additionally, it's possible that children who were born during the conflict or who were very young when it started never attended school or received reading instruction (Wofford & Tibi, 2018). When starting school in a host country, refugee students struggle to adjust to a new formal school system (Stewart et al., 2019). They face challenges in adapting to new routines, procedures, and school expectations. A qualitative study conducted by Ayoub and Zhou (2021) investigated school experiences as perceived by Somali refugees in Ontario schools using ethnographic methods. Another study performed by Stewart et al. (2019) used semi-structured interviews to understand the integration and settlement of Syrian children and youth in Winnipeg and Calgary. The findings of both studies suggested that refugee students often arrive in host countries with major learning gaps in literacy and numeracy in English as well as their mother tongue due to years of disrupted education and living in refugee camps. Additionally, Kanu (2008) reported that “fifty percent of refugee youth aged 15 to 18 years arriving in Canada are placed in inappropriate grades” (p. 925). Grade-level placement upon arrival is usually decided based on the student’s age and English language assessment tests rather than on the student’s academic abilities (Kanu, 2008). Refugee students may not prosper academically when placed in grade levels that are either too easy or too difficult. Consequently, there is a pressing need for tailored support and flexible educational approaches to address the diverse needs of refugee students and ensure their successful integration into new school environments.

**Language Barriers.** Language is a fundamental barrier to the inclusion of refugee students in host countries (Stewart et al., 2019). Due to language barriers, refugees face enormous difficulties when navigating the new school system including curriculum, school

policies, and regulations (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). Low competency in the language of the host country not only influences the academic success of refugees but also their daily routines. One participant in the study by Stewart et. al (2019) explained that a simple task such as riding the bus can become a major challenge for refugee students. Another participant stated that “if he knew English, then all other challenges and problems would disappear” (p. 63). Every participant in the study by Ayoub and Zhou (2021) expressed challenges in forming friendships within Canadian schools due to their limited English proficiency and a lack of necessary social skills and self-assurance. Most of the participants were only able to form few friendships with students who spoke their language.

According to Walker and Zuberi (2020), language support programs and resources are currently insufficient and do not meet the growing demand due to the increase in the number of refugee students in Canadian public schools. Even when ESL programs are available for refugee students in Canada, Ayoub and Zhou (2021) reported that some students were transferred early from ESL programs to regular language classes. Low levels of language proficiency were also accompanied by feelings of frustration, low self-efficacy, and social isolation (Stewart et al., 2019). Therefore, refugee students could face difficulties in communicating with peers or assimilating into unfamiliar classroom environments (Wofford & Tibi, 2018).

**Discrimination and Social Exclusion.** The challenges faced by young individuals from refugee backgrounds extend beyond just language and academic barriers (MacNevin, 2012). They include difficulties in adapting to new cultures, feeling isolated due to unfavorable conditions in school or the community, and schools not recognizing their previous knowledge and educational accomplishments (MacNevin, 2012). Newcomers generally arrive in Canada with hopes and dreams of living in a country that appreciates diversity and encourages

multiculturalism, freedom of speech, and equity (Walker & Zuberi, 2020). Richmond (2001) indicates that Canada's shift toward multiculturalism and diversity appreciation is only superficial in nature. The author elaborates that visible minorities are more likely to experience racism, stigmatization, violence, and discrimination.

Studies conducted by Ayoub and Zhou (2021) and Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021) suggested that refugee students frequently experience racism in schools in the form of name-calling, shaming, bullying, social exclusion, and even violence. Racism is defined by Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021) as "a multifaceted social phenomenon that involves attitudes, actions, processes and unequal power relations based on the belief in the superiority of one race over another" (p. 63). Racism often leads to prejudice against a group of individuals based on their race or ethnic background. Nevertheless, racism and discrimination adversely affect the confidence, self-esteem, health, well-being, and academic performance of immigrant and refugee students (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan, 2021).

Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021) reported that some newly arrived students face discrimination due to their country of origin, perceived cultural differences, accents, and the relationship between their home and host countries. Students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East encounter more pronounced instances of racism and discrimination compared to those from North American and European nations. Ayoub and Zhou (2021) made certain that refugee students felt isolated and unable to make friends. Students reported being demotivated to attend school and spending most of their time alone. Additionally, a literature review conducted by Amidon and Kuczarski (2020) reported that the exposure of refugee students to racism and perceptions of discrimination negatively influenced their settlement and inclusion in Canadian public schools. These experiences significantly impact the confidence,

well-being, and academic success of refugee students, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive support and inclusive practices in Canadian schools.

**Behaviour Challenges and Conflict Resolution.** The impact of behavior on academic progress and social inclusion in school for refugee students is highlighted by the participants in the study conducted by Ayoub and Zhou (2021). The participants in Ayoub and Zhou (2021) shared stories about conflicts they encountered in school with other students. The boys experienced more behavioural difficulties than the girls did, and the conflicts the boys were involved in occasionally led to fighting. Some of the participants felt that they needed opportunities for their voices and stories to be heard. The behaviour problems the male participants encountered took place mostly during unstructured school time (e.g., nutrition breaks, lunch). These problems resulted from isolation or other students making fun of them. The participants also had a difficult time resolving problems and were also reluctant to approach a staff member to ask for help. One student recalled how other students used to bother her, but she was unable to ask for help from a teacher because she was not able to communicate in English. These findings highlight the importance of providing opportunities for refugee students to express their voices and stories, as well as the need for effective support mechanisms to address behavior-related issues and promote a sense of belonging and safety within the school environment.

**Insufficient Academic Support and Teachers' Experiences.** Programs and policies tailored to support the inclusion of refugee students and other newcomers are available in Canada. However, these practices are not yet common in mainstream classrooms (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). Refugee students may encounter considerable uncertainty and stress when transitioning to a new school environment as they navigate various aspects of school life,

such as curriculum content, policies, learning expectations, behavior norms, and social interactions with peers, teachers, and administrators, all while using a second or foreign language (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). These students do not always receive the academic support they need. Teachers may lack the necessary training, skills, and information to effectively support refugee students (Kanu, 2008; MacNevin, 2012). A qualitative study conducted by MacNevin (2012) explored the teaching and learning practices of refugee students in Prince Edward Island, relying on interviews, journals, observations, and textual analysis of documents. The study found that educating refugees requires mastering various teaching techniques, addressing emotional challenges, integrating them socially and academically, and building on their prior experiences. Unfortunately, most teachers lacked the resources and training to implement these practices. Moreover, Stewart et al. (2019) found that educators had little knowledge about their students' experiences before settlement. Teachers were faced with the challenge of understanding the previous experiences of their students, building relationships with them, and catering to their academic and social needs.

Despite existing research, Canadian schools have seen little policy and practice change (Kovinthan, 2016). Older studies (Yau, 1995; Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994) found that educators recognized refugees' unique needs but often relied on personal experiences (Kovinthan, 2016). This lack of preparation stemmed from inadequate information, training, awareness, resource availability, parent engagement, and home-school connections (Kovinthan, 2016). Studies conducted by Kanu (2008), MacNevin (2012), Kirova (2011), Stewart (2012b), and Feuerverger (2011) in various Canadian regions support these findings, highlighting persistent challenges in meeting the educational needs of refugee children (Kovinthan, 2016). Additionally, MacNevin (2021) asserted that some “teachers internalize the pain and trauma of

the children and youth from refugee backgrounds with whom they work” (p. 51). Hence, to help children and youth from refugee backgrounds make the most of their learning experiences, teachers need access to both professional support networks and sufficient training opportunities (MacNevin, 2021).

### ***Resilience, Hopes, and Dreams***

Despite the significant challenges associated with integrating refugee students into the Canadian education system, several studies have reported that these students exhibit a high level of resilience, hope, and passion for learning (Stewart et al., 2019; Ayoub and Zhou, 2021). Participants in the study conducted by Stewart et al. (2019) expressed their hopes and aspirations for the future. Many shared a desire to return to their homeland as it was before the war, longing for their previous way of life and the companionship of their friends. Additionally, students discussed their career aspirations, although they acknowledged that without proficiency in English, they felt hopeless about accessing educational opportunities necessary for these careers. Some students also expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities to form friendships with Canadian peers.

Despite the numerous challenges encountered by participants in Ayoub and Zhou's (2021) study, they shared numerous stories illustrating their resilience. They expressed gratitude for the opportunities available to them in Canada and demonstrated a strong passion for learning, persisting through adversities. The children were appreciative that their basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, clothing, and medical care, were provided for in Canada. Their discussions about their educational experiences revealed a deep enthusiasm for learning and a desire for success. Despite facing significant obstacles, the participants remained determined to excel in their Canadian schools and exhibited a positive outlook on their futures, embodying a growth

mindset. Hence, several measurements should be implemented to support refugee students' integration into Canadian mainstream classrooms

### ***Favorable Educational Conditions for Support to Refugee Students***

The well-being of refugee youth heavily depends on the success of their school experience (Montero et al., 2012). Although generic refugee support programs are readily available in some Canadian schools, these programs are not always informed by research or refugees' input (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). The paucity of informed educational support along with documented incidents of discrimination against refugees, dramatically increase school dropout rates and the social exclusion of refugees (Kanu, 2008). Although addressing the psychological and educational needs of refugee students may require major education reforms, several actions may be utilized, within a relatively short period of time, to support the integration of refugee students in Canadian schools. These actions are extensive numeracy and literacy support, emotional and mental health support, and appropriate grade-level placement.

**Extensive Numeracy and Literacy Support.** Refugee students need extensive literacy and numeracy support to facilitate their inclusion in mainstream classrooms (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Several language support programs are available across Canadian schools, such as LEAD (Literacy, English, and Academic Development). LEAD develops refugee students' literacy and numeracy skills (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). The program runs in 15 schools across Calgary providing a short-term opportunity (around 20 months) for students, from grades 4 to 12, to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to eventually proceed to more advanced English language learning courses or other subject classes in mainstream classrooms (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). LEAD not only focuses on building communication skills across different

language strands, but also supports students in establishing knowledge in maths, science, social studies, and computer literacy to reduce educational gaps from disrupted school years (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). However, Ayoub and Zhou (2021) and Stewart et al. (2019) warned us regarding the implications of fast transitions of refugee students from ESL programs to regular homeroom classes. The authors reported that students often became frustrated when they were transferred to mainstream classrooms before they were fully prepared. Hence, there is an urgent need to increase funding and support for second language programs across Canada to meet the growing demand. We also need to follow systematic approaches to move refugee students to regular classrooms for different subjects whenever they are assessed and found ready to avoid learning frustration.

**Emotional and Mental Health Support.** Refugee students arriving in Canada require emotional and mental health support (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016). Ayoub and Zhou (2021) suggest that “educators should think of the best ways of providing emotional and social support, and when necessary, consult with the administration about offering students social services through the school’s social worker, with parental consent” (p. 47). It may not be enough to be a caring and compassionate teacher to support refugee students to overcome the effects of trauma. Amidon and Kuczarski (2020) suggest that educators and school mental health professionals should practice cultural humility.

Cultural humility is a life-long process of learning, self-evaluation, and self-critique that helps to address the power imbalances in the client–practitioner dynamic and to develop and maintain mutually respectful and collaborative partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and their communities. (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020, p. 25)

When practicing cultural humility, educators should understand that different cultures may have different views on mental health illnesses (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020). Stermac et al. (2013) explain that it may be difficult to implement Western psychological programs, since “Western perceptions on trauma and healing may not be universal” (p. 217). Educators should also be mindful that mental health issues may be stigmatized in some cultures. Amidon & Kuczarski (2020) suggest that mental health issues should be discussed “through student and caregiver clinical interviews and meetings with the family” (p. 25). The authors also propose the use of trained interpreters, culture brokers, and collaborating with community organizations that care for refugee families to support the mental health of refugee students. Therefore, healing should be facilitated by integrating the cultural context into the required interventions. Educators should understand the culture in which they are trying to facilitate healing and implement intervention plans that suit the targeted group or community.

**Appropriate Grade Level Placement.** Grade-level placement on arrival has a major impact on the educational success of refugee students (Wilkinson, 2002). As discussed earlier, refugee students are often placed in grade levels that are either too difficult or too easy for them (Kanu, 2008). This requires more strategic ways to assess students’ academic abilities. Brewer (2016) suggests providing students with the necessary time and resources to acquire English language proficiency before testing and placing them in appropriate grades. Refugee students may also benefit from temporary grade placement, whereby students’ performance is reassessed multiple times during the first academic year to determine students’ progress and adjust grade levels accordingly. Although the factors that are discussed above are fundamental for the inclusion of refugee students, on their own, they function as merely a band-aid for major issues that need careful consideration to facilitate the integration of this group of students. Supporting

the educational and emotional needs of refugee students may require a comprehensive approach that considers their unique backgrounds and challenges. The growing diversity within Canadian schools presents a pressing need for educational leaders and practitioners to implement effective and tangible strategies. These strategies must guarantee that all students, with their unique backgrounds, languages, identities, perspectives, skills, interests, and beliefs, receive equitable opportunities and support to engage and excel within the existing education frameworks (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

### ***Strategies to Support the Education of Refugees Exposed to Trauma***

Reviewing the literature reveals several strategies that can be implanted by educators to promote mental health and well-being and contribute to positive learning outcomes of not only refugee students, but other students exposed to traumatic experiences. The strategies involve: Trauma- Informed Pedagogies (TIPs), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Differentiated Instruction (DI), Social- Emotional Learning (SEL), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

**Trauma-Informed Pedagogies.** TIPs are models that provide care and support for children suffering from trauma while acknowledging the impacts of traumatic experiences on children's development, learning, and well-being (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017). TIPs adopt counselling and educational strategies that understand trauma and aim to create a safe environment where students are respected, appreciated, and empowered (Greaves & Poole, 2012). TIPs can replace traditional behavioral approaches with flexible classroom management and instruction practices to assist students in facing the challenges accompanied by trauma and supporting their mental health (Crosby et al., 2018; Dorado et al., 2016). TIPs include "general trauma-informed approaches to providing support (that do not necessarily require a disclosure of trauma), as well as trauma-specific services such as trauma assessment, psychoeducational

programs, and/or trauma-focused interventions” (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017, p. 288). TIPs not only empower children with traumatic experiences, but also their families and other individuals advocating for system-wide wellness and safety. Therefore, TIPs can moderate the effects of trauma, including learning difficulties and mental health concerns, while supporting children’s social-emotional development and educational success (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017).

Several frameworks around the world mandate TIPs in schools. In the United States, Hermann’s Recovery Goals (Hermann, 1997) and Blaustein and Kinniburgh’s Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) model (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010) are developed to address the needs of students experiencing trauma. In Australia, UNICEF’s STARS model (NSW Department of Education, 2016) and Foundation House “School’s in for Refugees” (Foundation House, 2016) are implemented to support the recovery of refugee students exposed to trauma. Although the steps followed in these models may differ, they encompass common components, including building a sense of security, establishing connections, self-regulation, and choice and empowerment (De Deckker, 2018). It is essential to note that there may be other interventions that can be used by school psychologists and other mental health professionals to support refugee students exposed to trauma. However, in the following section, I explain how the components of TIPs can be implemented by teachers to mitigate the effects of trauma on refugee students.

***Building a Sense of Safety.*** Restoring students’ sense of safety is fundamental in all TIPs models (De Deckker, 2018). Without the safety component, other objectives of TIPs cannot be established (Price, 2023). According to De Deckker (2018), children who feel emotionally safe are generally calmer, more trusting of those around them, and more open to engage in learning. The author adds that the lived experiences of refugee students have always exposed them to

unsafe environments with individuals who did not provide safety. Hence, they may feel threatened while present in a setting that may seem safe for another student. Safety is beyond physical (Imad, 2020). In fact, emotional safety may be more challenging to establish in today's classrooms (De Deckker, 2018). While physical safety can be established by attending school in a safe area (away from war zones), emotional safety requires creating a welcoming and understanding classroom environment, having a safe calming area, and the presence of a safe person to trust and check in with (Price, 2023). Giving children an opportunity to relax and teaching them ways to communicate their needs can contribute to young refugees' sense of safety and belonging (Imad, 2020).

Safety can also be enhanced by utilizing predictability and consistency (De Deckker, 2018). For young refugees, life may have consisted of unpredictable and unsettling situations. Although it may seem that having fewer rules for refugee students is more helpful, evidence suggests that having consistent rules and expectations is extremely beneficial (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). Consistency provides refugee students with a predictable environment that enhances feelings of security (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). Unexpected events at school such as the absence of a teacher, changes in schedule, and fire drills can trigger refugee students (De Deckker, 2018). Teachers can help students prepare for such events. When possible, changes should be communicated with affected students in advance. Students can also be provided with safety plans to help them adapt to unpredicted events. A safety plan can suggest a replacement safe staff member or an alternative safe place to keep students settled and regulated (De Deckker, 2018). Establishing emotional safety will also encourage refugee students to build trusting and transparent relationships with their teachers and peers (Imad, 2020).

***Establishing Relationships and Connections.*** Secure and nurturing relationships between refugee children and their teachers are fundamental to supporting students in establishing their identity and sense of security (Tweedie et al., 2017). Refugee students' negative experiences with adults in the past may be associated with feelings of threat. Therefore, teachers should support their students in building at least one safe relationship with a trusted adult (Price, 2023). The safe staff member can be someone other than the classroom teacher. When choosing a safe staff at school, it is essential to consider the schedule and availability of the individual, as well as that person's capability to communicate with the child (Price, 2023). It may take some time for refugee students experiencing trauma to establish relationships at school, but the more connections a young person can make, the better (De Deckker, 2018). Teachers can also map out the relationships their students have at school to identify connections that can benefit from further strengthening to support children in building a wider network of friends (De Deckker, 2018).

***Self-regulation.*** Children with trauma often disassociate from their experiences, both emotionally and physically (Tweedie et al., 2017). Previous dangerous experiences can "activate physiological and psychological survival resources, but de-activate higher cognitive functions" (Tweedie et al., 2017, p. 41). It may be challenging for refugee students to monitor their emotions at school, even during minor stressful events causing them to either shut down or lash out. It is essential to teach students how to identify and regulate their emotions (De Deckker, 2018). Teachers are required to know their students' possible triggers and the appropriate strategies needed to avoid escalating situations (Ellison & Walton-Fisette, 2022). Although self-regulation activities are individually based and may not fit all students, their implementation is an essential component of TIPs (Ellison & Walton-Fisette, 2022). Korinek and DeFur (2016)

suggest that teachers can model self-control skills for students to imitate and help learners set their own goals through modeling class-wide goals. Initial goals may include simple tasks such as completing problems, writing sentences, reducing transition time, and homework submission. The authors indicate that feedback can also support students' self-regulation skills. Frequent, specific, and positive verbal feedback can be a powerful and time-efficient tool to support students' behavior and ensure they know the class expectations. Therefore, teachers should aim at building meaningful connections with their students while supporting them to develop the necessary skills for successful self-regulation.

***Choice and Empowerment.*** Students are empowered when provided with choices and encouraged to use their voices in learning (Imad, 2022). To combat the feelings of helplessness associated with trauma, students should be given choices in their learning (Price, 2023). Having a choice in learning is an essential component of differentiated instruction as well as TIPs (Price, 2023). Teachers can provide students with different topics for assignments, options on media to present their learning, various classroom roles, and choices of work partners and rewards. Educators are also encouraged to give room for students to express their opinions during class meetings and at appropriate times during instruction to empower students' voices (Korinek & DeFur, 2016). Having a choice and voice in education is associated with building a growth mindset and supporting learners in developing positive self-esteem while taking responsibility for their learning (Ellison & Walton-Fisette, 2022).

***Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.*** While TIPs offer students the opportunity to enhance their emotional regulation and concentration (Barrett & Berger, 2021), they may not be sufficient for the full inclusion of refugee students in educational settings. It is essential to examine whether TIPs are implemented in a manner that is culturally responsive. CRP is defined as “using

the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p 31). Research indicates that while there is a universal biological response to trauma, cultural factors can influence how individuals experience trauma bio psychosocially and subsequently respond to traumatic stress (Whaley and Davis, 2007). According to Blitz et al. (2016), a culturally responsive environment acknowledges and supports individuals' cultural and racial identities, values their life experiences, and employs a flexible teaching approach to address students' needs. Therefore, for the effective implementation of TIPs within a culturally responsive framework, it is important that all students feel that their cultural backgrounds are positively represented within their schools (Blitz et al., 2016). CRP suggests that education of ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse students should relate the content they learn in school to their lived experiences outside school. CRP invites us to teach students through their cultures and promote equity and excellence in education while establishing communities of individuals from various backgrounds (Gay, 2013).

According to Vavrus (2008), CRP can be established when teachers proactively use the cultural experiences of students to create a welcoming classroom environment. It is a student-centered approach that rests on school policies and practices that seek to create a learning community within the classroom to celebrate and support marginalized cultures and their families. CRP relies on equity “to rectify educational conditions that have fallen short of facilitating the learning of many students from racially, culturally, and economically diverse groups (Vavrus, 2008, p: 50). CRP considers that teaching is a bidirectional communication process recognizing the importance of students’ engagement in learning. Hence, the role of

teachers in CRP is to support learners to play an active role in the production and accretion of knowledge (Vavrus, 2008).

Rychly and Graves (2012) indicate that for CRP to be effectively implemented, teachers are required to be caring and empathetic. Being a caring teacher is more than just being nice. It indicates that teachers should care about their culturally diverse students and “insist on holding them to the same standard as others” (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p: 45). Educators practise empathy by seeing the classroom from their students’ point of view. Additionally, teachers should question their cultural beliefs to see past the stereotypic assumptions on the achievements of culturally diverse students. CRP calls for teachers to be knowledgeable of other cultures. This knowledge goes beyond being familiar with food and holidays of various cultures, to understanding different “learning styles, preferences for cooperative vs. individual problem solving, expectations for behavior between children and adults, and gender roles to the standard categories of values and traditions” (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p: 46).

Schools play a fundamental role in welcoming refugees after resettlement, but they also present the risk of “exacerbating acculturative stress” (Bennouna et al., 2021, p: 15) when refugees feel unwanted and forced to assimilate. Two interconnected frameworks, TIPs and CRP, emerge as essential tools to mitigate the challenges associated with the acculturation process for refugees and other minority groups within the educational context (Bennouna et al., 2021). TIPs focus on recognizing and responding to the unique psychological needs of individuals who have experienced trauma, aligning well with the challenges that refugees may bring to the classroom (Barrett & Berger, 2021). By adopting trauma-informed approaches, schools can create an environment that is sensitive to the emotional well-being of refugee students, thereby fostering a more supportive atmosphere (Barrett & Berger, 2021). Simultaneously, CRP emphasizes the

importance of tailoring educational practices to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students (Gay, 2010). It recognizes the significance of social identity, belonging, and equity in the learning process (Gay, 2010). Through the integration of CRP, schools can actively work towards creating inclusive spaces where the cultural diversity of refugees and other minorities is not only acknowledged but celebrated. This, in turn, contributes to a more positive and affirming educational environment.

The synergy between TIPs and CRP is particularly powerful in addressing the educational and psychological needs of refugees. By combining trauma-informed practices with culturally responsive pedagogy, schools may create an educational framework that not only recognizes and supports the trauma experienced by refugees but also actively promotes their sense of identity, belonging, and equity within the school community. This integrated approach is crucial for fostering a positive and supportive educational experience for refugees, ultimately contributing to their successful resettlement and academic achievement.

**Differentiated Instruction.** DI is an educational approach characterized by student-centered teaching strategies that accommodate a diverse range of learners with various educational needs (Gaitas & Alves Martins, 2017). It is a method of instruction and learning designed to address the individual needs of students within an inclusive classroom setting (Whitley et al., 2019). Several countries, including Canada, have incorporated DI into their educational policies and resource materials. The DI approach is mandated for teaching and assessing students with diverse needs across educational levels, from preschool to postsecondary education (Whitley et al., 2019).

In Ontario, the Learning for All (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) document underscores the importance of DI in catering to the needs of all learners in K-12 education. The

document highlights the significance of considering the varied experiences and backgrounds of learners, adapting instructional and assessment materials, utilizing diverse forms of media, encouraging different types of activities and ways of demonstrating learning, and fostering a supportive learning environment to enhance the overall learning experience for all students. Additionally, *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) outlines assessment and evaluation policies and practices in Ontario schools. While it emphasizes the importance of addressing diverse student needs and providing multiple pathways for student success, which aligns with the principles of DI.

DI can serve as a highly effective instructional approach tailored to address the diverse educational needs of refugee students, considering the unique lived experiences and challenges they often encounter. DI recognizes and respects these differences by offering flexible teaching strategies and materials that accommodate students' varied backgrounds and educational needs (Bondie et al., 2019).

***Tomlinson's Framework for Utilizing DI.*** Tomlinson et al. (2003) propose the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in the classroom based on students' levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Regarding readiness, Vygotsky (1978) contends that individuals learn within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the point at which students require teacher support to master new learning. Teachers are tasked with guiding students into their ZPD, encouraging them to tackle tasks slightly beyond their independent capabilities, fostering independence, and developing problem-solving skills. Applying the same task with minimal modification to students of varied readiness levels often results in suboptimal performance, as the task may fall outside their ZPD. Tomlinson et al. (2003) underscore the

impact of this mismatch on performance, study habits, social interactions, attitudes toward school, and general mental health.

Students also exhibit diverse interests, which can significantly influence academic performance. Adapting instruction to align with students' interests has been shown to enhance motivation, productivity, engagement, creativity, and achievement (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Allowing students to pursue tasks aligned with their interests fosters a positive attitude toward learning and enhances creativity. Tomlinson et al. (2003) emphasize the crucial role of motivation in developing sophisticated skills, especially when tasks slightly exceed students' current capabilities, emphasizing the importance of balancing readiness and interests in task design. Teachers are advised to communicate clear learning goals, set high expectations, demonstrate passion for their subject, and invest time and effort in planning appropriately challenging tasks that consider students' talents and capabilities.

Considering students' learning profiles is also vital in task design. Learning profiles represent students' preferred modes of learning influenced by factors such as culture, race, gender, and intelligence preference. Individual preferences encompass aspects like environment, emotion, physical and psychological needs, as well as factors such as light, temperature, time of day, seating arrangements, and required concentration levels. Tomlinson et al. (2003) indicates that aligning instruction with students' learning preferences enhances academic outcomes. Even if the final assessment does not match learners' preferences, addressing thinking preferences during the learning process leads to better results. Cultural influences on learning preferences, such as the need for emotional closeness in the learning environment and perceptions of time, highlight the importance of teachers understanding these differences to tailor instructions and offer diverse learning options that align with students' preferences. Additionally, DI requires

teachers to provide strategies for all learners, including those with learning challenges, to raise self-awareness, take charge of their learning, and leverage strengths to compensate for weaknesses (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

***Advantages of Differentiated Instruction.*** DI is an educational model designed to foster inclusion by recognizing the diverse background knowledge, readiness levels, language proficiency, learning preferences, and interests of students (Robinson, 2018). It plays a crucial role in ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities by introducing responsive teaching methods to accommodate the increasing diversity in classrooms and schools (Bondie et al., 2019). By accommodating diverse learning needs, teachers create a more inclusive learning environment where every student feels valued and supported.

According to Tomlinson (2008), DI promotes mastery of content and prevents learning gaps. By proactively addressing the diverse needs of students through differentiated instruction, teachers can help prevent achievement gaps from widening. When all students receive instruction that is tailored to their needs, they are more likely to make progress and succeed academically, reducing disparities in achievement (Bondie et al., 2019). Differentiated instruction promotes mastery of content by allowing teachers to tailor their teaching strategies to match the diverse needs and abilities of students (Tomlinson, 2008). By providing multiple pathways for learning, such as varied instructional materials, activities, and assessments, students are empowered to engage with the content in ways that are most effective for them (Roy et al., 2013). This personalized approach ensures that students receive the appropriate level of challenge and support, which is essential for deepening understanding and mastering the material. Additionally, differentiated instruction encourages active participation and fosters a positive learning environment where students feel motivated and empowered to take ownership of their learning

(Tomlinson, 2008). By catering to individual learning styles, interests, and readiness levels, differentiated instruction helps students develop a deeper understanding of the content and promotes long-term retention and application of knowledge.

Tomlinson (2008) further emphasizes that the goal of DI is to cultivate true learners with high self-efficacy who can take agency for their own learning. Building trust, ensuring fit, strengthening voice, and developing awareness are identified by Tomlinson (2008) as four essential elements for teachers to consider, allowing students to assume control of their learning. Building trust involves instilling a belief in students that their teachers are invested in their success and always act in their best interest. Ensuring fit entails presenting material that aligns not only with students' readiness levels but also with their interests, enabling them to express their learning in ways that suit them. Strengthening students' voices involves respecting and responding to their needs, while developing awareness encourages students to build on their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses.

DI contributes to enhancing students' self-efficacy, learning motives, and problem-solving skills (Lai et al., 2020). Teachers, as highlighted by Lai et al. (2020), aspire for active student engagement and the realization of equity throughout the learning journey. The implementation of DI in mathematics classrooms, as demonstrated by Lai et al. (2020), significantly impacts students' psychological state, self-efficacy, learning motives, behavior, and performance, including their problem-solving skills. Tomlinson (2017) suggests that DI fosters organic, dynamic, and student-centered learning environments. Therefore, educators are tasked with creating such environments that cater to the needs of all students and maximize their potential for growth. It is incumbent upon educators to offer diverse learning options through multiple teaching strategies, flexible grouping, varied representations, and assessment tools,

ensuring that all learners receive equal opportunities (Tomlinson, 2017). Consequently, students will value their learning experiences in environments that support their self-efficacy, learning motives, and enhance their problem-solving skills (Lai et al., 2020).

***Differentiated Instruction for Refugees.*** Gregory and Burkman (2011) emphasize the significance of valuing diversity by fostering positive relationships between students and teachers, creating a supportive classroom environment, and implementing innovative instructional strategies. The authors underscore the idea that acknowledging and appreciating diversity in the classroom can lead to improved academic performance and overall student well-being. A supportive classroom environment, as advocated by Gregory and Burkman (2011), goes beyond traditional teaching methods. It involves creating a space where students feel safe to express themselves, take intellectual risks, and seek assistance when needed. This supportive atmosphere acknowledges that students may have different learning needs and styles, and it encourages collaboration and mutual respect among peers.

DI could be an instructional support to support the inclusion and educational needs of refugee students in Canadian classrooms. Implementing differentiated instruction could be particularly beneficial for refugee children and other students who have experienced disrupted schooling. Differentiated instruction is a method that considers the diverse needs and strengths of students, taking into account their varied learning strategies (Lai et al., 2020). This approach actively addresses diversity by making adjustments to instruction based on how students engage with the material (Lai et al., 2020). In practical terms, differentiated instruction recognizes that refugee students come from different backgrounds and have unique learning styles, experiences, and levels of readiness (Gregory and Burkman, 2011). For refugee children who may have faced interruptions in their education due to displacement or other challenges, this approach may

acknowledge their individual needs and seek to tailor instruction accordingly. By accommodating various learning preferences, readiness levels, and strategies, differentiated instruction aims to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017). DI acknowledges the diverse backgrounds and experiences of refugee students, helping to bridge gaps caused by disrupted schooling. It recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be suitable for students with varied educational histories, and it emphasizes flexibility in teaching methods to better meet the needs of each student (Tomlinson, 2017). Overall, the application of differentiated instruction can be seen as a responsive and adaptive approach to support the educational needs of refugee students, including those who have faced challenges such as disrupted schooling.

**Social-Emotional Learning.** SEL is defined as the process in which individuals, both children and adults, gain and apply knowledge to reach goals, display compassion for a variety of individuals, cultivate and sustain meaningful connections, and exercise sound judgment (Norris, 2003). SEL encompasses trainable skills such as relationship-building, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. These skills are teachable, distinguishing them from personality traits that are inherited and generally do not change over a lifetime (Jomaa et al., 2023).

According to McBrien (2022), SEL equips students with the abilities to navigate their emotions and comprehend their surroundings. With the guidance and example-setting provided by educators and caregivers, coupled with interactions and play among peers, the author indicates that students can acquire the skills to handle their thoughts and behaviors in positive ways. As they become more attuned to their emotions and recognize how their thoughts and values influence their actions, students also gain insight into understanding the emotions and

behaviors of others, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds. This awareness fosters the development of social skills necessary for collaborative work and the cultivation of healthy relationships. Moreover, the acquisition of skills for making responsible and empathetic decisions enhances students' capacity to care for both themselves and others (McBrien, 2022).

SEL originated from the discussions among educators in 1994, who came together to address gaps in the school curriculum (Jomaa et al., 2023). The consensus among participants was that emotional intelligence played a crucial role in student development and required focused attention (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Recognizing the need for students to understand and manage their emotions, cultivate empathy, and make responsible decisions, the group led to the establishment of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Bridgeland et al., 2013). CASEL was formed to promote and research the significance of SEL, along with the implementation of SEL programs in schools (Jomaa et al., 2023). Over time, SEL has evolved into a proactive intervention adopted by schools to address the growing prevalence of students facing mental health challenges (Jomaa et al., 2023). SEL encompasses procedures through which individuals gain and proficiently employ knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and regulate their emotions, express and demonstrate empathy toward others, set and attain positive objectives, nurture and sustain positive connections, and exercise responsible decision-making (McCallops et al., 2019). While the theoretical foundations of SEL interventions vary, the majority aim to help individuals comprehend and control their emotions, set and attain goals efficiently, cultivate empathy toward others, establish and sustain positive relationships, and/or participate in responsible decision-making (McCallops et al., 2019).

CASEL has pinpointed five interconnected competencies essential to SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-

making (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). 1) Self-awareness involves understanding one's thoughts, emotions, and values and recognizing how they impact one's actions. 2) Self-management entails effectively controlling thoughts, emotions, and behaviors across various situations while working toward goals. 3) Social awareness is the ability to comprehend social perspectives and empathize with individuals from diverse backgrounds. 4) Relationship skills include developing and sustaining healthy, supportive relationships and navigating social situations with people from varied backgrounds. 5) Responsible decision-making is the capacity to make considerate and constructive social and behavioral choices. These elements collectively constitute domains within the broader framework of SEL (Frye et al., 2022). The five competencies outlined by CASEL play a vital role in formal SEL programs, as highlighted by Frye et al. (2022), and are commonly integrated into K-12 education through health and physical education curricula. The advantages of SEL encompass enhanced perspectives toward oneself and others, along with reductions in aggression, depression, and stress (McCallops et al., 2019). Additionally, these positive outcomes extend beyond social-emotional aspects, including improvements in academic performance and overall life outcomes (McCallops et al., 2019).

***Strategies for SEL.*** According to McBrien (2022), for refugee and newcomer students, SEL involves acquiring techniques to cope with stress and uncertainty. As they cross borders and enter countries with different cultural settings, developing these social skills becomes indispensable for their sustained success. For instance, numerous refugee and newcomer students arrive from countries where girls and boys are segregated in educational settings. Consequently, they might feel uneasy when placed in coeducational environments. Girls, for instance, may transition from regions where they wore conservative attire to settings where more revealing

outfits are the norm for physical education and sports. These abrupt changes can be highly distressing for both the children and their parents (McBrien, 2022).

Effective teaching of SEL strategies is often observed when done consistently, incorporating culturally relevant content, and establishing clear expectations (Jomaa et al., 2023). The modeling of SEL competencies by teachers or adult role models has also proven effective in enhancing students' SEL knowledge and behavior (Cooney, 2021). Teachers have achieved success in instructing students on competencies related to awareness of others' feelings through methods like role-playing, classroom discussions, and games fostering students' sense of community (Jomaa et al., 2023).

Jomaa et al. (2023) indicate that the literature details various instructional methods employed by teachers for teaching students' self-awareness and self-management competencies. For instance, using statements that express students' feelings instead of confronting perceived misbehavior has been noted (Cooney, 2021). A prevalent informal SEL implementation strategy highlighted in the literature involves teachers establishing a positive, warm, respectful, and caring learning environment for students (Jomaa et al., 2023; Norris, 2003). This environment is cultivated when teachers (a) routinely check in with students about their academic progress and psychological well-being; (b) employ daily affirmations to bolster students' self-confidence and (c) foster positive teacher-student relationships (Jomaa et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers have reported using stress-reduction strategies, such as mindfulness practices, yoga, relaxation exercises with music, and breathing techniques, particularly in virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jomaa et al., 2023).

Social and emotional learning may not only support conventional academic education but also fosters a sense of capability and security among students. According to McBrien (2022),

research suggests that when students experience acceptance and a sense of belonging, their cognitive performance improves. Furthermore, social, and emotional skills like perseverance and collaboration enhance the likelihood of success in adulthood (Brackett et al., 2019). Importantly, social and emotional skills are not fixed traits; they can be learned, adjusted, and augmented or diminished based on individual and social experiences (McBrien, 2022).

***Teachers' Role in Facilitating SEL for Refugees.*** According to Jomaa et al. (2023), SEL programs enhance academic performance for students. Additionally, teachers implementing SEL practices in their classrooms observe heightened emotional regulation, increased emotional intelligence, and greater empathy among students. The authors suggest that these improvements are linked to subsequent academic success in school. Students also experience benefits such as enhanced social skills, including improved emotional regulation and interpersonal abilities. Furthermore, SEL has been recognized as valuable in students' diverse life pursuits, including school and work, fostering heightened awareness of their emotions and instructing them in essential social skills, such as social awareness (Jomaa et al., 2023).

Social and emotional learning is crucial for all students, but it may pose additional challenges for refugee and newcomer students due to their struggles with language acquisition, typically lower socio-economic status, and life experiences that can impact their mental health (McBrien, 2022). Conversely, developing social and emotional skills can assist them in overcoming these challenges (Brackett et al., 2019). The journey to the host country itself contributes to social and emotional stress, thereby increasing the needs of these students for SEL (McBrien, 2022). The needs of refugee students may differ considerably, as refugees are more likely to have experienced multiple traumatic events. McBrien (2022) maintains that trauma can affect students' ability to form positive relationships, contribute to poor behavior, and reduce

self-regulation and motivation. Additionally, their reduced social skills make many refugee students more likely targets of bullying.

Anderson (2004) proposes school-based interventions to increase resilience, thereby reducing the effects of trauma. Resilience is defined as the ability of individual to do well when faces with adversity (Wu et al., 2013). These interventions include creating a nurturing environment, implementing self-esteem programs, training teachers and counselors to be aware of refugee backgrounds and needs, facilitating group projects in classes to aid in developing friendships, and teaching social skills (Anderson 2004). Therefore, educators play a crucial role in fostering student success. Considering the obstacles encountered by refugee students, it is essential for teachers to possess an understanding of and sensitivity to various historical, cultural, and political contexts (McBrien, 2022). This knowledge enables them to welcome and support refugee students decrease stereotypes and discrimination within the classroom. Additionally, teachers should engage in self-reflection to identify and address their own attitudes and biases, preventing actions rooted in prejudice (McBrien, 2022).

***Culturally Responsive SEL.*** When teachers and school staff implement SEL interventions, a significant concern revolves around participant engagement, as the positive benefits of the SEL intervention may not be realized if participants are not actively involved (McCallops et al., 2019). One effective strategy to enhance participant engagement is the integration of culturally responsive practices into SEL programming. According to McCallops et.al (2019), culturally responsive SEL involves instructional approaches that draw upon the lived experiences and frames of reference of students to reinforce and teach SEL competencies. Central to culturally responsive SEL is the affirmation of students' cultural expressions of effective social and emotional competencies, providing support for them to navigate cultural

conflicts and express these competencies in both school and home environments (Yeh et al., 2022). Furthermore, this approach values and promotes student engagement and buy-in by incorporating student interests, perspectives, and needs into existing SEL programming or developing new SEL initiatives with input from the student population and surrounding community (McCallops et al., 2019).

McCallops et al.(2019) suggest a framework to conceptualize CRP within SEL programming by integrating ideas from the SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy literature. The resulting key components vital for successful facilitation of culturally responsive SEL instruction include empathy, self-awareness, awareness of others, self-regulation, and motivation. Empathy encompasses the facilitator's ability to adopt the perspective of students, including those from diverse cultures, and respond to students from that standpoint. It also involves the facilitator's skill in understanding and sharing students' feelings. A pivotal strategy involves building relationships with students, employing questioning and active listening to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives and feelings on various topics within the classroom and SEL programming. Self-awareness relates to the SEL facilitator's consciousness of their implicit bias, cultural identity, cultural references, and emotional state. Utilizing reflective journaling serves as a strategy to augment self-awareness. Awareness of others entails recognizing and valuing the cultural backgrounds and emotional states of students. Acquiring general knowledge about cultural groups and emotional expressions can support awareness of others, which should then be tailored to individual students through relationship building. Self-regulation involves the facilitator's endeavors to adjust their thoughts, actions, and expression of emotions, cultural perceptions, and biases. Engaging in intercultural and emotion-filled interactions and reflecting on actions and outcomes can contribute to the development of self-regulation. Motivation

pertains to the SEL facilitator's ability to concentrate attention and energy on learning about and actively participating in interactions related to emotions or those involving students from diverse cultural backgrounds (McCallops et al., 2019).

Culturally responsive SEL may bring several benefits to refugee students, considering the unique challenges they often face. In addition to improving academic achievement, these teaching methods are advantageous for students as they aid in the cultivation of their individual identities, fostering connections with their cultural heritage and building bonds with their ethnic communities (Yeh et al., 2022). This, in turn, facilitates the development of a sense of belonging, encourages shared responsibilities within the community, and enhances SEL competencies (Yeh et al., 2022). Culturally responsive SEL acknowledges and respects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of refugee students. It considers cultural nuances in emotional expression, communication styles, and social interactions (Denston et al., 2022). This sensitivity may help create an inclusive learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging for refugee students. SEL focuses on building social skills and culturally responsive approaches while tailoring these skills to align with the social norms and expectations of diverse cultural groups (Yeh et al., 2022). This may help refugee students adapt more smoothly to their new social environments and build positive relationships with peers and educators.

***Social Emotional Learning in Ontario.*** Social emotional learning is a key component in Ontario curriculum. The curriculum is designed to help students develop essential skills for emotional well-being, resilience, and positive relationships. This includes learning to manage emotions, express feelings, cope with stress, and develop critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities. SEL skills are integrated across various subjects, with a particular emphasis on health and physical education. These skills are reinforced through everyday

experiences at school, home, and in the community. Key SEL skills include identifying and managing emotions, coping with stress, positive motivation, building relationships, deepening a sense of self, and thinking critically and creatively. These competencies not only help students understand their own emotions and relationships but also build resilience in the face of challenges and develop decision-making skills that are necessary for success. For example, in Grade 1, students practice positive motivation by showing willingness to try new skills and persist through challenges. By integrating SEL across subjects, the curriculum aims to prepare students for lifelong learning, supporting their mental health and well-being, and equipping them to become engaged and productive citizens (Government of Ontario, 2024).

