

Part 2: The Effects of War and Resettlement

What do the terms trauma and child traumatic stress mean?

For the purpose of this document, we have adopted the definition of trauma and child traumatic stress of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) as found in the NCTSN resource: *Defining Trauma and Child Traumatic Stress*. Retrieved from www.nctsn.org/content/defining-trauma-and-child-traumatic-stress. For ease of reference, the definitions are reproduced in this document exactly as they appear on the NCTSN website.

Trauma

Children and adolescents experience trauma under two different sets of circumstances.

Some types of traumatic events involve (1) experiencing a serious injury to yourself or witnessing a serious injury to or the death of someone else, (2) facing imminent threats of serious injury or death to yourself or others, or (3) experiencing a violation of personal physical integrity. These experiences usually call forth overwhelming feelings of terror, horror, or helplessness. Because these events occur at a particular time and place and are usually short-lived, we refer to them as **acute traumatic events**. These kinds of traumatic events include the following:

- School shootings
- Gang-related violence in the community
- Terrorist attacks
- Natural disasters (for example, earthquakes, floods, or hurricanes)
- Serious accidents (for example, car or motorcycle crashes)
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one
- Physical or sexual assault (for example, being beaten, shot, or raped)

In other cases, exposure to trauma can occur repeatedly over long periods of time. These experiences call forth a range of responses, including intense feelings of fear, loss of trust in others, decreased sense of personal safety, guilt, and shame. We call these kinds of trauma **chronic traumatic situations**. These kinds of traumatic situations include the following:

- Some forms of physical abuse
- Long-standing sexual abuse
- Domestic violence
- Wars and other forms of political violence

Child Traumatic Stress

Child traumatic stress occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or traumatic situations, and when this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope with what they have experienced.

Depending on their age, children respond to traumatic stress in different ways. Many children show signs of intense distress—disturbed sleep, difficulty paying attention and concentrating, anger and irritability, withdrawal, repeated and intrusive thoughts, and extreme distress—when confronted by anything that reminds them of their traumatic experiences. Some children develop psychiatric conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and a variety of behavioural disorders.

While some children “bounce back” after adversity, traumatic experiences can result in a significant disruption of child or adolescent development and have profound long-term consequences. Repeated exposure to traumatic events can affect the child’s brain and nervous system and increase the risk of low academic performance, engagement in high-risk behaviours, and difficulties in peer and family relationships. Traumatic stress can cause increased use of health and mental health services and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Adult survivors of traumatic events may have difficulty in establishing fulfilling relationships, holding steady jobs, and becoming productive members of our society. Fortunately, there are effective treatments for child traumatic stress.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *Defining Trauma and Child Traumatic Stress*.
Reproduced from www.nctsn.org/content/defining-trauma-and-child-traumatic-stress.

What is resiliency? What are protective and risk factors?

Children and youth may be particularly prone to dangers and traumatic experiences in times of war. After experiencing trauma, it is normal for them to manifest strong emotional and even physical reactions; however, with time these usually diminish. Refugee children and youth's short and long-term responses to traumatic events are complex and variable factors may influence a newcomer's psychological well-being. Furthermore, refugee children and youth also have resources to draw upon (resiliency) which ensure that they are seldom overcome by a single traumatic event.

Following are some of the factors that affect how they will come to terms with their traumatic experiences and being a refugee:

- the duration and intensity of traumatic events
- the child's age
- the child's personality and character
- the quality of child care
- the refugee youth's experience in a new country

Some factors—adverse or risk factors—make it more likely that problems will arise. Protective or success factors help safeguard a child against psychological distress.

While the number and severity of the traumatic events children may experience are important, they do not necessarily result in worse psychological outcomes. Many war-affected children that have experienced high numbers of traumatic incidents demonstrate high levels of resilience and do not develop lasting patterns of distress (Bonanno and Mancini, 2008). Conversely, for some, the experience of even one incident of severe war-related violence or sexual assault may constitute a profoundly traumatic and life-altering event (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Resilience in children has been conceptualized in various ways. One definition of resilience is health despite adversity (Masten, 2001). However, there is an emerging, more dynamic conceptualization of resilience which emphasizes that resiliency is a process. From this perspective, resilience is the outcome or result of negotiations between individuals and their environments that allows them to access the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that may sustain their well-being in situations or conditions commonly and collectively viewed as adverse (Ungar, 2008).

A resilient child will perform competently and has the ability to adapt under stress, especially in the context of severe hardships and disadvantageous life circumstances (Crawford et al, 2005). From this perspective, resilience is not a personal characteristic or trait but, rather, the **individual's response to adversity** (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000) and ability to draw on environmental and other protective factors. Resilience is a measure of the way children use and develop their resources to positively respond and adapt to life situations and challenges (Yates, Egeland, and Sroufe, 2003).

Resilience

- Resilience is a dynamic process characterized by positive development in spite of significant adversity.
- Severe adversity does not necessarily have a major or lasting effect on adaptive behaviours.
- Maladaptive profiles emerge when adversity is high and protective resources are weak.
- Low protective resources rather than adversity in itself result in maladaptation.

(Montgomery, 2010, pp. 477–489)



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File 12349372.

The following three types of factors are commonly considered important with respect to resiliency and protecting the child from developing maladaptive behaviours and patterns:

- individual factors such as experiences, personality, intelligence, sociability, effective coping strategies, and other characteristics of the child
- relational factors such as a supportive family environment, close relationships, interpersonal interactions over time, cohesion, structure, emotional support, secure attachment, and a close bond to at least one caregiver
- social factors or external support factors such as positive, appropriate teaching and learning experiences; close affirmative relationships (good peer relations and positive relations with other adults); an external social group with a supportive ethos and behavioural style

(Rutter, 2000; Masten, 2001; Fraser, 2004; Waaktaar & Christie, 2000; Waaktarr, 2004; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992)

Hope arises from a sense of moral and social order embodied in the expression of key cultural values: faith, family unity, service, effort, morals, and honour. These values form the bedrock of resilience, drive social aspirations, and underpin self-respect and dignity.

(Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010)

While research related to immigrant children and families has demonstrated and identified the adverse factors related to exposure to war-related trauma (armed conflict, displacement, and resettlement) and their consistent links or relationships between children's development and overall psychological well-being, the research is relatively limited regarding the protective factors, positive experiences, and coping strategies of these children and youth.

There is, however, a variety of research related to protective factors drawn upon by non-immigrant children. As a result, "resiliency theory" that draws on this research has become the cornerstone for building programming for youth from a 'strengths' perspective or approach. A 'strengths' approach focuses on working with clients to identify and build upon the strengths, skills, and resources that they bring to their situation. While this research on non-immigrant children is valuable as a beginning point to understand the strengths paradigm, the application to immigrant and refugee children is less clear. The lack of research on resiliency with regard to immigrant, refugee, and war-affected children limits the possibilities of applying this approach in designing policy and programming.