**Universal Design for Learning.** Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that guides the creation and evaluation of curricula, programs, and materials to ensure they are inclusive and effective for all learners (CAST, 2024; Meyer & Rose, 2000; Rose & Meyer, 2002). Rooted in the learning sciences, UDL is structured around three principles. To support affective learning, it emphasizes providing multiple means of engagement, offering diverse strategies to promote and sustain motivation, addressing the "why" of learning. For recognition learning, it advocates for multiple means of representation, using flexible methods to present information and address the "what" of learning. Finally, to enhance strategic learning, UDL encourages multiple means of action and expression, offering various approaches for learners to demonstrate and develop their knowledge, focusing on the "how" of learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

According to Hall et al. (2012), UDL is essential because it addresses the diverse needs of students by promoting flexible and inclusive educational practices. Traditional teaching methods often fail to accommodate the varying abilities, backgrounds, and learning styles present in

today's classrooms, leading to barriers that can hinder student success. UDL offers a framework that guides educators in designing curricula that provide multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to learn and demonstrate their knowledge. By implementing UDL principles, educators can create more accessible and effective learning environments that cater to the unique needs of each student.

*UDL for Culturally Diverse Learners.* For culturally diverse learners, UDL promotes the inclusion of varied materials, resources, and teaching methods that are not only adaptable but also reflective of students' cultural contexts. This approach encourages the use of culturally relevant content, teaching strategies, and assessment tools that are meaningful and resonate with students' lived experiences. By diversifying the ways in which information is presented, UDL addresses different cultural perspectives, ensuring that all students can access knowledge in a way that aligns with their background and abilities (Rose & Meyer, 2002). One key aspect of UDL is providing multiple means of engagement. For culturally diverse learners, this can involve incorporating culturally relevant texts, practices, and examples into lessons. It is important for educators to recognize and validate the cultural identities of their students, creating an environment where diverse perspectives are seen as assets rather than obstacles. Moreover, UDL supports the development of critical thinking by allowing students to approach problems and projects from different angles, encouraging creativity and self-expression within the context of their cultural frameworks (Meyer & Rose, 2000).

Another central principle of UDL is offering multiple means of representation. This ensures that content is delivered in various ways, making learning accessible to students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, students who speak different languages or come from different cultural backgrounds may benefit from visual aids, multimedia

resources, and contextualized materials that draw on their cultural knowledge. By offering diverse representations of content, UDL helps learners make connections between new information and their prior knowledge, creating deeper and more meaningful learning experiences (CAST, 2024).

Finally, UDL emphasizes multiple means of expression, allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways. For culturally diverse learners, this flexibility is critical as it enables them to express themselves in ways that align with their cultural norms and communication styles. Whether through oral presentations, written work, or digital formats, UDL supports students in showcasing their knowledge in ways that reflect their cultural strengths and preferences. This approach not only boosts confidence but also provides a more accurate representation of their abilities (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Incorporating UDL principles into classrooms that serve culturally diverse learners may promote an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and supported. It encourages educators to view diversity as an asset and to develop strategies that celebrate cultural differences while providing the necessary scaffolding for academic success. By embracing UDL, educators can ensure that every student, regardless of cultural background, has the opportunity to thrive in an equitable and inclusive learning environment.

***UDL in Ontario.*** The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes UDL as a foundational framework to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion across the education system. The Ministry has embedded UDL into its policies and practices, with significant emphasis on removing barriers to learning and creating inclusive environments for students of all abilities, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances.

A central resource, *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), highlights the critical role UDL plays in supporting varied learner needs. This guide emphasizes flexible teaching methods and strategies, ensuring accessibility and engagement for students, including those with disabilities, English Language Learners (ELLs), and those from marginalized or underrepresented communities. By aligning UDL principles with curriculum planning, educators can provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, allowing students to access, process, and demonstrate knowledge in ways that align with their strengths.

The Ministry further encourages the application of UDL to promote inclusive practices such as differentiated instruction, the use of assistive technology, and culturally responsive teaching. Schools are encouraged to adopt UDL strategies within professional development initiatives, classroom environments, and systemic planning. This ensures that every learner is empowered to achieve their full potential. By embedding UDL into instructional design and decision-making processes, Ontario schools aim to create equitable learning environments that reflect the province's commitment to inclusive education.

### ***Teachers' Experiences with Refugee Students***

Teachers who work with refugee students may find themselves at the intersection of education and humanitarian response, navigating complex dynamics that extend beyond traditional teaching roles. The literature on the experiences of teachers working with refugee students reveals a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities that shape educational practices in diverse and often unpredictable ways.

Since 2011, Turkey has hosted a significant number of Syrian refugees due to the ongoing conflict in Syria (Karakuş, 2019). A study conducted by Basaran, (2021), employed semi-

structured interviews with 21 teachers in Turkey. The findings indicated that teachers implemented strategies to enhance the active participation of refugee students in the classroom and to minimize discrimination against them. Despite these efforts, the teachers felt that their attempts to offer a quality and equitable education to refugee students were inadequate. They also believed they lacked the necessary expertise to effectively educate these students. It was also found that the primary driver of motivation for teachers is their affection for children. Another qualitative study conducted by Soylu et al. (2020) in Ankara, Turkey, aimed to analyze the experiences of 14 teachers educating refugee students through culturally responsive education. The study reported that there was a lack of knowledge among the participants about the cultural backgrounds of their refugee students. In addition, there were systematic problem in the Turkish education system being not ready for educating refugees in a culturally responsive manner. Another important result was that teachers lacked adequate resources to address these issues from a pedagogical perspective. On the other hand, to evaluate teachers' classroom management experience with Syrian refugee students in Turkey, Saklan (2017) conducted a qualitative multiple case study. The research revealed that most teachers had negative experiences with classroom management involving Syrian refugee students, particularly highlighting the students' language difficulties. Teachers noted that pronunciation issues led to ridicule and expressed uncertainty about how to handle communication problems with these students. To address this, the author suggested that a range of activities (such as in-class events and school trips) should be organized to prevent bias against Syrian refugee students and promote integration between them and other students. Additionally, in-service training should be implemented to increase teachers' awareness of how to effectively support Syrian refugee students.

In Victoria, Australia, a study was conducted by Barrett and Berger (2021) utilizing semi-structured interviews with 6 teachers who had experience with refugee students exposed to trauma. The findings highlighted the crucial role of building individualized relationships between teachers and refugee students exposed to trauma, as these connections were fundamental for fostering trust, safety, and a sense of belonging, which in turn enhanced learning. Teachers faced challenges in managing emotional regulation of refugee students and needed to adjust teaching materials to avoid triggering trauma without missing valuable learning opportunities. Inconsistent background information about students, often due to privacy concerns or variable school practices, affected teachers' ability to provide adequate support. Another study, was performed by Baldwin (2015) to analyze and explore the experiences of eight first-year physical education teachers who have taught African refugee students. The author employed in-depth interviews with eight physical education teachers who completed their first year of teaching during the 2012 school year. The study found that despite some minor improvements, many primary and secondary schools still provided inadequate support for new teachers. First-year physical education teachers, like other novices, often navigated their roles with little assistance, particularly if they were employed as specialists in primary schools. Additionally, the nature of physical education requiring specific equipment and scheduling and needing to continually justify its importance compared to other subjects—posed unique challenges for transitioning into professional teaching.

In Canada a narrative inquiry was conducted by Kovinthan (2016) on one refugee student and one beginning teacher. The findings reveal a gap in the novice teacher understanding of refugees, their experiences, and the most effective ways to support them in the classroom. However, some teachers had negative attitudes and viewpoints towards refugee students and did

not cultivate a nuanced understanding of diversity and multiculturalism. Additionally, Mayor (2021) examined 11 narratives from seven teachers that centered on Syrian refugee student trauma disclosures in the classroom in Ontario. The author reported that teachers often felt unsettled by unexpected disclosures of trauma from students, struggling with how to respond and fearing they might trigger further distress. This uncertainty was particularly evident among less experienced teachers who had received minimal trauma training. The study also highlighted that teachers were often disturbed by students' emotional numbing, which was not well addressed in training. Teachers valued the opportunity for students to share their stories and found meaning in these interactions, emphasizing the importance of creating safe spaces for such disclosures.

Another study conducted by Kendrick and Early (2024) in Western Canada reported on an ethnographic research project. The study aimed at understanding the language and literacy needs and challenges of students with refugee experiences, as well as the pedagogical responses used by educators to build trusting, collaborative relationships of power. The authors emphasized the importance of relationships in supporting the language and literacy needs of students with refugee experiences. The study identified three types of relationships. Anchoring relationships provided emotional support and stability from school staff, family, and community members, helping students feel seen and grounded. On the other hand, mediating relationships supported specific needs like friendship, language learning, and personal growth, through programs such as after-school sports or cultural mediators who assisted families. Networking relationships connected students to broader community resources, facilitating support and cultural navigation. Mindful pedagogies were characterized by collaborating school-wide. Teachers and administrators worked together to meet students' needs through collective planning and wrap-around services. They also focused on seeing, hearing, and knowing learners. Teachers

prioritized understanding each student's unique background and experiences. They connected instruction to students' lives and fostered confidence and self-identity.

In her research, Gagné (2023) indicated that it is crucial to support refugee students in navigating the transitions between their home, school, and community environments throughout their entire educational journey, rather than just focusing on their initial entry into schools. The combined impact of pre-migration and post-migration experiences can create challenges for refugee children and youth. These challenges can affect their academic performance, well-being, and ability to integrate into Canadian society. In addition, compassionate administrators and teachers who understand the complexities of their students' experiences and collaborate with other service providers can help mitigate the effects of pre-migration trauma and post-migration discrimination.

In Surrey and Greater Vancouver, a study by Barber (2021) gathered feedback from 40 participants, mostly professionals working with refugees, through open-ended questionnaires and interviews after presenting a refugee resettlement report. The study examined Canada's refugee policy. It emphasized the need for compassionate, holistic support and a layered ecological perspective. It also highlighted the importance of addressing both practical needs (like housing) and cultural/psychological adjustments. The article stressed the role of teachers and advocates for improved collaboration between the government and educators to close resource gaps and enhance support systems.

Additionally, a pilot study conducted by Gagné et al. (2018) utilized a survey and interviews to explore the perspectives of K-12 educators on the social and academic integration of refugees. The study highlighted the critical roles of parents, caregivers, peers, teachers, school administrators, and settlement workers in supporting the integration of Syrian refugee children

and youth into schools and communities. It emphasized the need for schools to address the mental health and social-emotional needs of these students, identifying them as optimal settings for preventative interventions and long-term support.

The experiences of teachers working with refugee students across different contexts reveal the complex nature of their roles, extending beyond traditional educational responsibilities to encompass aspects of social and emotional support. Despite their dedication, teachers often face significant challenges, including inadequate training, limited resources, and systemic barriers that hinder their ability to provide equitable and culturally responsive education. These studies highlight the importance of targeted professional development, the need for a deeper understanding of refugee backgrounds, and the value of creating safe and supportive learning environments. As these educators navigate the intersection of education and humanitarian response, it is essential to address these challenges through policy changes, resource allocation, and ongoing support to empower teachers and promote the academic and personal growth of refugee students.

### ***Building Welcoming and Inclusive Schools***

“An equitable, inclusive education system is one in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5). Hence, this requires building welcoming and inclusive classrooms that prioritize diversity, cultivate a sense of belonging, and provide the necessary support for each student to thrive academically and personally. Creating welcoming and inclusive schools involves taking a systematic approach to tackle the issues faced by newcomer and underrepresented children (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007). This helps to ensure fairness and

inclusivity in education, minimize discrimination and conflicts, and strengthen social and cultural unity among diverse student groups (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007). Newcomer students, including refugees, face a range of challenges when adjusting to a new educational system and environment, including adapting to different learning and teaching styles, struggling with language acquisition in academic and social contexts, experiencing feelings of exclusion and isolation, and lacking adequate guidance and support from parents and educators (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). These difficulties are often attributed to the students' perceived inability to assimilate or adapt, placing the responsibility solely on them and their families to overcome. When newcomer students are left to navigate sociocultural and systemic barriers largely on their own, they become structurally marginalized (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). Therefore, creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment requires a comprehensive strategy involving collaboration among policymakers, schools, newcomer service providers, and community stakeholders. Together, they can identify effective solutions and offer support services and programs that are culturally responsive and embrace diversity (Margo, 2008). This strategy involves bringing together important individuals and groups to collaborate in ensuring that the process is thorough, inclusive, and long-lasting (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021) suggest a comprehensive framework for building inclusive and welcoming schools. The framework includes eight dimensions encompassing including leadership engagement, shared vision, open and inclusive process, link to existing priorities, empowering newcomer students, community engagement, professional development and celebration.

**Leadership Engagement.** To build welcoming and inclusive schools, leadership is crucial from administrators, teachers, and students. Administrators play a vital role by fostering new perspectives on diversity and inclusion, creating inclusive environments, promoting culturally responsive programs, and building relationships with newcomer families and the community. They demonstrate leadership through setting goals, planning resources, supporting teachers and students, and fostering collaboration. Teachers are also key leaders in creating welcoming environments as they have direct contact with students. Their commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity, along with modified planning and instruction for newcomer students, plays a significant role. Students also contribute to creating welcoming schools by establishing social relationships, fostering cross-cultural awareness, and participating in leadership roles. Engaging newcomer students in leadership opportunities can empower them and enhance overall school inclusivity (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Shared Vision.** Creating welcoming and inclusive schools requires a shared vision wherein the education and well-being of all young people, regardless of their background or abilities, is prioritized in school policies and practices. This collective goal can be established through several steps: first, implementing procedures and activities to address diversity, discrimination, and inclusion/exclusion issues within schools; second, inspiring all school members and stakeholders to collectively develop and support the vision, while providing assistance to those working towards it; third, inviting teachers and students to share their perspectives and strategies to enhance the school's welcoming environment and inclusivity; and fourth, clearly articulating and disseminating the vision in school policies, documentation, meetings with student and parent councils, and communication with stakeholders (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Open and Inclusive Process.** To create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for immigrant and refugee students in schools, it's crucial to consider the perspectives of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and government officials. Engaging the entire school community in an open and inclusive process allows for collective brainstorming of strategies to address challenges related to language, resources, and differing agendas. Key elements for success include sharing a common vision, providing genuine cross-cultural learning experiences, fostering social connections between local and newcomer students, and ensuring a participatory approach sensitive to the needs of newcomer families. Language plays a significant role in this process, as it not only reflects cultural identity but also serves as a vital tool for engagement and empowerment. Addressing language barriers through interpretation services and volunteer coordination can help promote inclusivity and facilitate communication with newcomer families (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Link to Existing School Priorities.** Schools typically organize their efforts and programs around six main areas: learning and teaching, leadership and management, student environment, school atmosphere, parental relationships, and community engagement. Improving inclusivity and creating welcoming environments in schools positively impacts performance across these disciplines. To maximize resources and efforts, it's important to align initiatives for building welcoming schools with existing priorities. For instance, if a school is focusing on implementing new curricula or promoting project-based learning, integrating welcoming school initiatives into these existing priorities can be more effective. By identifying common objectives and strategies, the work of building welcoming and inclusive schools can complement existing efforts and

engage all stakeholders effectively, acknowledging the challenges administrators and educators face in managing various demands and initiatives (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Empowering Immigrants and Refugee Students.** Immigrant and refugee children bring unique strengths and face distinct challenges. Their multicultural backgrounds often equip them with valuable language skills and cross-cultural awareness, fostering critical perspectives crucial in today's interconnected world. However, they also require supportive environments and caring educators to navigate the isolation and uncertainty they may experience, particularly refugee students. With appropriate guidance, these students can develop resilience, problem-solving skills, and adaptability, becoming valuable contributors to intercultural understanding.

Empowering them through recognition of their strengths and involvement in leadership roles and cultural activities fosters a sense of belonging and confidence. Schools can further support immigrant and refugee students by offering culturally responsive career planning, hiring bilingual staff, involving community organizations, providing teacher training on second-language education and trauma support, and implementing programs for at-risk students. These steps aim to enhance the integration, inclusion, and success of immigrant and refugee children in educational settings (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Community Engagement.** Partnering with immigrant and refugee settlement agencies and workers is crucial for supporting newcomer children and their families. These agencies possess unique expertise in settlement, integration, and trauma support, essential for addressing the diverse challenges faced by refugee children. Schools benefit from integrating the resources and programs offered by these agencies, as it enhances cultural recognition and fosters intentional integration of immigrant and refugee students. Conversely, schools that fail to engage with these agencies may struggle to provide adequate support and resources, leading to social

exclusion and academic challenges for newcomer students. Additionally, collaborating with immigrant and refugee parents is vital for bridging the gap between their children's school experiences and prior education in their home countries. Immigrant parents' knowledge and involvement can facilitate their children's transition, integration, and social inclusion within the school community. Strategies to engage immigrant and refugee parents include creating opportunities for involvement, providing parent leadership classes, integrating cultural perspectives into the curriculum, and validating diverse languages and practices. Furthermore, partnering with the wider community is essential for fostering social interactions, providing adult education programs tailored to immigrants' needs, and combating systemic racism and discrimination. Schools can collaborate with local media to promote diversity, inclusion, and raise awareness about the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee families, thus creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Professional Development.** The diversity gap between the student population and the teaching force in Canada remains significant, with the latter predominantly white and middle-class despite increasing student diversity due to immigration. Teachers often lack exposure to diverse cultural backgrounds, limiting their ability to effectively address cross-cultural issues in education. To support immigrant and refugee students, educators require ongoing professional development in areas such as global perspectives in education, cultural awareness, understanding immigrant issues, and meeting the diverse needs of refugee students, including trauma-sensitive approaches. Additionally, promoting education for global citizenship can help students navigate their complex identities and foster a sense of belonging in broader communities. Such efforts are crucial for creating inclusive and culturally responsive educational environments that meet the diverse needs of all students (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

**Celebration of Success.** Recognizing, rewarding, and celebrating successful initiatives in building welcoming and inclusive schools is essential. These efforts should involve key stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, administrators, local governments, community members, and supporting non-profit organizations. Public recognition highlights the importance placed on diversity, inclusion, and equity within schools and communities. These events serve as opportunities to showcase student achievements, engage stakeholders in decision-making processes, and inspire continued commitment to creating welcoming environments for all students (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, the journey toward building welcoming and inclusive schools is multifaceted and requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders involved in the education system. As emphasized by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014), an equitable and inclusive education system is one where every student is welcomed, respected, and supported to succeed in an environment of high expectations for learning. Achieving this vision entails prioritizing diversity, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing comprehensive support for each student's academic and personal growth.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored various aspects essential for creating inclusive schools. From understanding the rights of refugees under international conventions to examining the education system in Ontario and the specific challenges faced by refugee, we have delved into the complexities of integration and inclusion. It is evident that refugees students encounter numerous hurdles as they navigate the educational landscape, from language barriers to social exclusion and discrimination. However, amidst these challenges lies an opportunity for growth and transformation. By implementing immediate actions such as providing literacy and

numeracy support and offering emotional and mental health assistance, schools can address the immediate needs of refugee students. Moreover, long-term strategies like TIP, CRP, ESL, DI, and UDL can contribute to creating supportive and inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

In light of these challenges and opportunities, it becomes imperative to recognize that building inclusive schools is not a solitary endeavor but rather a collaborative effort involving policymakers, educators, community stakeholders, and newcomer service providers. By aligning efforts and fostering a shared vision, we can create environments where every student feels valued, respected, and empowered to reach their full potential. As we celebrate successful initiatives and recognize the importance of diversity and inclusion, we pave the way for a brighter and more inclusive future for all students within the Ontario education system.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter was divided into three sections. It began by describing the context of the study, followed by a conceptual framework and a literature review. In the context section, the causes of the refugee crisis were introduced, along with Canada's response to this global issue and the support received by refugees arriving in Canada. The Geneva 1951 Refugee Convention was described, highlighting the significant rights it provided for refugees, including the right to education. An overview of the education system in Ontario was then presented, emphasizing its commitment to equity and inclusion for all students, regardless of their background. The distinctions between ESL and ELD programs in Ontario schools were explored. The second section of the chapter was the conceptual framework defining trauma and its various types, discussing the implications of trauma on refugee students' sense of safety, belonging, and ability to engage in learning. The third section was dedicated to the literature review, addressing the

challenges faced by the integration of refugee students in Canadian classrooms, such as psychological difficulties, learning gaps, language barriers, discrimination, and social exclusion. The literature review also examined favorable educational conditions and strategies aimed at supporting the inclusion of refugee students in mainstream classrooms in Canada. Favorable educational conditions included providing extensive numeracy and literacy support, ensuring appropriate grade level placement, and offering emotional and mental health support. Interventions and strategies identified included TIP, CRP, DI, SEL, and UDL. These strategies can profoundly impact the lived experiences of refugee students by creating a supportive, inclusive, and responsive learning environment. TIP helps address the emotional needs of refugee students who may have experienced trauma, making them feel safer and more understood in school. CRP values their cultural identities and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and respect. Meanwhile DI meets their diverse learning needs by providing tailored support, allowing them to access the curriculum effectively. Additionally, SEL helps refugee students build resilience, self-regulation, and social skills, easing their adjustment to a new educational and social environment. Together, these strategies help refugee students feel supported academically, socially, and emotionally, which is essential for their overall well-being and success in school. This was followed by an overview of the experiences of teacher with refugee students. The chapter concluded by presenting the framework for building inclusive and welcoming schools as outlined by Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021).

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with an overview of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development. It then explains the rationale for selecting this theory to guide the study and discusses how it will be applied to address the research questions.

### **The Bronfenbrenner Bioecological System Theory of Human Development**

The Bronfenbrenner bioecological system theory of human development shown in Figure 1 was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, during the late 1970s (Eriksson et al., 2018). The theory experienced substantial modifications from its initial formulation in the late 1970s, as Bronfenbrenner consistently refined it until his passing in 2005. While originally designed to comprehend human development, his theory has found widespread application across various fields including refugee education (Eriksson et al., 2018). This theory views human development within a system of relationships that shapes the human's environment (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). Recently renamed as the "Bioecological System Theory," it supports the investigation of individuals within their ecosystem while examining the factors that influence their transition from one country to another (Stewart, 2012a). Since teachers are a major contributor to the ecosystem of the child, particularly refugee students given their lived experiences, the aim of study is to investigate the experiences of teachers with refugee students through examining some of the teacher centered interactions that take place in the child's ecosystem. Changes in any layer of the system can have ripple effects throughout. Therefore, when studying a human's development, it's essential to consider not only the individual's immediate environment but also interactions within the larger context (Paquette & Ryan, 2015).

When Bronfenbrenner first introduced his theory, it was made up of four environmental systems or levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. These levels consist of the individual's surrounding environments and values. Bronfenbrenner then introduced the chronosystem as an additional level to update the structure of the theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development serves as a holistic conceptual framework for understanding the factors that influence the development of refugee students, including the experiences of teachers educating them (Stewart, 2011). These students do not exist in isolation but are embedded within a larger social structure. The Bronfenbrenner bioecological system theory has been used extensively in research around supporting the education of refugees and immigrants (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Kendrick & Early, 2024; Moinolnolki & Han, 2017; Paat, 2013; Stewart, 2012b). This guiding framework can serve as a foundation of knowledge to detect ecological risks facing refugees, since it integrates the interactions of diverse environmental settings "in a person-process-context-time model" (Stewart, 2012b, p: 956). Refugee students are at the center of the interactive system where each structure represents a significant development context for refugee children.

### ***The Microsystem***

The microsystem is the layer closest to the child and consisting of the elements that are in direct contact with the individual including one's family, school, neighborhood, childcare (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This level encompasses bi-directional influences. For instance, the child's family can impact his/her behaviour and the child can impact the behaviour of the family. The interactions that take place within the same layer or between different layers are essential in this theory. However, the interactions that occur within the microsystem are the most powerful affecting the child's development (Drakenberg & Malmgren, 2013; Paquette & Ryan, 2015).

The engagements within microsystems are frequently intimate and play a pivotal role in nurturing and facilitating a child's development. A positive impact is suggested when a child maintains a close and supportive bond with their parents, while distant and unresponsive parental relationships may adversely affect the child. Nevertheless, not all microsystems are of the same influence. One's impact may be greater than another's. For instance, depending on the developmental milestones of the children, the influence of family may be greater than the influence of peers, or vice versa. Additionally, the number of microsystems increases as children grow older. For refugee students this level represents their daily reality and immediate socialization (Stewart, 2012b).

### ***The Mesosystem***

The mesosystem is the interrelations between different structures in the child's microsystem in which the child is an active participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). For instance, the interactions and connections between the refugee child's family and the teacher (Drakenberg & Malmgren, 2013). If a child's parents communicate with their teachers, these interactions will influence the child's development. In line with the ecological systems theory, favorable outcomes in a child's development are anticipated when there is a positive relationship between the child's parents and teachers. Conversely, if there is a lack of harmony between teachers and parents, detrimental effects on the child's development may ensue (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). The connections occurring at this level affect the social outcomes of refugee children in the host country (Stewart, 2012b).

### ***The Exosystem***

The exosystem includes the larger society system where the refugee child is not an active participant. However, the actions that occur at this level impact and are impacted by the events

that happen in other levels (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). The exosystem encompasses parents' workplaces, parents' friends, border agency, and the mass media (Stewart, 2012b). For example, considering the parents' workplace; the child is not directly involved in the events happening at the parents' workplace, but these actions can have a positive or negative influence on the child's development (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). A parent may come home with a temper due to an event that happened at work resulting in a negative impact on the child's development.

### ***The Macrosystem***

The macrosystem is the outer most layer in the system. It consists of cultural values, beliefs, political ideologies, and laws in which the child is growing up (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The impact of these principles has cascading effects on all the other interactions that occur throughout the system. For example, according to Paquette and Ryan (2015), if a certain culture believes that raising a child is a responsibility exclusive to the parents, then this culture is less likely to provide parents with resources to help them raise their child. This will affect the parents' ability or inability to carry out this responsibility. The macrosystem also comprises the socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic location, and ideologies of the culture (Drakenberg & Malmgren, 2013). Hence, a child living in a third-world country may experience a different development than a child living in a wealthier country.

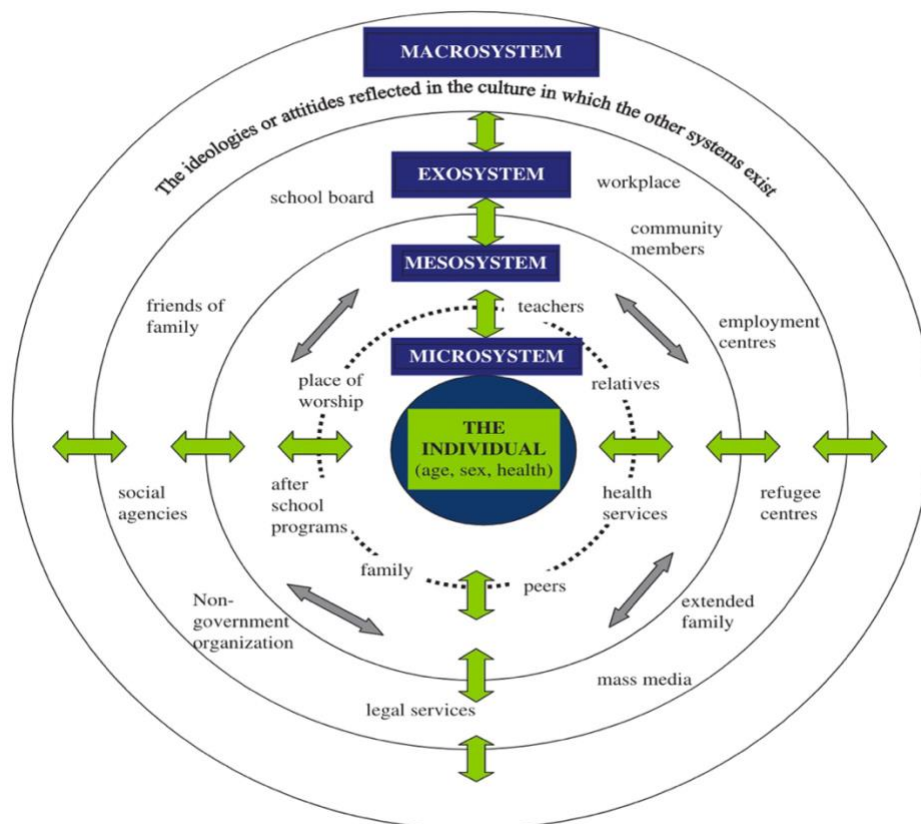
### ***The Chronosystem***

The chronosystem includes the environmental changes that can happen over a lifetime; including normal life transitions such as starting school or non-normative time transitions such as forced displacement or divorce of parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This level represents the dimension of time and the way it relates to the child's environment. The timing factor can be

external (life transition) such as a parent's death or internal (individual changes) such as the psychological changes that happen when the child gets older (Paquette & Ryan, 2015). For refugee children life transitions can also include cross-national migration, timing of migration, and duration in the host society (Stewart, 2012b).

**Figure 1**

*The Bronfenbrenner Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development*



*Note:* The Bronfenbrenner Bioecological Systems Theory. From Stewart, J. (2011). *Supporting refugee children: Strategies for educators*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

### **Rationale for Choosing the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory is unique in its comprehensive approach to understanding human development within the context of multiple interconnected systems. It

places particular emphasis on the ecological context and its influence on an individual's development. According to Stewart (2011), due to the wide unique traumatic experiences that characterize the lives of refugee children during the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration phases of their lives, it is essential to investigate these experiences as they occur within their ecosystem. The author indicates that for most children, changes in their environment happen gradually but for refugees, changes occur suddenly affecting all aspects of their lives including family, community, school, friends, culture, and the society in which they live. Hence, “the Bronfenbrenner’s model provides a framework to examine all of the environments that affect the individual as well as how these environments are connected and influence each other” (Stewart, 2011, p: 21). Some of the interactions that takes place in the refugee child’s environment influencing their development are centered around teachers. These interactions have a significant impact on the child's development. Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the experiences of teachers of refugee students by examining teacher-centered interactions that ultimately affect the child's development. Within the Bronfenbrenner bioecological system theory, refugee children have stronger connections with the microsystem and mesosystem. However, they are not active participants in the higher levels such as the exosystem and macrosystem. Although there may be multiple ways to model the interactions that occur within this social system (Stewart, 2012a), this project will focus primarily on the active roles teachers play in the development and education of refugee students. While Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory places the child at its center, it is well-suited to guide a study on teacher experiences with refugee students, even though the teachers themselves are not the primary focus of the theory. The aim of the study in to understand the experiences of teachers with refugee students. These experiences are going to be examined through the interactions that happen with

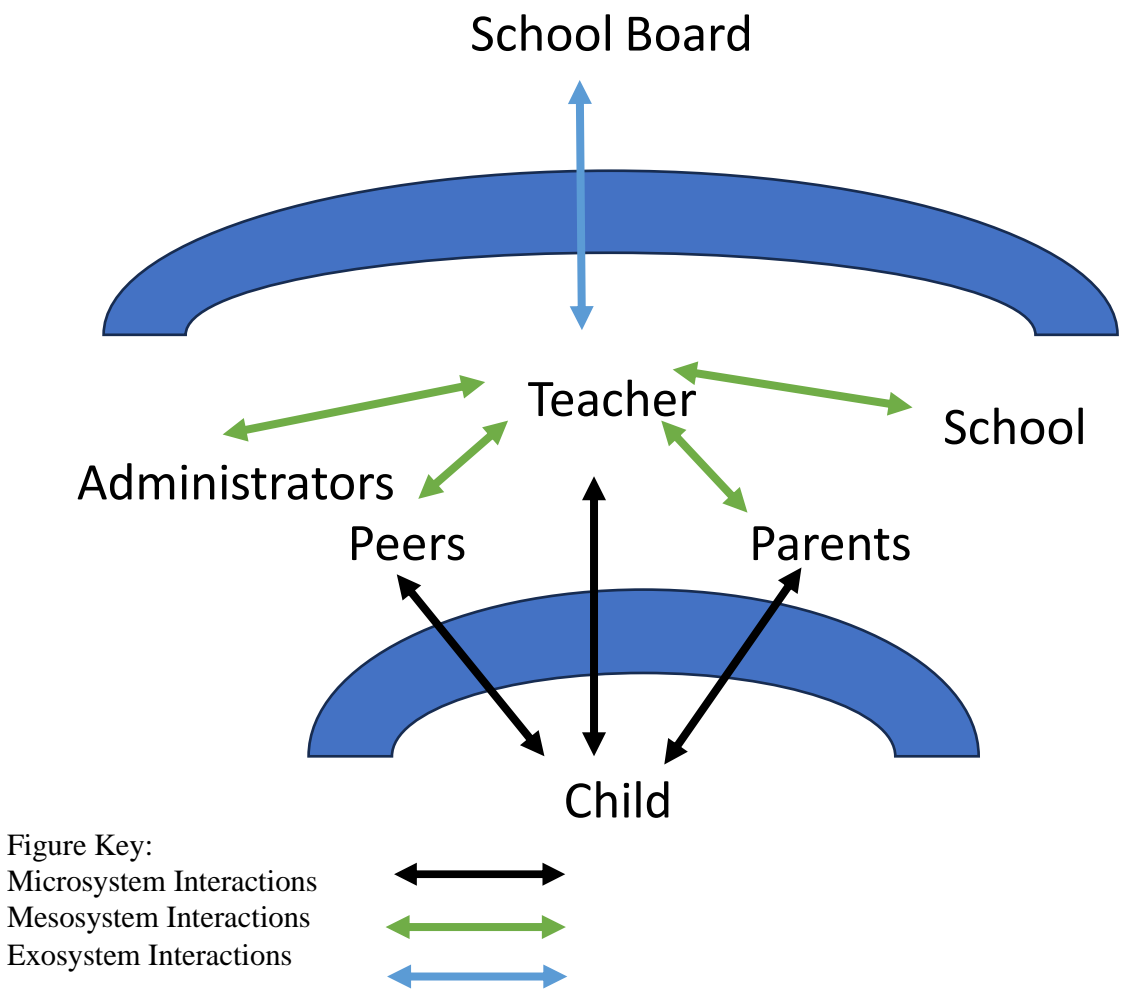
in the Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory particularly in the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. Refugee students, as a vulnerable population, remain at the core of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, as they are profoundly influenced by various systems within their environment. Yet, to fully understand the complexities of their educational experiences, this study will focus specifically on the interactions and experiences of teachers who support these students. By examining teacher-centered interactions, the study aims to gain insight into the ways in which teachers' perspectives, challenges, and strategies within these systems—such as the classroom, school, and broader community—affect their ability to support refugee students. Understanding educators' experiences, from their classroom approaches to their interactions with colleagues, school administrators, and support services, can reveal critical factors that shape the quality of education refugee students receive. This focus on teacher-centered interactions acknowledges that teachers play a pivotal role in shaping refugee students' educational outcomes. Through this lens, the study will explore how teacher experiences within each system level influence and ultimately contribute to the academic, social, and emotional development of refugee students. The study focuses on one particular aspect of the teacher—their experiences with refugee students—rather than their entire life context. The examined interactions are all teacher centered illustrated in Figure 2. In the microsystem, we will examine the interaction between teachers and their refugee students in addition to the interactions between refugee students and their peers from the teachers' perspective. In the mesosystem, the study will examine the interactions that take place between teachers and refugee students' parent, teachers and their colleagues, and teachers with school administrators. In the exosystem, this research will examine the interactions that take place between teachers and school boards. This approach highlights the ways in which different social systems—such as family, school, community, and

society—interact to shape and influence teachers’ experiences and roles when working with refugee students. Teachers do not operate solely within the classroom; they are part of a complex network of relationships and structures that affect how they interact with refugee students. For example, teachers’ interactions with parents, school administrators, and community organizations impact their understanding of and approach to supporting refugee students’ unique needs.

By examining these interactions, this study aims to reveal how various external and internal factors—such as cultural expectations, language barriers, institutional policies, and available resources—shape teachers’ experiences. These teacher-centered interactions play a crucial role in shaping the quality of education refugee students receive. Ultimately, by understanding the factors that influence teachers’ roles and perspectives, we can gain insights into how to better support teachers, which in turn fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that promotes the academic, social, and emotional development of refugee students.

**Figure 2**

*Teacher-Centered Interactions within the Bronfenbrenner Bioecological System Theory of Human Development*



**Using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory to Respond to the Research**

**Questions**

The application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory to address the research questions involves a nuanced and comprehensive approach to data collection, focusing on various levels of the ecological system. For the first research question, the emphasis is on the

microsystem, the immediate environment where direct interactions occur. Data collection will revolve around gaining insights into the dynamic interactions within the microsystem, particularly focusing on the experiences of teachers dealing with refugee students. This entails employing open-ended questions to delve into the intricacies of classroom dynamics, teaching strategies employed by educators, and the challenges they encounter in this specific context. By concentrating on the microsystem, the aim is to gather in-depth information about the immediate and direct influences on the students within the classroom setting.

Addressing the second research question involves delving deeper into the microsystem interactions, specifically examining the strategies and practices employed by teachers to address the educational needs of refugee students. This stage of data collection also extends into the mesosystem, exploring how teachers collaborate with various stakeholders, including parents, school staff, counselors, special education teams, and other professionals. By investigating interactions within the mesosystem, the goal is to comprehend the collaborative efforts and support networks that contribute to the holistic development and well-being of refugee students.

The third research question broadens the scope to the mesosystem and exosystem, encompassing the support structures at the school and school board levels respectively. Data collection at this level involves scrutinizing professional development programs, policies, and resources available to teachers, specifically those aimed at supporting refugee students. Examining the exosystem allows for an understanding of the broader influences and systemic factors that shape the educational environment, offering insights into the resources and support mechanisms that contribute to the overall well-being of students.

The application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory guides a systematic approach to data collection, traversing the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. This holistic perspective ensures a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influences and interactions that impact the educational experiences of refugee students.

### **Chapter Summary**

In summary, this chapter has established Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Through an exploration of its various levels, this chapter demonstrated the theory's relevance in understanding the complex environments influencing refugee students and the roles teachers play within these ecosystems. By applying this framework, the study can systematically examine teacher-centered interactions across different levels of the ecological system, revealing how immediate and broader social factors shape teachers' experiences with refugee students. This approach enables a nuanced investigation of how interactions within classrooms, schools, and broader institutional structures impact the educational and social-emotional development of refugee students, providing insights into how educators can be better supported in fostering inclusive, supportive learning environments.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of elementary teachers in grades 4-6 within Ontario public schools regarding their interactions with refugee students. The study seeks to investigate how these teachers support the educational needs of refugee students, assess their confidence, present their insights regarding their ability to meet these needs. It also intends to identify the strategies teachers use to support the educational needs of refugee students. Furthermore, the study aims to uncover support mechanisms and resources currently available to educators and additional resources and mechanisms that teachers believe would better assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities towards refugee students. In seeking to understand this phenomenon, the study addressed three research questions: 1) What are the teaching experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools regarding refugee students? 2) How are elementary teachers of grades 4-6 supporting the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools? 3) How do elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee students? What support mechanisms and resources are available to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities? What are the mechanisms and resources they wish were available?

In this chapter, we delve into the rationale behind the chosen research design, detailing the steps taken to gather and analyze data, and elucidating the ethical considerations that guided the entire research process. The chapter commences by discussing constructivism as the epistemology guiding this research. Then, multiple case-study methodology is introduced as the methodology adopted for this research. The subsequent sections of the chapter unfold the research method, detailing the participant selection process through purposeful sampling and the

rationale behind the chosen sample size. An overview of the participants is also illustrated in this chapter. The ethical considerations, data collection methods using semi-structured interviews, and the subsequent analysis process are outlined, emphasizing the strategies employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Epistemology**

Research is defined by Merriam (1988) as the process of “producing knowledge about the world” (p. 3). Via systemic inquiry, researchers collect, analyze, and interpret data to enhance their understanding of the world and empower individuals (Merten, 2010). Therefore, through research, we try to answer questions that we have about the world surrounding us. Scientific research can be considered through various research paradigms that make assumptions about the way the world functions (Park et al., 2020). We always contribute some of our beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our study, whether we are conscious of it or not (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These are firmly held beliefs that influence the kinds of problems we investigate, the types of questions we pose in our research, and the methods we employ while acquiring data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Research paradigms are the philosophies that guide the way research is conducted by influencing the ontology (the nature of reality and human beings), epistemology (how the nature of knowledge is conceived), axiology (the role and values of the research process), methodology (how the paradigm defines processes associated with conducting research) (Park et al., 2020).

Constructivism is a philosophical paradigm asserting “that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Adom et al., 2016, p: 2). Constructivism assumes that the understanding of the world is constructed based on individuals’ previous experiences and backgrounds (Liu & Chen,

2010). Hence, knowledge or meaning is created through interactions among beliefs, ideas, events, and activities that we encounter in our lives. From a constructivist perspective, the same situation can be perceived, interpreted, and explained differently among different individuals (Adom et al., 2016). Constructivism is used to support and guide studies that aim to comprehend how people make meaning of their daily lives in their natural environments (Liu & Chen, 2010).

Adopting a constructivist epistemology in this research highlights the diverse realities that teachers have and provides multiple perspectives on the experiences of teachers with refugee students. By adopting a constructivist epistemology, the research approach recognizes that teachers bring diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences into their teaching practices (Ayaz & Şekerci, 2015). It suggests that there is no singular, objective reality but rather multiple subjective realities shaped by individual perspectives. A constructivist approach encourages the exploration of various viewpoints and interpretations (Liu & Chen, 2010). In the context of this research, it implies that the study will not rely on a single, uniform narrative but will seek to understand the experiences of teachers with refugee students from different teachers' perspectives. The research specifically focuses on a subgroup of teachers—those working with refugee students. This indicates a recognition of the unique challenges and complexities involved in teaching refugee students who may have faced unique experiences such as displacement, conflict, or persecution. Adopting a constructivist epistemology for this research indicates recognizing and valuing the diverse realities that teachers bring into their roles. It involves acknowledging that there are multiple ways of understanding the experiences of teachers working with refugee students and seeking to capture these varied experiences in the study. This approach can contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes in teaching in such contexts.

Since constructivism assumes that meaning making is multiple and variable, researchers should look for complexity of views instead of narrowing the meaning to a few ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Adom et al. (2016), constructivism is associated with the qualitative research approach aiming at understanding a certain phenomenon under investigation from the perspective of the participants using various methods for data collection. Hence, qualitative research aligns with the constructivist epistemology by allowing for in-depth exploration and interpretation of participants' experiences, fostering a more holistic understanding of the subject matter.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

According to Merriam (1998), research serves as a method for generating understanding about the world, providing a pathway to gain additional insights into a phenomenon, concern, or challenge. By engaging in a structured exploration, researchers gather, scrutinize, interpret, and apply data to enhance their comprehension of the world and to enable individuals (Mertens, 2023). Research can be conducted to various purposes, including comprehending, depicting, forecasting, or managing phenomena in the realms of education or psychology, as well as enhancing the capabilities of individuals within those contexts (Mertens, 2023). Hence, research is a way to answer questions that we have about the world surrounding us.

Initially, researchers were focused on obtaining conclusive answers to their inquiries about the surrounding world. Within the positivist framework, still employed by researchers today, there is a belief that the social world can be examined akin to the natural world—through a value-free, objective approach that ultimately reveals universal laws describing consistent relationships between variables (Mertens, 2010). Research designs based on quantitative methods, which aim to establish definite connections among the studied variables, are commonly

employed to ascertain the "truth" or the accurate means of understanding and knowing the world (Mertens, 2010). Quantitative research is rooted in post positivism and seeks to establish definitive relationships among the variables being studied or the correct way of knowing and understanding the world (Mertens, 2010).

Researchers aim to address a variety of questions and pursue diverse forms of knowledge, necessitating the use of different approaches to find answers (Mertens, 2023). In this research project, I was not seeking to find definitive answers for my research questions, but to understand the daily lived experiences of teachers of refugee students. Therefore, I found that qualitative research was the best fit for my study since it allowed a meaningful exploration of the experiences of these teachers. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018):

Qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe narratively what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them. It identifies meaning-relevant kinds of things in the world—kinds of people, kinds of actions, kinds of beliefs and interests—focusing on differences in forms of things that make a difference for meaning. (p. 110)

Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) definition portrays qualitative research as an exploratory approach, seeking to uncover and understand the complexities of human behavior and experience. It emphasizes the importance of subjective meaning attributed by individuals to their actions, beliefs, and interests. Qualitative research aims to delve into the perspectives and interpretations of the participants.

Creswell and Poth's (2016) definition includes some of the elements present in Denzin and Lincoln's definition but places a greater emphasis on the research design. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research begins with underlying assumptions and the application of interpretive or theoretical frameworks that guide the exploration of research issues

related to the meanings made by individuals or groups to a social or human problem. In exploring these issues, qualitative researchers use a flexible qualitative inquiry method, gathering data in real-world settings that are closely aligned with the individuals and environments under study. The data analysis process is both inductive and deductive, aiming to identify and establish patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation incorporates the perspectives of participants, the reflective stance of the researcher, a nuanced description and interpretation of the problem, and highlights its contribution to existing literature or advocates for transformative change.

It was the researcher's belief that the knowledge being sought in the current study was best served through qualitative methods. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena (Merriam, 1998). The goal of this study was to enter the world of the participants and to learn about their experiences with refugee students. As such, the research was open-ended and was not trying to validate any specific pre-existing hypotheses. Teachers' experiences with refugee students are multifaceted and nuanced. Qualitative methods, such as interviews with open-ended questions, provided the space for teachers to express their experiences in detail, capturing the depth and richness of their narratives (Merriam, 1998). Besides, teachers' experiences are subjective, influenced by their personal backgrounds, teaching styles, and relationships with students. Qualitative research, grounded in constructivism, acknowledged and values these subjective perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It allowed for the exploration of multiple realities, recognizing that different teachers may interpret and respond to similar situations in unique ways. Additionally, teachers' experiences with refugee students involve complex meaning-making processes. Qualitative research, with its interpretive approach, was well-suited for exploring the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). It allowed the researcher to delve into the underlying beliefs, values, and emotions that shape teachers' experiences with their refugee students.

Hence, qualitative research was the best fit for understanding the experiences of Ontario grade 4 to 8 teachers with refugee students due to its ability to capture the depth of experiences, contextualize them within natural settings, acknowledge subjective perspectives, and provide a platform for the voices of participants and advocacy for change.

### **Rationale for Multiple Case-study Methodology**

This study was most suited to a multiple case study design. Case study is a qualitative research methodology used for acquiring deep understanding of a situation providing a rigorous description and analysis of a single case or multiple cases such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community within its real life context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Merriam (1988) defines a case study methodology as an inductive methodology that does not aim at testing a hypothesis but at achieving a deep understanding, insight, and interpretation of the phenomenon of interest. Case study is regularly adopted as a qualitative research methodology in the field of education (Yazan, 2015). In case study methodology, the interest is mostly in the “process rather than outcomes” (Merriam, 1988, p: 19). Hence, while conducting a qualitative case study, researchers should focus on providing a holistic and intensive description and analysis of the subject(s) involved in the study. Multiple case studies are used when the researcher collects and analyzes data from multiple cases (Merriam, 1998). Researchers generally use multiple case study methodology to find similarities and differences among cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, the researcher can analyse data within each case and across cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, the inclusion of multiple cases enhances the validity and generalization of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

There are three main perspectives to conducting a case study methodology held by three methodologists, namely Robert K. Yin, Sharan Merriam, and Robert E. Stake. They vary in their epistemological positions and case study designs. Although Yin (2002) does not explicitly specify his epistemological position, the way he approaches case study methodology seems to be rooted in the positivist orientation (Yazan, 2015). For instance, Yin (2002) emphasizes the importance of maximizing construct, validity, internal validity, and reliability throughout every step of the research. Additionally, Yazan (2015) indicates that Yin does not believe in the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research but in the common ground holding both research paradigms. On the other hand, Merriam and Stake's epistemology is oriented toward constructivism, believing that reality is not an object, and that qualitative research is based on the view that reality is constructed when individuals interact with each other in the social world (Yazan, 2015). In terms of designing a case study, Yin (2002) provides a very precise and comprehensive design for case study methodology with details for every step of the research process. Meanwhile, Stake (1995) argues for a more flexible design allowing researchers to undergo major changes. On the other hand, Merriam (1998) provides a one step at a time guide to case study methodology including conducting literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research problem, writing the research questions, and selecting the sample. Merriam's approach in case study design is a combination of both Yin and Stake's approaches (Yazan, 2015). Merriam's methodology "is flexible to a certain degree which is the influence of her coming from a qualitative tradition, but it is not as flexible as Stake's account" (Yazan, 2015, p: 141).

Case study methodology holds the potential to uncover novel insights and meanings applicable beyond the specific case. However, it's crucial to emphasize that in case study

research, the foremost responsibility of the researcher is to understand the individual case or cases, rather than making generalizations to the broader population (Stake, 1995). While some scholars, such as Yin (2002), characterize case studies as a method or a specific research process, others, such as Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998), place greater emphasis not on the procedural aspects but on the unit of analysis – the case. Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) consider that employing a case study methodology is more an indication of what is to be studied than a methodological choice. Regardless of the method or methods used, researchers opt to investigate a particular case within its specific context, considering the chosen case as one example among others and delineating it as a specific entity with boundaries. Hence, case study methodology provides an in-depth description and analysis of “bounded system” which is the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37). As articulated by Merriam (1998), these boundaries are essential to allow the researcher to precisely define and constrain the study's scope.

As a novice researcher positioning myself in the constructivist paradigm, and since Merriam (1998) provides clear guidelines to conducting qualitative case study research, the case study methodology in this research followed the recommendations presented by Merriam (1998). The current qualitative research study fits well into a case study methodology because it sought to understand the experiences of Ontario grades 4 to 6 teachers with refugee students. The study allowed us to learn more about the experiences of teacher with refugee students and the types of strategies and support teachers found useful in supporting refugee students. By studying these cases, insight into teachers' practices were gleaned and used to identify the types of support and capacities that could potentially help Ontario grades 4 to 6 teachers educate refugee. Case study methodology was well-suited for qualitative research on the experiences of grades 4-6 Ontario teachers with refugee students due to its ability to provide a rich exploration of context and a

holistic understanding of the complex and nuanced nature of these experiences. The methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of individual cases, capturing the unique challenges and successful practices of teachers within the educational and cultural setting. By focusing on specific cases, the methodology enabled the exploration of contextual factors, including school policies and support systems, which significantly influenced teachers' interactions with refugee students. The flexibility allowed in the data collection method, semi-structured interview, aligned with the dynamic nature of this research context. Furthermore, case study methodology permitted comparative analysis across multiple cases, offering practical insights and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in the education of refugee students.

## **Research Method**

### ***Recruitment***

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to recruit participants for this research study. Purposeful sampling is a method, used in qualitative research, allowing researchers to select a group of participants representing a range of possibilities that they are seeking to study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Purposeful sampling relies on recruiting information rich cases from which the researcher can learn a lot about the purpose of the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For this study, the teacher participants were purposefully selected based on the several criteria. The first criterion was that teachers were teaching grades 4 to 6 in Ontario public schools. I was particularly interested in the experiences of teachers working with grade 4-6 classes since these years are characterized by students' physical, academic, and social growth; in addition to children becoming more involved in the world around them (Finnan, 2008). Focusing on Ontario public schools ensured that all participants were employed at similar publicly funded institutions

within one geographic area. Additionally, teachers were working with the same grade level range and having the same policies and regulations shaping their experiences. The second criterion was that teachers must have taught refugee students for at least two full academic years. The aim is to capture the experience of teachers who are fairly new to the profession in addition to those who are more experienced. The years of experience of the participant ranged from 2 to 20 years. Teachers from different regions in Ontario may have varying experiences. The initial aim of the study was to recruit participants from various regions in Ontario for maximum variation and diversity in teachers' experiences. Maximum variation allows for capturing a more holistic view of the topic and analyzing it from multiple perspectives (Patton, 2015). However, despite targeted advertising for the study on various social media platforms including community groups of cities spanning across various parts of the province, the resulting participant pool included teachers from major urban centers in Southern Ontario. A possible explanation for this limitation in the sampling process is the settlement patterns of refugees within Ontario. Many refugees tend to settle in larger cities in Canada including Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, 2020). Major cities are perceived to have more job opportunities, social support, and cultural diversities. Therefore, the number of refugees maybe higher in urban centers compared to less densely populated areas. Consequently, teacher in major cities in Southern Ontario would have more refugee students in their classroom compared to educators in more rural regions. This could explain why teachers from outside of major cities were less likely to meet our second criteria.

In qualitative research, sampling is recommended until a saturation in data is achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Reaching a saturation in data means that the researcher is no longer obtaining new information from recruiting new participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Since

this study was rooted in constructivism and aimed at understanding the experiences of Ontario grades 4 to 6 teachers with refugee students, a total of six participants were recruited. Using a small sample allowed an in-depth understanding of the cases which is generally not possible through studying the larger samples (Subedi, 2021).

After receiving approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, recruitment was done in an informal manner through social media platforms including Facebook, LinkedIn, Craig's List, and Kijiji. A digital recruitment poster was created ([Appendix A](#)) and posted on various social media platforms for voluntary participation. This research project followed passive recruitment. Unlike active recruitment in which the researcher approaches and interacts directly with potential participants to enrol them in the study, passive recruitment encompasses distributing recruitment material on social media to attract participants to contact the researcher for participation (Gelinas et al., 2017). Potential participants contacted the researcher via email. After making sure that the participant fit the criteria mentioned above, the consent form was emailed to the participant to read and sign prior to scheduling an interview via zoom at a time the suit the participant and the researcher. The researcher also asked for a verbal consent prior to the onset of the interview. Each participant was given a 40 \$ gift card of their choice as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. It is worth mentioning that upon advertising for the research project on different social media platforms, the researcher received many scam emails reaching up to 400 a day. It took a significant amount of time to go through the large body of emails and identify genuine participants. Through this complex process, the researcher may have missed some potential genuine participants.

### *The Participants*

In case study methodology, “the case” represents a significant importance because it serves as a focal point for an in-depth exploration and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this research, the cases in multiple case study methodology represent real-life individual entities wherein the researcher must dive into their unique features. Table 1 represents the participants’ demographic and teaching experiences, whereas Table 2 demonstrates the participants’ background and school characteristics. Pseudonyms were given to all the participants. This study encompassed a diverse group of participants, each bringing their distinctive experiences to the research. Amy has 17 years of teaching experience and has worked with refugee students for 7 years. She currently teaches a 5th-grade class in the ELD program. The ELD program encompasses students who had limited access to education, hence having significant learning gaps in literacy and other subjects (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Amy’s 12 students are refugees with significant language barriers and learning gaps. Additionally, Amy’s school is in an urban community with low socioeconomic status (SES) and high cultural diversity. She brings a wealth of experiences given her unique class of 12 refugee students who as part of the ELD program. Similarly, Sarah has 3 years of teaching experience and 2 years of working with refugee students. She teaches a 4th-grade class with 7 refugee students in a similar urban setting. On the other hand, Vanessa has 17 years of teaching experience and focuses on ESL teaching in an urban school with high SES and cultural diversity. ESL programs are designed to support students who speak a language other than English as their first language, or who speak a variety of English that's significantly different from what's used in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Vanessa brings a unique perspective to the study as an ESL teacher with extensive experience in teaching refugees. During our interview, Vanessa offered an invaluable

comparison between her experience in her current and previous schools highlighting changes in funding and support within her school board. Viviane is another participant with 17 years of teaching experience with refugee students. Throughout her career she taught almost all subjects. This academic year, she is teaching French Immersion for grade 4. Samreen, is a first-generation immigrant who had international teaching experience before moving to Canada. She has a total of 20 years of teaching experience and 4 years working with refugee students. Samreen teaches 7th grade in an urban setting with mixed SES. Finally, Fatima is another participant who is also a first-generation immigrant whose family moved to Canada when she was very young. Fatima has 2 years of teaching experience with refugee students. She teaches a 6th-grade class with 5 refugee students in an urban school with low SES and high cultural diversity. Fatima works in the same school she attended when her family first moved to Canada. Both Samreen and Fatima immigrated from South Asian countries bringing valuable perspectives and insights as immigrant teachers to the study. Therefore, the six participants in this study provide a diverse range of expertise and backgrounds providing distinctive insights into the experiences of grades 4 to 6 Ontario teachers educating refugee students.

**Table 1*****Participants' Demographics and Teaching Experience***

Participants' Pseudonym	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Experience with Refugee Students	Number of Refugees in their Current Classroom	Grade Level
Amy	17 years	7 years	12	Grade 5 ELD
Sarah	3 years	2 years	7	Grade 4
Vanessa	17 years	17 years	Not applicable	ESL grades 4 and 5
Vivian	17 years	17 years	1	Grade 4
Samreen	20 years	4 years	2	Grade 6
Fatima	2 years	2 years	5	Grade 6

**Table 2***Participants' Background and School Characteristics*

Participants' Pseudonym	School Location, Socioeconomic Status (SES), and Diversity	Educational Background	School Subject(s)
Amy	Urban, low SES, high cultural diversity	Undergraduate in Psychology, Sociology, and History + Bachelor of Education in Australia	ELD program
Sarah	Urban, low SES, high cultural diversity	Undergraduate in English Literature+ Undergraduate in Criminology+ Bachelor of Education	English and Physical Education
Vanessa	Urban, high SES, high cultural diversity	Undergraduate in Psychology + Bachelor of Education+ ESL part 1+ Physical Education part 1+Teacher Librarian part 1	ESL Teacher
Vivian	Rural, mid to high SES, medium cultural diversity	Undergraduate in Languages + Bachelor of Education	French Immersion
Samreen	Urban, mixed SES, high cultural diversity	Undergraduate in Commerce + Masters in Education	Math, English, Science, History, and Geography
Fatima	Urban, low SES, high cultural diversity	Undergraduate majored in Neuroscience and double minored in Economics and Biology +Master of Teaching +Math part 1+ Additional Basic Qualification	All subjects except French and Library

### ***Data Collection***

For this study, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Ontario teachers (grades 4 to 6) experienced in teaching refugee students. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), an interview is a conversation-based social engagement. During an interview, knowledge is created through the exchange of ideas between the interviewer and the interviewee. Creswell and Poth (2016) indicate that the purpose of a qualitative research interview is to learn more about the participants' lived reality, to understand the world from their perspective, and to unravel the meaning of their experiences.

Interviews can be categorized by structure (Merriam, 1998). They can be highly structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. In highly structured interviews, the wording and order of the questions are pre-determined. Structured interviews are more like “an oral form of a written survey” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 110). Meanwhile, unstructured interviews are “more like a conversation” where the questions are flexible, and the researcher does not know much about the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 110). Besides, unstructured interviews are generally used to learn about the phenomenon to create interview questions for another interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews, used in this study, were interviews that involve flexible open-ended questions and follow-up probes to delve into participants' responses and the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). When a researcher wants to learn more about a participant's particular perspective rather than a broad understanding of a phenomenon, semi-structured interviews are ideal to collect data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). One of the main advantages of semi-structured interviews is their ability to be targeted while allowing the investigator to freely explore relevant concepts that may arise throughout the interview (Adeoye-

Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). For this study, semi-structured interviews were an ideal data collection method since they allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and perspectives. Teachers could provide detailed accounts of their interactions with refugee students, including challenges they faced, strategies they employed, and the impact of their experiences on their teaching practice. By allowing for open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews enabled the gain of insight into the specific contexts in which teachers work with refugee students. This included factors such as school policies, resources, and school dynamics, which could significantly influence teachers' experiences. Additionally, teachers were able to express their opinions, concerns, and suggestions, which contributed to more meaningful and relevant findings.

Semi structured interviews also align with Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on exploring multifaceted, contextual human development across ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). They allow for flexibility in addressing different levels within the theory, providing an in-depth examination of how teachers support refugee students, considering the ecological context. This approach ensures participants' perspectives and unique contextual themes are central to the research (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Each participant sat for an interview, lasting around 90 minutes. A relatively long interview in a multiple case study qualitative research was key to enhance data depth and richness (Patton, 2002). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for ongoing analysis via a software called Otter.ai. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher proofread the transcripts to rectify any discrepancies. Transcripts were then shared with participants for member checks before data analysis to ensure accuracy in representing their experiences and opinions. Member checks is an essential way to measure credibility. Member checks are also

known as respondent validation. It allows participants to verify the interpretation made through data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). All participants responded to the member check, but none of them made any changes to their transcripts.

The interview questions created for this study ([Appendix B](#)) were based on a synthesis of the review of the literature on the education of refugee students in Ontario and the experiences of teachers with refugee students. The interview questions were also guided by Bronfenbrenner's (2007) model of human development. The questions were designed to elicit the lived experiences of teachers with refugee students, the strategies they use to support the educational needs of these students, and the types of support available for elementary teachers in Ontario. The interviews examined interactions in the microsystem—between refugee children and their teachers, and between the children and their peers. Additionally, they explored interactions in the mesosystem, encompassing those between teachers and parents, as well as between teachers and other school staff including administrators. Furthermore, the interviews investigated interactions in the exosystem, specifically between teachers and the school board. Some interview questions were taken from other studies including Barret and Berger (2021), Smith (2009), and Stewart (2021). Other interview questions were created by the researcher and guided by the conceptual framework, the literature, and the research questions. Prior to data collection, the interview questions were piloted on one teacher to make sure that they were answerable and produced sufficient data. Minor adjustments were needed to improve the clarity of the questions to the participants.

### ***Overview of Information Needed to Conduct the Study***

This study, comprising multiple case methodology, examined the experiences of teachers in grades 4 to 6 in Ontario with refugee students. To understand the experiences of these

educators, three research questions were investigated. 1) What are the teaching experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools regarding refugee students? 2) How are elementary teachers of grades 4-6 supporting the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools? 3) Do elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee? What support mechanisms and resources are available to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities? What are the mechanisms and resources they wish were available? The data collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants is demonstrated in Table 3. The interview questions were guided by the literature and the Bronfenbrenner bioecological systems theory. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the participants was categorized into five groups: demographic questions, questions about the levels of teachers' readiness, questions about the interactions in the microsystem, questions about the interactions in the mesosystem, and questions about the interactions in the mesosystem and the exosystem.

**Demographic Questions.** Inquiring about the participants' experience with refugee students and the current number of refugee students in the participants' class helped in understanding the level of exposure and experience teachers had with refugee students. This information shed light on the teacher's familiarity and comfort level in addressing the needs of refugee students. Besides, information about the school's location (urban/suburban/rural), socioeconomic status (SES), and cultural and racial diversity, provided insights into the broader context in which teaching and learning took place. The school environment could significantly influence the experiences and challenges faced by both teachers and students, especially those from refugee backgrounds.

**Questions About the Levels of Teachers' Readiness.** There were questions about the various training the participants received. Questions about training in Trauma Informed Pedagogy (TIP), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Differentiated Instruction (DI), and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) revealed the participants' readiness to address the diverse needs of refugee students. Training in these areas or other relevant areas could equip teachers with strategies to support students from various backgrounds effectively. These questions provided insight into the specific classroom environment and any additional support structures in place for refugee students with unique learning needs.

**Questions About the Interactions in the Microsystem.** The questions about teachers' experiences with refugee students, their feelings when they receive a refugee student in their class, and the strategies they employ to help refugee students feel safe and successful directly addressed interactions within the microsystem. Inquiring about the strategies teachers used to support refugee students' emotional well-being and academic success, as well as the effectiveness of these strategies, related to the microsystem's influence on child development. Additionally, teachers' actions within the microsystem could significantly impact refugee students' socioemotional development and academic achievement. Hence, questions about creating, teaching, and modifying lessons to address refugee students' needs highlighted the teacher's role in adapting the microsystem to better support refugee students within their immediate learning environment. Moreover, there were questions about the differences in behaviors and needs between refugee students and other students, teachers' responses to these needs, and the strategies used to help students regulate their behavior. These questions delved into the dynamics of the microsystem and the way teachers navigated these differences within their classrooms. The semi-structured interviews also included questions on the strengths refugee

students bring, areas in which they may be lacking, and the way teachers maintained high expectations from their students despite potential deficits. These questions explored the interplay between individual characteristics and the immediate environment within the microsystem. The interviews also included questions about specific incidents where teachers felt either incapable or confident in supporting a refugee student academically or emotionally. Such questions provided insights into the quality of teacher-student interactions within the microsystem and their impact on student outcomes. Finally, within this category, there were questions about refugee students' social integration in school, including their relationships with peers and strategies teachers used to encourage peer relationships. The responses provided by the participants to these questions examined the way the microsystem influenced social development and peer interactions among refugee students. This category of questions allowed for understanding the experiences of Ontario grade 4-6 teachers with refugee students. Teachers' experiences were examined within the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of child development, focusing on the way the interactions within the microsystem can influence on refugee students' well-being and academic success.

**Questions About the Interactions in the Mesosystem.** Such questions were vital in a study. They focused on interactions within the mesosystem, exploring teachers' relationships with refugee students' parents. To understand communication strategies, their effectiveness, and their impact on teaching efforts, the questions examined the teacher-parent relationships and its implications on students' academic success. Additionally, there were questions that inquired about the parental involvement in their children's learning and the school community providing insights into the mesosystem's role in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of refugee students.

**Questions About the Interactions in the Mesosystem and Exosystem.** The semi-structured interviews inquired about the resources and support, from school administration (mesosystem) or school board (exosystem), available for teachers educating refugee students. The responses to these questions shed light on the sources of support and professional development opportunities available for teachers to support them in educating refugee students. The participants were also asked to evaluate the adequacy of their teacher education programs in preparing them to teach students from various cultures. Additionally, the participants were asked for their opinion on the desired training to support them in teaching refugee students. They identified areas for improvement in teacher preparation and professional development. Finally, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with refugee students and provide potential advice for teachers working with refugee students for the first time. These reflections and insights provided valuable guidance and perspectives for educators facing similar challenges. In conclusion, this category of questions helped provide a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and support systems encountered by Ontario grade 4-8 teachers in teaching refugee students. They informed efforts to improve teacher preparation, school supports, and educational outcomes for refugee students.

**Table 3***Information Required to Respond to the Research Questions*

Research Question	Information required	Methods
What are the teaching experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools regarding refugee students?	Information about the dynamic interactions within the microsystem, particularly focusing on the experiences of teachers dealing with refugee students. Information about classroom dynamics, teaching strategies employed by educators, and the challenges they encounter in this specific context.	Semi- Structured Interviews
How are elementary teachers of grade 4 to 6 supporting the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools	Information about the strategies and practices employed by teachers to address the educational needs of refugee students within the microsystem and the way teachers collaborate with various stakeholders, including parents, school staff, counselors, special education teams, and other professionals within the mesosystem.	Semi- Structured Interviews
How do elementary teachers of grades 4 to 6 feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee students? What support mechanisms and resources are available to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities? What are the mechanism and resources they wish were available?	Information about the support structures at the school (mesosystem) and school board (exosystem) levels including professional development programs, policies, and resources available to teachers, specifically those aimed at supporting refugee students.	Semi- Structured Interviews

### *Data Analysis and Synthesis*

Data analysis in case study methodology is centered around “conveying an understanding of the case” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p: 223). Merriam (1998) emphasizes the importance of analyzing data while being collected. She indicates that collection and analysis of data are iterative and fluid processes. However, it should not be assumed that analysis concludes upon completion of data collection. On the contrary, Merriam (1998) insists that analysis intensifies as the study advances, even after all data have been gathered. Therefore, for this research, the data emerging naturally from the participants’ experiences was analyzed using the constant comparative method where each interview was completed and analyzed before moving on to the next participant (Merriam, 1998). The method's basic strategy is to do what its name implies, and that's to constantly compare. The researcher should begin by describing a particular incident in an interview, field notes or document and compare it to another event from the same set of data or other sets. These comparisons lead to preliminary themes which are then compared to each other and to other cases. Hence, “comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

Themes based on the conceptual framework were created to guide the data analysis. These themes include interactions between refugee children and their teachers, the children and their peers, the teacher and the parents, and the teacher and the administration and school board. During the process of data analysis, other themes and subthemes emerged. These themes are explained and elaborated in the next chapter.

Following Merriam’s (1998) recommendations, creating themes started with diving into the first interview transcript of the study. As I read through, I jotted down thoughts, reactions, and questions in the margins next to parts of the text that caught my attention as interesting,

potentially important, or relevant to the research. After going through the entire transcript, I reviewed the margin notes and tried to group together those that seem related. Then, I moved on to the next interview transcript and repeated the process. Keeping in mind the groupings identified from the first data set, I checked to see if they appear in this new set. I made a separate list of comments, terms, and notes from the second transcript and compared it to the first transcript. These two lists were then combined into a single master list of concepts derived from both sets of data. This master list was as a basic outline or classification system that reflected the recurring patterns or themes in the study. The themes and subthemes into which subsequent items were organized. The same process was repeated for all transcripts. The themes and subthemes were used to write the story of each teacher regarding their experience in teaching refugee students. Hence, individual profiles for each case were created based on the researcher's interpretation. These profiles are presented the readers in the following chapter. Finally, a cross-case analysis was performed to identify similarities and differences in teachers' experiences.

### **Ethics**

This research required approval from the University of Ottawa Board of Ethics prior to commencing recruitment and data collection. The researcher adhered to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2, 2014). There were no changes to the research core or process that required informing the University Board of Ethics. Recruitment was voluntary and anonymous. All interviews were conducted outside teachers' working hours and outside school settings. Hence, there was no need to obtain any school board approval. All research data remained private and confidential. Only the researcher and the Human Research Ethics Unit had access to the data. The data were anonymous and encrypted. Per University of Ottawa's Ethics Board rules, personally identifiable information

will be deleted after five years or upon dissertation completion. All data will be password-protected and stored on the researcher's device, inaccessible to others.

Central to these protective measures was obtaining informed consent. It was crucial that each participant understood the purpose and scope of the study. Therefore, it fell upon the researcher to thoroughly explain the study details, including potential benefits and risks, enabling participants to make a fully informed choice regarding their participation. In this study, the researcher carefully went over the informed consent form with each participant prior to commencing the interview. Participants read and signed the consent form before the interview ([Appendix C](#)). The researcher also requested and verbal consent before the start of the interview.

In this study, participants shared personal experiences regarding their interactions with refugee students, a process that might have evoked emotional discomfort. To address this concern, various safety measures were implemented. Participants were assured that they were not obligated to answer all interview questions and could opt out of any questions that made them feel uneasy. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable at any point. Additionally, participants were provided with resources for counseling services should they require additional support following the interview. Besides, participants were guaranteed confidentiality, with pseudonyms used in the dissertation and any identifying details altered to protect their privacy.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative studies, the researchers must ensure that the data are trustworthy and believable (Merriam, 1998). Several indicators were considered to ensure the trustworthiness of the study including credibility, also called internal validity, and transferability.

## *Credibility*

Credibility is the correspondence between how the participants view the phenomenon and how the researchers interpret the multiple realities of the phenomenon (Mertens, 2010). There are several ways to ensure credibility in qualitative research. In this study, I used member checks, triangulation, and reflexivity.

**Member Checks.** Member checks is an essential way to measure credibility. Member checks are also known as respondent validation (Merriam, 1998). It allows participants to verify the interpretation made through data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). The participants were provided with a copy of their transcript of their interviews and the case study report draft to check and verify its content. Participants were invited to review these materials and provide feedback, corrections, or additional insights to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately represent their perspectives and experiences. Member checks allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the data collected and analyzed,

**Triangulation.** Triangulation was another strategy used in this research to enhance credibility. Triangulation encompasses collecting data from multiple sources to obtain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998). To enact triangulation, participants were recruited from diverse school boards across Southern Ontario, encompassing both urban and rural school settings. By intentionally selecting participants from different school boards, the study aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to the education of refugee students. This approach allowed for the exploration of potential differences or similarities in the experiences of teachers working with refugee students across different contexts. The research project recruited participants from different cultural backgrounds and different teaching experiences. Two participants were first generation

immigrants from South Asia where the remaining five participants were white Canadians from European descent. The participants also included mainstream classroom teachers, an ESL teacher, and an ELD teacher. This variation in teachers' experiences contributed to a broader understanding of the challenges, strategies, and support mechanisms employed by teachers working with refugee students in different educational settings.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity in qualitative research refers to the researcher's awareness and acknowledgment of their own biases, perspectives, and influences on the research process and findings. It involves critically examining one's own positionality, assumptions, values, and prior experiences that may shape the research process, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Reflexivity encourages researchers to be transparent about their role and perspective in the research, recognizing that their subjectivity inevitably influences every aspect of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In this study, the researcher openly acknowledged her own background as an elementary teacher who had prior experience working with refugee students. This acknowledgment was crucial as it recognized the potential influence that the researcher's personal experiences and biases may have on the outcomes of the research. As an individual with firsthand experience in the field, the researcher may have held certain preconceptions or assumptions about the topic under investigation. Despite being aware of this potential influence, the researcher made a concerted effort to maintain objectivity and minimize bias throughout the research process. This included striving to keep an open mind and approach the study with a willingness to challenge their own assumptions. The researcher aimed to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment for participants, ensuring that their voices were heard without any undue influence or interference.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is also known as external validity. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied or generalized to other contexts or settings beyond the specific research participants and conditions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this case, the researcher was transparent in every step of the research process and provided detailed descriptions of the research methods, participants, and context, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own settings. Additionally, the researcher provided a thick description of the research findings, to facilitate the reader's understanding and application of the findings to their own context.

Transferability can also be enhanced through maximum variation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Maximum variation in the participants school boards and experiences was enacted to capture a breadth of perspectives and experiences, thereby enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the epistemological foundation, research methodology, and ethical considerations of a qualitative research study aiming to understand the experiences of Ontario grade 4 to 8 teachers working with refugee students. The chapter emphasized the significance of epistemological perspectives, particularly constructivism, in shaping the research paradigm and justifying the use of qualitative methods. The chosen methodology was a multiple case study design, aligning with a constructivist epistemology, with a detailed explanation of its relevance and approach. The chapter also outlined the purposeful sampling procedure, data collection through semi-structured interviews, and the subsequent analysis process. Ethical considerations, including participant recruitment, confidentiality, and data security, were thoroughly addressed.

Potential limitations, such as personal bias, were acknowledged, and strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, such as member checks and triangulation, were discussed.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### Introduction

In this chapter, the profiles of the six participants are presented. During the interviews the teachers shared their personal stories focusing on their experiences with refugee students and their parents. They elaborated on the strategies they used to support the educational needs of refugee students and facilitate their integration into the school community. The participants also talked about the resources that they felt were helpful to them along their journey as well as the things that they felt had challenged them along the way. They reflected on the support they are receiving from peers, administrators, school staff, and school boards. The participants also reflected on the types of support they feel could be valuable to help them respond to refugee students' educational needs. While each participant's story and perspective are unique, there are many similarities as well. The case study profiles were organized based on themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The themes and subthemes were also guided by the conceptual framework. After presenting all the case study profiles, a cross-case analysis will be presented in the subsequent chapter to highlight commonalities and differences in the participants' experiences.

### Case #1: Amy's Profile

Amy is an educator with around 17 years' experience in the field of education. She started with four years of teaching in Nunavut, then spent three years teaching English in Japan. The participant holds an undergraduate degree in psychology, sociology, and history, followed by teacher's college at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She has been with her current school board for almost a decade, nearing her tenth year there. She has 7 years' experience teaching refugees.

Amy's current school is in an urban area with high diversity and relatively low SES. She explains, "The cultural diversity here is striking, with a significant portion of students coming from displaced families from Syria and Afghanistan." She estimates that almost two third of her students are from Muslim backgrounds, while the remaining are from diverse cultural origins. Amy teaches the English Language Development (ELD) program, catering to students from displaced families with limited or no prior schooling. She indicates that all her students are refugees with minimal educational backgrounds, sometimes only having attended school for a few weeks in their home countries. Despite the challenges posed by such circumstances, Amy expresses dedication to providing intensive support to her students in literacy, oral language, mathematics, and integrated social studies and science.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Amy shares her experience with various training sessions including training on TIP and CRP, in addition to other resources that helped her support refugee students. Regarding TIP, Amy attended a couple of information sessions on supporting children with trauma organized by a local organization supporting refugees and immigrants. One session focused on understanding the experience that trauma can have on the individual and navigating a society, and the second one looked more at the resources that are available in the city. These resources could then be passed along to the families of refugee students. Despite finding the sessions beneficial, she expresses frustration with the lack of support and resources provided by the school board.

"The board has done a one-hour session on trauma informed teaching. I'll be blunt with you, it was really frustrating as a teacher who had had a lot of experience working with children who have dealt with trauma, both from those who are refugees, as well as from Inuit students up north. Because in the hour, they covered the basics of the impact it has on the brain, but there

was a lot of you, as the teacher, must solve it all and by the way, we're not providing any resources.”

Amy finds it very frustrating and dismissive of the problems when the training provided by the board does not provide any tangible support or resources and leaves it all on “teachers’ shoulders”. She indicates that there's a lot of “fluff stuff” that the board says they are doing, but then teachers never actually see the outcome from it. According to Amy, there's a lot of public relations. The board announces they're doing great initiative, but in the classroom, teachers are not seeing it. Some of the school board’s initiatives include one-hour sessions on trauma-informed teaching focusing on the effect of trauma on human brain and culturally responsive pedagogy

Amy shares insights from a book she received from a colleague, which explored the effects of trauma on child development. The book opened Amy’s eyes to the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by students who have experienced trauma.

“I found that very valuable even this year, because I sometimes see that with some of the students I work with, where they're missing some of that development that would happen during the younger years when you're playing with peers in a classroom situation, and you're developing your skills and refugee students haven't had that experience. But they get very good at reading the people around them. Because you have to! That's survival that literally comes down to an ability to survive and navigate in a situation where you're worried about your own safety, you're worried about, what's going to happen to you and what's going to happen to your family as well.”

Amy’s knowledge of TIP theories and practices comes from her own self training and the training she received while teaching in Nunavut. Amy also discusses her training in CRP. While

acknowledging brief token training sessions organized by the school board, she emphasizes the value of more hands-on approaches, particularly highlighting her training experience in Nunavut. During Amy's teaching time in Nunavut, funding was provided for teachers to seek out experts in specific areas of interest. She recounts how her principal facilitated her attendance at a training session on "social thinking," which she later applied to her work with students beyond her original context of teaching junior autism. During her teaching time in Ontario, Amy elaborates on her participation in CRP training sessions through Additional Qualification (AQ) courses. She indicates that these courses have various levels of effectiveness ranging from "a quick read of an article" to others that are very well handled. Amy shows her appreciation to a course where the participants had to look at the present standard of reading in the society and evaluate how the reading level may create a disadvantage for students who are coming in with unique lived experiences. Amy felt that the professor at that training did a good job making the participants evaluate what they think is best practice.

On the other hand, Amy does not feel that her teacher education program in Melbourne, Australia prepared her to teach diverse students. She explains, "It didn't prepare me specifically for children with trauma or for children who are refugees." She notes a lack of specific training on these topics. However, Amy acknowledges that the strategies and hands-on learning she gained can be applied to support refugee students. Amy also finds gaps in her teacher education program, especially in special education training. She struggles to recall any relevant special education courses that were provided during her teacher education program.

Despite her frustration with the lack of tangible support and resources provided, Amy is dedicated to understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by students who have experienced trauma.

## ***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner theory. It is divided into seven subthemes including: initial feelings towards having refugees in class, strategies used to make refugee students feel safe, strategies used to academically support refugee students, students' behaviour, strengths vs areas of growth, instances of confidence vs incapability, and experiences with students' trauma.

**Initial Feelings Towards Teaching Refugee Students.** Amy reflects on her feelings when anticipating having refugee students in her class. She explains, "Not anxious, definitely not anxious. And I wouldn't say confident because every child is coming in with a different story and different circumstances." She explains that each student's unique background and response to trauma makes her feel more curious and excited than confident. Amy views her role as an educator as an opportunity for problem-solving and support, despite the challenging circumstances her students have faced.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** Amy elaborates on several strategies she employs to create a safe environment for her refugee students including creating a warm and safe classroom environment and employing restorative circles.

**Creating a Warm and Safe Classroom.** Amy explains that her school is an open concept. She thinks that an open classroom is not ideal for her ELD class. She requested from her principal to have her classroom in a separate portable to avoid the noise and chaos. In the portable classroom, Amy has more control over creating a calm environment that is both safe and welcoming. She highlights the importance of having control over the physical space to create sense of calmness, especially for students who may be sensitive to external stimuli. Hence, Amy

creates a flexible seating plans with tables instead of desks. The tables allow for more mobility and choice among her students. This flexibility also allows students to move around freely and choose their preferred workspace creating a comfortable learning environment. Moreover, Amy implements classroom organization similar to those implemented in kindergarten classes. She has a “comfy cushion center” for students who may need emotional support or simply a quiet space to recharge. Additionally, she provides various seating options, including cushions and lap desks during independent work time to allow students to choose a space where they feel most comfortable and productive.

***Restorative Circles.*** Amy describes implementing restorative circles to resolve conflict in her classroom environment. She shares her experience of undergoing training on restorative practices at her previous school. During her training, Amy learned to move away from traditional punitive approaches of disciplining children to facilitating conversations. These conversations aim at rebuilding trust among students after conflict. Amy explains that she learned about this strategy after a aboard training session,

“This strategy that was taught to me, it wasn't through the board training, but it was the trainers who came in with board consultants. They were external. They did the official training that the board wanted, but then afterwards, a bunch of us who were associated with Kinder because I was teaching Kinder at that time went to them and said, how do we take this and apply it to little kids who don't have the same grasp of these bigger concepts. And they introduced us to a book called A Bug and a Wish.”

Amy elaborates on her experience in adapting restorative practices to suit her young learners particularly in the ELD program. In this method, students are encouraged to express their feelings and needs using a structured format: "It bugs me when... I wish you would..." Amy

explains that she always carries four images with her. She uses these images to resolve conflicts: a bug to identify the problem, a heart to express feelings, stars to convey what students wish to do, and a band-aid to suggest ways to make amends. Amy also shares her pride in witnessing the gradual adoption and effectiveness of this strategy over time. She indicates that by the end of November, students were using this method independently during recess conflicts. Amy felt proud when her students started confidently using restorative conversations with the vice principal and other school staff.

Amy also explains that there are still conflicts that arise at school. However, she notes a positive shift within their portable classroom, called "the cottage," where conflicts are being addressed using the "a bug and a wish" method. Amy continues to observe progress in students' social skills development and notes the method's success in resolving conflicts.

**Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.** Many of the strategies Amy use with her students come from her experience as a second language learner in Japan, her teacher education program in Australia, and the various trainings she attended in Nunavut. During her time in Japan, Amy experienced what it is like to be a second language learner with all the challenges that come when you live in a country where people do not speak your language. Amy indicates that she understands how it feels when "you have to psych yourself up to go to the grocery store". Hence, she can relate to her students' experience with the language barrier. To support her students academically, Amy implements various strategies including adopting culturally responsive activities, cross-curricular approach, writing continuum, reading paralleled with writing, and inventive spelling.

***Culturally Responsive Activities.*** Amy emphasizes on the importance of making the content more culturally relevant to her students especially for those from diverse backgrounds.

She talks about the importance of having student-created material inside the classroom to foster a sense of belonging and pride among students. Amy describes various strategies she employs to integrate cultural relevance into the curriculum. For instance, in social studies, historical topics are connected to students' own cultural backgrounds and experiences. By discussing ancient civilizations and pre-colonial history, students can relate these concepts to their own countries and heritage. Additionally, Amy shares an innovative approach to engaging students through music. Initially, her class struggled with singing the Canadian national anthem, prompting Amy to explore anthems from students' home countries. According to Amy, this initiative not only personalizes the learning experience but also uncovers students' hidden talents, such as musical abilities. Furthermore, cultural traditions and practices are celebrated within Amy's classroom. For example, students are encouraged to share traditional dances from their cultures during gym class, allowing them to present their heritage and feel valued within the school community. Through student-centered approaches Amy focuses on cultural integration to create an inclusive learning environment that celebrate diversity and promote academic success.

***Cross-curricular Approach.*** Amy's teacher education program advocated for an integrated and cross-curricular approach to learning. This approach emphasizes connections between subjects rather than isolated topics. She explains, "You don't just have reading time or science time, but you integrate the topics into your literacy and into your math." With subject integration, she aims to provide students with a broader understanding of concepts and encourages critical thinking skills.

***Writing Continuum.*** While in Nunavut, Amy attended a conference about teaching writing. The method she learned suggests creating a writing continuum based on students' individual needs. This continuum guides students through incremental steps in their writing

development, starting from basic skills such as writing their name to more complex tasks like composing sentences. Amy elaborates, “So, first week of school with the exception of one student, all of my students were non writers, they would only copy whatever was put on a board in front of them.” To empower her students to become confident writers, Amy modified the writing continuum to match the needs of her ELD students. She explains,

“I modified it to: write your name then find a word from our word wall regarding social studies and record it with a picture. That goes from one word to three words, where it's not, you're copying what I told you to copy, but you have to go and use the words that we're learning elsewhere in class through stories and through picture word. You get to pick which words you want to put in your journal. Then, it becomes a filling in the blanks. The next step is, along with other little steps inside of like letter height and the more technical aspects of writing, is now you get to create your own sentences.”