Nevertheless, the small body of work that has emerged concerning the resiliency, mental well-being, and coping skills of immigrant, refugee, and war-affected youth is promising (Ahearn and Athey, 1991; McEwen, 2007; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2003). There is emerging recognition in the literature and from clinical experience that war-affected children demonstrate tremendous resilience (Garmezy, 1988; Klingman, 2002). In addition, there is an increasing interest in the research about the idea that biological processes caused by access to love and continuous and personalized care in a child's development are of great importance for the long-term development of health and well-being (Cloninger, 2004; Gerhardt 2004; Lewis et al, (2001).



iStock. Portrait Hmong baby. File 11517549.

For a summary of protective and risk factors, click on the following link: [*Blackline Master 1: Common Stress and Protective Factors Affecting Young People of Refugee Background.*](#)

There is still much to learn about the multiple factors, in addition to exposure to trauma, that contribute to both risk and resilience in the adjustment of refugee children and families over time (Betancourt and Kahn, 2008).

Nevertheless, when working with immigrant and refugee children and youth, it is important to identify risk factors and it is equally important to identify the protective factors that are present in the family, peer group, and school environment. This perspective has shifted the focus away from individual deficits to individual strengths, competencies, and capacities and is a critical step in understanding resilience within the context of the individual and the family (Brooks, 1994).



iStock. Outdoor portrait of young cheerful attractive Indian mother and daughter. File 5455952.

Another aspect of resiliency is the cultural and religious resources that children and youth have available to them that help mediate their experiences of a crisis and aid in their recovery from devastating loss. An appreciation of such resources should form the basis of psychosocial responses and protection mechanisms for immigrant and refugee youth.

The *anthropology of hope* also links well-being with social structures, but receives comparatively less attention. Ideologies of hope have significance for individual and collective resilience, social identity, and social dynamics across successive generations... Hage (2003) forcefully argued that in contexts of marked inequality, society is a mechanism not only for the distribution of social opportunities, but also for the distribution of *social hope*: access to resources reduces or encourages dreams of social mobility. Such hope is about “one’s sense of the possibilities that life can offer... Its enemy is a sense of entrapment, of having nowhere to go, not a sense of poverty.”

(Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010, p. 20)

The ability to cope with trauma and misfortune is often promoted through cultural training in resilience and risk management during adolescence. Ceremonial traditions that focus on transitions from childhood, as an example, can prove to be a source of strength in times of crisis. For example, research related to the mental health of unaccompanied Somalia children demonstrated that the protective factors mitigated the effects of war.

“Interviews conducted with young Somali refugees living in three cities in Canada (Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto) highlighted the sources of resilience and protection. The Somalis’ experiences are an accumulation of nomadic tradition, beliefs, and myths as well as exile and migration to the West. For the young Somalis, forced exile was not benign. However, in the context of their traditional upbringing, which includes sending boys off to learn about nomadic pastoral existence, the experience of exile becomes less weighted with negative attributes. Moreover, young Somalis’ capacity to recuperate quickly from exile was attributed by the interviewees to their training, from an early age, to survive in harsh conditions away from home.” (Rousseau, Said, Gagné, and Bibeau, 1998)

For many children, religion or spirituality is a central part of their identity, and the associated beliefs, practices and social networks offer important tools for coping with adversity. Children learn to manage stress or come to terms with grief through praying. A sense of personal security and well-being may be restored by appealing to the belief that a wise and benevolent creator is in control of their fate. Some children are encouraged to find meaning in suffering and

see it as an opportunity for growth or redemption. Religion and spirituality also provide specific activities for actively coping with stress and loss, such as prescribed mourning and burial rituals. Finally, religious institutions often provide children with their first point of contact with the larger community and serve to welcome them fully into the social world of their family, community, and society (Wessells and Strang, 2006).

A 2009 report, *Silent Suffering: The psychosocial impact of war, HIV and other high-risk situations on girls and boys in West and Central Africa*, on a five-country study by Plan International and Family Health International (FHI) provides some important insights concerning resiliency. The study examined some of West Africa’s most vulnerable children and provided some evidence of the factors that build resiliency, even in the harshest and most violent conditions. The researchers interviewed more than 1,000 adolescents in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Togo. Their aim was to assess the mental health and psychological needs of the children, and the protective factors that allowed these children to cope with often extreme and difficult experiences. Many of the children that were part of the study had experienced conflict, human trafficking, or the loss of a parent. This is what they found:



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“Our study illustrated several internal or individual factors that build up and maintain the resilience of children and help them to carry on even in circumstances of long-lasting and extreme adversity. Besides hope, dreams and faith [...], these factors were:

- self-esteem
- feeling in control
- a sense of belonging
- connection to community values

In addition to the internal factors, there were different external factors at [a] family or community level that make children strong. These were:

- a solid relationship with a caregiver
- relationships with peers
- sufficient food, clothing, shelter
- access to education and healthcare
- a close link to their culture, and participation in traditional rituals”

(Morgan and Behrendt, 2009)

Over the past decade, children were conscripted into armed forces and armed groups in 87 countries...

At any given time, approximately 250,000-300,000 children are involved in armed forces worldwide...

(Betancourt, 2011, p. 8)

What are some of the common challenges refugees experience because of war or conflict?



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Refugees face many challenges because of their experiences with war and conflict, their forced displacement, their flight from war or persecution, and their resettlement experiences. They often have suffered significant disruption, trauma, and stress prior to being forced out of their homes or communities. Access to schools, shelter, and food may be very limited during their displacement or flight. Forced displacement or flight may be very arduous physically and emotionally. Deprivation of food, shelter, medical care, and other necessities, as well as exposure to parasites and disease, are quite common during displacement or flight. Refugees have often experienced severe physical and emotional stressors and children are increasingly recruited and used by armed groups

and armies. Torture and other forms of physical and psychological abuse are common before and during flight, and sometimes even after flight in initial places of asylum.

Refugee camps or temporary places of asylum may offer only minimal services and support. Some camps are not secure and may be quite violent. Refugees may be repeatedly traumatized or subjected to violence and deprivation of the necessities of life.

What about refugee families and those left behind?

As defined earlier, refugees are people who have survived persecution in their home countries. For those who manage to flee from war, their recent experiences may still have been horrific. Although many are grateful to be alive and given asylum in a peaceful country, they may face many stresses related to Canada's immigration and settlement policies, and issues related to family members left behind.