Amy finds that setting small goals makes the writing tasks more manageable. According to Amy, for children who cannot put their thoughts on papers and are still learning the names of the letters and their sounds, this method empowers them to use the tools available around them and become writers.

***Reading Paralleled with Writing.*** To support her students to become better writers, Amy implements a strategy that involves integrating a reading approach with writing instruction to improve students' confidence and comfort with using sight words as sentence starters. Over a period of about six weeks, students are gradually introduced to common sight words, such as "I am" and "I see," to build familiarity and fluency. Amy focuses on allowing students to experiment with using these words in their writing, even if they are occasionally misspelled or

out of order. She emphasizes on celebrating students' progress and addressing one aspect of writing at a time to avoid overwhelming them.

***Inventive Spelling.*** Amy allows inventive spelling to help her students overcome their dependence on the provided sight words. Inventive spelling, also known as phonetic spelling or temporary spelling, is a developmental stage in writing where children use their knowledge of letter sounds and phonetic patterns to spell words as they sound. Instead of relying on conventional spelling rules or memorized spellings, students try to represent the sounds they hear in words, often resulting in unconventional or creative spellings. This approach encourages students to take risks, explore language, and develop their phonetic awareness and spelling skills as they progress in their literacy development.

***Goal setting and Celebrating Success.*** Amy elaborates on the importance of learning in small steps and celebrating incremental progress in writing development. Each time a student achieves a milestone, they receive a beaver card and proudly move their corresponding beaver marker on a dedicated wall display in the direction of the next goal. She explains,

“Every time someone levels up, we celebrate and say their name. They get their little beaver card; they move their Beaver. I have these things on the wall of: how high can you build? And how far can you swim. How high you can build has to do with literacy. Whereas how far you can swim has to do with math. In math, we are doing the same thing. This scaffolds the idea that they're working on the goal that matches where they need to be and they know that's what their goal is.”

Amy finds that this method acknowledges students' achievements and build a sense of community and encouragement among peers. Although some of her students were resistant to this method at the beginning, she indicates that now they are more involved in their learning process.

***Students' Behavior.*** Amy talks about her students' distinctive behavioural needs. She highlights the challenges she faces especially with students who have experienced trauma or have cognitive delays. She explains her experience in supporting her students to regulate their behaviour,

“Swearing actually is a big one that we've had to deal with in the ELD class, using their hands hitting, kicking when they're upset. A child with trauma may engage in that behavior, because as they're shifting into that fight or flight faster than a child who feels safe. But you get that same behavior in a child has cognitive delays, because cognitively they haven't developed that part of their brain, or their brain will develop at a slower pace than a child who doesn't have cognitive delays”.

Amy adopts an educational approach to address behaviors, explaining the meaning behind swearing words in an age-appropriate manner, “I actually tell them what the words mean, in an age-appropriate way.” By relating the words to cultural and familial values, she aims to instill a sense of responsibility and awareness in students. Similarly, when faced with physical aggression, Amy emphasizes the need for a firm response, “I have to be firm with them... what has been working in my case... if I go strong, say NO like a very strong NO, or STOP and then a short instruction of GO sit.” Through this approach, while firm, Amy aims to establish clear boundaries and consequences while maintaining respect among students.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Amy highlights the resilience and intense passion her students exhibit in the ELD class. Her students show deep attachment to their home countries. This is evident in their passion to display their country flags all over the classroom. Amy indicates that her students are “really resilient, they're very passionate about things that they enjoy and prefer. They love their home countries very much.” Amy believes that this deep-rooted sense of identity serves as a source of strength for the students, creating a strong sense of belonging and cultural pride.

However, alongside this deep passion lies a potential challenge. Amy notes that while the students' strong cultural identity is admirable, it can sometimes hinder their openness to new experiences. She gives an example about an incident that happened with a student when they had an Inuit guest speaker named Alla in their class. Alla is pronounced the same way as God in Arabic. Amy explains,

“I knew going in and telling the class he's coming I was ready for it! I've said oh, we have an Inuit person for a presentation and we're learning about Inuit and all this stuff. And I said his name is Alla and right away her face (the student) was so angry. It was like I had offended her family. She refused to look at me and talk to me for the rest of the day. So that passion is good and lovely, but it can sometimes limit. But you can navigate that passion in a lot of ways. So, in her case, when I went to talk to her about it, I took very much of yes, I know, this makes you feel uncomfortable. You really want to support your heritage. He (the guest speaker) wants to support his culture too.”

Amy believes that by navigating her students' cultural pride with sensitivity and understanding, she can use this passion to culture to introduce her students to new ideas and experiences. She

highlights the importance of supporting the students in developing their social skills to facilitate their integration into new environments.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** When Amy is asked to recall an incident where she felt incapable of supporting her students, she shares a challenging incident from a previous school year, where she faced overwhelming obstacles due to the lack of support from her principal. Amy recounts the very diverse classroom she had the year before including a large number of refugees from various countries, ESL students who recently immigrated to Canada, and students with learning differences. Amy reflects,

“I’ll be honest with you, I ended up going on a mental health leave, and did not return to the class. It was horrible because I was constantly trying to support and develop and trying to help all of them. What pushed me over the edge was I had a classroom set up kind of similar to this year, where you have a relaxation center and other material. I bought with my own money, one of those cushions and a crash mat. So, I had set up things and things were getting better, but there were still a lot of challenges with the group. I went for a small medical surgery. I was supposed to be back in three days. The day of my surgery, the principal sent me an email saying you're not allowed to have any non-board items in your classroom, remove them all immediately. So instead of recovering from surgery, I spent three days freaking out because every single strategy that I'd set up that was making progress came from stuff that I've purchased. It was not from the board. They didn't provide the wiggle chair for the child who's supposed to have one. They didn't provide a standing table for the child with ADHD, who just been on a list for a standing table for a year and a half because of pandemic, it was not arriving.”

Amy felt crushed. She was starting to see progress, but she had to return to ground zero with the lack of resources she could utilize. She felt stripped from every support she had. After she returned to school following her surgery, she had a new child with previous traumatic experiences in her class and they were meant to go on a skating trip. She explains,

“I did not have a relationship with that child. You have to have that connection with children with trauma so they will listen to you. We went for skating and his feet hurt. He tried to run out of the arena. I was able to coax him back in. While we were handling another child who also got hurt, he was escalating and there were other behaviors escalating within the class.

And when we proceeded to try and walk back to school, he started screaming, he was going to kill himself and attempted to run towards the road where there's traffic.”

Amy had to physically restrain her student. She did not expect to have to do that for a child in her class at the side of the road. The incident pushed Amy completely of the edge. She elaborates, “I can talk about it now without bursting into tears. Up until the summertime even thinking about it with my therapist, I would... Gush!”. Amy elaborates that there are still times when some things will spike. For example, this year one girl in the grade four class who's from Afghanistan physically attacked one of the students who is from Syria, who's part of the ELD program. And in that moment, this year, Amy was almost like she was right back at the side of the road. Although Amy is having a much better experience this year, there have been a couple of times where she felt incapable of protecting her students.

On the other hand, there are also instances when Amy feels bolstered to support her students' unique needs. For example, she recalls a recent event she celebrated with enthusiasm. Amy explains that this student, initially flagged for potential special education due to developmental delays, demonstrated significant growth by attempting to write a sentence. She

indicates, “He brought his sentence to me with this big smile on his face. There's a lot of little moments like that where you see the students make that step. And that was a big step for him!”. Despite challenges, Amy remains motivated and excited to come to school each day, contrasting with feelings of burnout experienced in the past academic year.

**Experience with Students’ Trauma.** Amy explains that students’ traumatic experiences are often revealed through students themselves. For example, one of her students told Amy a heartbreaking story of her family’s experience when they lost their home and were held at gunpoint. This direct disclosure allows Amy to gain more valuable insights into her students’ backgrounds and the challenges they may be facing. Due to privacy issues, not a lot of information about the students’ past experiences from the school board is shared with teachers. However, Amy highlights the importance of informal communication among teachers and schools in sharing sensitive information about students' backgrounds and experiences. Teachers may receive informal information from colleagues or other schools about students who have undergone significant life events. For example, Amy recounts receiving an email from a colleague alerting her to a student's recent loss of a parent. This type of communication allows Amy to provide targeted support to students who may be struggling emotionally. However, Amy acknowledges the challenges in navigating the balance of privacy concerns and the need to support her students effectively. She stresses on the importance of maintaining confidentiality while also being mindful of potential challenges students may face due to trauma.

### ***Theme 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their peer. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner theory of bioecological development.

Amy reflects on her refugee students' social integration at school. She observes that students from similar cultural and language backgrounds tend to form initial friendships. She notes, "Those who are from Afghanistan and Syria tend to maintain friendships with other students from the same locations." However, Amy highlights significant challenges due to gaps in social skills, leading to sudden souring of friendships over mistrust or inappropriate behavior. Despite the conflicts, Amy acknowledges progress in students' ability to acknowledge their actions over time, mentioning, "Beginning of the year, they would have never acknowledged their behavior at all, so this is a big improvement." She emphasizes the impact of classroom dynamics on social integration, stating, "Displaced students in classrooms with calm and predictable behaviors from peers tend to adjust better to social integration, while those in chaotic classrooms really struggle."

On the other hand, Amy uses various methods to help refugee students build relationships with their peers at school. She organizes joint activities between her ELD class and other homeroom classes to creating opportunities for students to interact and collaborate. Amy actively engages with students across different classrooms, ensuring she is visible and approachable to all students, which helps reduce any feelings of exclusion. According to Amy, encouraging participation in extracurricular activities like basketball enables refugee students to connect with a diverse group of peers while working toward common goals. During conflicts, Amy uses

restorative approaches discussions and role-playing to address issues and encourage empathy and understanding. Additionally, Amy openly shares her own emotions and experiences, to set an example for students on how to communicate effectively and resolve conflicts constructively.

#### ***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between teachers and refugee students' parents. These interactions fall within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner theory of bioecological development.

Amy delves into the interactions she has with parents of her students shedding light on the difficulties associated with the language barrier and cultural differences. She candidly admits finding it difficult to communicate with parents, "I find my communications are not effective, it's something I'm working on... But I'm now in the middle of the school year, and unfortunately, getting a translator, it can take five plus days to get back." She finds that translating communication documents through Google Translate is not ideal. Amy took the initiative to hire a private translator over the summer to translate essential school documents into languages understood by her students' families. Despite her efforts, Amy acknowledges the limited frequency of communication with parents. She points out that written communications are predominantly in English, posing a significant barrier for non-English-speaking families. According to Amy, parents may feel disconnected from their children's educational journey. Amy's reflections on parent-teacher interviews and report card discussions reveal a stark reality. The presence of language barriers coupled with cultural differences often leads to low attendance and minimal engagement from parents. This low parental attendance widens the gap between home and school. The Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO) at school explains to Amy that in

Afghanistan the concept of communication between family and school isn't like here in Canada. In Afghanistan, when the teacher reaches out, it's because the student is in trouble. Amy also sheds light on the challenges faced by parents in attending school events and activities. She reflects on the limited involvement of parents in school activities and volunteering. She attributes this primarily to the aftermath of the pandemic, which has slowed down the resumption of field trips and community engagements. Amy puts a lot of efforts to encourage parental participation, such as inviting them to accompany students on trips to the library. At the same time, she acknowledges the challenges faced by many parents, particularly those from refugee families who are often working long hours or facing logistical barriers like transportation issues.

***Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between teachers and the administration and other school staff. These interactions fall within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner theory. This theme highlights the resources available for teachers in schools in addition to the support provided by the administrators and other school staff.

Amy talks about the lack of resource available at her school. She emphasizes the critical need for more services for refugee students highlighting deficiencies in the available support. She points out the lack of enough ELD classes and Educational Assistants (EAs) which are essential in supporting refugee students and other students who are learning English as a second language. She explains, “There are only two junior ELD classes in our board! So for my job, because I'm there. That means there's one less teacher teaching the ESL students who are in the school.” She elaborates over her frustration with the staffing structure, stating, “ELD staffing

should not impact the regular staffing of the school.” She also provides an example of the impact of limited resources on individual students. She recounts the case of a student who is only receiving 30 minutes of instruction with the ELD program each day due to capped class sizes. Amy explains, “Because our ELD class is capped at 12, the student is technically only getting 30 minutes of instruction each day. Until I was able to, not secretly but unofficially, merge her into my class a little bit. Even then, I had to be limited, because if the board finds that, there could be potential problems.”

Amy believes that her colleagues are her biggest supporters. They offer guidance, lend an ear during tough times, and provide continuous encouragement. Despite Amy’s school reputation as being challenging and the high turnover rates, she feels there is a sense of collective resilience among staff. She also highlights a lot of support coming from teachers who have been in the school for a long time. Amy also appreciates the support she receives from her current principal. She elaborates, “The principal here really does advocate. There’s been a few times I’ve gone to him and say, this is something I need for this class, and he’ll work with me to try and find. If he can’t get what it is that I want, he’ll try and find something that would at least support.”

### ***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between teachers and the school board. These interactions fall within the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner theory. This theme underscores the resources available from the school board in addition to what teacher think they need to support refugee students.

Amy discusses the difficulties associated with translation support at her school. She indicates that the school relies heavily on students to translate to each other. She acknowledges that this is not ideal and emphasizes the need for professional translators. Amy acknowledges that the school board provides MLO once a week. She praises the effort, dedication, and effectiveness of the Pashtu MLO. However, she also recognizes the importance of having more professional translators to support communication with students and parents. She also highlights the need for more consistent translation services.

Additionally, Amy indicates that the board has provided some resources, such as videos and documents, translated into major languages like Arabic. However, there is still a lack of translations into languages like Pashtun, despite the significant need for them. Amy expresses dissatisfaction with the current level of support provided to refugee students in terms of both academic and social integration. She highlights the dependence on administrative decisions and board priorities, noting, “A lot of it depends on administration and what they're willing to advocate for. A lot of it depends on the board and what their priorities are.” She indicates that the support available for refugee students is contingent upon broader institutional policies and directives. Furthermore, she criticizes the effectiveness of professional development (PD) sessions, citing a specific example where PD sessions failed to address the unique needs of ELD teachers. She recounts her disappointment with the lack of relevant content during a PD session, stating, “The PD day ended up having nothing to do with our classrooms.” Despite the well-intentioned efforts of consultants, Amy feels that the sessions did not adequately address the challenges faced by ELD teachers working with refugee students. She believes that there is more that can be done to support the needs of refugee students. She expresses frustration with the current lack of support in this area,

“Other things that would be helpful is, having the board consultants listen to when we say what we need support with, and not just the board is kind of pushing this particular message. We need them to actually listen to us and that would be massive.”

In terms of desired training, Amy highlights the need for detailed scaffolding in mathematics instruction. She explains, "I would love to have, essentially the strands of math listed out into a continuum and a scaffold. Not with big jumps and skills, but with every little step."

Amy also highlights the importance of collaboration among ELD teachers. She believes in the value of informal discussions and resource sharing among colleagues. She reflects on a couple of PD days saying, “The most valuable thing of those two PD days... was... when their sessions ended, they all went home. Two other ELD teachers and I hung out. We just started comparing notes.” Hence, she emphasizes the necessity for educators to support each other and share resources to compensate for the deficiencies in formal PD sessions.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Amy reflects on her experience in education. She humorously remembers her mother’s advice against becoming a teacher due to the major challenges educators face. Despite this, Amy’s passion towards academia propelled her into teaching. She reflects,

“If I was to see myself pre going to Teachers’ College, I would say there's a lot of politics and a lot of red tape. Be prepared, that you're going to put your heart on the line and going to feel helpless at times, and that there's a lot going on, that takes away from actually doing the things that you're going to love in the job.”

Despite the obstacles, Amy offers a glimmer of hope, reassuring aspiring educators that passion can persevere through adversity. Amy's extends her advice to aspiring teachers,

“Be yourself. Be very honest. Don't try and fluff things. You know how you get those Pinterest teachers where they always look perfect. They never raise their voice, and their classrooms look immaculate and everything else. Don't get stuck in this idea of that's who you need to be.”

She highlights the need for authenticity over perfection. Amy urges educators to embrace their true selves rather than trying to be perfect. She emphasizes how important it is to be open and sincere when forming connections with refugee students because students can easily tell when someone is being genuine and when they're not.

### **Case #2: Samreen's Profile**

Samreen is an experienced teacher with around 20 years of experience including 14 years in Ontario. She began her career as a teacher assistant right after completing her grade 12. Afterward, she taught high school accounting and international business for few years at a private school in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Upon immigrating to Canada, she completed a Bachelor of Education followed by a Master of Education. She has been in her current school for the past 11 years. Currently, Samreen teaches grade 6 and has experience with grades 4 to 8. Her school is in an urban area with a diverse socioeconomic background, ranging from well-off families to newcomers who are struggling financially. Samreen's school has a large racial and cultural diversity. The participant has had refugee students in her class for at least four academic years.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Samreen indicates that she has not received any training in TIP. However, she actively pursues professional growth in CRP. She elaborates on her approach to personal professional development, "I look for free stuff. I read books and a lot of cultural pedagogy relevant studies." Regarding differentiated instruction, Samreen acknowledges the importance of DI, but highlights a gap in formal training, stating, "It's not that the board won't provide us training, it's up to the teacher to get the training or not." She emphasizes the individual responsibility of teachers for pursuing training opportunities, noting, "it's up to us." Samreen further reflects on the sporadic nature of released time for professional development, noting, "There's only a once in a blue moon that teachers will be released by the school principal to go."

In terms of professional development days assigned by the school board, Samreen provides insight into their structure, indicating, "one or two of them are for the assessment of learning because we have to, you know, catch up with our assessment." She expresses disappointment with the limited training opportunities provided by the board, stating, "I'm not that happy with the board, all training sessions are outside school hours, at our own time." She also draws attention to disparities in training opportunities between newly hired and experienced teachers. She remarks, "For old and experienced teachers... nothing. When you're newly hired, then you have one or two days or three days every year, where you can go for professional development for free, because the board will provide you the service." In contrast to the support offered to new hires, Samreen observes a lack of ongoing training opportunities for experienced teachers, saying, "But after that, no, the board doesn't provide you and I don't see any initiative given by the board where we've been given extra training for anything." She also highlights that

any training provided by the board happens after school hours which discourage teachers from participating.

Samreen does not feel that her teacher education program has prepared her to teach diverse students especially those with refugee backgrounds. She indicates that everything she has learned is due to her own effort to improve her teaching skills and strategies to adapt to the needs of her students.

### ***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner theory.

**Initial Feelings Toward Teaching Refugee Students.** Samreen shares her experience with teaching refugee students, indicating that she often learns about their presence in her class after they have already enrolled. She takes an advocative stance to support her refugee students upon arrival. Samreen describes a situation where students arrive mid-year, such as two girls from Syria, requiring intensive support due to language barriers. She advocated for the two girls to receive one-on-one support highlighting the challenges accompanied with paperwork and the lack of ESL programs to support these students. Since many refugee students arrive with limited resources, Samreen also stands up for her students to have access to technology. She explains,

“I have to fight; I have to go to the admin and say you need to give me a laptop for this kid that remains in my classroom. Technology is another issue in my board. Oh, my goodness, I can go on and on. So, after struggling, I'll get a Chromebook and that will be reserved, no one else will take it.”

The participant highlights her proactive advocacy for her refugee students showing commitment to their success despite the bureaucratic challenges she faces.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** Samreen describes several strategies she uses to make her students feel safe including creating a safe classroom environment, the use of translation tools, and the use of visuals.

***Creating a Safe Classroom.*** Samreen emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of comfort and familiarity in the classroom for refugee students. She indicates, “The first thing I just have to make them feel comfortable and knowing the routines.” Her approach involves pairing refugee students with a peer who speaks the same language. She elaborates, “So I pair them up all the time with someone they can speak to, because these kids are not comfortable when we speak in the mainstream language. They just look at us and they look quite confused.” Additionally, she makes sure that the child is seated in a spot close to the teacher to facilitate any assistance or support needed while learning.

***Translation Tools.*** When the language barrier persists, or when it is difficult to pair the student with a peer who speaks the same language, Samreen relies on translation tools. She recalls an instance where two girls from Syria required intensive assistance, saying, “So those two girls came from Syria, we only had the iPad for translation.” Samreen highlights the importance of leveraging technology to facilitate effective communication and support for refugee students navigating language barriers in the educational setting.

***Using Visuals.*** Upon the arrival of refugee students, Samreen utilizes a lot of visual aids to help students understand school routines and schedules. “I provide them with visual timetables that I draw myself or find online.” These aids facilitate students’ understanding of the school’s daily routines and schedules.

***Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.*** Samreen uses diverse teaching strategies and resources to support the educational needs of her students. These resources include culturally relevant activities, support from student teachers, online activities and resources, and color by number activities.

***Culturally Responsive Activities.*** Samreen sheds light on the importance of culturally relevant and responsive activities in creating an inclusive classroom. She explains several strategies she utilizes in her class including a culturally relevant book called “Refugees”. She explains,

“So it's basically a story about three kids one is Syrian, one is Jewish, and one is Mexican. So, all three were refugees in different time zones. The book talks about how they meet each other when they grow up.”

She describes how she incorporates the audio version of the book, noting, “The beauty about the CD is like they basically have that accent when it's read out. The three characters in the book speak with their own accents.” She indicates that her students can relate to these accents and learn about their beauty while she emphasizes the importance of not making fun of anyone’s accent.

Samreen also utilize other activities that relate to students’ lived experiences. She elaborates on “The Jersey Assignment” in Math and Media where her students are asked to design a jersey while integrating mathematical concepts into their designs. The assignment begins with a lesson on media and jersey design, discussing elements such as logos, messages, and the purpose of jerseys. Students then choose global issues that resonate with them. They can

research and incorporate any topic into their jersey designs. For example, they might focus on issues like Black Lives Matter, Islamophobia, or global goals. Each student will use a number for their jersey. These number can be of significant to students. Then, they are required to represent that number through various mathematical concepts they learn in class. This could include finding the greatest common factor, lowest common divisor, graphing, or solving equations related to their number. According to Samreen, this assignment encourages students to express themselves creatively while reinforcing their understanding of mathematical concepts in a practical context. Additionally, it promotes cultural awareness and empathy by allowing students to incorporate their own cultural backgrounds or interests into their designs.

Samreen also gives her students the choice of selecting books that resonate with their experiences. After selecting their books, students participate in thought-provoking discussions and activities designed to deepen their understanding of different perspectives. Samreen elaborates on these activities, stating,

“We consider how would this text be written if it was written from a point of view of an indigenous person or an immigrant person or a person of color or a person who is racially discriminated. How would you think they would write the same text or the same news? We have a kids’ news channel. It’s a website that says the newsreader message. So, I tell my students, this news is from the American mainstream point of view. If the news has to be written from an immigrant perspective, how would you represent the same news? Like how would you say it out? Or how would the public broadcaster broadcast the news in your way?”

According to Samreen, she always place the emphasis on encouraging students to critically analyze the representation of voices in literature and media. She believes that such activities can promote empathy and awareness among students with diverse experiences.

Moreover, Samreen encourages her students to express themselves creatively through various projects. She describes how students design book covers that highlight cultural perspectives and experiences. She allows her students to offer alternative interpretations of familiar texts or symbols. She explains,

“We read novels... we then try to design [the cover]... in a better way. Do you think you have better designs for the same book for the same novel? Can you do it in a way that is more relevant to your age and people? We have a lot of Gujarati communities in our school. I tell the students: you want to display the same book in your community. How would you design the cover?”

Through these projects, students develop a sense of pride in their culture and identity, while also honing their creative skills. Samreen emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural background of her students. She believes that her strong connection with her refugee students originates from her exposure to diverse cultures and her own experiences relocating to new countries. Having lived among Arabs in Dubai and attended a multicultural school, she deeply empathizes with refugee experiences. However, she acknowledges that there are aspects she may not fully understand in her students' experiences. To bridge these gaps, Samreen actively engages in learning opportunities and participates in heritage months and school committees to immerse herself in different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, she organizes school activities and

educational trips, such as visiting the Holocaust Museum, to deepen her and her students' cultural awareness and historical understanding. She explains,

“I believe in that, and every year is a learning curve for me. So, being a Muslim, like organizing a trip, the Holocaust Museum was like, oh, no, how are you doing it??? It is because I want to learn. I want the kids to know. They know what the Hitler did, but they don't know who Hitler was.”

Samreen remains dedicated to learning through social interaction to support her refugee students in their social and cultural integration.

***Online activities and Resources.*** Samreen uses various online resources to support the educational needs of her students including alphabet songs, audio books, and read aloud. She notes, “I go down to the grade one teachers or kindergarten teachers to get materials from them, some activities that I can do.” She also recognizes the proficiency of her students with technology and leverages this by incorporating online resources. She remarks, “I feel like all the kids are very good at technology. Yeah, they learn so fast.” She acknowledges their ability to navigate technology, even if they struggle with English proficiency. Hence, she provides them with several online activities and songs designed for ESL learners to get them started on the alphabet, numbers, and colors.

***Support from Student Teachers.*** In light of the persistent challenges posed by the lack of resources, Samreen strategically leverages the support of teacher candidates to address the needs of ESL students. She often relies on the support she gets from student teachers who spend their placement in her classroom. She assigns them tasks to create activities tailored to ESL students'

needs, stating, “So I tell them this is an ESL kid, this is his profile, I want you to arrange activities for them and give them jobs. So even they can help me out.” Hence, she tries to effectively maximize the potential of her classroom environment, ensuring that ESL students receive the personalized support as much as possible.

***Color by Number Activities.*** Samreen recounts her experience in supporting her refugee students in learning the alphabet, numbers, and colors. Despite financial constraints, she purchases materials from her own money indicating, “The school board is very particular. You can't buy from here you can't buy from there. You need to buy only from their catalog. You don't get anything from catalog. I can even complain about that too.” She engages her students by showing colors on an iPad and utilizing a website for reinforcement. She employs interactive methods such as breaking down images in a coloring book and associating letters with colors to facilitate learning.

It is worth mentioning that the online activities and recourses in addition to the color by number activities were utilized to support students in grades 5 to 8. These students did not speak a word of English and were not receiving any ESL support. So, the participant had to implement these strategies to cater to their needs. Despite her dedication to support her students, Samreen acknowledges the challenges posed by time constraints, especially when she had to deal with the behaviour of other students in the class. She candidly shares, “Honestly, they kept me on toes. When I say behavior classroom, like even the principal didn't want to deal with it.” Hence, she is only able to implement these strategies two to three times a week.

***Students' Behaviour.*** Samreen reflects on the behaviour of her refugee students noting, “Refugee kids that I got are very sweet, very nice, very well behaved and very quiet.” Hence, her

students exhibit good behaviour and show respect to their teachers and peers. However, she indicates that they may struggle in understanding classroom routines since many of them are not familiar with the school environment. She explains, “They will start walking and going out of the classroom to the washroom. I said no, you don't go to the washroom like that.” Samreen then emphasizes the importance of familiarizing them with the school routines to help them integrate successfully into the classroom environment and academic expectations. By teaching her refugee students the proper procedures and behaviors expected in school, such as how to ask for permission to leave the classroom or navigate daily routines, Samreen ensures her students feel confident and capable in their new learning environment.

Additionally, Samreen provides insight into her experiences with refugee students, highlighting that she has not encountered behavioral problems with them personally. She contrasts her positive experiences with anecdotes from other teachers who have faced behavioral challenges with refugee students in their classrooms. Samreen acknowledges that the occurrence of these issues can vary based on factors such as class composition and school demographics.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Samreen highlights the eagerness of her refugee students to learn. She recalls instances when her refugee students openly express their willingness to learn. She indicates.

“All the kids who came to my classroom are willing to learn. In the last school there was a grade one kid so much eager to learn, sitting down looking at me and like, I'm ready to learn. That's so sweet. I like it.”

On the other hand, she indicates that the major area of growth for refugee students is their language barrier. She indicates, “Language is their biggest hurdle.” Samreen notes that while math is comparatively easier to teach, students struggle with word problems and complex problem-solving tasks due to their limited English comprehension. Despite these challenges, Samreen is dedicated to support her students to overcome these barriers.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** Samreen assures that she never feels incapable of supporting her students. Her perspectives in supporting refugee student are rooted in her own immigration experience. She shares that she understands refugee students’ lived experiences saying,

“I can understand how it is like being in a new country, being an immigrant. I know how hard it is having your roots been pulled out from the country where you're born, and lived there for years, and then coming to another country and settling down. It's not that easy. It's hard.”

Despite admitting that she does not fully grasp the extent of her refugee students’ struggles, she emphasizes her efforts to connect with refugee students emotionally, stating, “They connect with me socially and emotionally, they do connect a lot with me.” Additionally, she underscores the importance of mental well-being over academic success, affirming, “For me, the mental health is more important than academic challenges.” Samreen’s commitment to supporting refugee students extends to providing practical assistance. She lends them school computers to use at home. She recounts her willingness to go beyond expectations, saying, “I just give the school computer to them. I tell them ...Go take it and bring it next day... I know there's no computer at home, take it, use it and bring it next day.” Through her empathy, dedication, and practical

support, she continues to create a nurturing and environment where refugee students feel valued and supported in their academic and emotional growth.

**Experience with Students' Trauma.** Samreen recalls several instances where her refugee students displayed signs of trauma triggered by different events at school. She recounts an incident when one of her students reacted adversely to the sound of a popcorn machine popping indicating, "When we started making the popcorn the kid started crying, and she had a panic attack because the sound of the popcorn was like guns." She describes another instance that happened during a fire drill. One of her students was terrified from the loud noise and the unfamiliarity of the sudden event. She explains, "The alarm is so loud. It goes into your soul. So, the kid got really terrified." Despite efforts to reassure the student, the drill caused anxiety and confusion. Samreen emphasizes, "All that procedure actually terrified the kid because they were like, Why have you been doing it? Why do we have to do that?"

Samreen talks about another student who witnessed a traumatic event involving violence within their family. She shares, "There was one who saw his aunt or his mom, a motherly figure in the family was shot in front of the kid." She indicates that teachers do not often know much about their students' previous traumatic experience. Consequently, they do not know how to deal with them and avoid potential triggers. Through these instances, Samreen highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches in education and the necessity of providing support and understanding to refugee students who may have endured significant hardship and trauma.

### ***Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

Samreen describes the interactions between refugee students and their peers. She discusses the social integration of refugee students in her school. She talks about their ability to form connections with peers. She also emphasizes her role in facilitating these connections by

pairing refugee students with friendly classmates who can assist them in navigating the large school environment. “I always hook them up with one or two students in my classroom. And I know these kids are nice, and they won't be mean. They will help them go around because my school is big.” She believes that refugee students are generally adept at making friends and can maintain these relationships over time. She recounts an incident where a refugee student became comfortable and made many friends. She declares, “Later on he was too comfortable and started being naughty. I knew he is adapting very well.”

#### ***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

Samreen describes her interactions with refugee students' parents. She sheds light on the challenges she faces in reaching them noting, “Communicating with the refugee parents depends on if they answer the phone... They don't speak to the teachers a lot.” She elaborates on potential reasons for this communication barrier saying, “They're busy meeting their ends, like, you know, providing for the table and they have other things to do.” She suggests that the language barrier and the socioeconomical pressures faced by refugee families could be a reason for this lack of communication. Despite these challenges, Samreen expresses a desire for increased parental involvement. She indicates a lack of parental involvement in students' learning as well in the school community. She suggests that more support and resources are needed to support these families. She reflects, “I think there should be more help provided for them financially, first of all... Maybe there should be some sessions offered in community centers for them to join.” Additionally, Samreen shares poignant anecdotes that illustrate the struggles faced by both parents and students in navigating the school system. For instance, she recounts how some students may feel embarrassed to have their parents participate in school activities due to language barriers, stating, “One of my students said: my mom can't even say speak anything. I'm

like it's okay. She'll look after you on the field trip. We need our eyes, not our tongue.”

Samreen emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive support mechanisms for families from refugee backgrounds. This includes support and resource allocation to bridge communication gaps and promote meaningful parental involvement within the school community. For example, providing translation services for school communications or organizing workshops on navigating the education system in a Canada are effective ways to support refugee families. Additionally, creating culturally inclusive events and activities that celebrate diverse backgrounds can help promote a sense of belonging and community for both students and their families.

#### ***Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem***

Samreen discusses the various resources and support available at her school to aid her in teaching refugee students. Regarding these resources, she mentions, “We have our technology, the Chromebooks, audiobooks that we have and whatever I can make, like the picture card, and visual timetable.” She heavily relies on these resources to support students' comprehension and engagement. Samreen acknowledges the effectiveness of these resources stating, “They are effective to get them settled down, to make them feel comfortable. Of course, they need that visual representation for everything.” She emphasizes the importance of these resources in creating a sense of comfort in the classroom environment.

Regarding support from staff members, Samreen acknowledges the valuable assistance provided by ESL teachers, stating, “ESL teacher steps in a lot because basically the language is the barrier for them, so they really help you.” Additionally, she expresses appreciation for the

administration's willingness to provide support when requested, stating, "If I asked them, yes. My administration is nice. They're very helpful people...they do give it to me." However, she raises concerns about the lack of documented support for ESL students and the impact of budget cuts on resources and services. According to Samreen, these budget cuts remain a significant obstacle in adequately meeting the needs of refugee students in the classroom. These budget cuts often affect the availability of essential resources such as additional language support and specialized educational materials.

***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem***

Reflecting on the support provided by the school board, Samreen indicates that while there are several mandatory workshops provided by the board on topics like workplace safety and child abuse, there is a lack of training on other essential topics such as SEL and trauma-informed teaching techniques. The participant assures that there is a need for training on handling refugee students emotional needs and understanding trauma. She elaborates,

"Many teachers, myself included, find it challenging to attend additional professional development sessions outside of regular school hours due to family commitments and personal responsibilities. Despite the importance of ongoing training, it's often difficult to prioritize when juggling multiple obligations."

Furthermore, Samreen highlights the absence of a structured system for assessing the backgrounds and needs of refugee students: "...there's no structured documentation or profiling system in place to assess these students' backgrounds, experiences, and specific needs." She suggests implementing a formalized process, similar to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for

students with learning disabilities. She implies that implementing a formalized plan for refugee students can greatly benefit both teachers and students. By having a formal assessment and plan in place, teachers can better understand the unique needs of each refugee student, allowing for tailored support and interventions. This structured approach can enhance educational outcomes by addressing specific challenges and facilitating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for refugee students.

Additionally, Samreen believes that refugee students are not receiving the support they need especially with the ESL program. She indicates that once they arrive in the country and undergo language assessments, they are often placed in ESL programs for additional language support. However, due to budget cuts and a shortage of resources, these programs have been significantly impacted. Samreen elaborates, “In the past, students would receive specialized instruction in separate classrooms, but now they often remain in regular classrooms without the necessary support.” She is also frustrated at the shortage of supply teachers and the consequent lack of support for ESL and refugee students: “When the teachers are off, and the jobs are not covered by supply teachers due to shortage, the ESL teacher is then asked to cover the classes. Then, the ESL kids don't get support for like weeks and weeks.” Therefore, Samreen indicates that the lack of support for refugee students within ESL programs due to budget cut leaves these students without the necessary assistance to thrive academically.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Samreen reflects on her experience in educating refugee students. She finds that “building connections and fostering trust are the cornerstones of effective teaching in such diverse classrooms.” According to the participant, refugee students need to feel that they can

trust their teachers and that they will support them at all times. She elaborates, “Once they feel comfortable with you and believe that you genuinely care about their success, they're more likely to engage and open up.”

For new teachers working with refugee students, Samreen emphasizes the importance of “self-learning” and remaining “open to everything that you can try on.” She indicates that each student is unique, and it's essential to “keep an open mind and be willing to adapt your teaching methods” to meet their diverse needs.

Samreen also recognizes the significant challenges students face, particularly post-pandemic. She believes that many are struggling academically, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems. She elaborates, “As teachers, we must be proactive in providing assistance and resources to help students succeed.” To aspiring teachers, she offers this advice, “Embrace the journey of learning and growth. Prioritize building connections with students, prioritize their well-being, and remain open to new strategies and approaches.” Finally, Samreen assures that she will continue to advocate for her students and implement inclusive and culturally responsive practices to support all her learners.

### **Case #3: Vanessa's Profile**

Vanessa has been an educators for 17 years. She began her teaching journey in 2006. She started as a Special Education teacher then an ESL teacher. Currently, she is a specialized library teacher. During her interview, Vanessa reflects on her diverse experience in education comparing her previous to current encounters. Vanessa has an Honors degree in Psychology in addition to a Bachelor of Education. Vanessa has had refugee students in her class ever since she started her career. She has consistently encountered and advocated for the unique needs of refugee learners

especially during the influx of Syrian refugees providing essential support and guidance to these students.

During the interview, Vanessa mostly reflects on her experience at an urban school located in the heart of a big city in Ontario. The school has a rich diversity of students with a predominant Middle Eastern demographic. However, the school recently witnessed an increase in cultural diversity, with students from India and other ethnic backgrounds contributing to the school's vibrant atmosphere. Vanessa's school community has a diverse mix of economic backgrounds.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Vanessa has actively engaged in a variety of training sessions to enhance her understanding of diverse students' needs. She recounts attending a workshop on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) facilitated by a social worker. She finds the session, conducted after school hours, to be invaluable in addressing trauma-related issues in the classroom. She explains, "It was just like an after-school workshop at the Board Office, where they just had a clinical social worker... speak about PTSD. And that was just like a one-time thing." In addition, Vanessa has pursued training in CRP workshops facilitated by the teachers' union. These are free of charge workshops available for teachers at their own time. Moreover, Vanessa has extensive training in differentiated instruction, primarily through specialized courses in special education. She elaborates on the importance of integrating these practices into her teaching approach. According to Vanessa, while the board has allocated resources to training sessions on social-emotional learning, Vanessa expresses reservations about its effectiveness. Drawing from her background in psychology, she voices skepticism as she describes the training sessions to be only "performative."

The participant shares her disappointment with her teacher education program particularly in terms preparing her to teach refugee students and students with diversity. She states that her programs provided little to no relevant training. Instead, she thinks that the curriculum was focused more on superficial activities, “such as drawing shapes in hallways and writing about feelings.” She indicates that she requested exemption from certain courses due to their “irrelevance”. This lack of preparation during her teacher education program left Vanessa feeling ill-equipped upon graduation to effectively support refugee students or students with diverse backgrounds.

### ***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of theory.

**Initial Feelings Toward Teaching Refugee Students.** When faced with the prospect of having refugee students in her class, Vanessa experiences a range of emotions, as expressed in her own words, “I feel like, it's really a big responsibility.” She also feels “excited” about the opportunity to interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, stating, “I love meeting people from other countries.” However, alongside this excitement, she has an underlying sense of worry. Vanessa expresses concern about her ability to adequately support the needs of refugee students, “I feel worried if I'll be able to support them and all their needs.” She elaborates, “I always feel a bit nervous; you never know what it's gonna look like? Or where they're at? Just like meeting anyone for the first time.” Despite these concerns, Vanessa’s overall attitude remains positive, as she emphasizes her eagerness to learn from the unique experiences of her students.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** Vanessa shares her experience making refugee students feel safe as part of the ESL program. She elaborates on several strategies including reception groups, collaboration with the settlement worker, providing mental health support, and celebrating cultural traditions.

**Reception Groups.** Vanessa talks about the establishment of reception groups that run all year within the ESL program. She describes the activities implemented at the reception groups noting that it is designed to facilitate language practice and socialization in a relaxed, non-academic setting. She explains, “We have what we call the reception group... It's just like one period a day where you can practice talking... There's not really academics on the table. It's just like time to practice talking.” Through the group, Vanessa creates an environment where students feel safe and comfortable to expressing themselves and building confidence in their language and communication skills. Additionally, Vanessa highlights the positive impact of this approach, noting, “Those kids loved coming to ESL so much... It was fun for them.” Besides, Vanessa emphasizes the importance of cultural affirmation through allowing refugee students to speak in their native languages. She also mentions her efforts to learn Arabic to better connect with her Syrian students. According to Vanessa, these activities illustrate how the reception groups promote language development and positive engagement among refugee students. They also promote cultural affirmation and build meaningful connections among students.

**Collaboration with Settlement Worker.** According to Vanessa, settlement workers in Ontario schools play a crucial role in supporting students and families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds to navigate various challenges associated with settling into a new environment. They assist with integration by providing information about school programs, resources, and policies, and facilitating orientation sessions and school tours to familiarize

newcomers with the school environment. Additionally, settlement workers support cultural adjustment by offering emotional support and guidance to students and families as they adjust to Canadian culture and school life. They help address cultural differences and promote respect for diversity within the school community. Vanessa believes that collaborating with the settlement worker enhances the support available for refugee students. She describes her coordination with the settlement worker who provides Vanessa with significant assistance in navigating the difficulties of helping refugee students resettle and integrate into the school community. Vanessa highlights the positive impact of this collaboration saying, “We would just make them feel welcome and take the pressure and the stress off and allow them time to talk.” Vanessa expresses her long-term commitment to supporting refugee students feel safe and welcome in Canadian classrooms. She acknowledges the long-term nature of the adjustment process and remains dedicated to providing ongoing support and encouragement throughout the students' academic journey.

***Mental Health Support.*** Vanessa expresses her strong passion for promoting mental health among children. She highlights the importance of addressing emotional needs from a young age. She shares her involvement in initiatives like the mental health stigma committee but expresses her dissatisfaction with the committee due to its performative nature. Despite this setback, Vanessa organizes what she called “a mental health playdate” at her school to teach students the importance of caring for their minds and feelings, alongside their physical health. She believes in equipping children with the vocabulary to express their emotions and providing them with coping skills. Vanessa's dedication extends to supporting families dealing with bereavement, linking them with resources and organizations for assistance.

***Celebrating Cultural Traditions.*** Vanessa is committed to promoting cultural awareness among her students. This is exemplified by her approach to celebrating cultural traditions. For instance, she integrates cultural celebrations such as Ramadan into classroom activities to honor and respect the religious practices of her Muslim students. Vanessa describes an instance where she organized a special activity in recognition of Ramadan, a significant religious observance for many of her students. She explains,

“Ramadan is obviously really big, we had a large Muslim population. So also, have many of our kids will be fasting in elementary school. And then I had the settlement worker, she one time came in, and we did a whole activity for Eid and we made like a sheep was like cotton balls and stuff.”

The participant also facilitates discussions about Ramadan's significance, traditions, and practices, allowing students to share their experiences and insights with their peers. According to Vanessa, students need to see their culture presented in class and at school. This cultural representation facilitates a sense of belonging and validation among students, affirming their identities and promoting pride in their cultural heritage. Vanessa believes that through the celebration of diverse traditions, she creates a classroom culture that celebrates diversity and promotes mutual understanding among students from different backgrounds.

***Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.*** Vanessa employs a variety of strategies to support the educational needs of her refugee students including dual language resources and multilingual text, technology integration, lesson and assessment modification, peer support, and collaboration with classroom teachers.

***Dual Language Resources and Multilingual Text.*** Vanessa uses dual-language posters and books to enhance comprehension and engagement among students with diverse language

abilities. Vanessa also incorporates multilingual texts into assessments and learning materials. Multilingual texts refer to written materials or documents that are presented in more than one language. She finds that these resources foster a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for her refugee students. Vanessa also indicates that these resources not only validate students linguistic background but also promote cultural pride within the classroom.

***Technology Integration.*** Vanessa frequently utilizes tools like Google Translate and Kahoot to support students learning. Google translates aids in facilitating communications and understanding. On the other hand, she utilizes Kahoot to enhance student engagement and learning. Kahoot is a game-based learning platform that allows teachers to create quizzes, discussions, and surveys, turning learning into a fun and interactive experience. Vanessa describes her use of Kahoot, saying, “They love playing games, I found this. We used Kahoot. We could make our own learning games, and I could put things at their level.” The participant believes that technology integration is essential for creating dynamic and interactive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs and interests of students.

***Lesson and Assessment Modification.*** Vanessa modifies lessons to fit the needs of her students, including fewer words, more pictures, and incorporation of students’ first language. She also modifies assessments to accommodate the unique needs and abilities of her students. She describes her process, saying,

“There was another teacher, she would give me whatever the lesson, she'd be like, here's the sheet that I'm going to give the kids after. And then I would take it and go home, and then modify it for my kids.”

Vanessa believes differentiating instructions and assessments is essential to ensuring equitable opportunities for all students, including refugees, to succeed academically.

**Peer Support.** Vanessa encourages higher-level students to assist their peers, to encourage collaborative learning environment. She emphasizes the importance of peer support, saying, “I would also use some of the higher students to help support the other peers.” The participant believes that promoting peer support can benefit refugee students in multiple ways including, creating a sense of community and belonging within the classroom.

**Collaboration with Classroom Teachers.** Vanessa collaborates closely with classroom teachers to align her support for ESL students with classroom instruction. She also supports classroom teachers in modifying assessments and providing additional support as needed. She actively engages in discussions and planning sessions with her colleagues to identify strategies for supporting refugee students. Vanessa values the insights and perspectives of other teachers and recognizes the importance of collective expertise in addressing the unique challenges faced by refugee students.

**Students’ Behaviour.** Vanessa acknowledges that refugee students often exhibit different behaviors and needs compared to other students due to their unique lived experiences and challenges. She recalls instances where refugee students displayed emotional distress during standardized testing, citing,

“For sure, like if you're coming as a refugee, you've been through something, and it's all different, right? I had a little girl whose dad was still in Syria, and she had to struggle every day. I remember her having to write the Education Quality and Accountability Office tests (EQAO) and this just kills me! I remember her sobbing like I understand, you just came to this country, and you must write the standardized test where we can't talk to you, can't help you, and it is really difficult to be in this situation.”

Vanessa also notes variations in behavior among refugee students, ranging from sadness and emotional sensitivity to more rambunctious behavior. She suggests that this behaviour possibly stems from the trauma and stress they have experienced.

Despite these challenges, Vanessa emphasizes the importance of understanding and supporting refugee students in a compassionate manner. In response to the diverse behaviors exhibited by refugee students, Vanessa adopts a supportive approach. She offers empathy and validation for her students' feelings. She shares personal connections with them, such as learning the meaning of their names and engaging in conversations to understand their experiences better. Vanessa also provides emotional support by listening to students' concerns and offering reassurance, acknowledging the difficulty and fear they may be experiencing.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Vanessa recognizes the numerous strengths her refugee students have in the classroom. She emphasizes their intelligence, quick learning abilities, and passion for education. She admires their bilingualism and describes them as kind, friendly, and passionate individuals. When discussing areas of growth or needs, Vanessa acknowledges that some students face challenges in their language acquisition due to emotional needs that require attention. She stresses the importance of addressing these emotional needs to facilitate refugee students' academic progress. Despite these challenges, Vanessa expresses her belief in the potential of these students and suggests the need for more English Language Development (ELD) programs to better support refugee students' needs. In response to maintaining high expectations for her students despite their unique lived experiences and potential exposure to trauma, Vanessa highlights the importance of setting boundaries around respect and teaching about mental health. She shares instances where enforcing consequences for disruptive behavior

in class led to positive changes in students' behavior. Additionally, she focuses on the effectiveness of maintaining consistent expectations. Vanessa also recognizes the influence of students' families on their learning. She explains how families of refugee students often hold high expectations for their children's education. Moreover, Vanessa aims to broaden her students' perspectives on career opportunities beyond traditional professions like law, medicine, or engineering.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** Vanessa shares an instance when she felt incapable of supporting a refugee student. She elaborates, "I don't know if I made a difference to him. I hope that at least I was a safe space." This incident stands out to Vanessa due to the intensity of the student's behavior and the challenges it poses, "He was difficult for his classroom teacher. His teacher couldn't manage the behavior." She suggests that the struggles may have occurred in regular classrooms with a teacher nearing retirement, "I think it was when I wasn't there. And he was in the regular classrooms." Vanessa notes concern about the classroom teacher's approach, "His homeroom teacher had an old school way of teaching. And I don't feel like she was able to address any of his needs or like acknowledge them or I don't know that she was modifying anything." This instance left Vanessa feeling mad and incapable of supporting the student.

On the other hand, Vanessa shares a specific incident where she felt confident and capable of supporting a refugee student. Despite not being the student's primary teacher but serving as the ESL teacher, Vanessa formed a strong bond with her student. She was impressed by the student's remarkable progress in learning, particularly in science. According to Vanessa, the student's ability to grasp not only academic concepts but also colloquial language was

impressive. However, the primary classroom teacher expressed concerns about the student's progress, which Vanessa found perplexing given the student's evident academic achievements. In response, Vanessa took an advocative stance to support her, highlighting her academic accomplishments and potential. She remains committed to recognizing and advocating for the educational needs and successes of her refugee students.

**Experience with Students' Trauma.** Vanessa reflects on the possibility of her students experiencing traumatic events. She mentions a boy whose behavioral challenges were noticeable, especially after his regular phone calls with his grandmother back home stopped abruptly. According to Vanessa, these sudden changes in communicating with family suggest a potential disruption in the student's life. Furthermore, Vanessa has several encounters with a family of five children. Although she lacked precise information about the family's past experiences, Vanessa could sense that they were experiencing hardships. Despite the absence of concrete details about her students' potential difficulties, Vanessa remains open to the idea that her students may have encountered trauma, acknowledging the potential impact on their behavior and well-being.

### ***Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

Vanessa describes the social integration of refugee students in her school as generally positive, particularly due to the homogeneous nature of the student body. She explains,

“It was easy for them and good because the school is pretty homogeneous in terms of like, everyone was kind of from the same area with the same kind of lifestyle and religion.”

However, she recalls a unique case involving a refugee student from China who faced challenges in fitting in due to his different cultural background. She recounts, “The boy was from the Muslim indigenous people in China. They're also treated like horrifically, and they had to leave the country.” According to Vanessa, unlike other students who easily integrated into the

social fabric of the school, this student struggled to connect with peers, possibly due to his quieter demeanor and distinct life experiences. Despite these challenges, Vanessa indicates that she employed various strategies to facilitate his social integration. Being academically strong in math, Vanessa focused on engaging him in collaborative activities and group projects to encourage communication and interaction. She also encouraged him to participate in group games to help him build friendships within the school community.

***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

Vanessa reflects on her relationship with refugee students' parents. She maintains regular communication that takes place on weekly basis. The participant ensures accessibility by considering parents' comfort with English and arranging interpreters for meetings when necessary. Vanessa also recounts instances when she personally addressed parental concerns, such as explaining permission forms over the phone. Additionally, she believes that this communication is two-way in nature since parents often reach out to her with questions or concerns.

On the other hand, Vanessa believes that refugee students' parents are actively involved in their students' learning. She elaborates on her relationship with them saying, "Those are some of my favorite parents ever. They value education so much. They are really great." The participant highlights that parents of refugee students regularly attend parent-teacher interviews, volunteer on school field trips, attended monthly assemblies, and actively engaged with teachers and staff. According to Vanessa this behaviour shows their dedication to their children's learning.

*Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem*

Vanessa gives credit to the support she receives from the settlement worker and her ESL colleagues in teaching refugee students. She emphasizes the importance of teamwork and highlights the expertise and experience of her colleagues. She indicates that many of them have been working in this capacity for a significant period. Vanessa also values the role of the settlement worker, particularly in facilitating communication with families and understanding their needs and circumstances. Vanessa reflects on the support system available at her current and previous school. She notices a severe decline in ESL resources and support for refugee students over time. Initially, at her previous school where she worked as an ESL teacher for 9 years, there were four ESL teachers. However, due to budget cuts, the number has dropped despite the increasing number of ESL students. She expresses concern that the current level of support is insufficient to meet the diverse needs of these students. Vanessa comments, “Back then, we had so many ESL resources...but as time went on, and the cuts just kept happening, I did have enough support back then, but I do not now. There's been too many cuts.” Despite the efforts of the lone ESL teacher at her current school to conduct small group sessions, Vanessa feels that it's not enough to adequately address the needs of all ESL students. She observes, “I see her doing small groups and I think it's maybe just the neediest kids. There's not a way to address all of the needs with one person.” Moreover, Vanessa highlights the absence of settlement workers in her recent school, which were integral in supporting social integration and family assistance at her previous school. She recalls, “At the school I was at for nine years I did have the settlement workers that I worked with...but right now, we don't have one.” Vanessa

emphasizes that the lack of support for ESL students' academic and social needs is a significant concern in the current educational environment.

***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem***

Vanessa provides insights into the Professional Development (PD) days within her school board, expressing dissatisfaction with their efficiency. She notes the themes of past PD sessions, such as STEAM education and health and safety, but questions their practicality in addressing pressing issues like literacy. Reflecting on the relevance of these sessions, Vanessa remarks,

“They're garbage. Like kids on our board can't read. Maybe if they didn't push STEAM down everyone's throat, and like abandon the baby in the bathwater! Everything has its place, but honestly, if people can't read, you can't access anything.”

Vanessa highlights the disconnection between PD priorities and the actual needs of students. Additionally, Vanessa discusses the availability of workshops offered outside school hours, which teachers can attend voluntarily. However, she expresses skepticism about their value, noting, “The title and description sounds amazing, and then I go to them, and it's like, patronizing, and it's performative.” Given these experiences with the PD offered by the school board, Vanessa has decided to opt out explaining,

“I'm not doing any more. There used to be PD during the day. And then there was the teacher shortage, we have trouble filling jobs in our board. So, they've made all of the daytime PD, aside from PD days, after school. So, you have to do it on your own time. But I've made myself a promise just this year, I'm not doing any more voluntary PD in my board. I will do my own learning through Sick Kids and other organizations, but not through our board.”

Therefore, Vanessa highlights importance of aligning professional development with the genuine needs of educators and students. She also expresses a desire for workshops or trainings facilitated by genuine experts in their respective fields indicating a preference for workshops grounded in evidence-based practices and relevant criteria.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Vanessa reflects on her experience teaching refugee students for 17 years. She advocates for several changes in schools to better adapt to the needs of refugee students. Firstly, she emphasizes the necessity for more education and training on topics such as PTSD and the refugee experience. Additionally, she calls for increased funding and more ESL teachers to provide adequate support. Vanessa also highlights the importance of professional development (PD) for teachers, suggesting that current PD opportunities are insufficient and often voluntary. She expresses concern about the mindset in schools regarding support for refugee students, noting that it varies greatly depending on individual teachers and school environments. Vanessa even proposes more radical ideas, like transitioning to a four-day workweek to provide educators with more time for training and learning about diverse student needs.

Vanessa offers advice to novice teachers working with refugee students. She focuses on the importance of understanding their backgrounds and prioritizing emotional needs over academics. She advises, “Think about what they've been through...do not worry about academics initially, until you've addressed their emotional needs and created a relationship.” Vanessa also highlights the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment. She advice aspiring teachers to get to know the students and their needs. She explains, “Get to know your kids, get to know their needs, make them feel safe and comfortable.” Moreover, Vanessa underscores the

importance of familiarizing oneself with the students' backgrounds by suggesting, "Read through their OSR (Ontario Student Record) ...have you read through it?" She also recommends connecting with settlement workers to further understand the students' background and cater to their needs.

In her closing remarks, Vanessa raises concerns about funding cuts affecting support for refugee families and advocates for greater awareness of their challenges. She reflects, "We just welcome them in and we're like, sink or swim," expressing her wish for people to understand "what's happening and how refugees are being treated." Through her advice and advocacy, Vanessa highlights the importance of providing comprehensive support for refugee students and their families. She indicates that she will continue to advocate for all her students to receive the support they need, whether within the ESL program or outside it.

#### **Case # 4: Sarah's Profile**

Sarah has been in the field of education for five year including three years as a teacher for refugee students. She teaches English and Physical Education. This academic year, she has seven refugee students in her class. Sarah holds a degree in English Literature and Criminology along with a Bachelor of Education. Her school is an urban area characterized by low-income housing. According to Sarah, the majority of the school population are low-income earners, or people on social assistance. The school serves predominantly blue-collar workers and families of refugees from various backgrounds, including Ukraine and Iran.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Sarah acknowledges a lack of formal training in trauma-informed pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, or social-emotional learning. Instead, she believes that teachers at her school rely on self-directed learning through resources found online, primarily utilizing Google and the internet to gather tips and tricks for assisting refugee students. Sarah thinks that this situation is attributed to the evolving dynamics of refugee influxes into Canada and the subsequent need for teachers to adapt and learn as they go. Despite the absence of formal academic training, Sarah strives to support her students to the best of her abilities. She indicates that she is willing to learn and adapt to the changing needs of the diverse student population.

Sarah does not feel that her teacher education program prepared her to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds and various lived experiences. She expresses concerns about the curriculum taught to teachers during their teacher education program. She suggests that the curriculum needs to be modernized and updated to reflect the current realities in teaching in a diverse classroom. She highlights that her program lacked focus on students' psychological needs. However, it only addressed day to day classroom management, curriculum delivery, and various assessment tools.

### ***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner theory.

**Initial Feelings about Teaching Refugee Students.** Sarah shares her emotions when anticipating teaching refugee students. She reveals a blend of emotions of apprehension and adaptability. She indicates that she feels concerned and afraid to accidentally offend her students or

to come along as being impatient or incompetent. She elaborates, “You don't want to do anything to offend them... It's a question of adaptability, for sure.” As Sarah delves into her experience with refugee students, she asserts the importance of being patient, kind, and understanding. She says, “A lot of my students don't speak a word of English. So, it is very difficult to adapt your material to try and convey the lessons.” According to Sarah these difficulties in adapting to students’ needs are her major concern when teaching refugees.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** Sarah implements several strategies to make her refugee students feel safe. These strategies include having a stuffed animal companion, fostering predictability and consistency, relaxing classroom environment, and celebrating cultural traditions.

***Stuffed Animal Companion.*** Sarah implements a unique approach in providing all her students with a stuffed animal companion. These stuffed animals serve as symbols of security and comfort, helping students feel reassured and less isolated in their new environment. She indicates, “Especially for the refugees, I find just having soft materials that is so comforting, it did help them.” Sarah finds this strategy effective in creating a sense of familiarity and stability for her students to aid their transition into the school community.

***Predictability and Consistency.*** Sarah believes in the importance of predictability and consistency in creating a safe and comfortable environment for her refugee students. She elaborates, “Implementing a routine, I find that's very important to them. They appreciate the routine, knowing what they need to do at what time, what's going to happen, and what's expected. I think that's so important.” Sarah indicates that these elements provide a sense of stability and assurance, helping her refugee students navigate the unfamiliarity of their new surroundings and routines.

***Relaxing Classroom Environment.*** Sarah creates a calming atmosphere in her classroom by playing soothing music in the background during English lessons. She elaborates, “I think it allows the students to be a bit calmer, and to be able to absorb the material easier as well.” The participant believes that this strategy reduces stress and anxiety and allow students to engage more effectively with the lesson.

***Celebrating Cultural Traditions.*** Sarah likes to incorporate music from students' cultural backgrounds. She often seeks input from parents. Sarah explains, “I've also reached out to the parents, if there's some music from their culture that we can get and if they are okay with me playing it in the classroom.” In addition, Sarah actively incorporates cultural and religious celebrations into her classroom, such as Ramadan. During Ramadan, Sarah ensures that her students understand the significance of this holy month for their Muslim peers. She facilitates discussions about the rituals and practices associated with Ramadan. She also encourages her students to ask questions and engage with the cultural diversity present in their classroom. Moreover, Sarah explains that her school organizes potluck events. These events provide a vibrant platform for cultural exchange among her students and their families. Through these gatherings, diverse food items are shared, allowing students to explore and appreciate the culinary traditions of their peers. The aim of this event is to promote a sense of community and belonging among students and their families. By integrating cultural elements into the classroom, Sarah believes she can create a sense of inclusivity and respect among students, encouraging them to learn from and appreciate each other's cultural heritage.

***Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.*** Sarah indicates that refugee students in her class do not get support from the ESL program although many of them do not speak a word of English. She reflects, “Unfortunately we have challenges trying to get this type

of assistance. I know that our current school board is trying desperately to find a way to implement that service for our students.” Hence, Sarah implements multiple strategies to support the needs of her refugee students including outdoor learning activities, use of visual aids, and peer support.

***Outdoor Learning Activities.*** Sarah appreciates her students’ strong inclination toward visual learning and the significance of outdoor education in accommodating their needs. Reflecting on her experiences, Sarah recalls conducting classes outdoors to teach students about trees and seasons, leveraging the natural environment to reinforce vocabulary and pronunciation. She elaborates on the transformation of their school backyard from asphalt to a peaceful, grassy area with trees, providing a conducive learning environment. Sarah is committed to implement outdoor learning activities around three times a week. She highlights the positive impact of outdoor learning on her students’ engagement and language development. Additionally, Sarah takes her teaching beyond the school grounds by organizing trips to local parks and shopping areas. Her goal is to introduce her students to different surroundings, helping them feel safe and at ease outside of the classroom. According to Sarah, outdoor lessons allow students to observe and interact with their surroundings, reinforcing vocabulary related to nature and the environment in a tangible way.

***Visual Aids.*** Sarah understands the importance of including visuals to support the needs of her refugee students who are not receiving support in English. She incorporates visual cues and aids into her teaching materials and activities. For example, she utilizes diagrams, pictures, and charts to illustrate concepts and vocabulary, making the learning process more accessible and engaging for her students. Sarah believes that providing visual representation of abstract ideas can help students grasp new concepts effectively regardless of their levels of English proficiency.

**Peer Support.** Sarah facilitates collaborative learning when refugee students work with a peer or in small groups to complete tasks and projects. She aims at creating a sense of community and belonging among refugee students in addition to providing them with opportunities to learn from their peers, build relationship, and share cultural insights.

**Students' Behavior.** Sarah suggests that refugee students exhibit different behaviors and needs compared to other students, especially when adjusting to new environments or approaches to learning. She says, "It takes a little bit of time for them to gain... the confidence to allow us to teach them something." She highlights the importance of being understanding and patient in supporting their learning journey, adding, "We're there to help... whatever time it takes for them to learn and understand." Sarah recounts an instance when teaching verb tenses like "running". Her student associated running with danger or trauma. She relied on her other students to demonstrate that running can be a positive and enjoyable activity.

Sarah also shares several instances when she had to provide emotional support for a student going through a rough time. She recalls, "I remember... literally hugging the student and saying it's okay... we're going to work together." She asserts that her refugee students often require personalized attention and emotional support.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Sarah identifies several strengths of her refugee students. She appreciates their profound respectfulness towards others. She also indicates that they appreciate emotional support and gestures of encouragement. She emphasizes how they pass on these positive behaviors to their peers. However, Vanessa also acknowledges the initial challenges her students face. She elaborates on their fearfulness and apprehension towards unfamiliar sounds or situations. For instance, she recalls their reaction to fire alarms as if it were

an air raid, highlighting their unfamiliarity with routine safety procedures due to their past experiences in war settings.

Through implementing the previously discussed strategies to make students feel safe and support their academic growth, Sarah remains committed to supporting her refugee students in building upon their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** Sarah reflects on an incident where she felt incapable of supporting a refugee student. She explains that a student from Iran showed profound fear and anxiety when he saw a classmate coming to school with a cast after breaking their leg. Despite Sarah's effort to provide reassurance and comfort, the student remained in distress. The incident left Sarah confused and unable to comfort her student. Sarah notes, "I couldn't understand why the student was so fearful. I wondered, why is this such an issue?" Upon delving into the matter, Sarah knew that her student's fear stemmed from previous experiences in the past where people were exposed to injuries without proper medical care. Reflecting on the incident, Sarah notes, "Speaking with the family afterwards, I learned that the student had been exposed to injuries without adequate medical attention. They associated casts and injuries with past experiences of blood and suffering." According to Sarah, this incident sheds light on the profound impact past trauma has on her refugee students' lives. It exposed Sarah to the complexities of supporting refugee students. Despite these challenges, Sarah remains committed to supporting her refugee students by continuously seeking ways to understand and address their unique needs.

Sarah also shares an incident that happened with one of her female students who wears a hijab. She explains, "when she first started with us, she was having a difficult time playing with the other girls in the classroom." Sarah tried to identify the root cause of the problem,

“The other students were sharing and caring, and they wanted to integrate her and asked her questions about her hijab and what it meant and why she was wearing it. So, I think maybe she was offended well...how come you don't know what this is?”

Sarah transformed the situation into a learning opportunity. She conducted a lesson on the symbolism and significance of the hijab, to promote understanding and empathy among her students. After the lesson, some students expressed interest in wearing hijabs themselves to show solidarity and inclusivity. This incident made Sarah feel confident in addressing the cultural differences and promote empathy among her students to create a more inclusive classroom environment.

**Experience with Students' Trauma.** Sarah indicates that she only receives a little bit of information about students' past experiences from the administration. She is often left unaware of the potential factors that can trigger students' trauma responses. Through our interview, Sarah shares several instances when her students' previous traumatic events became prevalent in the classroom. In addition to the instance of the child who was afraid of the cast on his peer's leg, she shared another story of a child who was terrified of the fire alarm during a fire drill. The student's reaction stemmed from associating alarms with air raid sirens, evoking memories of danger and chaos.

Sarah wishes she had access to more information about her students' past experiences to try to avoid triggering factors and create a safer space for her students. She understands that this information may be held back due to privacy issues. However, it leaves teachers ill-prepared and sometimes feeling incapable of supporting their students.

***Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

Sarah describes the process of integrating refugee students into the school environment, particularly focusing on their interactions with peers. She emphasizes her continuous efforts to create a sense of community and belonging among her students. The participant observes that boys from different cultures tend to bond easily with each other and build friendships effortlessly. Conversely, Sarah indicates that girls may encounter tension, such as in the case of discussing the hijab. This requires extra effort from her to support her female students to build and maintain friendships.

***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

Sarah delves into her interactions with refugee students' parents. She indicates that this relationship is characterized by regular communication and mutual support. Sarah shares her experience, stating, "When they first start the school year, I speak with the parents at least once a week." She emphasizes the importance of communication, especially for parents with limited English proficiency. Sarah often resorts to interpreters to convey information to parents effectively. Despite the language barrier, Sarah indicates that parents of refugee students are generally receptive and grateful for the educational opportunities their children are receiving in Canada.

Sarah believes that refugee students' parents are actively engaged in their children's learning. She highlights the seriousness with which refugee parents approach education. She explains, "Sometimes even more than the Canadian parents," noting their proactive approach to addressing academic challenges. Sarah describes how refugee parents are quick to address issues and communicate with teachers, demonstrating their commitment to their children's success.

Sarah then delves into the cultural differences in parental engagement, noting distinct attitudes towards education. She contrasts the response of refugee parents with that of Canadian parents when addressing student behavior or academic performance. Sarah observes,

“When I'm reproaching, another family's child's behavior, or lack of attention, or understanding or just not willing to learn, they'll be a bit more aggressive, and they'll blame the teacher. So, I find that difference in culture is very apparent. So, refugee parents, they really want their children to succeed.”

Sarah believes that this mentality reflects a deep-rooted commitment among refugee parents to prioritize their children's academic achievement and success, emphasizing their strong support and aspirations for educational attainment.

Regarding participation in the school community, Sarah confirms significant participation, particularly from refugee families, often due to one parent being at home. She remarks, “Especially for the refugee families, if there's only one working... mother is usually at home.” She indicates that parents are always available to help with the field trips and other school activities.

#### ***Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem***

Sarah reflects on the various resources available to support her in teaching refugee students. She highlights the significance of collaboration with fellow educators. She states, “I would say the other teachers are definitely a resource in itself.” Sarah values the insights gained from experienced colleagues and emphasizes the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Sarah also acknowledges the efforts made by the school to create a supportive environment for refugee students, such as adapting the school environment to be more inclusive of different

cultures and traditions. In addition, Sarah recognizes the positive mindset among staff members and their willingness to help. However, she highlights the need for further support and resources. She emphasizes that although the school has taken steps, there's still more to be done to fully support refugee students. Sarah expresses concern about the level of support available to refugee students in terms of staffing and resources. She reflects on the lack of teachers' aides, ESL teachers, social workers, and psychologists. She believes that there is an urgent need for additional support personnel to address the diverse needs of these students. In her words, "We don't have enough teachers' aides. We don't have enough social workers. I don't even think we have one right now." According to Sarah, this shortage poses a significant challenge in meeting the varied needs of refugee students, especially those who may require additional support due to trauma or language barriers. Moreover, Sarah notes the absence of consistent translation services. She emphasizes the importance of having an onsite translator, stating, "It would be good to have somebody like five days a week, on site." She believes this would facilitate effective communication between school staff and refugee families to ensure that parents are fully involved in their children's education. Sarah also discusses the limited support available for students with learning disabilities from refugee backgrounds, highlighting the scarcity of resources in the educational system. She mentions having one student with a reading disability who receives assistance from a TSA (Teacher Support Assistant) once a week. However, she expresses concern about the insufficiency of these resources and the potential long-term impact on students' educational trajectories. Despite not currently having students with special needs such as autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), she anticipates the possibility and emphasizes the importance of early intervention and support.

### *Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem*

Sarah reflects on her ongoing efforts to understand and integrate the cultural backgrounds of her refugee students. She admits to feeling only moderately proficient in this area. She states, "I'm like, on a scale from one to ten, maybe about a five." Despite her dedication to learning, she expresses frustration at the limited resources available for self-education, particularly regarding cultural understanding. She emphasizes the inadequacy of relying only on the internet to understand the cultural background of her students. She notes, "the internet is not necessarily the best tool. You know, it's as reliable as whoever programmed the information." Hence, Sarah recognizes the need for more reliable sources of information to support her teaching practice.

Regarding professional development (PD) opportunities, Sarah talks about the lack of teachers' choice of training sessions. She indicates that they are mostly decided by the school board. On the other hand, despite having four PD days allocated annually, she highlights that only two of these days are dedicated to training, with the remaining time often dedicated to administrative tasks such as report writing. Sarah expresses a desire for more practical and hands-on training sessions tailored specifically to the challenges of educating refugee students. She explains, "It would be great to have like an actual curriculum, learn an entire day and discuss, like various aspects of what it is to deal what it is to educate a student from a refugee background." Sarah recognizes the need for targeted teacher training programs that provide tangible strategies and resources for supporting refugee students effectively. Sarah also highlights the needs for collaboration among teachers within the same school board. She suggests that teacher should be allowed time to meet with each other to share strategies and tangible resources with their colleagues.

Furthermore, the teacher discusses initiatives by the school board aimed at enhancing support for refugee students. She mentions plans for curriculum development with input from experts in psychology and community centers, illustrating efforts to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences into educational practices. She expresses, “So, I would say the school board, especially for next year, because we're expecting an influx, they're trying to have a curriculum with the help of experts in the field.” Sarah supports a review of the curriculum to better meet the needs of refugee students. She also believes that curriculum adaptation alone is insufficient and that lessons learned from other school boards and institutions should be shared and utilized.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Sarah reflects on her experience with refugee students. She emphasizes the importance of preparation and self-education for new teachers working with refugee students. She advises aspiring teachers to conduct thorough research, seek guidance from experienced educators, and utilize online resources for support and learning. Additionally, she highlights patience and compassion as essential qualities for working with refugee students. She gives great importance for being understanding and empathetic in supporting their unique needs. She concludes by expressing hope that teachers will prioritize these qualities for the benefit of all students and demonstrate openness to learning and growth in the role.

### **Case # 5: Fatima’s Profile**

Fatima has been a teacher for the past two years. She earned an undergraduate degree in neuroscience, economics, and biology. She then completed a Master of Teaching. Fatima also completed an Additional Qualification (AQ) for math part one in addition to Additional Basic Qualification (ABQ) to extend her teaching license. So, now she is primarily a junior and

intermediate teacher. This year she is Long Term Occasional (LTO) teacher educating a core French fourth grade class of 26 students. Core French is a required program for all Ontario students enrolled in English-language schools. Starting in Grade 4, this program continues through to Grade 8, providing students with one daily period of French instruction (TDSB, n.d.). She teaches all subject except French and Library. She currently has 5 students who are refugees in her class. Her school is in an urban area with a unique cultural diversity and low SES. The majority of the population in the school area consists of the Bengali Muslim community. Out of the 26 students in Fatima's class, only five are non-Muslims. Fatima is a first-generation immigrant who moved to Canada at a very young age. She is currently working at the same school she attended when she first joined school in Canada and completed her second practicum during her Master of Teaching.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Fatima discusses her educational background and experience as a teacher. She sheds light on her training in various pedagogical approaches. While reflecting on TIP, she mentions that it was discussed in her special education course during her Master of Teaching program. However, the course lacked specific training in trauma-informed teaching practices. She notes, "I wouldn't say an official training, but it is spoken about in my special education course." In contrast, CRP was a significant emphasis throughout her courses at her Master of Teaching. Fatima states, "Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was very much a main theme of the course." Regarding differentiated instruction, Fatima acknowledges its inclusion in her courses but points out that instructors did not delve deeply into its specifics and how it should be implemented in the classroom. Furthermore, Fatima discusses social-emotional learning (SEL) and its limited coverage in her formal education. Fatima explains, "Social-emotional learning isn't included too

much.” She mentions conducting personal research on SEL during her Master of teaching due to her personal interest in the topic.

Fatima reflects on her teacher education program's preparation for teaching refugee students, expressing that it did not adequately equip her for this task. She notes that the program did not address the specific needs and challenges of teaching in a diverse, immigrant and refugee-heavy community. Fatima believes that the familiarity she has with her current school community has helped her in her teaching role. She indicates that she had her practicum at this school in addition to living in the neighborhood at an earlier point in life. Without this prior exposure, she believes she would have felt overwhelmed upon entering the school environment.

On the other hand, since Fatima is a new teacher, she receives three paid PD days from the school board. During these days, a supply teacher will cover her class while Fatima attends her training. These PD days are designated for LTOs and new teachers. Fatima explains that these days can be used to attend various workshops offered by her school board. This year, she took this time to attend a workshop on “Building Thinking Classrooms”. She chose this workshop because she had read the book that it was centered around and wanted to experience it in person. Fatima considers herself fortunate to have had the opportunity to attend these workshops as they are not available to more experienced teachers.

### ***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner theory.

**Initial Feelings about Teaching Refugee Students.** Fatima's experience with teaching refugee students is facilitated by her prior exposure to the community and school. She recounts her familiarity with the area, having spent the first two years in Canada within this community

and attending the same elementary school. This personal connection with the school and the community supports her current teaching role. When asked about her feelings upon learning about her classroom's composition, Fatima describes her response as unsurprised, given her background knowledge. She elaborates, "Honestly speaking, I wasn't that shocked...my mentor teacher briefed me on the background of majority of the students." She adds, "For 20 years, I've known this community extremely well." However, despite her familiarity, Fatima expresses her initial lack of preparedness upon starting her teaching role. She notes, "I felt like I was really just thrown into a classroom...I didn't have any material. I had nothing." Fatima's highlights the importance of adaptability and resourcefulness in overcoming initial challenges. She highlights the value of reviewing her students' Ontario Student Records (OSRs) to gain deeper insights into the students' academic needs and backgrounds: "The most important part that helped me was looking through their OSRs...I got to know more about the students academically." According to Fatima, being prepared to support your students is key to a successful academic year.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** Fatima employs several strategies in her classroom to foster a sense of safety and comfort among her refugee students. These strategies include creating a welcoming and supportive classroom environment and giving students a choice.

***Creating a Welcoming and Supportive Classroom Environment.*** Fatima believes that creating a welcoming and supportive environment is key to catering to her students' needs. She explains, "You have to create an environment where they know that they feel safe enough to express their own opinions, and safe enough to act as they are...you have to have a bond with them." To achieve this, Fatima emphasizes the importance of building relationships with her students over time. In terms of specific activities, Fatima focuses on community-building

exercises, particularly in the gym class. For the first 2-3 weeks of school, Fatima engages her students in team-building activities. These activities are designed to facilitate interactions among students and provide a comfortable, hands-on environment for English language learners, including refugee students. Additionally, Fatima focuses on building personal connections with her students. She recounts the transformation of a previously shy student who began initiating conversations with her in Arabic. She describes the student's newfound confidence, saying, "He comes in and every time he'll see me, the first thing he wants to say, Alsalam Alaikom (a greeting in Arabic) how was your weekend?" According to Fatima, this students' transformation shows the importance of creating supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere to make students feel safe.

***Giving Students a Choice.*** Fatima's approach to incorporating student choice and participation is deeply rooted in creating a supportive and engaging classroom environment. She emphasizes the importance of allowing students to have a voice in their learning experiences. Fatima gives her students a choice particularly in instances where flexibility is feasible, such as classroom decorations and discussions related to cultural events. For instance, when her students expressed a desire to decorate the classroom door for Ramadan, Fatima encouraged their initiative and adapted their idea by suggesting a calendar project due to supply limitations. Similarly, for Eid and other cultural celebrations like Diwali and Holi, she actively involves students in planning and creating related activities, such as creating a prayer chain or engaging in other special projects.

**Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.** On daily basis, Fatima utilizes a variety of tailored strategies to support her refugee students academically. These strategies

include peer support and multilingual resources, modified assessments, culturally responsive activities, and small groups and scaffolding.

***Peer Support and Multilingual Resources.*** Fatima leverages peer-to-peer support by pairing students who share the same mother tongue. She explains, “I try to find videos in their mother tongue, and because of the community I'm in, I pair them with other students who are comfortable speaking the same language. Anything I say, they can easily translate to their peers.” According to Fatima, this approach not only aids in academic understanding but also supports creating positive relationships among students.

***Modified Assessments.*** To accommodate their language acquisition needs, Fatima implements specific modifications in assessments to support her students. She provides alternative assessment options such as multiple-choice formats instead of long answer questions. She also allows her students to listen to test questions. She acknowledges the effectiveness of these approaches in facilitating language acquisition. Fatima emphasizes the importance of listening and speaking in language acquisition, particularly for refugee students with the language barrier. She notes, “They pick up English faster through listening and speaking.” Hence, Fatima fosters sensitivity to her students' preferred learning methods and highlights her commitment to leveraging effective strategies that align with their language development processes. Through these modifications, Fatima aims to create a supportive environment that promotes comprehension and confidence among her refugee students.

***Culturally Responsive Activities.*** Incorporating culturally responsive activities is another strategy utilized by Fatima to support her refugee students. She focuses on the importance of integrating activities that resonate with her students' backgrounds to create a classroom environment where they feel seen and valued. For instance, Fatima describes incorporating

cultural traditions into her math lessons, such as playing an Eid game. This game is inspired by the “Building Thinking Classroom” workshop and includes giving and receiving money during Eid. Eid is the Muslim celebration that comes after Ramadan. During this holiday, it is a tradition followed by the Muslim community for adults to give money to kids. During cultural and religious events like Ramadan, Fatima integrates culturally responsive activities into the curriculum, such as a Ramadan calendar with daily goals. These activities not only make the learning experience more relatable but also helps her students feel a sense of familiarity and belonging in the classroom. Regarding curriculum selection, Fatima intentionally chooses materials that reflect her students' experiences. For example, she incorporates a novel study that focuses on refugee protagonists around her students' ages. The novel highlights the lived experiences of refugees and speaks of their courage and resilience. Through this approach, Fatima aims to empower her students by incorporating characters with similar backgrounds to validate their lived experiences.

***Small Groups and Scaffolding.*** Fatima focuses on providing individualized attention in smaller group settings after a whole class lesson. According to Fatima, small groups allow for more personalized instruction and the opportunity to clarify concepts that may be challenging for her refugee students. Moreover, she incorporates visual aids, such as YouTube videos or hands-on activities like using building blocks in math, to enhance understanding and engagement during instruction.

**Students' Behavior.** Fatima observes distinct changes in her refugee students' behavior and confidence levels over time. Initially, in October, she noted their hesitancy and lack of confidence in speaking English correctly. She describes their behavior as shy. According to Fatima, this shyness may be due to self-consciousness related to their age and language

proficiency. Fatima elaborates, “They don't want to mess up when they're saying something in the classroom.” However, Fatima witnessed significant progress by November, indicating that her students had become more adjusted and confident. She explains, “I was seeing different colors,” suggesting a positive transformation in their demeanor and participation. Despite these initial challenges, Fatima emphasizes that there are no behavior issues with her refugee students. She describes them as “very sweet” and “very nice,” highlighting their positive disposition and cooperative attitude in the classroom.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Fatima's approach to her students' strengths and areas of growth is deeply rooted in empathy and understanding. She views her students' challenges as opportunities for growth and adaptation rather than weaknesses. In discussing her students' strengths, she highlights their bravery and resilience, recognizing the immense courage required to adapt to a new country and educational system. During parent-teacher meetings, she often engages parents in discussions about their children's adjustment process. She continuously urges parents to appreciate the significant transition their children are undergoing.

Regarding refugee students' areas for growth, Fatima focuses on supporting her students in building confidence in their potentials to overcome shyness and feelings of insecurity. She supports their academic progress with patience and understanding. Fatima's approach to maintaining high expectations involves clear and direct communication with her students. She explains the importance of setting consistent deadlines and academic standards, ensuring that her students understand and respect these expectations. Despite potential challenges, Fatima remains committed to nurturing her students' overall well-being and academic development.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** Fatima recalls a challenging period in October when she initially struggled to support her refugee students academically due to language

barriers and resource limitations. Although her students were receiving individual support during the language hour with the ESL teacher, they were with her for the rest of the day. She recalls,

“I would say it was when I was starting off. I don't know if I would call it incapable. But in the beginning, I had a really hard time, just because maybe of the lack of resources. I had a really hard time figuring out how to best include these students in the classroom academically because of the gap in English that they had.”

To address these challenges, Fatima invested additional time outside of regular hours to develop tailored materials and strategies for her refugee students. She explains, “So at that time, I felt like I was struggling a bit to make sure that they were incorporated. So, I had to take some time, on weekends to figure out stuff directly for them.”

On the other hand, Fatima reflects on instances where she felt confident and capable of supporting her students, particularly through small group instruction tailored to their needs. She finds success in adjusting the pace and expectations for her refugee students who are new to Canadian social studies. She elaborates,

“So anytime I've had those small group instructions, I felt they've worked wonders. So, the first time where I tried it in social studies, and it was much better than large group instructions for these students, because I could slow it down to their level.”

Fatima continues to see the impact of her strategies on her refugee students as they have become more engaged and confident in their learning.

**Experience with Students' Trauma.** Regarding student exposure to trauma, Fatima has no official information or observable signs of trauma among her students. She acknowledges her role as an educator and refrains from diagnosing trauma-related behaviors. Instead, she focuses on creating a supportive classroom environment. On the other hand, Fatima acknowledges the

complexity of implementing TIP in her classroom. However, she feels uncertain to whether or not she is implementing TIP in her class. While she incorporates elements of collaboration and student choice, she hesitates to claim full implementation due to limited knowledge and training in this area.

### ***Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

Fatima believes that refugee students do not receive specific support to promote their social integration or increase their sense of belonging to the school. However, her refugee students are well integrated into the social fabric of the school. They are able to develop relationships with their peers without the need for teacher intervention. She notes that this is facilitated by the school's diverse population, where many students understand the challenges of moving into a new country. Fatima observes that boys generally create friendships through sports. She indicates that through sports, the language barrier becomes less significant and children bond over their shared interests. Similarly, the girls can easily connect through shared interests that facilitate building friendships. According to Fatima, this natural integration might explain why school administration does not intervene actively in supporting refugee students' social integration.

### ***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

Fatima reflects on her relationship and communication with her refugee students' parents. She explains that she communicates with them at least twice a year. First, she introduces herself when the students are placed in her classroom. Then, she meets them during parent-teacher interviews. She seeks additional communication if the student is not progressing well academically. Fatima observes that refugee students' parents generally have high academic expectations from their children despite their recent arrival to the country. Consequently, Fatima

often has to discuss more realistic goals with the parents emphasizing the importance of the student settling in before focusing on academics.

Fatima believes that language is not a significant barrier to her communication with parents. She relies on non-verbal cues like intonation, facial expressions, and gestures to facilitate understanding. She also notices that at least one parent is often comfortable communicating in English. Fatima also describes a range of parental involvement among the refugee students, noting, “Some of them, I can see that they're very well involved. Like they'll get them tutors to help out.” However, she highlights instances where parents were unaware of their children’s struggles until she presented them with examples of the child’s work during parent-teacher interview. Regarding the parents’ involvement in the school community, Fatima notices a lack of participation. She suggests that this may be due to a cultural mindset where parents have complete trust in teachers’ guidance and see no reason to participate or volunteer in school activities or field trips.

***Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem***

Fatima reflects on the resources and support available at her school. She highlights the significance challenges she faces in acquiring adequate resources. She indicates that she relies heavily on resources like YouTube leveraging its multilingual content to bridge language barriers and cater to her students' needs. However, Fatima indicates that official resources from the board are severely lacking. She calls for the presence of resource teachers to support educators and provide necessary assistance. She also believes in the significance of having a translator on site to facilitate communication with students especially at the beginning of the academic year. Fatima also reflects on the absence of support from her school administration. She indicates that

they have a high turnover rate in leadership positions at her school. This turnover rate has led to a challenging environment where seeking support feels impractical to teachers.

Fatima feels that her biggest supporter is a mentor teacher present at her school who had a great impact on her teaching journey. She explains how the mentor provides reassurance and practical advice for adapting her teaching strategies to meet the needs of refugee students. This support includes suggestions for implementing graphic organizers, interactive classroom activities like gallery walks, and other teaching practices tailored to the students' unique circumstances.

***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem***

Fatima provides insights in the support provided to teachers from the school board. She values attending professional development workshops during school hours as an opportunity to enhance her teaching practices directly. She describes her experience with these workshops, stating, “I’ve been to two so far ... I find them very useful because I’m learning a lot of new things that I can incorporate in the math classroom.” Fatima also appreciates the practical nature of these workshops. She explains that she can implement what she learns immediately. She notes,

“They talked about doing math on non-permanent vertical surfaces. Okay, I didn’t have those. I used to give my kids chart papers... they gave me these huge paper whiteboards that you can just erase off, so I’m able to use that in my classroom now.”

Despite the challenges associated with attending workshops during school hours, such as the need to create lesson plans for the supply teacher and coping with supply shortages, Fatima finds

the experience highly beneficial. She highlights the tangible impact of these workshops on her teaching.

On the other hand, Fatima focuses on the critical need for targeted PD that addresses the specific challenges teachers face when educating refugee students. She highlights the importance of practical application in PD sessions, expressing frustration with generic instruction without clear implementation guidance. She also stresses the necessity of professional development on trauma-informed pedagogy and specialized strategies for supporting refugee language development. She also identifies the need for culturally relevant approaches in subjects like social studies and math to better engage and support refugee students.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Fatima reflects on her experience teaching refugee students. She feels strong connection to teaching this group of student because of her personal background as an immigrant. She believes that this shared experience helps her relate to her students and creates a sense of comfort and trust in the classroom. She explains, “I think it's because I'm able to relate to them a lot...they always think that...Ok our teacher knows what we're talking about.” She also emphasizes the shared experiences and bonds with her students, particularly in relation to religion. Fatima expresses, “They know I'm Muslim openly, and they're Muslim as well.” This mutual understanding allows Fatima to establish meaningful relationships with her students and create supportive learning environment.

Conversely, Fatima is also careful when teaching refugee students. She emphasizes the importance of using sensitive language and portraying events in a respectful manner, especially during activities like novel studies that focuses on refugee experiences. She explains, “I have to

be careful with the terminology that I'm using, because I don't want them to feel singled out.” Hence, she tries to be proactive in ensuring that her teaching materials and approaches are inclusive and considerate of her students' backgrounds and experiences.

Fatima highlights the critical role of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in schools to support refugee students in feeling safe and successful. She views this pedagogical approach as essential for fostering inclusion and a sense of belonging, particularly for students adjusting to a new country and educational system. Fatima explains, “Teachers should not only be windows but mirrors to reflect their students’ cultural backgrounds and identities in the classroom.” When asked to reflect on areas of potential improvement to better support the educational needs of refugee students, Fatima identifies a common challenge. She explains that educators believe they are implementing culturally responsive practices but still harbor biases and misconceptions about refugee students. She elaborates,

“Teachers view refugee students from a deficit lens. More like, oh, this child is a refugee, they cannot do this or that. Oh, they come from this country. Their parents say they came from a good school, but they don’t. Or they don't speak English, so teachers automatically assume that they must not know much. Like always, always having the English language as the upper hand. Like if you don't know English, you don't know anything.”

According to Fatima, these biases can undermine the full integration of CRP. She emphasizes the importance of teachers engaging in self-reflection to identify and confront their own biases and preconceived notions about refugees and their backgrounds. In addition, she challenges educators to shift their perspective away from these biases and recognize the diverse strengths and capabilities of individual students. To change this mindset, Fatima acknowledges the

complexity of unpacking deeply ingrained biases and suggests that educators engage in reflective practices to foster acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity. She sheds light on the historical context of Canada as a nation of immigrants. Hence, she urges teachers to recognize their own immigrant backgrounds and promote a culture of acceptance and inclusivity in schools.

### **Case # 6: Vivian's Profile**

Vivian has been an educator for 17 years. She is currently teaching grade 4 in the French immersion program, covering all subjects including math. Throughout her career, Vivian has had refugee students in her class every year. Vivian's educational background includes an undergraduate degree in Languages followed by Bachelor of Education. Additionally, Vivian holds qualifications as a French teaching specialist and French as a second language specialist. She has previously worked in settlement with the Government of Quebec before starting her career in education.

Vivian's current school is in a rural area that is gradually becoming more diverse due to an increasing number of newcomers settling there. The community is generally middle to upper-middle class, with few lower socioeconomic status students. Vivian notes that the area's appeal for newcomers is limited due to its rural location and smaller population.

### ***Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training***

Vivian has undergone professional development and training on TIP, due to her extensive experience teaching in intermediate schools. She notes,

“I worked predominantly in intermediate schools when I was with the other school board. So, I spent a lot of time in grade seven and eight. We had special workshops for us, because it's such a delicate and unique age range to be teaching.”

This specialized training is crucial in helping Vivian understand the learning needs of students affected by trauma. Reflecting on the practicality of this training, she mentions, “I would say that it was helpful in terms of figuring out the learning needs. Being trauma-informed is one of those challenging things, because we're teachers, we're not social workers, we are not psychologists.” According to the Vivian, the training emphasized the importance of collaboration with other professionals when dealing with complex behavioral issues among students exposed to trauma.

Regarding CRP, Vivian explains that her teaching approach is deeply rooted in her linguistic background and multicultural experiences. She explains, “I've always taught very multiculturally... It's just innate within me, I do it automatically. I've had very multicultural classrooms where I've had to make it all work and make sure that everyone's traditions and beliefs are respected.” Vivian indicates that her approach to integrating diverse cultural perspectives predates formal educational initiatives. She explains, “Before the Indigenous education focus came, I was already doing it... I've always been ahead before it becomes a thing in education.”

Additionally, Vivian has undergone extensive training in differentiated instruction since the beginning of her teaching career. She mentions participating in numerous workshops and incorporating components of differentiation into various professional development opportunities over the years. Regarding SEL, Vivian's approach is deeply rooted in her background in guidance. She explains that even before the term "social-emotional learning" became widely used, she was actively engaging in practices that support students' emotional well-being and

goal-setting. Her approach to SEL integrates academic guidance with emotional support and cultural sensitivity.

***Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem***

This theme highlights the interactions that take place between refugee students and their teachers. These interactions fall within the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner bioecological theory.

**Initial Feelings Toward Teaching Refugee Students.** Vivian feels excited to teach refugee students in her class. However, her excitement is associated with by a strong sense of responsibility and concern for the well-being of the students and their families. Due to her background in immigration work, Vivian seeks to understand the students' backgrounds and current circumstances, including their emotional state and their journey to Canada. Vivian's primary focus is on ensuring that the refugee families receive necessary support and services. She is actively involved in connecting refugee families with services and resources available in their area. She emphasizes the importance of community partners and support systems in helping the families settle and adjust. In addition, she recognizes that stable and supported families are essential for the well-being and success of refugee children in the classroom.

**Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe.** To make her refugee students feel safe, Vivian employs several strategies including creating a safe environment, emotional awareness and support, and peer support.

**Creating a Safe Environment.** Vivian acknowledges the unique challenges refugee students face. She indicates that her expectations from them cannot be the same as those for students who have grown up within the Canadian school system. Vivian explains that it's crucial not to impose the same expectations on potentially traumatized students, as their reactions and

triggers are unknown and can vary. To create a safe environment for her students, Vivian gives her students time and space to adjust. She focuses on introducing lessons gradually to assess behaviors and capabilities without overwhelming the students. She also emphasizes building relationships with refugee students based on trust and familiarity. In addition, she focuses on welcoming students by incorporating points of cultural familiarity and greeting them in their language.

***Emotional Awareness and Support.*** Vivian promotes emotional awareness by regularly checking in with students to assess their feelings and well-being. She recognizes the importance of addressing students' emotional needs, especially among refugee students. Checking in allows Vivian to identify and address the emotional needs of her students. Refugee students may struggle with feelings of homesickness, cultural adjustment, or uncertainty about the future. Through open dialogue, Vivian can gain insights into their emotional state and provide appropriate support.

***Peer Support.*** Vivian acknowledges the importance of pairing refugee students with supportive classmates who exhibit patient and kind qualities. She explains, “I team them up with other students who are patient and kind and who just want to be supportive, somebody who's perhaps not so loud and boisterous, someone a little more introverted.” By pairing refugee students with a classmates, Vivian aims to create a calming and supportive dynamic within her classroom.

**Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students.** Vivian utilizes multiple strategies to support the academic progress of her refugee students including collaboration with

the ESL department, fostering flexibility in activities, culturally responsive activities, and dual language resources.

***Collaboration with the ESL Department.*** In modifying lessons for refugee students, Vivian collaborates closely with ESL teachers to understand students' language proficiency levels and tailor lessons accordingly. She indicates that she works with an ESL teacher to understand where the refugee students were at in their English language development. By leveraging this information, Vivian tailors her French language lessons to correspond with the students' English language abilities. This collaboration ensure that the curriculum is accessible and meaningful based on the students' current language skills.

***Fostering Flexibility in Activities.*** Vivian's strategies to support students academically involve recognizing and nurturing their individual strengths and potential. She adopts an approach, stating, "I believe all kids are talented, and all kids are leaders, we just have to find ways to bring that out of them." Vivian allows her students to showcase their strengths, such as engaging in art or reading, to promote their talents and build confidence. She explains, "If they're doing art, they're not hurting anybody... I want them to keep doing art because they're fostering a talent. Or maybe if they want to read quietly a little more, then that's a good brain break for them." Vivian gives her students choice in the activities they engage in, as long as their choice will promote their growth and development.

***Culturally Responsive Activities.*** Vivian tries to integrate diverse cultural elements into her French language classes. She incorporates music from Francophone artists of African descent and engages students in exploring their backgrounds and countries of origin. Vivian describes her approach, stating:

“I try to focus on famous francophones. Every week, I do 'Musique Mercredi,' where we learn a French song of the week, and we vote on our favorite song at the end of the month. I feature artists who are mainly from African countries, showing the diversity within the French-speaking world.”

Vivian believes that her use of music serves as a vehicle for cultural exploration. It allows students to connect with the linguistic and cultural diversity represented in the Francophone community. She enhances students' awareness by exploring the artists' backgrounds to promote appreciation for multiculturalism within her classroom.

In addition to music, Vivian incorporates literature and language exploration to further enrich cultural understanding. She integrates bilingual songs blending Arabic and French, to create meaningful connections for students with Middle Eastern backgrounds. Vivian emphasizes:

“I always do it through music and through reading. I like to feature artists who speak Arabic and French, so there's a connection. Students get to see people who might look like them or people who behave similarly to them.”

According to Vivian, this approach enables students to see representations of their own culture and language within the classroom and promote a sense of identity and belonging. Vivian's cultural sensitivity extends to supporting refugee students, particularly those from Syrian backgrounds. Drawing from her travel experiences in the Middle East, Vivian reflects, “I've had experience traveling to the Middle East, respecting the local culture and observing how people behave. I feature artists who speak Arabic and French, creating connections for students. They can see similarities in the environment and behaviors.” Vivian believes that incorporating Arabic greetings and language learning activities supports inclusion and respects for students'

cultural backgrounds. By involving students in language activities, Vivian celebrates their heritage and create sense of pride and connection within her classroom community.

***Dual Language Resources.*** Dual language resources are essential tools that Vivian incorporates into her teaching approach to support students with diverse language backgrounds. These resources, such as dual language books, play a crucial role in helping students feel comfortable and engaged in their learning environment. Vivian uses dual language books to provide familiarity and accessibility for her students. These books contain content in both the students' native language and the target language. By utilizing dual language books, Vivian ensures that her students can access educational materials in a language they understand while simultaneously being exposed to the target language.

**Students' Behaviour.** In the discussion about the behavioral needs of refugee students, Vivian emphasizes the complexities that arise from their potential traumatic experiences and the necessity for tailored support. She expresses this by stating, "A smiling face isn't going to automatically guarantee trust. It's patience to allow students to warm up to you and get to know who you are." Vivian talks about the impact of previous experiences on behavior. She notes that students from unstable education backgrounds may require additional time to adjust to classroom expectations and build a trustful relationship with their teachers. She explains, "If they were coming from unstable education, they're learning how to be instructed, and that's going to take a lot longer than a student who's been in the Canadian education system since kindergarten." Reflecting on specific instances, Vivian recalls a student struggling with inappropriate behavior due to witnessing distressing situations in refugee camps. She elaborates, "There was one boy in particular...he saw a lot of inappropriate things. So, he was thinking that he could put his hands on girls in ways that he shouldn't and say things that he shouldn't that were really inappropriate."

To support this student, the school collaborated with community partners who work with the community and provide support and counselling to families in their mother language.

**Strengths and Areas of Growth.** Vivian reflects on the strengths and challenges of students from refugee backgrounds. She expresses admiration for the students' innate leadership qualities and eagerness to contribute positively. She explains, “They enjoy being part of the classroom community and feel a sense of fulfillment in contributing. Their willingness to participate is remarkable.” She also admires their resilience amidst significant transitions and uncertainties. She notes,

“These students are very strong. They are happy to be here and want to succeed, but there's also a sense of gratitude mixed with longing. They experience homesickness and a constant back-and-forth about their future. It's important to understand these stages and provide appropriate support.”

Vivian maintains high academic expectations for all students, including refugee students. She indicates that education remains a focal point for many refugee families, and students have a strong desire to learn and succeed. She explains, “There's a longing to learn because education is crucial for many of these families, both as a means to a better life here and as a way to maintain expectations from back home.” Moreover, Vivian talks about the cultural values placed on respecting educators. These values contribute to students' receptiveness and willingness to engage in learning. She observes, “They are taught to respect educators, so they listen and are receptive to learning new things.” Vivian believes that this respect for education serves as a motivation for refugee students especially after moving to a new country.

**Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence.** Vivian reflects on an instance when she felt challenged in supporting a refugee student due to deficiencies in resources upon the student's

arrival. The teacher did not receive the basic instruction package required to support the student. The package normally contains essential instructional materials in the student's native languages. Vivian felt it was beyond her role but took on out of compassion and experience:

“I felt like it's really not my job to be doing this, but I do it out of the goodness of my heart because I have that experience. The board needs to ensure they have starter kits in various languages for classroom teachers. Basic instructions like 'washroom' can help them communicate and feel supported on their journey.”

Vivian emphasizes the necessity of providing language resources and dual-language books to facilitate communication and familiarity. She explains, “a student just can't appear in a classroom without nothing. Like this isn't the 1970s when that was the case.” She highlights the need for improvements in these resources to effectively support refugee students.

On the other hand, Vivian feels happy and excited when she sees signs of relief, happiness, and comfort among her refugee students. She explains,

“I focus on success when I see relief, smiles, friendships forming, and students excited to share their traditions and identities comfortably. For example, one student presented on Ramadan, and the class responded positively, asking questions and showing understanding. It made her feel accepted and valued.”

Vivian's sense of satisfaction stems from observing her students' comfort and confidence in their new school environment, particularly when they can share their cultural backgrounds with their peers.

**Experience with Students' Trauma.** Vivian recognizes that some of her refugee students may have experienced traumatic events, although details are limited due to cultural and privacy considerations within the families. In navigating the sensitive topic of students' past experiences, Vivian emphasizes the need to respect families' privacy and cultural preferences regarding sharing personal information. She explains, "Because in certain communities, that's easier said than done. Because a lot of families don't want their information being shared with other people." Despite these challenges on discussing trauma openly, Vivian follows the previously discussed strategies to support her students. She focuses on facilitating peer connections to create a community where students feel understood and supported by their peers who share similar experiences.

### ***Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem***

Vivian implements a structured grouping in her classroom to promote community building, especially among refugee students and their peers. Through these groups, she introduces collaborative activities. She emphasizes the importance of these groups by saying, "We are not here to be competitive; we are not here to put each other down. We are here to learn from each other. We are here to help each other out." To encourage communication and kindness among students, Vivian uses engaging activities like games and group work. She describes her approach by stating, "I like to do little games or group work activities to get them more comfortable with communicating with each other and being kind to one another." Vivian believes that her strategy creates a welcoming and supportive classroom environment where all students, including refugees, can feel valued and build meaningful relationships with their peers.

***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem***

Vivian elaborates on her relationships with refugee students' parents. She acknowledges the complexities that arise due to language barriers and varying levels of involvement. She reflects on the challenges of engaging parents who may not have strong English proficiency, noting, "The older siblings are involved in the education. If the parents' command of English isn't very strong, a lot of the times we don't see them if an interpreter can't come." Regarding communication barriers, Vivian underscores the importance of interpreter access. She proposes structured parent-teacher meetings with an interpreter at the beginning of the school year to establish a strong foundation for communication.

Vivian believes that refugee students' parents are involved in their children's learning because they set clear expectations for their children regarding behavior and academic performance. She indicates that parents view education as a pathway to a better life. Vivian observes parental engagement in school events like concerts or meet-the-teacher nights. However, volunteer participation in activities like field trips remains limited due to language constraints. Despite these challenges, she emphasizes the significance of establishing communication channels. She continuously shares student achievements through photos of activities done at school with families.

***Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem***

Vivian reflects on the resources available at her school to support her in teaching refugee students. She acknowledges the presence of a community partner at her school. She indicates, "We have one guy who runs the whole show, he does everything from pick families up to at the airport, to help with paperwork to help them find work. Like he does it all." Vivian also indicates

that there is a need for more community partners to adequately support incoming individuals from diverse backgrounds. In addition, Vivian also calls for the necessity of more ready-made resources such as dual language books and dual language starter kits. Vivian explains that these resources are necessary for facilitating language acquisition and academic integration among refugee students, ensuring they have access to materials that support their language development and educational progress. She also suggests the need of a liaison person at their school. This liaison can serve as a point of contact for teachers, offering ongoing assistance and guidance beyond just providing materials. Vivian believes that this kind of support is instrumental in coaching and supporting teachers, advocating on their behalf with the school board, and arranging visits or workshops to address specific teaching challenges. She also thinks that this support is essential for enhancing the success of teaching refugee students and ensuring continuous improvement in the educational process.

Vivian appreciates the support she received from the ESL teachers at her previous school that was located in an urban setting. She praises the solid system that was established within the school, facilitated by the ESL teachers. She mentions,

“We had such a solid system set up; we didn't have to think about interpreters. We knew that our ESL teacher was going to send an email saying, if you need an interpreter for any of your students, let me know. And I'll get those set up. And she did.”

According to Vivian, the presence of this solid system in place allows for efficient coordination of resources and assistance. In terms of support from her current administrators, Vivian thinks that the support is limited. She suggests that this may be due to the unfamiliarity with supporting refugee students, which is common in the rural location of the school.

### ***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem***

Vivian sheds light on the professional development needs and support systems necessary for effectively teaching refugee students. She expresses a desire for PD days focused on collaborative planning by division. She emphasizes the importance of aligning teaching strategies and resources to best support refugee students within various language programs. She highlights the value of French immersion programs for ELL students. She notes that they often excel in these programs due to their prior language learning experiences. Vivian emphasizes the need for structured planning sessions to determine appropriate tools, materials, and strategies for different grade levels, from primary to junior grades. She believes that this collaborative approach aims to ensure consistent and effective support for refugee students across all levels of education.

Additionally, Vivian advocates for in-depth professional development that goes beyond superficial cultural awareness. While Vivian has acquired this type of knowledge through work and life experience and focused education on these issues, she acknowledges that not all colleagues may possess the same level of awareness or experience. She explains, “I’m really hoping for more professional development focused on these issues. It’s not just about reading a book; we need to dive in and truly understand. Liaising with community partners and settlement workers could be immensely beneficial for educators.” Vivian suggests strategies such as liaison sessions with community partners and settlement workers to enhance educators’ understanding and effectiveness in supporting refugee students. On the other hand, Vivian advocates for culturally competent support services that consider students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

She emphasizes the need for counselors and support staff who can understand and relate to the unique challenges faced by ELL students, including family expectations and cultural conflicts.

In terms of the support provided by the board, Vivian acknowledges efforts to promote equity and culturally responsive pedagogy through initiatives like providing materials for culturally significant events such as Ramadan. However, she notes that more support is needed, particularly in addressing academic and social-emotional needs of refugee students. Vivian recognizes the challenges faced by smaller boards in rural areas with Canadian newcomers. Hence, she often adjusts her expectations while advocating for immediate and effective solutions to support refugee students.

### ***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice***

Vivian reveals insights into the varying levels of support and preparedness among schools to assist refugee students. Having worked with various school boards throughout her career, Vivian suggests that the availability of tools and support programs for refugee students can differ based on the community and school location. While some schools have well-established systems in place, others may lack experience and require additional support to effectively serve refugee populations. In terms of teachers' mindsets towards supporting refugee students, Vivian portrays a positive and empathetic outlook among educators at her school. She emphasizes that teachers are eager to assist students who are struggling and actively collaborate to provide support and resources.

When asked for advice for aspiring teachers working with refugee students, Vivian proposes that teacher should have a prepared checklist or toolkit to ensure readiness for various

situations. This toolkit can include key contacts within the school responsible for English Language Learners' support and a list community partners involved in refugee assistance. Vivian also suggests having access to resource banks that can provide specific support as needed.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the profiles of the six participants were presented. Each profile contained the themes and subthemes identified from analyzing the data guided by the conceptual framework and the research questions. The teachers reflected on their experiences with refugee students highlighting the strategies they use to support them. In addition, they reflected on the resources available for them and the ones that are lacking. In the next chapter, a cross-case analysis will be presented to highlight commonalities and differences in the participants' experiences. This will be followed by the final chapter in the thesis focusing on the discussion and conclusion.

## **Chapter 6: Cross Case Analysis**

The profiles elaborated in the previous chapter represented the experiences of the six teachers with their refugee students. In their narratives the teachers focused on their strategies to support refugee students and their relationship with their students and their parents. The teachers' stories also highlighted the support they receive and/or need from peers, administrators, and school boards. While each teacher's experience was unique, there were some commonalities that emerge. In this chapter a cross-case analysis will be conducted to compare and contrast the experiences of the six cases. The information will be summarized in tables corresponding to each theme.

### **Theme 1: Teacher's Readiness and Training**

The participants reflected on their levels of readiness and training to support refugee students (Table 4). When discussing training in teacher education programs, Amy, Samreen, Vanessa, Sarah, and Fatima expressed dissatisfaction with their initial teacher education programs, noting a lack of specific training for teaching students with diverse backgrounds, including refugee students. Vivian, however, did not explicitly mention dissatisfaction with her teacher education program but emphasized her personal proactive approach to implementing multicultural education in her class.

In terms of self-directed learning and professional development, Amy, Samreen, Vanessa, Sarah, and Fatima had all taken steps to pursue additional learning and professional development independently due to gaps in formal training. This included reading books, attending workshops, and seeking out free resources. Vivian also demonstrated personal efforts to self-directed learning, but had more structured opportunities provided by her previous school board.

To elaborate on the support provided for them when teaching refugee students, Amy, Samreen, Vanessa, and Sarah expressed frustration with the lack of support and resources provided by their school boards. The four participants particularly noted that training sessions were often superficial or conducted outside school hours. These feelings of frustration resonated strongly throughout the teachers' narratives. However, Fatima felt fortunate to receive some support as a new teacher but acknowledged that experienced teachers did not have the same opportunities. Meanwhile, Vivian had specialized training in TIP during her time in intermediate schools. She felt she was better supported while working at her former school board compared to her current experience.

Some of the participants indicated that they faced challenges when implementing training in their classroom. Amy and Vanessa highlighted the challenges of applying training effectively in their classrooms due to lack of tangible support and resources. Meanwhile, Vivian acknowledged the difficulty of implementing trauma-informed practices without the support of other professionals.

Regarding training in TIP, Amy had attended various TIP sessions but found them insufficient and lacking practical support. Both Vanessa and Vivian also received some training in TIP. Vanessa found it somewhat helpful while Vivian emphasized its importance for intermediate students. In contrast, Samreen, Sarah, and Fatima had little to no formal training in TIP, with Fatima only encountering it briefly in her special education course.

In terms of approaches to CRP, Amy participated in CRP training through AQ (additional qualification) courses and found some of them valuable. Samreen pursued CRP through self-directed study and free resources and Vanessa attended CRP workshops facilitated by the teachers' union. Fatima found CRP to be a significant focus in her master's program, while

Vivian integrated CRP naturally due to her multicultural experiences and linguistic background. Meanwhile, Sarah relied on self-directed learning to incorporate CRP in her classroom.

Regarding the participants' experience with DI and SEL, Vanessa had extensive training in DI through special education courses. Also, Fatima and Vivian engaged with DI to varying degrees but found that their teacher education programs did not delve deeply into its specifics. Sarah relied on self-directed learning for DI and SEL, utilizing online resources while Vivian integrated SEL practices throughout her career, especially due to her background in guidance.

In summary, while there were common challenges faced by these educators, their approaches to professional development and experiences with specific pedagogies varied from structured formal training to self-directed learning. Each teacher's unique background and efforts to fill in gaps in their training demonstrate their commitment to effectively teaching diverse student populations, despite systemic shortcomings in formal teacher education and support systems.

**Table 4***Theme 1: Teachers' Readiness and Training*

Aspect	Amy	Samreen	Vanessa	Sarah	Fatima	Vivian
Teacher Education Program Preparedness	Inadequate for diversity, trauma, and special education	Inadequate for diversity, learned independently	Inadequate, focused on superficial activities	Inadequate, needs modernization and focus on psychological needs	Inadequate, did not address refugee needs	No specific dissatisfaction mentioned, proactive multicultural approach
Self-directed Learning	Pursued TIP and CRP through own efforts and AQ courses	Pursued CRP through self-study and free resources	Attended workshops independently and union-facilitated CRP workshops	Relied on online resources for TIP, CRP, DI, and SEL	Conducted personal research on SEL	Proactively engaged in multicultural education, extensive training in various pedagogies
Frustration with School Board Support	Frustrated by superficial training and lack of resources	Limited training opportunities, mainly outside school hours	Found training performative and not very effective	Frustrated by lack of formal training, relied on self-learning	Receives some support as a new teacher, but noted disparity for experienced teachers	Better support in previous school board, specialized training for intermediate grades
TIP Training	Some training but insufficient and lacking practical support	No formal training	Attended PTSD workshop, found it helpful	No formal training, relies on self-directed learning	Briefly encountered in special education course, no formal training	Received specialized TIP training for intermediate students, emphasized collaboration with

Aspect	Amy	Samreen	Vanessa	Sarah	Fatima	Vivian
CRP Training	Participated in AQ courses, values hands-on approaches	Pursued CRP through self-study and relevant studies	Attended CRP workshops facilitated by the teachers' union	No formal training, self-directed learning	CRP was a significant focus in master's program	other professionals  Naturally integrates CRP due to multicultural and linguistic background, ahead of formal educational initiatives
DI Training	Valued DI, mixed experiences with training effectiveness	Acknowledged importance, highlighted gap in formal training	Extensive training in DI through special education courses	Self-directed learning for DI	Encountered in courses but lacked depth	Extensive DI training since beginning of career
SEL Training	No specific mention, self-trained through resources	No formal training, self-directed learning	Extensive training through special education background	No formal training, relied on self-directed learning	Limited formal coverage, conducted personal research	Engaged in SEL practices due to guidance background, integrates academic and emotional support
Professional Development Opportunities	Frustrated by lack of support and tangible resources	Limited, mainly outside school hours, newer teachers get more opportunities	Disappointed with limited effectiveness and performative nature	Frustrated by reliance on self-learning	Receives PD days as a new teacher, disparity in opportunities for experienced teachers	Extensive PD opportunities in previous school board, proactive in engaging with training

## **Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem**

This theme presented in Table 5, is divided into seven subthemes including: initial feelings towards having refugees in class, strategies used to make refugee students feel safe, strategies used to academically support refugee students, students' behaviour, strengths vs areas of growth, instances of confidence vs incapability, and experiences with students' trauma.

### ***Initial Feelings Towards Teaching Refugee Students***

The initial feelings teachers have toward having refugee students in their class exhibited both commonalities and differences. Common among them was the presence of mixed emotions. Amy, Vanessa, and Sarah expressed a blend of excitement and apprehension. Amy felt curious about her students experiences rather than confident in supporting their needs. Meanwhile, Vanessa experienced a mix of excitement with worry about her capability to support her refugee students' needs. On the other hand, Sarah was worried about unintentionally offending her students and found it challenging to adapt her materials to support the needs of her refugee students. Samreen and Vivian both showed a strong sense of responsibility; Samreen adopted an advocacy-driven approach to support her refugee students, while Vivian emphasized holistic support for refugee families.

All teachers recognized the need for adaptability in their teaching methods. Amy and Sarah highlighted the challenges of addressing each student's unique background and trauma in the classroom, while Fatima stressed the importance of having enough resources due to the initial lack of materials she experienced. Advocacy and support were also prominently discussed by the participants. Samreen fought for resources like laptops, Vivian connected families with community services, and Fatima underscored the value of understanding students' backgrounds through Ontario Student Records (OSRs). Resource challenges were another common issue

among the participants. Samreen noted technology and ESL support deficits, Fatima faced a lack of materials, and Sarah struggled to overcome the language barrier with her students.

Despite these commonalities, the participants' reactions and approaches differed. Amy focused on implementing problem-solving strategies to resolve conflicts which were common among her students and support the needs of her refugee students. On the other hand, Samreen took an advocative stance to stand up for the needs of her students. Vanessa was always excited to have refugee students in her class despite her concerns about her ability to support them. Additionally, Sarah emphasized the importance of being patient and understanding when teaching refugee students and Fatima leveraged her community familiarity and resourcefulness to build connection with her students. Meanwhile, Vivian used her immigration background to support families holistically. This diverse yet overlapping range of experiences highlighted the complexities and varied strategies involved in teaching refugee students.

### ***Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe***

The strategies employed by the participants to help refugee students feel safe exhibited both commonalities and unique approaches. All teachers emphasized the importance of creating a safe classroom environment. Amy utilized a warm and controlled portable classroom setup with flexible seating and restorative circles, and Samreen focused on establishing a safe environment utilizing peer pairing and translation tools to help refugee students feel settled. Vanessa incorporated reception groups and collaborated with settlement workers to help her refugee students settle and feel safe in their new surroundings, while Sarah promoted predictability with a calming atmosphere through music and stuffed animal companions. Also, Fatima created a welcoming environment by implementing community-building activities and emphasizing students' choice in various cultural events. Moreover, Vivian allowed time and

space for refugee students to adjust while building trustful relationships with them with gradual lesson introduction.

Specific techniques to make refugee students feel safe also varied among the participants. Amy used the "a bug and a wish" method for conflict resolution while Samreen relied on visual aids to support communication and understanding among her students. Vanessa provided continuous mental health support and celebrated cultural traditions. Meanwhile, Sarah incorporated parental input on music to enhance student engagement and create a more inclusive environment. Fatima engaged in team-building activities, and Vivian emphasized cultural familiarity and greeting students in their native language to foster a sense of belonging and comfort among her refugee students.

Providing emotional and social support to refugee students was a key element for all participants. Amy offered structured conflict resolution and emotional support areas within her classroom, Samreen ensured seating her refugee students close to the teacher for easier assistance, and Vanessa supported families dealing with bereavement. Additionally, Sarah utilized soothing music and celebrated cultural traditions, Fatima worked on building student confidence, and Vivian performed regular emotional check-ins and peer support pairing to provide social and emotional support to her students. Each teacher also integrated cultural awareness and integration in unique ways, from Vanessa learning Arabic to better connect with students to Sarah and Fatima actively celebrating cultural traditions and events in their classrooms.

In conclusion, the diverse strategies employed by the participants highlighted the importance of tailored approaches to ensure refugee students feel safe, supported, and included in their new educational environments.

### *Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students*

To support refugee students' academic progress, the participants employed diverse and tailored strategies informed by their experiences and cultural contexts. Amy drew from her time as a second language learner in Japan, her Australian teacher education program, and Nunavut training. She focused on culturally responsive activities, a cross-curricular approach, implementing a writing continuum, and adopting inventive spelling. Her culturally responsive activities included integrating student-created materials and cultural traditions into the curriculum. She connected historical topics to students' backgrounds and used anthems from students' home countries to build a classroom community. Amy's cross-curricular approach tied various subjects together, fostering a broader understanding and critical thinking. She also emphasized the importance of celebrating incremental progress through goal-setting and celebrating achievements.

Samreen leveraged her multicultural background to support her refugee students. She used culturally relevant books, online resources, and creative assignments such as the "Jersey Assignment" to integrate refugee students' lived experiences into the curriculum. She also emphasized critical analysis of media and literature, encouraging students to view content from diverse perspectives. Samreen incorporated audio books and interactive online activities to support students' language acquisition, alongside peer support and student teacher assistance to address the lack of resources available to support refugee students.

Vanessa employed dual-language resources, technology integration, lesson and assessment modification, peer support, and collaboration with classroom teachers to support the educational needs of her refugee students. Her use of dual-language posters and books,

multilingual texts, and tools like Google Translate and Kahoot enhanced students' comprehension and engagement. Vanessa's utilized these strategies to create an inclusive and collaborative learning environment.

Sarah, facing challenges in obtaining ESL support, relied on outdoor learning activities, visual aids, and peer support to engage her refugee students. She conducted outdoor lessons and trips to local areas to reinforce vocabulary and provided visual aids to make learning accessible. Sarah's strategies aimed to create a sense of community and facilitate collaborative learning.

Fatima used strategies such as peer support, multilingual resources, modified assessments, culturally responsive activities, and small group instruction, to support her students' needs. She paired students who shared the same mother tongue, used culturally relevant materials, and incorporated visual aids to enhance students' understanding. Fatima also focused on individualized attention and scaffolding to help students grasp complex concepts.

Vivian integrated culturally responsive activities, dual language resources, and fostered flexibility in activities to support her refugee students' academic needs. She collaborated with ESL teachers to tailor lessons to students' language proficiency levels and incorporated Francophone music and literature from diverse backgrounds to promote cultural awareness among her learners. Vivian also used dual language books to provide familiarity and accessibility for her students, enhancing their engagement and learning experience.

Overall, the participants demonstrated a commitment to creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for refugee students. They leveraged their cultural backgrounds, modifying curriculum and assessments, integrating technology and visual aids, and promoting

peer support and collaboration. Each teacher's approach reflected a deep understanding of their students' needs and a dedication to fostering academic success and cultural pride.

### ***Students' Behaviour***

Amy, Vanessa, Sarah, and Vivian reported significant behavioral challenges linked to their students' trauma and stress. Amy and Vanessa dealt with overt behavioral issues such as aggression and emotional distress. Meanwhile, Vivian had students with inappropriate behaviors stemming from past experiences. Sarah emphasized the need for patience and sensitivity to trauma when teaching refugee students. In contrast, Samreen and Fatima noted generally positive behavior among their refugee students but highlighted challenges in understanding daily class routines and building confidence.

In response to their students' behavioral needs, Amy and Vanessa adopted firm but compassionate approaches to manage behavior. Sarah and Vivian noted the importance to being patient and the need for supporting students' emotional needs. Both participants highlighted the need to address trauma-related issues when dealing with refugee students. Samreen and Fatima focused more on integrating students into the classroom routine and building confidence between refugee students and their new classroom community.

All teachers recognized the impact of trauma on behavior and stressed the need for adopting understanding and supportive approaches to support refugee students. However, the extent and nature of behavioral issues varied, reflecting differences in individual student experiences and classroom dynamics.

### *Strengths and Areas of Growth*

When asked to reflect on their refugee students' strengths and areas of growth, Amy, Fatima, and Vivian all highlighted the resilience of their students and their ability to adapt to their new environment. Amy and Vanessa also emphasized their refugee students' passion for learning and cultural pride. Additionally, Vivian appreciated her student's leadership qualities and willingness to contribute to the classroom communities. Samreen and Vanessa both noted their refugee students' eagerness and readiness to learn. Sarah and Vivian, on the other hand, highlighted their students' respectfulness and appreciation for the emotional support they receive at school. Moreover, Vanessa admired her students' bilingualism and quick learning abilities, similar to Fatima's acknowledgment of their bravery in adapting to their new environments.

A common challenge that emerged among participants was the language barriers. This challenge was highlighted by Samreen, Vanessa, and Fatima. It impacted students' comprehension and ability to engage fully in academic tasks. Another challenge discussed by Sarah and Vivian, was the feelings of fearfulness and apprehension among refugee students when they first arrive to the classroom due to past traumatic experiences. Amy discussed the need to support students in becoming more open to new experiences in the classroom, while Fatima focused on building students' confidence to overcome the initial shyness and insecurity.

The teachers' experiences revealed a multifaceted view of refugee students' strengths and areas for growth. While students exhibited resilience, passion, eagerness to learn, and leadership qualities, they also faced significant challenges such as language barriers and initial shyness fearfulness when arriving to class. The common thread across all cases was the importance of providing a supportive, understanding, and patient educational environment to help these students leverage their strengths and address their areas for growth. Each teacher's unique

approach highlighted the necessity of personalized strategies to foster refugee students' academic and personal development.

### *Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence*

When recalling instances of incapability and/ or confidence they had when teaching refugee student, the participants shared several stories. Amy and Vivian both faced challenges due to a lack of resources and institutional support. Amy's experience with the removal of her self-purchased classroom items and Vivian's issue with missing instructional materials underscored the lack of resources available to teachers to support refugee students. On the other hand, Amy and Vanessa encountered severe behavioral challenges with refugee students, leaving them feeling incapable of providing adequate support. Similarly, Sarah's experience with her student's trauma-induced fear when a peer was injured also highlighted the emotional complexities faced by teachers educating refugee students. On the other hand, Fatima initially struggled with language barriers and resource limitations, which made her feel like she was not adequately supporting her students.

Both Amy and Vanessa felt confident in supporting their refugee students when they witnessed significant progress in their students' educational progress. These moments of academic and personal growth reinforced their sense of efficacy. Samreen and Sarah also felt confident in their ability to connect with and support their students emotionally and culturally. Samreen's personal immigration experience and Sarah's continuous effort to learn about the cultural background of her students were key examples. Fatima's use of small group instruction tailored to her students' needs proved effective, boosting her confidence in her teaching methods.

Similarly, Vivian's efforts to integrate cultural sharing and promote cultural understanding among her students fostered a positive classroom environment.

The cross-case analysis revealed a nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes teachers faced in supporting refugee students. While institutional limitations, behavioral issues, and language barriers could leave teachers feeling incapable, moments of student progress, empathetic connections, and effective instructional strategies bolstered their confidence. The experiences of these teachers highlighted the importance of providing adequate resources, fostering cultural understanding, and implementing tailored instructional methods to support the unique needs of refugee students.

### *Experience with Students' Trauma*

In terms of similarities among teachers' experience with their refugee students' trauma, both Sarah and Vanessa received minimal information about their students' past traumas. This lack of information made it challenging for teachers to provide targeted support. Additionally, Samreen and Sarah both described instances where students' trauma was triggered by loud noises or sudden events, leading to panic and fear. Vivian and Amy both highlighted the need to balance respecting students' privacy with providing effective support, acknowledging the challenges of navigating this balance. Moreover, several teachers, including Samreen and Sarah, emphasized the importance of trauma-informed practices in supporting refugee students.

Despite these similarities, the participants had some differences in their experiences with their students' trauma. Amy indicated that she often learns about trauma directly from her students, whereas Fatima and Vanessa dealt with more subtle or indirect indicators of trauma.

Samreen felt confident in her trauma-informed approaches due to her personal immigration experience, while Fatima felt uncertain about her implementation of TIP due to limited training. On the other hand, Amy relied on informal communication with colleagues to gather information, whereas Vivian focused more on establishing peer connections and respecting cultural privacy preferences when dealing with students with traumatic experiences.

The cross-case analysis revealed that teachers faced significant challenges in supporting refugee students' trauma due to limited information, privacy concerns, and the complex nature of trauma responses. Despite these challenges, they employed various strategies to create supportive environments, from leveraging informal communication and fostering peer connections to implementing trauma-informed practices. These experiences highlighted the need for better training and resources to equip teachers with the tools necessary to support their students' emotional and educational needs effectively.

Table 5

*Theme 2: Interactions between Refugee Students and Teachers in the Microsystem*

Subtheme	Amy	Samreen	Vanessa	Sarah	Fatima	Vivian
<b>Initial Feelings Towards Teaching Refugee Students</b>	Curious, not confident; focused on problem-solving	Advocacy-driven; fought for resources	Excited but worried; balances excitement with concern	Apprehensive about unintentional offenses; emphasized patience and understanding	Stressed resourcefulness due to lack of materials	Strong sense of responsibility; used immigration background for holistic family support
<b>Strategies to Make Refugee Students Feel Safe</b>	Warm, controlled classroom; flexible seating; restorative circles	Safe environment; peer pairing; translation tools	Reception groups; collaboration with settlement workers; mental health support	Predictability; calming atmosphere; parental input on music	Welcoming environment; community-building activities; student choice in cultural events	Time and space for adjustment; gradual lesson introduction; building trust
<b>Strategies to Academically Support Refugee Students</b>	Culturally responsive activities; cross-curricular approach; goal-setting	Culturally relevant books; online resources; peer support	Dual-language resources; technology integration; lesson modification	Outdoor learning; visual aids; peer support	Culturally responsive activities; peer support; multilingual resources; small group instruction;	Culturally responsive activities; dual-language resources; flexibility in activities

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Amy</b>	<b>Samreen</b>	<b>Vanessa</b>	<b>Sarah</b>	<b>Fatima</b>	<b>Vivian</b>
<b>Students' Behaviour</b>	Significant challenges linked to trauma; adopted firm approach	Generally positive; focused on integrating routines and building confidence	Significant behavioral issues; compassionate approach	Significant challenges linked to trauma; patience and sensitivity	Generally positive; focused on integrating routines and building confidence	Behavioral challenges linked to trauma; patience and emotional support
<b>Strengths and Areas of Growth</b>	Resilience; passion for learning; needed to be more open to new experiences	Eagerness to learn; critical analysis skills; language barriers impact comprehension	Passion for learning; cultural pride; bilingualism; initial fearfulness and apprehension	Resilience; respectfulness; appreciation for emotional support; initial fearfulness	Resilience; bravery in adapting; language barriers impact comprehension	Leadership qualities; willingness to contribute; emotional needs due to past traumatic experiences
<b>Instances of Incapability Vs Confidence</b>	Lack of resources led to feeling incapable; confidence in student progress	Confident in connecting and supporting students emotionally and culturally	Severe behavioral challenges led to feeling incapable; confidence in student progress	Emotional complexities from trauma-induced fear; confidence in proactive cultural education	Initially struggled with language barriers; confidence from effective small group instruction	Lack of resources led to feeling incapable; confidence from integrating cultural sharing and understanding
<b>Experience with Students' Trauma</b>	Learned about trauma directly from students; relied on informal communication	Confident in trauma-informed approaches due to personal immigration experience	Minimal information about past traumas; delt with subtle indicators of trauma	Minimal information about past traumas; trauma triggered by loud noises or sudden events	No official information on trauma; uncertain about TIP implementation	Balanced respecting privacy with providing effective support; trauma-informed practices

### **Themes 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem**

In comparing the experiences of the participants with their refugee students' interactions with their peers, several similarities and differences emerged (Table 6). Firstly, similarities were found in the observation of social integration among students. This social integration was often initiated by shared cultural and language backgrounds, bolstered by sports and common interests, and supported by teachers' efforts to create inclusive environments. However, challenges raised from cultural disparities and social skill gaps, particularly for girls facing specific tensions as noted by Amy, Vanessa, and Sarah. To address these challenges, teachers like Samreen paired students with friendly peers, while others, such as Amy and Vanessa, organized joint activities and emphasized a supportive classroom atmosphere to assist their refugee students in building relationships with their peers. Nevertheless, differences existed in the degree of teacher intervention. Some participants actively facilitated integration, as seen in the practices of Amy and Vivian, while others, like Fatima, observed integration evolving naturally within the diverse school population.