Newcomers who have found safety in Manitoba often feel a great responsibility for missing family members or those left behind or in other places of asylum. One of the primary stressors resettled refugees face is the constant reminders of the difficulties that family and close ones left behind may be experiencing. This is especially true in our contemporary world where international news coverage and communication technologies allow for almost instantaneous information about major events, famines, catastrophes, and conflicts. Children, parents, and extended family members left behind may be living in difficult circumstances in refugee camps, other countries of asylum, or in the country or region of conflict from which the newcomers fled in the first place.

Another stressor is the difficulties that may occur in reunification with family members left behind. The process for reunification may be quite difficult with many delays and disappointments. Newcomers may find it difficult, at least initially, to meet financial and other criteria for sponsoring family members left behind. Unaccompanied youth must reach the age of 18 years before sponsoring their parents and other family members when no other sponsorship assistance can be found. Many individuals and families send their limited surplus funds to family members left behind as part of their loyalty and personal support. Some newcomers do without food and clothing and adequate shelter to help family members and friends. Family resources often thin out after the initial immigration support allowances conclude and the full expense for rental accommodation is born by the newcomer family. Additionally, refugees are expected to begin repaying the airfare and medical check-up loan from the federal government within the first year of arrival.

For others, looking for, finding, and contacting family members that may have survived but whose whereabouts are unknown are a major and ongoing concern. In times of conflict and civil breakdown, families are often separated and information about each family member's status and survival may be difficult, if not impossible to obtain. Years may pass before accurate information may become available and families are able to establish contact.

What are some of the common experiences and characteristics of refugee children and youth?



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UN Photo/Fardin Waezi. Afghan primary school children attend classes. CC license. <www.unmultimedia.org/photo/>.

In this section, a number of experiences and characteristics common to many children and youth from refugee backgrounds are discussed. While these generalizations are useful, it is important to recognize that refugees are a diverse group who have a wide range of educational, social, and political histories; individual experiences; and personal characteristics, which determine their short-term and long-term needs. There are four common experiences or challenges that refugee children and youth experience.

Interrupted schooling and experience in camps

The majority of young people from refugee backgrounds enrolling in Manitoba's schools will have experienced some disruption to their education prior to arrival in Canada. Some will have experienced the difficult, often insecure and harsh conditions in refugee camps. They are almost certain to have been exposed to disease, malnutrition, lack of medical care, and high levels of stress. It is also equally certain that they will not have had adequate, appropriate, and continuous access to schooling in their countries of origin and of asylum. Disruption in their schooling is a direct result of their refugee experience and the longer the disruptions and the absence of the most basic of services and conditions, the greater the likelihood that their lives have been broken by war and displacement. Therefore, it is critically important that educators and service providers understand that low levels of education among young Canadians from refugee backgrounds typically correlate with long-term exposure to traumatic experiences. (Victoria Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008)

Although primary schooling may be offered in camps, many children do not attend for a number of reasons: they may be needed to queue for food at distribution points, they may be ill or have inadequate clothing or money for materials to allow them to attend, or they may be prevented from doing so due to gender biases. The quality of the schooling that may be available also varies enormously. Others may have experienced several interruptions in their schooling and restarts in one or more school systems as they may have spent time in a number of different countries before arriving in Canada. As a result, even though they may have attended some form of school in a number of places, their schooling will have been severely disrupted such that they are likely to lack literacy and other learning skills. Children from refugee backgrounds who have limited literacy in their home or first language will experience greater challenges in learning English. Because they have not experienced schooling, they often have to develop the concepts needed to understand abstract academic concepts or the language which describes them. On the other hand, some gifted newcomers are self-taught or had family members who were able to provide educational support.

Not surprisingly, many learners from refugee backgrounds find it difficult to adapt to school life and integrate. Their limited schooling or lack thereof means that they have not experienced the socialization that comes with attending school. They may not know how to be organised. They may find it difficult to sit for extended periods in the classroom and may also find it difficult to concentrate. Cultural and social norms of refugee camps or of their countries of origin may also be quite different and they may have some difficulty in understanding, adapting to, and dealing with the norms of behaviour prevalent in Canadian schools and society.

Every change of country
threw me unprepared into
whole new languages and
sharply different habits of
mind. Each time, I made a
child's forlorn, often vain,
attempt to adapt.

(Ali, 2010)

Exposure to Trauma



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For many students, the trauma related to the refugee experience will also interfere with their capacity to learn. As such, it will take them longer to learn English. Refugee children and youth may have experienced a multiplicity of different stressful events in the past and may continue to do so in the present. The majority of newcomer children and youth are able to cope with these stressors most of the time. Children and adults may be extremely resilient and overcome most of the negative effects of the many traumatic events and experiences in their lives. Many refugee children and their families are survivors with great motivation and

desire to succeed and overcome challenges. They may have suffered and witnessed traumatic events, but not suffered trauma: they have been traumatized but not incapacitated.

Children and youth are particularly vulnerable during periods of war and social conflict. Learners from refugee or war-affected backgrounds have often lived through some terrible experiences. In the last decades, millions of children have witnessed and felt the terrible effects of war. The recent developments in warfare have made it much more dangerous for children. Millions of children have been killed, disabled, left homeless, or separated from their parents, and many millions have been psychologically traumatized.

Children experience many different types of trauma during war and conflict. The list that follows summarizes these.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Intense war operations, civil war, bombings, shootings, and executions▪ Destruction of homes, landmarks, cities, villages, and countryside▪ Violent death of family or friends▪ Separation from family, friends, and neighbours▪ Physical injury, wounds, beatings, and deprivations▪ Arrests of members of their families, or fear of discovery or arrest▪ Being arrested, detained, or even tortured | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Being forced to join the army or militias, or being subjected to indoctrination▪ Sexual trauma and rape, observing the rape of loved ones▪ Serious shortages of food, water, or other daily necessities▪ Betrayal by governments, neighbours, and other authorities▪ Hostility and culture shock in new communities and countries▪ Material deprivation in the present circumstances |
|--|---|

Children, as well as adults, will often try to suppress memories of horrific experiences rather than confront them when they are deeply disturbing or overwhelming. However, many trauma researchers believe that the repression of such memories and feelings is at the heart of short- and long-term suffering. Time alone does not heal trauma. A child must be helped to express suffering and to confront bad memories, with the support and guidance of an empathetic and informed adult. The very act of talking, writing, or drawing about, or acting out traumatic events is a way for a child to begin to heal and to start on the road to recovery.

Every culture has its own way of dealing with traumatic experiences. Much also depends on the family circumstances of the children, as well as on their age and the nature of their exposure to traumatic events. In all cultures, one of the most important factors is the cohesion of the family and community, and the degree of nurture and support that children receive. Indeed, one of the most significant war traumas of all, particularly for younger children, is simply separation from parents—often more distressing than the war activities themselves.

Adolescents face particular problems. Adolescence is a time of life when children undergo many physical and emotional changes. This makes them, in some ways, more vulnerable than younger children since they are much more aware of the significance of the events occurring around them. It is not uncommon for aid and settlement workers, as well as educators, to report adolescents who have a 'weeping crisis', talk about or attempt suicide, are in a state of depression, and demonstrate increased levels of aggression and delinquency.

While most children and youth are able to overcome the trauma related to war and the refugee experience, some youth remain emotionally unsettled and psychologically vulnerable. A small number of newcomer children and youth present at risk behaviours and require specialized support from school guidance services, child guidance clinics, or some of the other specialized referrals such as those listed in the last part of this booklet. Some may only require short-term support and services while others may have more complicated and numerous symptoms which may require longer-term supports and services.

Recent longitudinal research (Montgomery, 2010) suggests that

- the cumulative effect of traumatic experiences appears to be more important than the specific war and organized violence related experiences
- the traumatic experiences prior to arrival do not seem to be of primal importance for recovery during the period in asylum
- attending school or work is a very important aspect of the process of recovery of children and youth

Loss

Newcomer children and youth may have lost their parents and other key caregivers, their siblings, their extended family, and their friends. They may have lost physical items such as their home, their material possessions, and their favourite toys. Exile also results in the loss of familiar surroundings, familiar ways of doing things, and perhaps their parents' full attention and support in their new country. The loss experienced takes different forms. They may have

- experienced a loss of childhood and all that this entails; including loss of play, loss of parents and family, and loss of continuous caregivers
- suffered, with their parents, a severe drop in their standard of living and status as educated, professional, and influential people as they begin a new life in entry-level work
- lost the love and care of adults in their life due to death, or because parents and caregivers are emotionally absent (as a result of managing their own multiple experiences with grief, losses and changes, and challenges) or are physically absent (due to separations here and abroad)

Conflict increases the vulnerability of those who are already vulnerable, especially children. A child needs a family and a community that provide a nurturing and protective environment. The effects of war on the young can be devastating. In 2008, the number of children who had been forced to flee their homes, either as refugees crossing an international border or as internally displaced persons (IDPs), stood at 18 million. Conflicts, which today are often internal in nature, spare no one. Children are imprisoned, raped, maimed for life, and even killed. Armed conflict tears families apart, forcing thousands of children to fend for themselves and to care for very young siblings.

(International Committee of the Red Cross, 2009)



© United Nations Photo. Photo ID 442508. August 30, 2009. Sari Pul, Afghanistan. UN Photo/Eric Kamalstein. Afghan former refugee at UNHCR returnee camp in Sari Pul, Afghanistan. CC license. <www.flickr.com/photo/un-photo/4843308691>.

Transitions: Post-Flight and Resettlement Challenges

Children, from refugee backgrounds, and their families arrive in Canada with great hope and expectations for a safer and better life. However, the resettlement process and the challenges of integrating into a new environment, culture, and community can be quite stressful for children and their families. These may include the following:

- *Continued separation from loved ones:* uncertainty regarding the whereabouts of family members or friends left behind; potential reports of bad news from their country of origin
- *Poverty:* may be living without some basic necessities that Manitobans take for granted (such as sufficient resources for shelter, food, clothing, transportation and cars, entrance fees for activities, and so forth) and may find difficulty in continuing studies because of family responsibilities, lack of resources, and lack of benefits
- *Language skills:* speak little or no English or French upon arrival in Canada, while perhaps speaking several languages from the countries or regions of origin, or the place of first asylum
- *Lack of knowledge of their educational, social, and legal rights and responsibilities, and are faced with racial and ethnic discrimination:* may suffer bullying or isolation, and institutionalized or personal racism in the school and community which often stems from a subtle lack of knowledge about the newcomers' culture, religion and family customs, educational histories, and individual experiences; racism happens at many levels, even among well-intentioned helpers
- *Developmental, physical, and health issues:* as a result of extended periods of malnutrition, lack of water, exposure to disease and parasites, and lack of medical care; post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and possibly other anxiety disorders
- *Upheaval in family roles:* many children and youth, because of being acculturated more quickly in schools and work, become the family translators and experience role reversals with usual caregivers out of cultural necessity and concern for family members who may be more marginalized in rates of adjustment

Children may feel that they have been 'let down' by parents and other responsible adults who have been caught up and disempowered by war and persecution. Exile and resettlement may bring about changes in a child's relationship with his or her parents. They may see their parents as being vulnerable or dependent. This may result in a lack of trust or faith in adults, parents, or authority figures.



© United Nations Photo. March 1, 1999. Blace. UN Photo/R. LeMoyné. Kosovo refugees. CC license. <www.un.org/av/photo/>.



© United Nations Photo. July 1, 2001. Tesseney, Eritrea. UN Photo/Jorge Aramburu. United Nations mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE). CC license. <www.un.org/av/photo/>.

I stowed away in a great steel boat, but the horror stowed away inside me. When I left my homeland I thought that I had escaped--- but out on the open sea, I started to have nightmares. I was naive to suppose I had left my country with nothing. It was a heavy cargo that I carried.

(Cleave, 2008)

There are a number of Internet resources that provide insights into the experiences of refugee and war-affected youth.

[Beyond the Fire: Teen Experiences of War](#) is an interactive website dedicated to the stories of fifteen refugee teenagers (from eight different countries), who experienced war and fled their homes. To help bring their stories to life, photographs of family and loved ones are included. The website also briefly describes the events in each country in order to explain how the conflict developed. The life stories of these fifteen refugee teenagers are good examples of the experiences that refugee youth encounter abroad before settling in a new country.

[Mapping Memories](#) is a bilingual project collaboration in which personal stories and a range of media tools (video, sound walks, mapping, and photography) are used to better understand the experiences of youth with refugee experience in Montreal. Resources available from the site include Mapping Memories (a book/DVD of first-person narratives by youth with refugee experiences), videos, and educator resources.

[Starting Again: Stories of Refugee Youth](#) is an online video produced by School's Out Washington, which partnered with documentary filmmaker Jill Freidberg of Corrugated Films to produce a film chronicling the lives of refugee youth in Washington State. The film highlights four youth from Burma, Nepal/Bhutan, Russia, and Somalia.

The [Documentary Project for Refugee Youth](#) was a workshop led by Raeshma Razvi, which sought to explore the refugee condition through photography, video, interviews, and journal writing. Twelve teenaged refugees from Africa and Europe met weekly for three years, using creative projects as a means to work through their past and make sense of their new future in New York City. The site provides some of the works produced and the stories of the participants.

For more information on resources related to child soldiers, children, and war, click [here](#).

For a summary of the strengths and challenges reflected by refugee and war-affected children, click on [Blackline Master 2: Common Strengths and Challenges Reflected by Immigrant Youth](#).