Specific challenges, such as those faced by individual students like the Chinese refugee student in Vanessa's class, underscored the necessity for tailored strategies to support the social integration of refugee students. Vanessa emphasized academic collaboration and group games to support the integration of her student. She highlighted the need for flexible and adaptable approaches.

Ultimately, the collective experiences of these teachers emphasized the significance of nurturing a supportive environment and employing a range of strategies to foster social integration among refugee students while acknowledging and addressing their unique challenges.

**Table 6**

*Theme 3: Interactions between Refugee Students and Their Peers in the Microsystem*

Teachers Interaction Observations	Strategies for Facilitating Integration
<p>Amy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refugee students initially formed friendships with peers from similar cultural and language backgrounds.</li> <li>- Social skill gaps led to challenges, such as sudden souring of friendships due to mistrust or inappropriate behavior.</li> <li>- Improvement over time as students began to acknowledge their actions and behaviors.</li> <li>- Classroom dynamics significantly impacted social integration; calm and predictable environments aided adjustment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organized joint activities between ELD and other homeroom classes for interaction and collaboration.</li> <li>- Engaged with students across classrooms to reduce feelings of exclusion.</li> <li>- Encouraged participation in extracurricular activities like basketball to connect with a diverse group of peers.</li> <li>- Used restorative approaches, discussions, and role-playing to address conflicts and foster empathy.</li> <li>- Shared her own emotions and experiences to set an example for effective communication and conflict resolution.</li> </ul>
<p>Samreen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refugee students were generally adept at forming and maintaining friendships.</li> <li>- Social connections facilitated by pairing refugee students with friendly classmates to navigate the school environment.</li> <li>- Examples of refugee students becoming comfortable and exhibiting typical "naughty" behavior as a sign of adaptation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focused on creating a welcoming atmosphere where refugee students can feel comfortable and build friendships.</li> </ul>
<p>Vanessa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Generally positive social integration due to the homogeneous nature of the student body.</li> <li>- Unique challenges faced by a refugee student from China due to cultural differences and quieter demeanor.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focused on engaging the student in collaborative activities and group projects.</li> <li>- Encouraged participation in group games to build friendships.</li> </ul>

Teachers Interaction Observations	Strategies for Facilitating Integration
<p>Fatima</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refugee students developed relationships with peers naturally, facilitated by the diverse school population.</li> <li>- Boys created friendships through sports, reducing the impact of language barriers.</li> <li>- Girls connected through shared interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observed natural integration without specific teacher intervention due to the school's diverse population.</li> </ul>
<p>Vivian</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Structured grouping promoted community building and facilitated interactions among refugee students and their peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used collaborative activities and games to encourage communication and kindness.</li> <li>- Emphasized a non-competitive environment focused on learning from and helping each other.</li> <li>- Engaged students in group work activities to build comfort and promote positive interactions.</li> </ul>
<p>Sarah</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Boys from different cultures bonded easily and form friendships effortlessly.</li> <li>- Girls encountered tension, especially around cultural topics like the hijab, requiring extra support from the teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continuous efforts to create a sense of community and belonging.</li> <li>- Supported female students in building and maintaining friendships by addressing cultural tensions.</li> </ul>

#### **Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem**

In comparing the interactions of teachers with refugee students' parents, notable similarities and differences emerged across the experiences of the six participants (Table 7). Across most cases, language barriers and cultural differences presented significant challenges, hindering effective communication between the participants and parents of refugee students and limiting parental engagement in the school community. Amy, Samreen, and Vivian all grappled with these obstacles, seeking solutions such as hiring private translators or arranging interpreters to bridge the gap. Despite their efforts, all three noted varying degrees of parental involvement, with low attendance at meetings and events being a recurring issue. Conversely, Vanessa, Sarah, and Fatima reported more positive interactions, with regular communication and active engagement from refugee parents in their children's education.

Other differences existed among the participants interactions with parents of refugee students. For instance, Sarah noticed that parents of refugee students had a more proactive approach to supporting their children's learning compared to Canadian counterparts. Meanwhile, Fatima highlighted instances when parents of refugee students were unaware of their child's academic struggles.

Despite challenges, all teachers recognized the importance of fostering meaningful connections with refugee parents, whether through tailored support mechanisms or efforts to overcome language barriers, to support the educational journey of their students effectively.

**Table 7***Theme 4: Interactions between Teachers and Refugee Students' Parents in the Mesosystem*

Teachers Interaction Observations and Strategies for Facilitating Parental Engagement	
Amy	- Struggled with communication due to language barriers and cultural differences, leading to limited frequency of communication with parents. - Hired private translator for essential school documents. - Low parental attendance at interviews and report card discussions due to language barriers and cultural differences.
Samreen	- Faced challenges in reaching refugee parents due to communication barriers and socio-economic pressures. - Desired increased parental involvement and suggested more support and resources for refugee families. - Encouraged parental participation despite challenges, such as inviting them to accompany students on trips.
Vanessa	- Maintained regular communication with parents, ensuring accessibility and arranging interpreters when necessary. - Refugee parents actively involved in students' learning, attending interviews, volunteering, and engaging with the school community.
Sarah	- Regular communication with parents, employing interpreters to convey information effectively. - Refugee parents were actively engaged in their children's learning, demonstrating commitment and proactive involvement. - Significant participation from refugee families in school community activities.
Fatima	- Communicated with parents at least twice a year, noting high academic expectations despite recent arrival to the country. - Relied on non-verbal cues and observed a range of parental involvement, from well-involved to unaware of their child's struggles. - Noticed a lack of participation in school activities or field trips, possibly due to cultural mindset or trust in teachers' guidance.
Vivian	- Acknowledged challenges of language barriers and varying levels of involvement among refugee parents. - Advocated for interpreter access and proposes structured meetings at the beginning of the school year. - Viewed parental involvement as driven by clear expectations for behavior and academic performance, with engagement in school events but limited volunteer participation due to language constraints.

## **Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem**

In comparing the interactions between teachers and administrators and other school staff in supporting refugee students, both similarities and differences emerged from the narratives of the six participants (Table 8). Across all accounts, there was a shared acknowledgment of the lack of resources and support available for refugee students in the school system. All participants highlighted deficiencies in staffing, ESL classes, educational assistants, and other essential resources necessary for effectively supporting refugee students. Despite the resource constraints, there was a consensus on the value of support from colleagues and administrators. All participants expressed gratitude for the assistance, guidance, and advocacy provided by their peers and school leaders, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing the needs of refugee students.

While all participants faced resource challenges, the specific resources available varied. For example, Samreen highlighted the use of technology such as Chromebooks and audiobooks, while Fatima relied on multilingual content from YouTube. However, Vanessa discussed the decline in ESL resources over time due to budget cuts, contrasting with Vivian's praise for the comprehensive support system established at her previous urban school. The location of the school appeared to influence the level of support available. Participants like Vivian noted stark differences between urban and rural settings, with urban schools often having more established support systems and resources for refugee students. In contrast, participants like Fatima described the challenges of acquiring resources in rural areas with high turnover rates in leadership positions. While all participants advocated for more resources and support, their

specific needs for support varied. For instance, Vivian called for more community partners and a dedicated liaison person at the school, emphasizing the importance of ongoing assistance and guidance beyond material provision. In contrast, Sarah emphasized the need for more staffing, including teachers' aides, ESL teachers, social workers, and psychologists, to address the diverse needs of refugee students effectively.

In summary, while teachers faced common challenges, collaboration among staff members remained crucial in navigating these challenges and advocating for the necessary resources to ensure the academic success and well-being of refugee students.

**Table 8**

*Theme 5: Interactions between Teachers and Administration and Other School Staff in the Mesosystem*

Participant	Resource Challenges	Appreciation for Colleagues and Administration	Variation in Available Resources	Impact of Location on Support Systems	Advocacy for Additional Support
Amy	Lack of ELD classes and Educational Assistants	Grateful for support from colleagues and principal	Limited resources impacted individual students	Challenges in staffing structure	Advocated for more services and support
Samreen	Concerned about budget cuts affecting resources	Acknowledged assistance from ESL teachers and administration	Reliance on technology and visual aids	Impact of budget cuts on support for ESL students	Called for more documented support and resources
Vanessa	Decline in ESL resources over time	Credited support from settlement worker and ESL colleagues	Lack of resources compared to previous urban school	Differences between urban and rural settings	Advocated for more community partners and resources
Sarah	Limited staffing and resources for refugee students	Valued collaboration with colleagues and supportive environment	Emphasis on adapting school environment for inclusivity	Shortage of support staff and translation services	Called for more teachers' aides, ESL teachers, and social workers
Fatima	Reliance on YouTube and lack of official resources	Appreciated mentor teacher's support and practical advice	Challenges in acquiring resources due to high turnover rate	Difficulty seeking support in challenging environment	Advocated for more resource teachers and a translator on site
Vivian	Advocated for more support and resources	Acknowledged presence of community partner at school	Variation in available resources between urban and rural settings	Notable differences in support systems based on location	Called for more ready-made resources and a liaison person

## **Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem**

The cross-case analysis of interactions between teachers and the school board (Table 9) revealed a consensus among teachers on the critical need for targeted, practical, and culturally relevant professional development (PD) to effectively teach refugee students. All participants highlighted different aspects of these needs, emphasizing the importance of PD that goes beyond generic instruction and addresses specific challenges like trauma-informed pedagogy, language development, and cultural competence. Teachers expressed frustration with the current PD offerings, which they often found irrelevant and impractical. There was a shared desire among the participants for structured planning sessions and collaboration among teachers to share strategies and resources. Additionally, the need for better support services, including professional translators and culturally competent counselors, was a recurring theme. While some efforts by school boards were acknowledged by some of the participants, the teachers collectively stressed the necessity for more consistent, practical, and supportive measures to address the academic and social-emotional needs of refugee students.

While all teachers recognized the necessity for more targeted, functional, and culturally relevant PD and support services, their experiences differ in the specific challenges they face and the aspects they prioritize. For instance, Vivian emphasized the importance of collaborative planning sessions and deeper PD involving community partners and settlement workers, particularly to support refugee students in rural areas. Similarly, Fatima valued practical PD workshops with clear, implementable strategies and stressed the need for trauma-informed pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching. Moreover, Sarah, frustrated with limited resources for cultural education and the lack of teacher choice in PD sessions, advocated for more practical,

hands-on training and teacher collaboration. Vanessa critiqued the relevance of PD days. She opted for independent learning through non-board organizations due to her dissatisfaction with the board's offerings. On the other hand, Samreen highlighted the need for training on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed techniques. She also suggested a formalized process for assessing refugee students' needs and expressed frustration over budget cuts affecting ESL programs. Finally, Amy discussed the challenges with translation support and the irrelevance of PD sessions to ELD teachers' needs. She emphasized the value of informal teacher collaboration and the need for the board to be more responsive to teachers' needs. Across their experiences, the common threads were a call for pragmatic, relevant PD, better cultural competency, and improved support systems tailored to the specific needs of refugee students.

**Table 9***Theme 6: Interactions between Teachers and the School Board in the Exosystem*

Teacher	Key Insights on PD Needs and Support	Specific Challenges and Priorities
<b>General Consensus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for targeted, practical, and culturally relevant PD</li> <li>- PD should address trauma-informed pedagogy, language development, and cultural competence.</li> <li>- Frustration with irrelevant and impractical current PD offerings.</li> <li>- Desire for structured planning sessions and collaboration.</li> <li>- Need for better support services (e.g., professional translators, culturally competent counselors).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for consistent, practical, and supportive measures from the school board.</li> <li>- Acknowledgment of some efforts by school boards but need for improvement.</li> </ul>
<b>Vivian</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of collaborative planning sessions.</li> <li>- Deeper PD involving community partners and settlement workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support for refugee students in rural areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Fatima</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Valued practical PD workshops with clear, implementable strategies.</li> <li>- Need for trauma-informed pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasis on practical and culturally relevant PD.</li> </ul>
<b>Sarah</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advocated for more practical, hands-on training and teacher collaboration.</li> <li>- Frustration with limited resources for cultural education and lack of teacher choice in PD sessions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for more practical and relevant PD options.</li> <li>- Desire for greater teacher autonomy in PD selection.</li> </ul>

Teacher	Key Insights on PD Needs and Support	Specific Challenges and Priorities
<b>Vanessa</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Critiqued the relevance of PD days.</li> <li>- Opted for independent learning through reputable organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dissatisfaction with the board's PD offerings.</li> </ul>
<b>Samreen</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highlighted need for training on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed techniques.</li> <li>- Suggested a formalized process for assessing refugee students' needs.</li> <li>- Expressed frustration over budget cuts affecting ESL programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed techniques.</li> <li>- Need for formal assessment processes.</li> <li>- Impact of budget cuts on ESL programs.</li> </ul>
<b>Amy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussed challenges with translation support.</li> <li>- Emphasized the value of informal teacher collaboration.</li> <li>- Need for board to be more responsive to teachers' needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irrelevance of PD sessions to ELD teachers' needs.</li> <li>- Need for improved translation support.</li> </ul>

## **Theme 7: Reflection and Advice**

The experiences and advice to aspiring teachers shared by the participants encompassed common aspects of empathy, adaptability, and authenticity but also displayed distinct perspectives based on their individual backgrounds and challenges. Amy reflected on the emotional toll and political challenges in teaching, advising aspiring teachers to be genuine and not strive for perfection. Similarly, Samreen and Vanessa emphasized the importance of building trust and addressing the emotional needs of refugee students before focusing on academics. Samreen specifically highlighted the need for self-learning and flexibility in teaching methods, while Vanessa advocated for systemic changes such as increased funding, more ESL teachers, and better professional development opportunities. Sarah, like Samreen, stressed thorough preparation and continuous learning to empower aspiring teachers educating refugee students. Fatima, drawing from her immigrant background, focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and the importance of using sensitive language to avoid singling out refugee students. She also addressed the need for all educators to reflect on and overcome potential biases they may have against students from refugee backgrounds. Finally, Vivian emphasized the varying levels of support across schools and school boards. Her advice included sensible suggestions like having a checklist or toolkit and access to resource banks, reflecting her focus on preparedness and proactive support.

In addition to the mentioned common perspective of the participants, some expressed unique viewpoints. For instance, Amy uniquely emphasized the importance of being oneself and avoiding the pressure to be a "Pinterest teacher." This focus on authenticity over perfection is not as explicitly mentioned by the others. Also, Vanessa stood out in her advocacy for systemic

changes. Her suggestion of a four-day workweek to provide educators with more training time is particularly radical. On the other hand, Fatima's personal background as an immigrant uniquely influenced her approach, creating a sense of shared experience and trust with her students. This personal connection is a distinctive aspect of her teaching philosophy.

In summary, while the teachers shared common concerns, each teacher brought a unique perspective to the table, offering a rich and varied understanding of the complexities and challenges in supporting refugee students.

**Table 10***Theme 7: Reflection and Advice*

Teacher	Reflection	Advice to Aspiring Teachers
<b>Amy</b>	Amy reflected on her challenging yet passionate journey into teaching despite her mother's warnings. She noted the politics and red tape that can take away from the enjoyable aspects of teaching. Amy highlighted the emotional toll and the feeling of helplessness educators might experience.	Amy advised aspiring teachers to be authentic and honest rather than striving for perfection. She emphasized the importance of being genuine, especially in forming connections with refugee students, as students can easily discern authenticity.
<b>Samreen</b>	Samreen focused on the importance of building connections and fostering trust with refugee students. She highlighted the unique challenges faced by these students, especially post-pandemic, and the necessity of providing comprehensive support.	Samreen encouraged new teachers to prioritize self-learning and maintain an open mind to adapt their teaching methods. She stressed the importance of building connections, prioritizing student well-being, and being proactive in providing resources to help students succeed.
<b>Vanessa</b>	Vanessa advocated for more education on PTSD, increased funding, and more ESL teachers. She criticized the current professional development opportunities as insufficient. Vanessa also suggested a more radical change, like a four-day workweek, to provide educators with more time for training.	Vanessa advised new teachers to understand the backgrounds and emotional needs of refugee students before focusing on academics. She stressed the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment, getting to know the students, and utilizing settlement workers for better understanding. Vanessa also called for greater awareness of the challenges faced by refugee students and their families and advocates for comprehensive support.
<b>Sarah</b>	Sarah emphasized the need for preparation and self-education for teachers working with refugee students. She highlighted the importance of patience and compassion in supporting their unique needs.	Sarah advised aspiring teachers to conduct thorough research, seek guidance from experienced educators, and utilize online resources. She underscored the importance of patience, compassion, and an understanding and empathetic approach in supporting refugee students.

Teacher	Reflection	Advice to Aspiring Teachers
<b>Fatima</b>	<p>Fatima felt a strong connection to teaching refugee students due to her personal background as an immigrant. She emphasized the importance of using sensitive language and being culturally responsive. Fatima also pointed out the biases and misconceptions some educators have about refugee students and stresses the importance of self-reflection to overcome these biases.</p>	<p>Fatima advised educators to engage in self-reflection to identify and confront biases. She highlighted the importance of using culturally relevant pedagogy and creating a supportive learning environment. Fatima challenged educators to recognize their own immigrant backgrounds and to promote inclusivity and acceptance in schools.</p>
<b>Vivian</b>	<p>Vivian highlighted the varying levels of support and preparedness among schools to assist refugee students. She noted that the availability of resources can differ significantly based on the community and school location. Vivian also emphasized the positive and empathetic mindset of teachers at her school towards supporting struggling students.</p>	<p>Vivian advised aspiring teachers to have a prepared checklist or toolkit for readiness in various situations. This toolkit should include key contacts for English Language Learners' support and community partners involved in refugee assistance. She also suggested having access to resource banks for specific support needs.</p>

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the cross-case analysis of the six cases. Each teacher's experience was unique and reflected their personal narratives as educators for refugee students. Some common themes and perspectives emerged; however, some unique insights and perspectives were also evident.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

### Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of elementary teachers in grades 4-6 within Ontario public schools regarding their interactions with refugee students. The study sought to investigate how these teachers support the educational needs of refugee students, assess their confidence, present their insights regarding their ability to meet these needs. It also intended to identify the strategies teachers use to support the educational needs of refugee students. Furthermore, the study aimed to uncover support mechanisms and resources currently available to educators and additional resources and mechanisms that teachers believe would better assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities towards refugee students. It was hoped that this research would illuminate teachers' voices to highlight the complexities of managing cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity in the classroom. Moreover, this research provided teachers with opportunities for self-reflection on their teaching methods, fostering ongoing improvement and professional development. The research also hoped that this continuous cycle of growth would improve education quality for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds. The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) What are the teaching experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools regarding refugee students?
- 2) How are elementary teachers of grades 4-6 supporting the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools?
- 3) How do elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee students? What support mechanisms and

resources are available to assist them in fulfilling these responsibilities? What are the mechanisms and resources they wish were available?

To fulfill the aim of the study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 participants. The data generated from the interview provided a thick detailed description of the participants' experiences with refugee students. The researcher then created a case study profile for each participant. The profiles were arranged based on the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. These themes were guided by the research questions and by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory of human development, which served as the theoretical framework for this study. The case study profiles represented the participants' narratives and emerging their voices.

Once each teacher's story was told, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes. Differences and unique experiences among the participants were also considered in the analysis. This chapter will explore the specific themes that emerged in the participants' stories within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory of development and the existing literature. It will also present and discuss research contributions and recommendations.

### **Research Question 1: Experiences of Elementary Teachers with Refugee Students**

The first research question sought to explore and describe the experiences of elementary teachers of grades 4-6 in Ontario public schools teaching refugee students. The response to this question will include discussing teachers' perceived levels of readiness to support refugee students, their input on refugee students' strengths, and their experience with students' trauma and the language barrier. During the interviews, when the participants were discussing the different forms of training, they received to prepare them to teach refugees, they all talked about

various trainings provided by the school board. Hence, in this research question, the support mechanisms and resources available for teachers from their school boards will be discussed briefly. However, more details will be explained when responding to the third research question.

### *Levels of Readiness*

The participants reflected on their perceived levels of readiness to support the educational needs of refugee students. Many reported dissatisfaction with their initial teacher education programs. They highlighted a notable lack of specific training for teaching students from diverse backgrounds, including refugees. Consequently, they often had to pursue additional learning and professional development independently. This self-directed approach included reading books, attending workshops, and seeking out free resources to compensate for the shortcomings of their formal education.

Support from school boards was frequently described as inadequate. Teachers expressed frustration over the lack of resources and the superficial nature of training sessions. These training sessions were often conducted outside school hours. The lack of meaningful support from schools boards hindered teachers' ability to effectively implement the training they received. Newer teachers sometimes received more support compared to their experienced colleagues, though this support was still limited. Specialized training in trauma-informed practices (TIP) was occasionally available, but it was often found to be insufficient and lacking practical application.

Challenges in applying training within the classroom were common among teachers. They found it difficult to implement strategies effectively without tangible support and resources. This challenge was particularly pronounced when trying to incorporate TIP without

the backing of other professionals such as school counselor or psychologists. Despite attending various TIP sessions, many teachers felt their training in this area was not sufficient. Some found TIP training somewhat helpful, while others received little to no formal training in TIP, highlighting a significant gap in their preparation.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) was another area where teachers sought to improve their skills. Some participated in additional qualification courses and found them valuable, while others pursued CRP through self-directed study and free resources. Workshops facilitated by teachers' unions and a focus on CRP during advanced degrees also contributed to the participants' understanding on how to implement CRP in their classes. Integrating CRP naturally due to multicultural experiences and linguistic backgrounds was a common approach among some participants. However, some relied heavily on self-directed learning to incorporate CRP into their classrooms.

Differentiated instruction (DI) and social emotional learning (SEL) were additional areas where teachers had varying degrees of training and engagement. Some had extensive DI training through special education courses, while others engaged with DI to different extents but found their teacher education programs lacking in specifics. Many relied on self-directed learning for DI and SEL utilizing online resources. One participant integrated SEL practices throughout her careers, drawing on her backgrounds in guidance.

These findings align with existing literature on teachers' readiness and preparation, which suggests that many mainstream teachers lack sufficient tools to meet the educational needs of refugee students in their classrooms (Levi, 2019; Roxas & Fruja, 2019; Wiseman & Galegher, 2019). However, it is important to note that the primary data for this study was gathered through

a single interview, where participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, some of which occurred as far back as 17 to 20 years ago. Since that time, the requirements for teacher education programs in Ontario have been updated, including the 2015 mandate to incorporate courses that prepare teachers to work with diverse learners.

To address the challenges identified, teacher education programs should ensure comprehensive training that emphasizes teaching students from diverse backgrounds, including refugees. Ideally, continuous professional development should be prioritized, with mandated training sessions provided during school hours and sufficient resources allocated to support teachers. In-depth, practical training in trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), differentiated instruction (DI), and social-emotional learning (SEL) should be emphasized. However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario's education system has faced significant budgetary challenges. The 2023 provincial budget reported a \$47 million reduction in education spending, attributed primarily to lower-than-expected non-government revenue and delays in implementing the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (PressProgress, 2023). Additionally, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) highlighted that Budget 2022 introduced cuts totaling \$12.3 billion over nine years, with these reductions continuing into Budget 2023 (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2024).

In light of these financial constraints, several strategies can be implemented to support educators. For instance, free or low-cost online platforms such as webinars, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and open-access materials on trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and differentiated instruction can be utilized. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are free online learning opportunities open to everyone. They offer a cost-

effective and flexible way to acquire new skills, enhance career prospects, and deliver high-quality education to a large audience (MOOC.org, 2023). School boards can also partner with NGOs specializing in refugee education to conduct free workshops that help teachers address the needs of their refugee students. Additionally, school boards can encourage teacher collaboration by organizing peer-led professional development sessions, where experienced teachers or specialists share their expertise with colleagues. Schools can further support educators by pairing them with mentors or coaches who have experience working with diverse and vulnerable student populations. These suggestions require little to no cost and can significantly enhance the professional development of educators.

The findings on teachers' readiness and the challenges they face in supporting refugee students can be analyzed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory, which emphasizes the complex interactions between an individual and their environment across multiple layers. In the microsystem, the immediate environment of the classroom and school plays a crucial role in the development of refugee students. Teachers' direct interactions with refugee students are impacted by their training and readiness. The lack of training in teacher education programs can hinder the effectiveness of these interactions. Teachers who feel unprepared may struggle to provide the necessary support, impacting students' academic and emotional well-being. Additionally, the exosystem includes broader social systems that indirectly influence the individual, such as school policies and professional development opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The findings highlight a lack of meaningful professional development and inadequate resource allocation by school boards. Improved support at the school board level, such as providing training and allocating resources for refugee education, can enhance teachers' preparedness and effectiveness.

### *Refugee Students' Strengths*

Despite the difficulties faced by teacher educating refugee students, the participants recognized numerous strengths in their students. They highlighted the resilience and adaptability of their students, their passion for learning, and cultural pride. Leadership qualities, eagerness to learn, and respectfulness were also noted by the participants. They appreciated students' bilingualism, quick learning abilities, and bravery in adapting to new environments. These strengths underscored the potential and positive attributes refugee students bring to the classroom. The strengths of refugee students were reported in several studies within the Canadian context such as Stewart et al., (2019) and Ayoub and Zhou (2021) who reported that refugee students often exhibit high levels of resilience, hope, passion for learning, and desire to succeed.

In the microsystem, refugee students' resilience, adaptability, and eagerness to learn contribute positively to their interactions with teachers, peers, and the classroom environment. These strengths allow students to engage actively in learning, even amidst challenges. Teachers recognize these qualities and can leverage them to create more inclusive and supportive classroom dynamics. For example, students' bilingualism and cultural pride provide opportunities for teachers to incorporate culturally relevant materials and create a classroom culture that values diversity, which benefits both refugee and non-refugee students alike. In the mesosystem, refugee students' strengths can support stronger connections between home and school environments. For instance, their respectfulness and eagerness to learn may positively influence how they interact with teachers and peers, creating a foundation for positive relationships that extend beyond the classroom. If teachers acknowledge and value these

strengths, they may feel encouraged to connect with families, which strengthens the link between students' home and school lives. This interconnected support can reinforce students' resilience and adaptability, enhancing their overall academic experience. Additionally, in the exosystem, recognizing the strengths of refugee students at this level could promote the development of resources and support that focus on their potential, rather than solely on their challenges. For instance, school boards could provide resources and training for teachers to better harness refugee students' bilingual abilities or leadership qualities, promoting a strengths-based approach to education. In the macrosystem, society's attitudes toward refugees and multiculturalism shape support for refugee students in schools. When teachers recognize these students' strengths, they challenge stereotypes, promoting a positive societal narrative that can lead to inclusive policies in education. Meanwhile, in the chronosystem, ongoing positive interactions reinforce refugee students' confidence and success over time. Teachers who value these strengths help create a supportive school experience, fostering long-term positive outcomes for current and future refugee students.

### ***Experiences with Trauma and Language Barrier***

Teachers reported that the language barrier significantly hindered their ability to effectively communicate with refugee students, creating challenges that permeated nearly every aspect of the students' academic experience. This barrier not only made it difficult for students to understand verbal instructions and written materials but also negatively affected their engagement in classroom activities. These findings align with previous studies that found that the language barrier is a major obstacle hindering the integration of refugee students within

mainstream classrooms (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021; Stewart et al., 2019).

Fearfulness and apprehension due to past traumatic experiences were common among refugee students, necessitating a supportive and understanding educational environment. Teachers emphasized the importance of trauma-informed practices in supporting refugee students but noted the difficulty of doing so due to limited information and privacy concerns. Instances of students' trauma being triggered by loud noises or sudden events were also described, highlighting the need for sensitive and informed approaches to support refugee students. The literature demonstrates that refugee students experience trauma due to their lived experiences. They do not always receive the psychological support they need. Hence, their traumatic experiences remained vivid in their minds, interfering with their learning potential (Amidon & Kuczarski, 2020; MacNevin, 2012; Kanu, 2008).

At the microsystem level, the immediate environment within the classroom is directly affected by these barriers. Teachers' struggles to communicate due to language differences impede relationship-building with refugee students and limit their engagement with peers and classroom activities. Trauma symptoms like fearfulness in response to loud noises further disrupt students' participation and can create a sense of alienation. These challenges highlight the need for teachers to foster safe, trauma-informed microsystems that can accommodate students' linguistic and emotional needs. To mitigate the effects of language barriers and trauma within the microsystem, the participants emphasized the importance of building trust and addressing the emotional needs of refugee students before focusing on academics. They highlighted the necessity of creating a safe and supportive environment. Adaptability and continuous learning

were also seen as essential, with teachers advocating for flexibility in teaching methods and thorough preparation to meet the unique needs of refugee students. Many participants called for systemic changes in the exosystem, such as increased funding, hiring more ESL teachers, and better professional development opportunities, including practical, hands-on training. Therefore, providing structured support for teachers could enhance their ability to address students' challenges, strengthening a more inclusive exosystem for refugee students.

Furthermore, participants with immigrant backgrounds contributed valuable insights to the study, drawing from their own experiences and understanding of the challenges faced by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. One participant, in particular, emphasized the importance of encouraging all educators to engage in self-reflection and critically examine their own attitudes and assumptions. This participant highlighted the necessity for educators to actively work towards identifying and addressing any unconscious biases they might hold against students from refugee backgrounds. By doing so, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that acknowledges and respects the unique experiences of refugee students. These educators focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and the importance of using sensitive language to avoid singling out refugee students. This personal connection established between teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds and refugee students helped build a sense of shared experience and trust. This aligns with the literature from Gay (2018) suggesting that teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to establish strong relationships with ethnically diverse students with minimal effort due to their common lived experiences. The literature also suggests that diversity in teachers' cultural backgrounds sends a hopeful message to diverse students, showing them that they too can aspire to and achieve professional roles (Nevarez et al., 2019). To promote cultural diversity, teachers must possess the necessary

teaching abilities to support diverse learners. This will enable them to support cross-cultural learning in the classroom and throughout the school by utilizing their professional experience and background. However, this duty shouldn't fall exclusively on the shoulders of educators from various backgrounds. To improve the academic accomplishment of diverse learners including refugee students, all teachers should be culturally competent and able to relate to the experiences and knowledge of their students. Hence, regardless of the teachers' backgrounds, advancing culturally responsive methods requires deliberate efforts from educators. In relation to the interactions within the Bronfenbrenner (2007) bioecological theory microsystem, teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds, especially those with immigrant experiences, might more easily relate to refugee students. This shared experience can foster stronger, more trusting relationships within the microsystem. The positive teacher-student interactions can create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, which is crucial for the academic and social development of refugee students. In the mesosystem, culturally responsive teachers may be able to build bridges between home and school. For example, teachers with diverse backgrounds might better understand the challenges that refugee families face and can more effectively communicate with them. This cross-cultural understanding strengthens the connection between refugee students' home and school environments, helping teachers work collaboratively with families to support students' success. In the exosystem, school policies and professional development opportunities play a role in shaping how well teachers can support diverse learners. When schools provide training in culturally responsive pedagogy, all teachers—regardless of their cultural background—can develop the skills to better understand and relate to refugee students

Beyond the existing knowledge, the findings of the first research question revealed that despite the challenges, teachers had a positive attitudes toward their refugee students. Despite the

lack in PD for more experienced teachers all participants showed a strong commitment to professional development and employed various strategies to support their students' educational needs of their refugee students. This highlights the participants dedication and commitment to supporting the needs of their refugee students. Their efforts underscored the necessity of better training and resources to effectively foster refugee students' academic and personal development. The research highlights the potential for positive educational outcomes when refugee students' resilience, passion, and adaptability are met with teachers' dedication and proper support. Refugee students demonstrate remarkable determination and adaptability, while teachers play a vital role in creating supportive learning environments. Access to resources such as culturally responsive training, language support, and mental health services further enhances this dynamic. Together, the strengths of refugee students and the commitment of teachers, supported by schools and communities, can lead to successful academic and personal development, fostering inclusive and equitable educational environment.

### **Research Question 2: Supporting the Educational Needs of Refugee Students**

The second research question sought to explore the ways elementary teachers of grades 4-6 support the educational needs of refugee students in Ontario public schools. To answer this research question, several themes will be discussed including creating a safe environment, providing social and emotional support, tailored academic approaches, managing students' behaviour, and facilitating relationships with peers and interacting with parents of refugee students.

### *Creating a Safe Environment*

The participants emphasized the importance of establishing a safe classroom environment to help refugee students feel secure and included. This involved both common and unique strategies implemented by teachers. For instance, one teacher used a warm and controlled classroom setup with flexible seating and restorative circles. Another teacher focused on peer pairing and translation tools to help students settle. Others incorporated reception groups and collaborated with settlement workers, while some promoted predictability with calming atmospheres through music and stuffed animal companions. Additionally, community-building activities and cultural events were implemented to foster a welcoming environment. Some teachers allowed time for students to adjust, building trustful relationships gradually. Specific techniques varied, such as using conflict resolution methods like "a bug and a wish," relying on visual aids for communication, providing continuous mental health support, and celebrating cultural traditions. Teachers also involved parents in classroom activities and utilized team-building exercises to make students feel safe. Greeting students in their native language and performing regular emotional check-ins were other methods used to foster a sense of belonging. These strategies promote safety and a stronger sense of belonging among refugee students. The literature suggests that children who feel emotionally safe are generally calmer, more trusting of those around them, and more open to engage in learning (De Deckker, 2018; Imad, 2020; Price, 2023). In addition to these benefits, these strategies play a critical role in establishing a supportive and inclusive microsystem within the educational setting. This microsystem, characterized by positive interactions and a nurturing atmosphere, is particularly beneficial for refugee students who may have experienced significant trauma or disruption in their previous educational experiences. By fostering a sense of security and belonging, these strategies help

refugee students integrate more easily into the classroom, allowing them to feel that they are an important part of the school community. This sense of inclusion not only supports their academic success but also contributes to their emotional and social development, helping them to feel valued and respected in their new environment. In the mesosystem, involving parents in classroom activities and collaborating with settlement workers, may help teachers bridge the gap between school and home environments for refugee students. These interactions ensure that parents feel welcomed and included, which encourages open communication and greater parental involvement. This connection between school and family environments helps reinforce a sense of security and continuity, providing refugee students with consistent support across different parts of their lives. In the exosystem, school policies and community resources, such as support from settlement workers and access to mental health services, play an important role in shaping the safety of the classroom environment. Teachers' collaboration with these external resources brings additional support into the classroom, enabling them to better support their refugee students. This indirect support from the exosystem helps to address the unique needs of refugee students, ensuring that teachers are not alone in fostering a safe environment and that resources are available to sustain it.

### ***Providing Social and Emotional Support***

Providing emotional support for refugee students was a key focus for all participants. Structured conflict resolution and emotional support areas within the classroom were common strategies. Some teachers seated refugee students close to them for easier assistance, while others supported families dealing with bereavement. Soothing music, cultural celebrations, and building student confidence were additional methods implemented by the participants to provide

emotional and social support to their refugee students. Regular emotional check-ins and peer support pairing were employed to provide social and emotional stability. Teachers integrated cultural awareness in unique ways, such as learning students' languages, celebrating cultural events, and promoting cultural familiarity among their students. These efforts aimed to create an inclusive environment where refugee students felt respected and understood. These strategies support the goals of SEL by fostering a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment where students can thrive emotionally and socially. SEL strategies enhances academic education and fosters students' sense of capability and security (Norris, 2003). McBrien (2022) notes that acceptance and belonging boost students' cognitive performance, while Brackett et al. (2019) highlight that SEL skills like perseverance and collaboration increase the likelihood of students success in adulthood.

These findings can significantly affect interactions in the microsystem, as defined by Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological systems theory. In the microsystem, providing emotional support within the classroom enhances teacher-student interactions, helping refugee students feel safe and understood, which can improve their academic and social outcomes. Additionally, strategies like peer support pairing and cultural celebrations foster positive peer relationships, creating a sense of belonging and community that is essential for the social integration and well-being of refugee students.

### ***Tailored Academic Approaches***

Teachers employed a variety of diverse and tailored strategies to support refugee students' academic progress. These strategies include culturally responsive activities, various

instructional strategies, collaborative learning, creating engaging learning environment, and language support.

**Culturally Responsive Activities.** Culturally responsive activities included integrating student-created materials and cultural traditions into the curriculum and using anthems from students' home countries to foster a sense of classroom community. Teachers also employed culturally relevant books and materials, incorporated students' lived experiences into the curriculum, and celebrated incremental progress through goal-setting. Additionally, there was a focus on the critical analysis of media and literature from diverse perspectives, and the incorporation of culturally relevant materials to enhance students' understanding. These strategies foster stronger classroom relationships, inclusivity, and equity, promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity. The literature suggests that culturally responsive activities support students' social and emotional development, encourage active learning, and prepare them for a diverse world (Gay, 2013; Roberts, 2023) . In addition, celebrating cultural diversity, and having strong ethos of equity and inclusion have been recognized as essential elements in effectively supporting students from refugee backgrounds (Arnot and Pinson 2005; Taylor and Sidhu 2012).

**Instructional Strategies.** The instructional strategies employed by teachers encompassed a range of methods designed to enhance learning and address diverse student needs. These strategies included cross-curricular approaches that integrated multiple subjects, modified assessments tailored to individual student requirements, and the use of online resources and creative assignments to engage students. Dual-language resources and books were utilized to support bilingual learning, while technology integration facilitated modern, interactive learning experiences. Small group instruction and individualized attention with scaffolding helped cater to

specific learning needs, providing personalized support. Flexibility in activities allowed for adaptable teaching methods, and collaboration with ESL teachers ensured comprehensive support for English language learners. The literature suggests that offering diverse instructional materials, activities, and assessments, enabled students to interact with the content in ways that best suit their learning needs (Roy et al., 2013).

**Collaborative Learning.** Collaborative learning strategies implemented by teachers focus on creating a supportive and inclusive environment for students. These strategies include encouraging peer support to help students learn from and assist each other, pairing students who share the same mother tongue to provide language and cultural familiarity, and collaboration among teachers to ensure consistent support across different learning settings. These approaches aim to build a strong network of support, enhancing the educational experience and well-being of all students. The literature suggests that collaborative learning enhances social skills, fosters long-term relationships, and builds supportive learning communities. It helps students understand and resolve social differences, promotes positive relationships and diversity, and reduces conflict and violence. It also encourages responsibility among students, enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and makes the learning process more engaging and enjoyable (Ferguson-Patrick, 2020; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012).

**Engaging Learning Environment.** The strategies for creating engaging learning environments implemented by the participants focused on making education interactive and visually stimulating. Outdoor learning activities were used to take advantage of natural settings to enhance students' learning experiences and provide hands-on educational opportunities. Visual aids were employed to help clarify complex concepts and maintain student interest, making

lessons more accessible and engaging. These approaches aimed to create dynamic and stimulating learning environments that cater to various students' needs and keep students actively involved in their education. Studies indicate that a stimulating educational setting fosters the development of skills that are advantageous throughout life, including lifelong learning, conflict resolution, and communication (Hebib & Žunić-Pavlović, 2018; Liang et al., 2012; Lucas, 2010).

**Language Support.** The strategies for multilingual and ESL support implemented by the participants were designed to aid students in overcoming language barriers and enhancing their educational experience. These included the use of multilingual resources that cater to students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, collaboration with ESL teachers to provide specialized language instruction and support, and the incorporation of dual-language books to facilitate bilingual learning. These methods aim to support refugee students overcome the language barrier and enhance their educational experience. The literature suggests that refugee students with good language skills are better adjusted to their school environment (Cole, 1998; McBrien, 2005). Hence, supporting refugee students to overcome the language barrier is essential to their overall academic success and social integration.

The microsystem, in the Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory, encompassing immediate student interactions with teachers, peers, and the classroom setting, is significantly influenced by various strategies implemented by the participants. Culturally responsive activities create an inclusive environment, strengthening teacher-student relationships and creating a supportive peer network by reflecting students' cultural backgrounds in the curriculum. In addition, instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and cross-curricular

approaches, promote active engagement and positive peer interactions. Collaborative learning enhances mutual support and camaraderie among students, while engaging learning environments, through interactive and visually stimulating methods, boost student interest and collaboration. Moreover, language support strategies bridge communication gaps and improve both teacher-student and peer interactions. Interactions in the mesosystem, which involves interactions between different microsystems, are strengthened by the collaboration between teachers and ESL specialists, as well as peer support systems. These collaborations ensure consistent support for students and enhancing students' educational experiences. The exosystem is also impacted by leveraging community resources and advocating for systemic changes that promote equity in educational policies. Additionally, the emphasis on cultural awareness contributes to shifts in societal attitudes within the macrosystem, fostering a more inclusive school culture. Over time, the consistent implementation of these tailored strategies supports the academic success and social integration of refugee students, positively influencing their overall development within the chronosystem.

### ***Managing Students' Behavior***

Behavioral challenges linked to trauma and stress were frequently reported by teachers in this study, highlighting a significant concern in the classroom environment. Some students who had experienced trauma or high levels of stress exhibited a range of behavioral issues. The participants noted that such challenges disrupted the learning environment, making it difficult to manage classroom dynamics and maintain a positive, productive atmosphere. These findings are consistent with those of Ayoub and Zhou (2021). The authors highlighted behavioural issues among refugee students stemming from previous lived experiences. In this study, the participants

suggested several strategies to manage behavior including firm but compassionate approaches, patience, and sensitivity to trauma. Teachers focused on integrating students into classroom routines and building their confidence. Hence, understanding and supportive approaches were essential, with the extent and nature of behavioral issues varying based on individual student experiences and classroom dynamics. These strategies are an integral part of TIP which aims to create a safe and nurturing educational environment, promoting resilience and academic success for trauma-affected students (Record-Lemon & Buchanan, 2017).