What role do religion and spirituality play?

Newcomers to Canada may come from diverse faiths, belief systems, and religious traditions or practices. This is an important aspect of the multicultural face of Manitoba and of newcomers of refugee origins. For some newcomers, religious persecution or conflict forced them to flee their home country: the experience or threat of sustained persecution and organized violence made them fearful for their survival. Similarly, poorly understood faith differences and internalized biases often form part of subtle and unintentional prejudice and discrimination these newcomers may face in the host nations and communities.



iStock. World religions. File 4343342.

Spirituality or religious beliefs as well as beliefs about life may be severely shaken through the painful accumulation of traumatic stress in the lives of children, youth, and their families affected by war. Ultimately, each person in such circumstances must find their own answers and meaning about the problems of suffering and the horrors they may have witnessed or experienced. Traumatic experiences can challenge beliefs about the value of life, humanity, and one's faith. For some, war deepens and strengthens their spirituality and faith, while for others, it leads to doubts, inner conflict, questions, or even the elimination of once deeply held spiritual and religious beliefs. These questions of spirituality, faith, and religion are part of the complexities of dealing with the affects of war and trauma.

Is there a model that may be helpful for understanding the major categories of challenges experienced by children who come to Canada from refugee backgrounds?

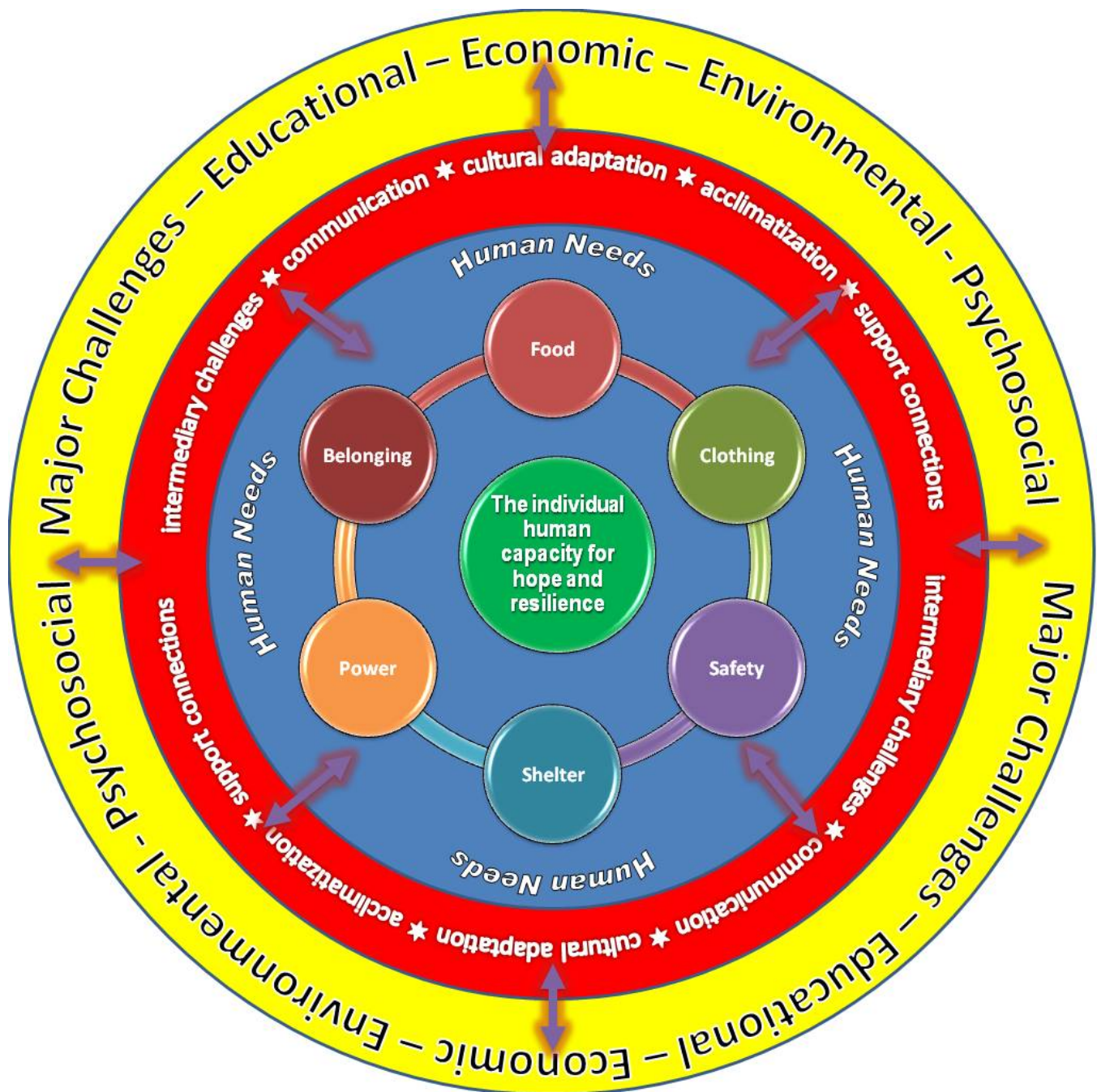
Jan Stewart (2011) developed a model for understanding and considering the major adjustment challenges that refugee children who come to Canada may experience. It is a reflection of her research and work with refugee children and educators in Canada and abroad. A description of the model follows.

At the center of the model, Stewart places the individual and the core characteristics (human capacity, hope, and resilience) which mediate the effects of the array of challenges they encounter. Individuals will possess protective factors which emerge and provide a means for coping and dealing with the challenges they experience. (Stewart, 2011, p. 126)

Surrounding the individual are the six basic needs of the individual (food, clothing, shelter, safety, belonging, power) that emerged from her research and are present at the pre-migration, trans-migration, and post-migration stages of the individual's life.

In the next layer of Stewart's 2011 model are four **intermediary categories** of challenges: **basic communication, cultural adjustments, acclimatization** (adjustment to the physical and natural environment), and **support connection** (links to the ecological system; e.g., support worker, reception centre counsellor, teacher, etc.). (Stewart 2011, p. 128)

At the extremity of the model, Stewart places the four **major dimensions of the challenges** they may experience: **educational, economic, psychological, and environmental**. The image that follows is a graphic adaptation, created by Tony Tavares (Consultant, Manitoba Education), based on Stewart's model. (View Stewart's model on page 127 of her book, *Supporting Refugee Children: Strategies for Educators*.)



From her research, Stewart (2011) found that students were generally able to deal with both the intermediary and major challenges they experienced. They “are not passive victims; they are active agents who negotiate, compromise, and forge ahead despite adversity.” (Stewart, 2011, p. 129) While not all students experience the same level of success and individuals often face challenges in different ways, she found that in most cases, the “outlook was positive”. (Stewart, 2011, p. 129) In addition, she found that the success of refugee children and students can greatly be enhanced by removing “the barriers and challenges we impose on students so that they have a chance at success.” (Stewart, 2011, p. 129) She suggests that initiatives that combat racism and provide financial support for refugee and war-affected learners to attend school, and that develop and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate programs are a “good place to begin”.

Why do we need to consider the whole child in developing supports for newcomer and refugee learners?



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Newcomer and refugee children in many aspects are just like all children. They reflect a similar range of characteristics, gifts, needs, and aspirations. In many ways, they benefit from the same programming and instructional approaches that create effective and safe learning environments for children in general. Refugee children can be extremely resilient and reflect enormous ability to adapt to new and challenging environments. They also, however, have specific needs related to their immigrant and refugee experiences.

“Adolescence and young adulthood are times of transition when many changes take place” (Department of Victorian Communities, 2005). Thus, refugee youth arrive in Canada at a particularly important time in their personal development and this can contribute to them being a particularly vulnerable group, which may result in marginalization in their schools and community. Their marginalization may lead to negative and destructive behaviours, exploitation by gangs, and other undesirable outcomes.

The challenges confronted during this stage include identity formation, gaining independence, finding their place in the community, dealing with religious beliefs, developing relationships with peers and family, determining life goals, and discovering their sexuality. These challenges play an important role in a young person’s development.

Schools can “create learning environments and spaces for participation, communication, relationships, friendships, belonging, and learning about one and others. To this end, what are required are systematic, whole-school approaches addressing school policy, organisational procedure, pedagogy, and curricula which are informed by understandings of post and pre-displacement issues.” (Matthews, 2007) As well, drawing on support from outside school resources (whether they be health services, social service agencies, grass roots community organizations, ethnic/cultural groups, or faith groups) will enhance service delivery and support for the refugee learner.



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In developing programming for newcomer students, it is important to consider three aspects of learner characteristics and needs as follows:

- **Linguistic:** First Language and English Language Fluency and Literacy—It is important to consider a learner’s first and English language development. For learners with limited experience and exposure to English, their first language skills will provide important information on the nature of EAL and educational programming required. Students with limited first language literacy will require support that is more intensive and may progress more slowly.
- **Academic Background and Experiences:** Some refugee children may have had their schooling interrupted for extended or significant periods or were not able attend a formal school at all. Other children may have transited through several different educational systems and languages of instruction. Other newcomer children may have very complementary or equivalent educational experiences to those available to Canadian students.

- **Learner Experiences and Personal Characteristics:** There are a range of individual or personal experiences and characteristics or factors which may significantly affect a learner’s ability and readiness to learn. These include
 - learning styles and preferences: learners will exhibit different preferences about how they learn that may be influenced by their cultural backgrounds and prior experiences
 - learning disabilities: some learners may experience learning disabilities that are related to differences in the brain, which affect how information is received, processed, or communicated, which may be difficult to identify as learning disabilities due to linguistic factors

For further information on learning disabilities and English as an additional language learners see:

- Centre for Applied Linguistics. *English language learners with special needs. ELLs with Special Needs—CAL Resource Guide Online* <www.cal.org/twi/rqos/special.html>.
- Fraine, N., & Mcdade, R. (2009). Reducing bias in psychometric assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse students from refugee backgrounds in Australian schools: A process approach. *Australian Psychologist*, 44, 16–26.
- Laing, S., & Kamhi, A. (2003). Alternative assessment of language and literacy in culturally and linguistically diverse populations. [PDF] *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 34, 44–56.
- Pearl Pirie (2003). *Assessing learning disabilities in ESL*. <www.teslontario.net/uploads/research/ESLLDStrategies.pdf>.
- Regional Educational Laboratory. *Misidentification of English language learners as students with disabilities. “How Do We Identify Learning Disabilities in English Language Learners?”*. <<http://archive.relnei.org/newsletters.php?nlid=27&nlapno=2>>.

- physical characteristics and health: newcomer children may have significant health and physical issues because of war, violence, or deprivation of food, shelter, and access to health care
- culture shock and socio-emotional well-being: the adaptation to a new culture, social environment, lifestyle, and climate may present an enormous challenge for many newcomers. As a result, some may become quite alienated and overwhelmed by the whole experience. Culture shock may result in depression and feelings of isolation
- mental health: the immigration and adaptation to a new culture combined with the effects of trauma may result in significant short- and long-term mental health issues. Post-traumatic stress reactions may severely hamper students’ abilities to learn and communicate
- educational and personal aspirations: newcomer students reflect a diversity of interests and career aspirations. They may not be familiar with the educational system and the opportunities available. They may also underestimate the time required to learn a new language and meet their academic goals. Teachers need to be aware of personal and cultural biases that may limit their expectations of certain groups of learners

What do we need to consider regarding the assessment of war-affected and English as an additional language learners?

The appropriate educational assessment of war-affected learners is a complex and challenging task because of the many factors which can affect those learners, and the linguistic and cultural barriers that may limit or impede effective communication and assessments. Educators need to be cautious in their use of assessment and screening tools. The literature on this topic points to the insufficient number of assessment and screening tools appropriate for young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and the fact that the most commonly used tools were not developed for use with these populations (Lyman, Njoroge, and Willis, 2007).

Gokiert, *et al.* (2010) state that, “In Canada, many of the standardized tools that are used have been normed on Euro-American populations and may not be valid for use with children from diverse cultural groups (Gladstone et al., 2008; Padilla, 2001). This makes examining child development a challenging process in families marginalized by income, cultural, and language barriers. Parents of immigrant and refugee children have culturally-influenced knowledge and experiences that are not well understood by mainstream providers and that may not be captured through traditional screening and assessment tools.” (Gokiert et al 2010, pp.10–11)

There are also concerns related to

- cultural biases that are present in intelligence tests and other assessment tools (Rhodes, Ochoa, and Ortiz, 2005)
- invalid outcomes/results related to the linguistic complexity of assessments and from assessments designed for native English language learners (Abedi, 2011; Abedi, 2012; Abedi & Gándara, 2006)