The findings on managing behavioral challenges through trauma-informed practices affect interactions within Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory at the microsystem. At this level, where refugee students directly interact with their teachers and peer, the implementation of firm but compassionate approaches, patience, and sensitivity to trauma helps create a supportive classroom atmosphere. This enhances student-teacher relationships and peer interactions, creating a sense of safety and belonging for trauma-affected students.

### ***Facilitating Relationships with Peers and Interacting with Parents***

Teachers played a significant role in facilitating social integration among refugee students and their peers in school. Social integration was often initiated by shared cultural and language backgrounds, supported by sports and common interests, and bolstered by teachers' efforts to create inclusive environments. Challenges included cultural disparities and social skill gaps, particularly for girls. Strategies to address these challenges included pairing students with friendly peers, organizing joint activities, and emphasizing a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Teachers' interaction with refugee students' parents was presented with challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences, hindering effective communication and parental engagement. Some teachers sought solutions like hiring translators or arranging interpreters. Despite these efforts, varying degrees of parental involvement were noted, with low attendance at meetings and events being common. These findings were consistent with the literature suggesting that parental involvement has been recognized as crucial for providing effective education to students from refugee backgrounds. However, low parental engagement is common due to the parents' limited school experience and the language barrier (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Paxton, 2011). Conversely, some teachers in this study reported more positive interactions, with regular communication and active parental engagement. The participant whose school was located in high SES neighborhood reported significant parental involvement. The socioeconomic status SES of refugee parents may be a factor that encourage or hinder those interaction. Parental involvement in schools can be influenced by socioeconomic status (SES), with high SES neighborhoods often seeing greater engagement due to parents' access to resources like time, financial stability, and familiarity with the education system. For refugee parents, SES plays a key role: higher SES can enable involvement through stable employment and education, while lower SES can create barriers like long work hours, language difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the system.

Within the microsystem, teachers' efforts to create inclusive environments directly impact refugee students' immediate interactions with their peers. By pairing students with friendly peers, organizing joint activities, and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, teachers help build positive relationships and social skills among refugee students. This supportive microsystem is essential for students' sense of belonging and well-being. The interactions between home and

school are critical in the mesosystem. Teachers' attempts to engage with refugee students' parents, despite language barriers and cultural differences, influence the students' overall support system. Hiring translators or arranging interpreters to facilitate communication between teachers and parents helps bridge the gap between these two important environments, ensuring consistent support for the students' educational journeys. Effective communication and parental involvement enhance the interconnectedness between home and school.

In addition to contributing to the expansion of existing knowledge, the response to the second research question highlights several important findings. It reveals the strategies teachers implement to support the emotional safety of their students, which are detailed in the case studies of each participant. These strategies include flexible seating, conflict resolution techniques, restorative circles, community-building activities, and peer support. Furthermore, it identifies the approaches participants found effective in addressing the educational needs of their refugee students. These include culturally relevant and responsive activities in Language, Math and Arts, collaborative learning, and strategies designed to foster relationships between refugee students and their peers. Such practices provide valuable insights for other teachers who work with refugee students and are seeking effective methods to support them. Additionally, the response to the second research question underscores the relationship between the SES of refugee families and parental involvement in their children's education, shedding light on how SES influences engagement in school-related activities.

The government's decision to reduce the number of refugees entering the country over the next few years could be seen as a step toward ensuring that incoming refugee populations receive better financial support and stronger overall assistance systems. This approach may provide refugees with improved opportunities to access comprehensive support from the government, including financial aid, psychological services, and language support programs.

### **Research Question 3: Teachers Feelings about Their Ability to Support the Educational Needs of Refugee Students and Support Mechanisms and Resources Available and Needed for Teachers**

This research question aimed to explore how teachers feel about their ability to support the educational needs of refugee students. It also aimed to investigate the support mechanisms and resources available or needed to help them in this endeavor. To respond to this research question, several themes will be discussed including teachers' feelings towards teaching refugee students, available vs needed support mechanisms and resources, interactions with school boards.

#### ***Teachers Feelings Towards Teaching Refugee Students***

The participants experienced a blend of excitement and apprehension when first teaching refugee students. There was a common thread of mixed emotions, with some feeling curious about their students' experiences but unsure of their ability to support them, while others were excited but concerned about their capability to meet their needs. A strong sense of responsibility was evident among the participants. Some teachers adopted an advocacy-driven approach and others emphasized holistic support for refugee families. Additionally, some teachers focused on problem-solving strategies to support their students when resources were not available, while others stood up for their students' needs or emphasized the importance of being patient and

understanding. The lack of resources was a significant challenge, underscoring the importance of adaptability and advocacy among teacher for acquiring necessary materials.

Teachers shared stories reflecting moments of both incapability and confidence. Challenges due to a lack of resources and institutional support were common among the participants. Some teachers faced the removal of self-purchased classroom items and had missing instructional materials. Additionally, severe behavioral challenges and trauma-induced emotional complexities further contributed to feelings of incapability among some of the participants. Language barriers were another significant hurdle, making some teachers feel inadequate in supporting their students. However, witnessing significant progress in their students' educational development bolstered the participants' confidence. Empathetic connections and efforts to learn about students' cultural backgrounds enhanced their ability to support these students emotionally and academically. Moreover, effective instructional methods, such as tailored small group instruction and integrating cultural sharing, contributed to a positive sense of efficacy among the participants. These findings align with the literature on teachers' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the confidence an individual has in their own abilities and skills to perform a certain job or task (Bağcı & Kayir, 2023). Teachers who have low self-efficacy in their educational and training practices may feel negative emotions like stress, tension, and dissatisfaction more often than their peers with high self-efficacy (Yılmaz & Gürçay, 2011). Therefore, it is believed that understanding self-efficacy perceptions can help in enhancing and improving teacher behaviors related to the education and training of refugee students (Bağcı & Kayir, 2023).

The findings about teachers' feelings toward teaching refugee students can significantly influence interactions in the microsystem, which represents the immediate environment where

direct interactions take place (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Teachers' emotions directly affect how they engage with refugee students. For example, a teacher's curiosity and excitement might lead to a more open and welcoming classroom atmosphere, fostering trust and connection with the students. On the other hand, feelings of uncertainty or apprehension might result in hesitation or less effective communication, which could hinder the relationship. Challenges such as language barriers, students' trauma histories, and behavioral issues are integral parts of this immediate environment. These factors can create obstacles that teachers and students must navigate daily. Teachers may feel inadequate when faced with these challenges, potentially leading to frustration or stress. However, overcoming these challenges can also lead to stronger bonds, as teachers who successfully address these issues can provide crucial support and stability for their students. The way teachers approach their roles directly influences the classroom environment. For instance, teachers who adopt a holistic support approach may focus on the overall well-being of their students, addressing both academic and emotional needs. This can lead to more personalized and compassionate interactions, making students feel more supported and understood. Teachers who are adaptable and willing to modify their teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of refugee students contribute to a more effective learning environment. Techniques like small group instruction tailored to different language levels or integrating cultural sharing activities can help bridge gaps in understanding and build a more inclusive classroom. This adaptability not only enhances learning outcomes but also strengthens the teacher-student relationship, as students feel their specific needs are being acknowledged and addressed.

### ***Available Vs Needed Support Mechanisms and Resources***

The participants acknowledged a shared appreciation for the support from colleagues and administrators, despite facing significant resource constraints. Support mechanisms included

collaborative efforts and guidance from peers and school leaders. This support was thought to be vital in addressing the needs of refugee students. This aligns with the literature contending that comprehensive school reform, including the involvement of school leadership, teachers, and support staff, is essential for ensuring equitable education for students with refugee backgrounds (Block et al., 2017; Pugh et al., 2012). The participants also highlighted various available resources, albeit limited and varied across different settings. For example, some teachers utilized technology like Chromebooks and audiobooks, while others relied on multilingual content from online platforms such as YouTube. The location of the school significantly influenced the level of available support, with urban schools typically having more established support systems compared to rural schools. Urban schools often benefitted from comprehensive support systems, while rural schools faced challenges such as high turnover rates in leadership positions and difficulties in acquiring necessary resources. This finding is consistent with the research suggesting that rural schools face staffing, funding, and resource challenges due to their remote locations and the continued focus on metropolitan-centered education policies and provisions (Brennan 2005; Kline et al., 2014).

On the other hand, all participants emphasized the critical need for additional resources and support to effectively support refugee students. Key deficiencies were noted in staffing, ESL classes, educational assistants, and other essential resources. Teachers called for increased staffing, including teachers' aides, ESL teachers, social workers, and psychologists, to address the diverse needs of refugee students effectively. Specific resource needs varied among participants. Some teachers advocated for more community partners and a dedicated liaison person at the school to provide ongoing assistance and guidance beyond material provision.

Others emphasized the need for practical, hands-on training and teacher collaboration to enhance their ability to support refugee students.

These findings can influence interactions in the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory. The collaborative efforts and guidance from peers and school leaders are key interactions in the mesosystem. These interactions between different components of the school environment (e.g., teachers, administrators) help create a network of support that influences how teachers manage their classrooms and support refugee students. Effective collaboration can lead to shared strategies and pooled resources, enhancing the overall support system for students. The variation in resources between urban and rural schools reflects how the mesosystem operates differently depending on the school's context. In urban settings, where resources and support are more abundant, there are more opportunities for teachers to collaborate and share strategies, leading to a more cohesive approach to supporting refugee students. In rural settings, the challenges like high turnover in leadership and limited resources may strain these interactions, potentially leading to less effective support for students.

Interactions in the mesosystem can significantly affect the microsystem by shaping the environments and relationships that individuals experience directly. For instance, when teachers collaborate effectively with colleagues, school leaders, and other professionals, they can share strategies, resources, and support. This collaboration (a mesosystem interaction) strengthens the teacher's capacity to support students in the classroom (microsystem). In addition, school administrators' decisions and the support they provide influence the resources available to teachers. For example, if school leaders prioritize funding for technology or professional

development, this can enhance the tools and strategies teachers use in the classroom, improving the immediate learning environment for students.

### ***Interactions with the School Board***

Teachers consistently highlighted the need for targeted, practical, and culturally relevant professional development to teach refugee students effectively. There was a shared frustration with current PD offerings, which were often deemed irrelevant and impractical. Teachers expressed a desire for structured planning sessions and opportunities for collaboration among educators to share strategies and resources to better support refugee students. Additionally, the necessity for better support services, including professional translators and culturally competent counselors, was a recurring theme. While some efforts by school boards were acknowledged, teachers collectively stressed the need for more consistent, practical, and supportive measures to address the academic and social-emotional needs of refugee students. This is consistent with studies suggesting that education policymakers have overlooked the specific educational needs of students from refugee backgrounds (Block et al., 2014).

Teachers' priorities in PD varied. Some emphasized the importance of collaborative planning sessions involving community partners and settlement workers, particularly to support refugee students. Practical PD workshops with clear, implementable strategies and trauma-informed pedagogy were highly valued. Others advocated for more culturally relevant teaching and practical, hands-on training, expressing frustration with the lack of teacher choice in PD sessions. Additionally, teachers highlighted the need for training on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed techniques, along with a formalized process for assessing refugee students'

needs. Overall, teachers called for more pragmatic, relevant PD, better cultural competency, and improved support systems tailored to the specific needs of refugee students.

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory, these findings impact interactions at several levels. In the microsystem, teachers' frustrations with professional development (PD) offerings impact their immediate teaching environment and relationships with students. When PD is perceived as irrelevant or impractical, it can diminish teachers' confidence and effectiveness, directly affecting their interactions with refugee students. A lack of structured planning sessions and collaboration among educators may hinder the sharing of best practices, limiting the overall support that teachers can provide to their students. At the mesosystem level, effective collaboration between teachers and external partners, such as community organizations and settlement workers, is vital for supporting refugee students. Teachers emphasized the need for PD that incorporates insights from these stakeholders, promoting a more integrated approach to education. Improved collaboration between the school board and community partners can enhance the educational experience for refugee students by aligning resources and support systems more effectively. In the exosystem, the call for better support services, including professional translators and culturally competent counselors, highlights the importance of systemic structures in facilitating effective education for refugee students. While some school board efforts are recognized, teachers advocate for more consistent and practical measures. The availability of culturally relevant resources and support staff can significantly enhance teachers' capabilities to meet the diverse needs of their students, creating a more inclusive learning environment.

In addition to contributing to existing knowledge, this research question provided a platform for participants to share their feelings about their ability to teach refugee students. They discussed moments of confidence in their capability to support refugee students, as well as instances of doubt. Participants also reflected on the crucial role of peer support in helping them navigate the challenges they face. It allowed them to voice their needs, share their experiences, and evaluate the resources available to them. The severity of the teacher shortage after the pandemic was particularly evident. In a school with a high population of refugee students, there was no ESL teacher available, leaving classroom teachers to support students who did not speak any English without additional assistance. In conclusion, while the participants are committed to supporting refugee students, their efforts are often hindered by resource limitations and inadequate institutional support. Addressing these gaps through increased resources, practical professional development, and enhanced support systems is crucial for enabling teachers to effectively meet the educational and socio-emotional needs of refugee students.

The findings emphasize that changes in a single interaction within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can create a ripple effect, influencing all levels of the model and profoundly impacting teachers' experiences as well as the education and development of refugee students. A positive shift at one level can enhance teachers' self-efficacy and pedagogical strategies, directly improving their classroom interactions with refugee students. This creates a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for refugee students. As these changes propagate through the various levels of the model, teachers become better equipped to address the diverse needs of their students. Ultimately, these interconnected changes contribute to a more responsive and effective educational system that supports the academic and social-emotional

development of refugee students, creating pathways for their successful integration and growth within the school community.

### **Contributions to Theory**

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, which provides a lens for understanding the complex interactions between individuals and their environments. While Bronfenbrenner's theory has been extensively used to explore child development in general contexts, there has been limited application in understanding the experiences of teachers supporting refugee students. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the findings.

This research extends Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory in several ways. First, the findings suggest that teachers' perceptions of their ability to support refugee students may influence interactions at the microsystem level. For instance, when teachers feel confident in meeting the educational needs of their students, these positive emotions can strengthen the interactions within the microsystem—between teachers and students, students and peers, and students and parents. Conversely, if teachers feel incapable of addressing their students' needs, their emotions may weaken these microsystem interactions.

Second, the Bronfenbrenner model views the school and teacher as one entity. However, the findings suggest that the amount and quality of support teachers receive from their peers and administration influence interactions within the microsystem. In Figure 3, teachers are separated from their peers and administration. The rationale behind this distinction is that refugee students do not always have direct interactions with the administration and other teachers in the school. Figure 2 illustrates how the mesosystem can be divided into two levels: one for teachers and another for teachers' peers and school administration. The interactions between teachers and their

peers, as well as between teachers and school administration, can either strengthen or weaken the interactions within the microsystem.

Third, Figure 3 also highlights how interactions in the exosystem can have a ripple effect on those in the microsystem. It illustrates how the absence or presence of quality professional development, physical resources, and support for teachers (such as ESL teachers, educational assistants, counselors, etc.) may positively or negatively influence interactions in the microsystem. Additionally, the presence or absence of strong pre-service teacher training can also impact interactions within the microsystem.

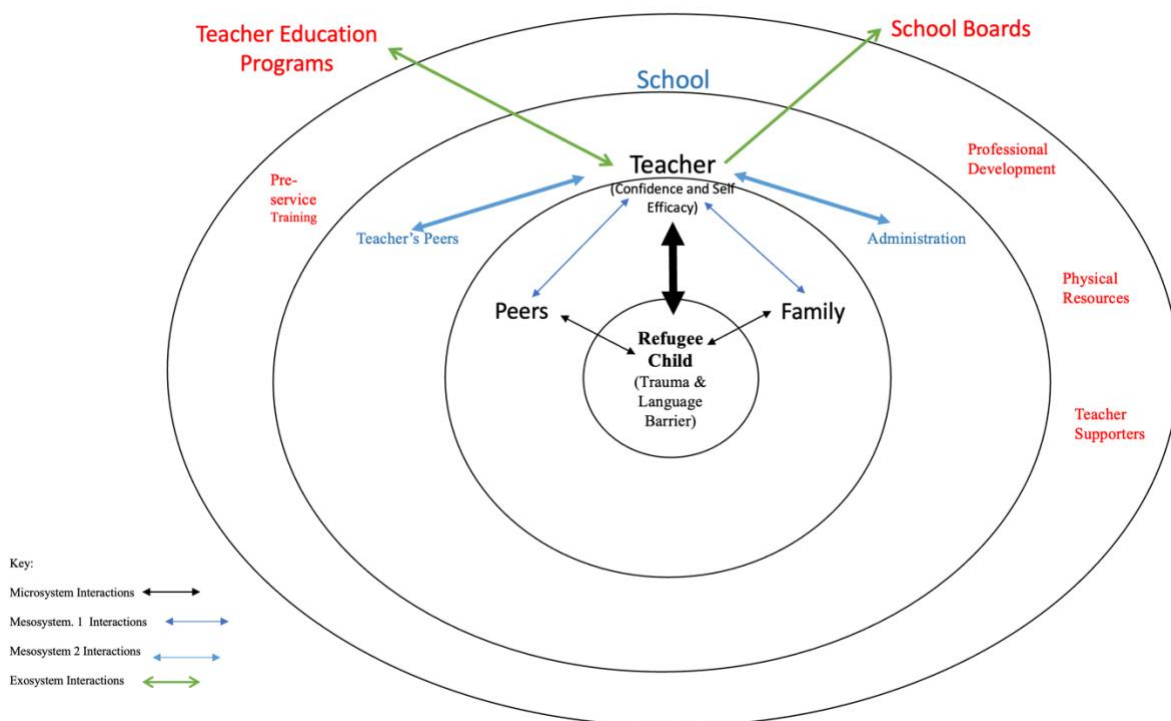
These findings add to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory by expanding the understanding of how various levels of influence affect interactions in the microsystem. The research highlights the role of teachers' emotions and perceptions, suggesting that their feelings of competence or inadequacy in supporting refugee students can directly influence the quality of interactions in the microsystem. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the importance of the individual's immediate environment in shaping development, while also emphasizing the emotional and psychological factors that impact these interactions.

Furthermore, the study extends Bronfenbrenner's original model by differentiating between the teacher, their peers, and school administration within the mesosystem. By separating these entities, the research shows how interactions between teachers and their colleagues, as well as with the administration, can have a significant influence on the dynamics within the microsystem, specifically concerning the support provided to refugee students. This suggests a more nuanced understanding of the mesosystem, particularly in the context of teacher support, which is not fully captured in Bronfenbrenner's traditional framework.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of the exosystem in shaping microsystem interactions, particularly the impact of external factors such as professional development, resources, and teacher training. By highlighting how the presence or absence of these factors can ripple through to affect teachers' interactions with students, peers, and administration, the research demonstrates the interconnectedness of all ecological levels. This extension to Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes the broader environmental and institutional support systems that are critical for the successful integration and development of refugee students.

**Figure 3**

*Visual Representation of the Findings*



### Contributions to Knowledge

This study provides significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge by addressing critical gaps in understanding how teachers support the educational needs of refugee

students. By exploring teachers' experiences and challenges, this research uncovers key emotional, practical, and systemic factors that shape educational outcomes for this vulnerable population. While previous studies have largely focused on refugee students' educational experiences in various Canadian provinces (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Kanu, 2008; Stewart et. al, 2019), this research shifts the focus to teachers' perspectives, giving teachers voice to share their experiences and challenges.

This study offers a snapshot of how the participating teachers experience the opportunities and challenges in supporting refugee students in Ontario public schools. The research identifies a potential gaps in teacher education and professional development, particularly in the areas of trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive pedagogy, highlighting the necessity for more structured and accessible training opportunities. It underscores the challenges posed by language barriers and students' traumatic experiences which affect the educational outcomes for refugee students. Despite these challenges, the study recognizes the strengths of refugee students, such as resilience, adaptability, and bilingualism, which are crucial assets that need nurturing. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory is employed to contextualize the interactions between teachers, students, and the educational environment, emphasizing the importance of the classroom and broader educational policies. The findings also contribute new insights into creating safe and inclusive classroom environments, providing tailored academic and emotional support strategies, and fostering positive relationships with peers and parents, essential for the social integration and well-being of refugee students. Moreover, the study reveals the emotional complexity teachers face and the impact of this on classroom dynamics. It highlights the disparities in resources between urban and rural schools and calls for more equitable resource allocation and comprehensive support systems. The study

also underscores the importance of professional development that is relevant, culturally competent, and practical, urging systemic changes to better equip teachers and schools to support refugee students.

Beyond providing participants with an opportunity to reflect on their interactions with refugee students, the outcomes of this study offer several potential benefits. The findings can inform teacher education programs and in-service training initiatives, aiding in the provision of pedagogical tools necessary to support refugee students in Ontario's elementary public schools. Additionally, the insights gleaned from this research have the potential to enhance the practices of grade 4 to 6 teachers not only in Ontario but also in other jurisdictions facing similar challenges. Furthermore, the findings may be instrumental in guiding education policymakers and other stakeholders in identifying the types of support required by teachers to effectively address the diverse educational needs of refugee students. Since this research was conducted on a small sample, the findings may lay a cornerstone for future research to explore the experiences of Ontario teachers with refugee students on a larger scale.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary objective of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of the participating Ontario grade 4 to 6 teachers as they educate refugee students. However, it's important to acknowledge potential limitations inherent in qualitative research, which are similar to those encountered in other studies of this nature. Qualitative research heavily relies on the interpretations and interactions of the researchers, leaving room for personal biases to influence outcomes. As noted by Clandinin and Connelly (2004), our individual experiences serve as the foundation for our research interests. In this study, the researcher's background as a teacher who has previously worked with refugee students might have influenced the findings. Despite this

potential bias, efforts were made to create an environment conducive to open and non-judgmental communication, allowing participants to freely express their experiences and perspectives.

The initial plan was to recruit participants from various regions in Ontario for maximum variation in geographic location covering all regions in Ontario. Maximum variation allows for capturing a more holistic view of the topic and analyzing it from multiple perspectives (Patton, 2015). However, despite advertising the study on social media platforms targeting various communities across different parts of the province, the resulting participants were mainly teachers from big cities in Southern Ontario. One reason for this could be that refugees tend to settle in larger Canadian cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, as they offer more job opportunities, social support, and cultural diversity. As a result, urban areas likely have a higher concentration of refugees compared to rural regions. Therefore, teachers in major cities in Southern Ontario may have more refugee students in their classrooms, which could explain why educators from less populated areas were less inclined to participate in the study. It is also important to mention that the participants were either Canadians with European descents or first-generation immigrants from South Asia. Teachers from other cultural backgrounds may have different experiences in teaching refugee students. The voices of these teachers were not represented in this study adding another limitation to this research project. Additionally, all the participants were female teachers. Hence, the voice of male teachers is not represented in this study. This may be due to the widening gender gap among Ontario teachers. According to Statistics Canada (2014), 84% of Ontario elementary teachers were females in 2011. Furthermore, the study does not include input from other educational staff, such as principals educational assistants and other school staff , who play a critical role in the educational support

system. The absence of their perspectives limits the study's understanding of the full educational environment, and the collective strategies used to support refugee students.

This study presents the experiences of six Ontario teachers, which may not fully represent the broader spectrum of teacher experiences across the province. The sample size is small and may not capture the diversity of experiences that exist in different schools, regions, or contexts. Other teachers from different schools or school boards may have a different experiences. However, the participants provided a rich description of their experiences, which enriched the findings of this study. Additionally, the study may have inadvertently attracted participants who have a particular interest in or commitment to teaching refugee students, potentially leading to a sample bias. Teachers who are less engaged or who face challenges in supporting refugee students might not have participated, meaning their perspectives are underrepresented. Another significant limitation is the lack of classroom observations. Without direct observations, it is difficult to ascertain the frequency or extent to which the strategies discussed by teachers are actually implemented in the classroom. This limits the study's ability to validate the reported practices and their impact on refugee students' educational experiences. No classroom observations were conducted for several reasons. First, obtaining consent from various school boards, teachers, and potentially refugee students' parents could be both challenging and time-consuming. Additionally, classroom observations might create stress for teachers, making it difficult to find participants willing to take part in a study where they would be observed. Furthermore, visiting schools across different cities in Ontario required resources that were not available for this project, as it was entirely self-funded. The participants in this study participated in a single 90-minute interview. They did not have the opportunity to reflect on their responses or return for a follow-up interview. The decision to conduct only one interview was based on

concerns about potentially losing participants after the initial session. Teachers are often very busy and may be unwilling or unable to commit to multiple interviews. This limitation impacted the study, as it restricted the opportunity to delve deeper into participants' reflections or gather additional insights.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study have shed light on the complexities and challenges faced by six elementary teachers in Ontario working with refugee students, particularly in areas such as teacher preparedness, resource allocation, and the implementation of culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices. While this research has contributed valuable insights into these areas, it also highlights several gaps and avenues for further exploration. Future research should build on these findings to deepen our understanding of effective strategies and interventions that can enhance the educational experiences of refugee students and support the educators who work with them.

Future studies could explore the long-term effects of professional development programs that focus on trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive pedagogy, providing insight into how these programs influence teacher preparedness and student outcomes over time. Studies can also focus on identifying cost effective ways to support teacher professional development amid the budget cuts in Ontario. Additionally, investigating the disparities in resources between urban and rural schools and how they affect refugee students' educational experiences would offer valuable insights, with comparative studies potentially identifying specific needs and effective strategies in diverse school settings. Research could also examine the impact of peer support programs and parental involvement initiatives on refugee students' social integration,

emotional well-being, and academic success, offering a deeper understanding of these relationships and informing better practices in schools. Further studies could also delve into the emotional and professional well-being of teachers working with refugee students, exploring the impact of support systems such as mentoring, counseling, and professional learning communities on their job satisfaction and effectiveness.

Finally, while this study focused on interactions within the microsystem (the immediate environment of the student, such as family and classroom) and the mesosystem (the connections between these immediate environments), future research could benefit from a broader examination of the macrosystem and chronosystem as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bioecological theory. The macrosystem encompasses the larger societal and cultural contexts that influence educational experiences, such as national policies, cultural norms, and socioeconomic factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Investigating how these broader societal and policy-level influences shape the experiences of refugee students could provide valuable insights into systemic barriers and supports that impact their education. Additionally, the chronosystem, which considers the dimension of time and how changes over time influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), could offer further understanding of the evolving challenges and supports that refugee students face. For example, studying how shifts in immigration policies, changes in societal attitudes toward refugee students, or historical events impact educational outcomes could reveal important trends and offer guidance for adaptive strategies in educational practices. By extending research to these broader and temporal systems, future studies could offer a more holistic view of the factors affecting the development of refugee students. Such research would help educators, policymakers, and researchers understand how larger societal

structures and temporal changes interact with immediate educational settings, ultimately informing more effective and contextually relevant support mechanisms for refugee students.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

This multiple case study methodology explored the experiences of six Ontario elementary grades 4-6 teachers working with refugee students. The participants faced significant challenges in supporting refugee students due to a lack of training in their teacher education programs and inadequate support from school boards. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the resources and training available, often resorting to self-directed learning to compensate for these gaps. TIP, CRP, and strategies like differentiated DI and SEL were areas where the participants sought additional training, but these efforts were often hindered by insufficient practical application and limited professional development opportunities. Despite these challenges, the participants recognized and nurtured the resilience, adaptability, and other strengths of their refugee students, contributing to positive educational outcomes. Participants from culturally diverse backgrounds were particularly effective in building trust and connections with refugee students. This emphasized the need for better systemic support and training to enhance teachers' preparedness and effectiveness in supporting the academic and emotional well-being of refugee students.

The findings highlight several strategies employed by the participants to support refugee students. Teachers emphasized creating a safe and welcoming environment through flexible seating, peer pairing, and cultural events to help students feel secure and included. Emotional and social support was provided by integrating cultural awareness into classroom activities and providing structured emotional support areas. Tailored academic approaches included culturally responsive activities, differentiated instructional strategies, collaborative learning, engaging

learning environments, and language support, all of which aimed to address diverse student needs and foster inclusivity. Managing behavioral challenges was addressed through trauma-informed practices, focusing on patience, compassion, and integrating students into classroom routines. The participants also facilitated peer relationships and interacted with parents, overcoming language barriers and cultural differences to promote social integration and parental engagement.

The findings also revealed a range of emotions among the participants when supporting refugee students, including excitement, apprehension, and a strong sense of responsibility. Despite initial challenges such as lack of resources, language barriers, and managing trauma-related behaviors, teachers felt more confident as they witnessed their students' progress. The participants emphasized the need for additional support mechanisms, particularly in rural schools where resources are scarcer. They called for more staffing, ESL classes, and community partnerships, as well as practical, culturally relevant professional development to better equip them to meet the needs of refugee students. While collaborative efforts with colleagues and school leaders were appreciated, there was a consistent demand for more tailored resources and support systems to enhance their teaching efficacy.

### ***Microsystem Recommendations***

In the microsystem, where direct interactions between teachers and students occur, it is essential for teachers to enhance their cultural competence. They should deepen their understanding of refugee students' cultural backgrounds and trauma histories. Additionally, teachers need to question their own cultural assumptions. Understanding the lived experiences of their students and honoring their cultural philosophies is also important. Targeted emotional and academic support should also be implemented. This support can include emotional check-ins,

small group instruction, and differentiated learning strategies. Such approaches are designed to address the specific needs of refugee students. The goal is to help them feel safe, valued, and capable in their learning environment. Expanding the use of trauma-informed practices in daily interactions is also crucial, with an emphasis on patience, understanding, and compassionate approaches to managing behavioral challenges. This can help create a calm and predictable classroom environment that mitigates the impact of trauma and stress on students' behavior and learning.

### ***Mesosystem Recommendations***

In the mesosystem, which involves the interconnections between different microsystems like teachers, parents, and school administrators, collaboration is key. It's important to strengthen teacher collaboration by supporting more cooperation among teachers, ESL specialists, and support staff. This collaboration can involve sharing resources and strategies for supporting refugee students. Regular planning meetings and professional learning communities can help facilitate this process. Improving communication with refugee parents is also crucial. This can be achieved by providing translation services and cultural liaisons to bridge the gap between home and school. Encouraging parent involvement in school activities is also important. Additionally, offering resources to help parents support their children's learning at home can make a significant difference in supporting the educational needs of refugee students. Moreover, establishing stronger partnerships with community organizations and local agencies that support refugee families is essential. This can include bringing in settlement workers to assist with student integration and offering workshops or information sessions for parents.

### ***Exosystem Recommendations***

In the exosystem, which includes the indirect environment such as school board policies and resources, teachers and students are affected by these broader factors. It is important to advocate for increased funding and resources from the school board. This is especially important for schools in rural or under-resourced areas. Additional funding can be used to hire more ESL teachers, educational assistants, social workers, and counselors. These professionals should be trained in trauma-informed care and cultural competence. School boards should also prioritize relevant professional development opportunities. These opportunities should be practical and hands-on. The focus should be on topics like trauma-informed teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and differentiated instruction strategies. This training is essential to address the diverse needs of refugee students.

### **Conclusions and Reflections**

Refugees often endure unimaginable hardships before finding safety in a new country like Canada. Many have faced persecution, violence, and the loss of their homes and loved ones, leaving behind everything familiar in search of security and a chance to rebuild their lives. These difficult lived experiences shape the challenges refugee children bring with them when they enter Canadian classrooms. As they navigate a new language, culture, and educational system, these children carry with them the emotional scars of their past, which can profoundly impact their ability to learn and adapt.

To better support refugee students, several improvements can be made. First, providing ongoing professional development for educators on culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching practices could help them better understand and address the needs of refugee students.

Teachers who are equipped with strategies to support language acquisition, manage classroom diversity, and recognize signs of trauma can create a safer and more inclusive environment. Second, schools could incorporate more individualized support services, such as bilingual counseling and social-emotional learning programs, tailored specifically for refugee students. Recognizing the unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these students would allow educators to implement targeted interventions that build on students' strengths, such as their bilingualism and adaptability, while also addressing any challenges they may face. Lastly, establishing a structured system for tracking refugee students' progress, both academically and socially, would allow schools to provide consistent, tailored support. This tracking system could include regular assessments that inform individualized learning plans, ensuring that refugee students' unique learning needs are met over time.

For new refugee students arriving in Canada, support should be implemented immediately within the exosystem, which includes the broader community and the resources indirectly affecting students' school experiences. Upon arrival, refugee families often face numerous challenges, from language barriers to navigating unfamiliar social systems. Establishing strong community support networks—such as language programs, mental health resources, and cultural orientation sessions—can help families adjust and feel more supported in their new environment. Schools can play a pivotal role by partnering with community organizations to provide holistic support to refugee students and their families. For instance, community centers could offer language classes and mental health services, while schools could host workshops to help families understand the Canadian education system and access resources. Furthermore, community programs that promote peer mentoring, where newly arrived students are paired with peers who have successfully adjusted to Canadian schools, could help them

acclimate more quickly and feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, providing dedicated funding for schools with high numbers of refugee students would allow these schools to hire specialized staff, such as ESL teachers and cultural liaisons, who can provide targeted support. This additional funding would ensure that schools have the resources to implement long-term support structures, addressing the broader needs within the exosystem that impact refugee students' ability to thrive in their new academic and social environment.

This study illuminates the profound dedication and resilience of teachers who strive to meet the educational and emotional needs of refugee students, often in the face of significant challenges. Their commitment to creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment reflects a deep empathy and a genuine desire to see these students thrive despite their difficult pasts. The stories shared by teachers are a testament to the powerful impact that understanding, patience, and cultural sensitivity can have on a child's life. Through their efforts, these educators not only provide academic instruction but also offer a sense of stability and belonging to children who have experienced immense upheaval.

Through this study, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the complex interplay of challenges and triumphs that define the educational experiences of refugee students and the educators who guide them. As I reflect on these findings, it is clear that with the right resources and support systems in place, teachers can be empowered to continue this vital work, helping refugee students to rebuild their lives and futures with hope and confidence. It is my hope that this research will contribute to the ongoing efforts to create educational spaces where every student, regardless of their background, feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Digital Poster

 uOttawa

# Would you like to share your experience teaching refugee students?

*You can be part of this study if:*

 <p><b>You teach grades 4 to 6 in Ontario public schools</b></p>	 <p><b>You have at least 2 academic years experience teaching refugees</b></p>
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**Participate in a 90-minute interview conducted in English to discuss your experience and instructional strategies.**

**A 40\$ gift card will be given to each participant. Participants will be selected on first come first serve basis.**

*To participate, please contact: Nabila El Bizri*

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

**Aim:** Scrutinise interactions in the microsystem—between refugee children and their teachers, and between the children and their peers. Additionally, it will explore interactions in the mesosystem, encompassing those between teachers and parents, as well as between teachers and other school staff. Furthermore, the interviews will investigate interactions in the exosystem, specifically between teachers and the administration/school board.

### Part A: Demographic

- How many years have you been teaching?
- How many years in your present school?
- How many times (in academic years) have you taught refugee students in your class?
- How many refugee students do you currently have in your class?
- Tell me about your current school. (Urban/suburban/rural, SES, cultural and racial diversity, size)
- What is the highest degree you have earned?
- Have you had any training in Trauma Informed Pedagogy (TIP)? If so, tell me about it.
- Have you had any training in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)? If so, tell me about it.
- Have you had any training in Differentiated Instruction (DI)? If so, tell me about it.
- Have you had any training in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)? If so, tell me about it.
- What is the size of the classroom you teach now?
- Do you have any refugee students with IEP?
- At what point did you know that you wanted to be a teacher? How did that happen? (Smith, 2009)

### Part B: Experience with refugees (interactions in the microsystem between refugee children and their teachers and interactions between the children and their peers)

- Can you describe your experience with refugee students? (Barrett & Berger, 2021)
- How do you feel when you get a refugee student in your class? (Stewart, 2021)
- What strategies do you follow in your classroom to help refugee students feel safe? (Prompts: TIP, CRP, differentiated instruction...) (Stewart, 2021)
- How often do you use these strategies? (Daily, every week, whenever possible...)
- Do you feel that these strategies are successful? Why or why not?
- What strategies do you follow in your classroom to help refugee students feel successful? (Prompts: TIP, CRP, differentiated instruction...) (Stewart, 2021)
- Do you feel that these strategies are successful? Why or why not?
- How often do you use these strategies? (Daily, every week, whenever possible...)
- Can you share some experiences you have had in creating, teaching, and modifying lessons that address your refugee students' needs? (Stewart, 2021)
- How are your refugee students' behaviours and needs different from those of other students? (Stewart, 2021)
- How do you respond to those needs? What strategies do you use to help students regulate their behaviour?
- What strengths do your refugee students bring? (Stewart, 2021)

- What are some areas that refugee students are lacking in? (Stewart, 2021)
- How do you focus on the strengths of refugee students and maintain high expectations for them when they have deficits in many areas? (Stewart, 2021)
- Can you describe a specific incident or occasion where you felt incapable of supporting a refugee student academically or emotionally? (Prompts: when, where, why, how, how did you react, how did that make you feel?)
- Can you describe a specific incident or occasion where you felt confident and capable of supporting a refugee student? (Prompts: when, where, why, how, how did you react, how did that make you feel?)
- Can you describe refugee students' social integration in school? (relationship with their peers)
- How do you encourage refugee students to build relationships with their peers? What strategies do you use? (Smith, 2009)
- Do these strategies work? Why or why not? (Smith, 2009)
- Do you know if your student have been exposed to trauma? How do you know? How do you support them in class?

**Part C: Experiences with refugee parents (interactions in the mesosystem between the teacher and the parents).**

- Can you describe your experience/relationship with refugee students' parents? (Barrett & Berger, 2021)
- How do you communicate with them?
- How often do these communications take place?
- Do you find these communications effective? Why and why not?
- How does communicating with refugee students' parents support or undermine your efforts in teaching these students?
- How are parents of refugee students involved in the school community?
- How involved do you expect them to be with the students' academics? (Smith, 2009)

**Part D: Experiences with the school staff members and school board (interactions in the mesosystem between teachers and other school staff and interactions in the exosystem between the teacher and the administration/school board)**

- Does your school have a protocol with regard to students from refugee backgrounds? (Barrett & Berger, 2021)
- What resources do you have that help you feel successful teaching refugee students? (Stewart, 2021)
- What resources do you need to help you feel more successful teaching refugee students? (Stewart, 2021)
- What aspects have made you feel comfortable teaching refugee students? (Stewart, 2021)
- What aspects have made you feel uncomfortable teaching refugee students? (Stewart, 2021)
- How do you talk about the issue of students from refugee backgrounds and trauma, if at all, with your colleagues? (Barrett & Berger, 2021)

- Who are the people who have helped you most in teaching refugee students? (teachers, administrators, other staff members, parents, school board...) (Stewart, 2021)
- How did these people support you?
- Why was their support helpful?
- Can you describe any training you have received regarding students from refugee backgrounds, if any? (DI, CRP, TIP..) (Barrett & Berger, 2021)
- How well did you feel that teachers' education program prepared you to teach students with various cultures? (Prompts: different learning needs, psychological needs, various disabilities?)
- What kind of training do you feel would be beneficial to support you in teaching refugee students? (Barrett & Berger, 2021)
- What things do you see present in schools that help refugee students feel safe and successful? (Prompts: mindset, facilities, services, support programs, ...)(Stewart, 2021)
- What things do you think schools need to add or change that would help refugee students feel safer and more successful? (Prompts: mindset, facilities, services, support programs, ...)(Stewart, 2021)
- What do you wish you knew that would help you most in teaching refugee students? (Stewart, 2021)
- What advice would you give a teacher who is working with a refugee student for the first time? (Stewart, 2021)
- Is there anything else that you would like to add?

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## Appendix C: Consent Forms

**Title of the study:** Building Bridges: Exploring the Experiences of Ontario Grade 4-8 Teachers with Refugee Students

Name of Principal Investigator: Nabila El Bizri

Affiliation: Faculty of Education

Name of the Supervisor: : Dr. Carole Sénéchal

Affiliation: Faculty of Education

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Nabila El Bizri in the context of a PhD thesis.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of Ontario grade 4 to 8 teachers with refugee students.

**Participation:** My participation will consist of taking part in an interview lasting around 90 minutes. During the interview, I will be asked questions that will scrutinise interactions between refugee children and their teachers, and between the children and their peers. Additionally, the questions will explore interactions between teachers and parents, as well as between teachers and other school staff. Furthermore, the interview will investigate engagements between teachers and the administration/school board.

The interview will be conducted virtually via Zoom at an agreed time that suits both the researcher and I. The interview will be recorded. Only the audio component of the recording will be saved. Beside signing this consent form, I will also provide a verbal consent at the beginning of the interview.

I will also be asked to review my interview transcript and case study profile to confirm their content. My interview transcript will be sent to me within a week of the interview. I will review it and send it back to the researcher within a week of receiving it. When my case study profile is ready, it will be sent to me for verification. I will send it back to the researcher within a week of receiving it.

**Risks:** There is minimal risk in participating in this study. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw my participation at any point should I feel uncomfortable. If I experience any discomfort or emotional distress while sharing my experience with refugee students, I can withdraw from the study immediately. Also, should I, at any stage of the study, wish to no longer participate, I can request all my information to be removed from the project, including my personal information and research data.

**Mental Health Resources Available for Participants:** Should I need mental health support the following resources are available:

Ontario Health provides access to immediate mental health support including live chat and toll-free line <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-mental-health-support#section-0>

Ontario English Catholic Teachers platform has various resources on mental health services, mindfulness and medication resources, programs, articles, and publications <https://www.catholicteachers.ca/For-Your-Benefit/Your-Mental-Health-Matters>

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will allow me to share my experience and strategies with refugee students, in addition to reflecting on my practices teaching this group of students.

**Confidentiality and Privacy:** I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purposes of the research described in this form and further publications. The information gathered will be encrypted and anonymized, meaning that my identity will not be identified in any of the research and identifiable information will not be shared in any form or context. All files and data will be saved onto the researcher's personal device with password protection and will not be accessible from other devices or persons.

Since data collection will take place through online interviews, in order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality, it is recommended that I use standard safety measures, such as signing out of my account, closing my browser, and locking my device when I am no longer using it/when I have completed the study.

**Conservation of Data:** The data collected is electronic data. All data including audio recordings, transcripts, researchers' notes, and consent forms will be kept in a secure manner. This data will be kept on the primary investigator's personal laptop protected by a password. The data collected during the interviews will be kept for a duration of five years as per the regulations set by the Board of Ethics at University of Ottawa

**Compensation:** I will receive a 40 \$ gift card as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. If I choose to withdraw from the study, I will still receive this compensation.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset and not used in the study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email ([ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)) or telephone (613-562-5387).

It is recommended that I keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

**Acceptance:** By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_