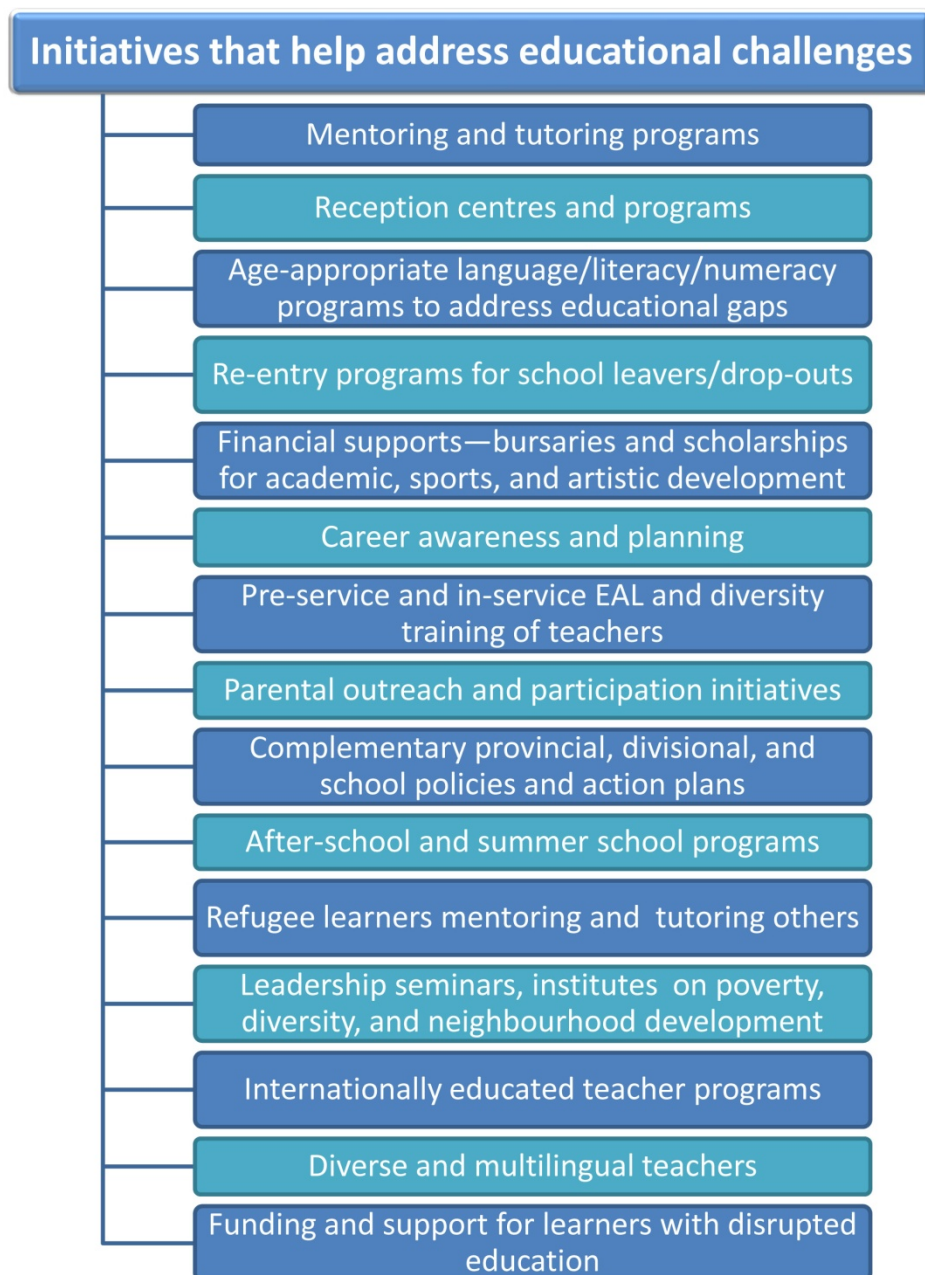
© Mataparda. January 7, 2009. Sin nombre—No name. CC license. <www.flickr.com/photos/liferfe/3174963103/in/photostream/>.

For further information on the educational assessment of war-affected and refugee learners, see:

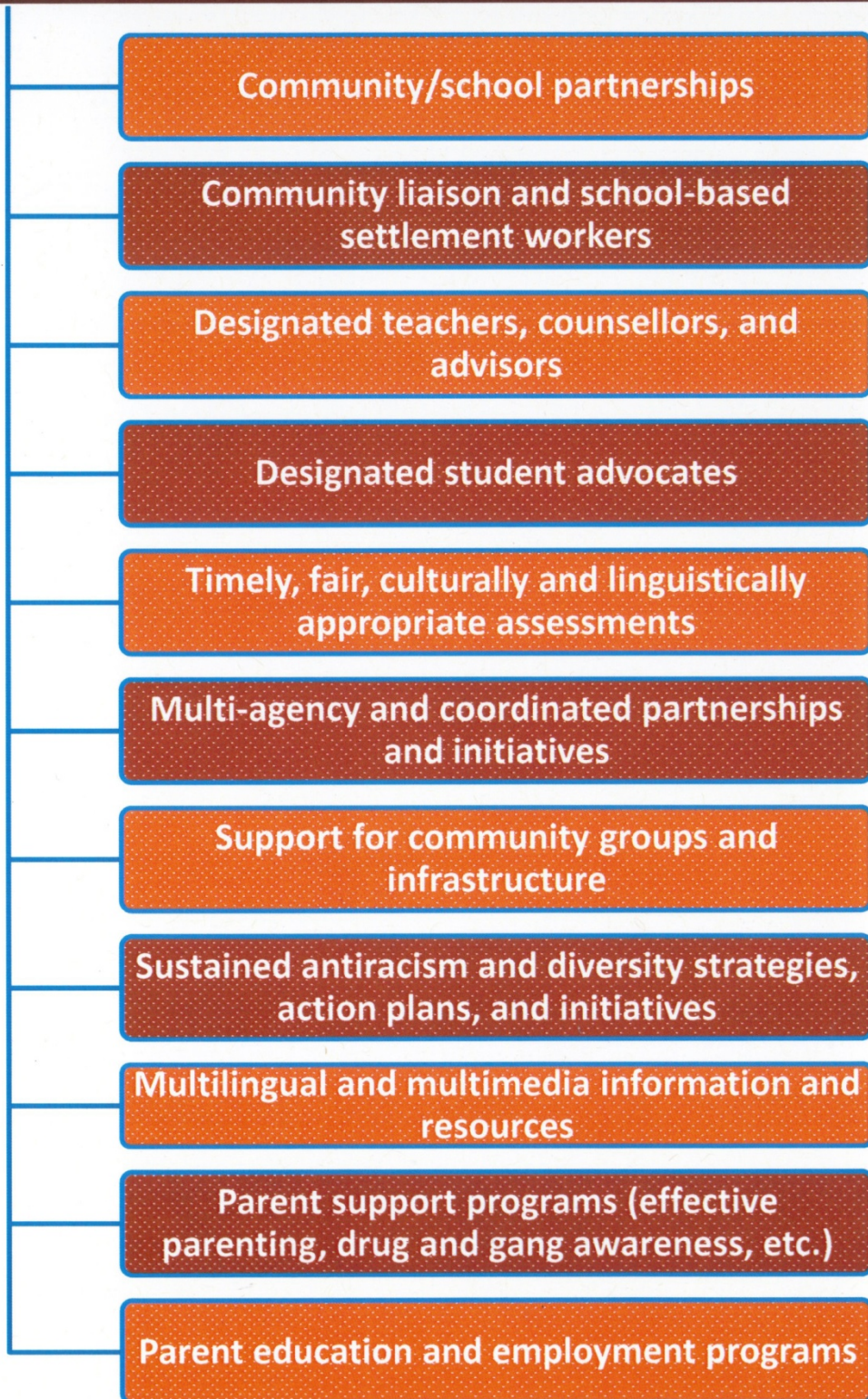
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- Rhodes, R. L., Ochoa, S. H., & Ortiz, S. O. (2005). *Assessing culturally and linguistically diverse students: a practical guide*. New York: Guilford Press.
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What are the elements of good educational practice with respect to learners from refugee and disrupted education backgrounds?

Refugee and war-affected learners face many challenges, which may be conceptualized as falling into four major categories: educational, environmental, economic and psychosocial challenges (Stewart, 2011). Stewart (2011) suggests that society and refugee-serving agencies and institutions can contribute to the successful integration and long-term well-being of these students by removing barriers and developing appropriate programming and supports. Drawing on Stewart's (2011) and others' work, Tony Tavares (Consultant, Manitoba Education) created the following four diagrams to show some examples of initiatives or actions that help remove barriers or address the four categories of challenges. (Stewart 2011, p. 147 & 148, charts 5.2 and 5.3; American Psychological Association, 2010.)



Initiatives that help address environmental challenges



Initiatives that help address economic challenges

Stay-in school incentive programs (e.g., Bright Futures, Pathways to Education)

Preparing students for independent living

Information on work skills and employment rights

After-school, evening, and day community-based, and workplace EAL for parents

Reduction of financial pressures on families, (low-interest loans, subsidizing settlement costs, etc.)

Technology-based communication and supports

Internships and career planning

School-based breakfast and nutrition programs

Clothing and school supply programs

Student employment programs (summer and school-year)

Initiatives that help address psychosocial challenges

Preventive programs and counselling

Group support initiatives to assist school and community integration

Reception and on-going screening to identify psychosocial challenges

Arts-based programs (videography/photography, theatre, dance, music/drumming, and graffiti/painting/sculpting)

Sports and recreation-based programming (e.g., drop-ins, inner-city soccer teams, school YMCA-YWCA programs)

Training of student services and clinics on refugee issues/supports

Translators/interpreters and bilingual services

Language and literacy programs that draw on professionals to help identify and respond to psychosocial needs

Conflict management and mediation training and programs for all students

Integrated healthy living supports (emotional, health, and spiritual care)

In addition to these broader initiatives, the local school and classroom can do a great deal to create a welcoming, appropriate, and supportive environment. Some examples follow.

Examples of effective classroom practices

- Strong leadership on the part of school administrators, which includes mobilizing resources to support the acquisition of basic skills by all students
- Teachers who believe they are responsible for students' learning and capable of teaching them effectively
- High expectations for student learning and behaviour on the part of administrators and teachers, and active communication of these expectations to students
- Creation of an environment of safety, trust, and mutual respect
- Safe, orderly, and well-disciplined, but not rigid, school and classroom environments
- Teachers who are adept at adapting instructional strategies and materials in response to diverse learning styles and needs
- Provision of incentives, reinforcement, and rewards to enhance student-learning motivation and acknowledge achievements; regular, frequent monitoring of student progress and provision of feedback
- Teachers who make a practice of not assuming or generalizing about newcomer students; rather, they are open to viewing each student as an individual and to learning about each one's uniqueness
- Staff professional learning initiatives which are focused on school improvement and influenced by teachers themselves
- Use of time, personnel, money, materials, and other resources in support of the school's priority goals
- Active involvement and use of parents for instructional support, classroom help, and input into governance decisions
- Coordination among staff of different programming serving the same children
- Use of cooperative learning structures (rather than competitive)
- Computer-assisted instructional activities, which supplement and complement traditional teacher-directed instruction
- Peer and cross-age tutoring
- Provision of early childhood education programming
- The use of small learning units within large schools (e.g., school-within-a-school) and other alternative learning initiatives
- Promotion policies that allow accelerated remedial instruction or transition classrooms as alternatives to retention
- Provision of support targeted to the learning needs of those students who are retained in grade; coordination between school and community resources as needed to support children in need of services outside the school
- Diversity education, which is integrated into the overall school curriculum; belief of belonging, learning, and growing can be further explored at <www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/diversity/educators/index.html>
- Recruitment and hiring of minority teachers
- Learning activities to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice
- Personnel, material, and activities to meet the needs of language minority students

***For more information on effective classroom practices, see [Manitoba Kindergarten to Grade 12 Curriculum Framework for English as an Additional Language \(EAL\) and Literacy, Academics, and Language \(LAL\) Programming](#) as well as [Towards Inclusion: Supporting Positive Behaviour in Manitoba Classrooms](#) (Manitoba Education, 2011).**

What are some of the curriculum strategies and classroom practices that are appropriate for learners with EAL and disrupted education backgrounds?

In Manitoba, students who have EAL and learning gaps are often referred to as needing foundational Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL), to emphasize that educational programming must not only develop language skills, but also literacy and basic academic concepts in order for them to transition into regular EAL and content-area learning. Students who have not had schooling opportunities will require longer and more intensive support for learning than EAL students with age-appropriate education. Furthermore, the older students are when they commence school, the greater the support needed.



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The [Manitoba Kindergarten to Grade 12 Curriculum Framework for English as an Additional Language \(EAL\) and Literacy, Academics, and Language \(LAL\) Programming](#) discusses the educational needs of these students in more detail (sections 5 and 6) and sets out a continuum of LAL development that can guide planning for individual students.

All students, no matter what their prior schooling, should have the opportunity to develop their potential, preparing for the same educational and workplace opportunities as their Canadian-born peers. Although many of the approaches and practices that are effective for EAL learners in general can work well for LAL learners, research and experience with learners with limited formal schooling indicate that a number of other components are essential for providing an effective and appropriate programming. These components include

- theme-based curriculum*** that is intellectually challenging and fills gaps in foundational learning through age-appropriate topics and processes (Gibbons, 2009); foundational academic concepts and skills, as well as common school-based activities and tasks, such as reading a graph or map may need to be taught, but students also need to develop higher-level thinking skills and the associated language
- extended or double periods of EAL instruction***
- smaller classrooms (lower student to teacher ratios)*** that allow for more individualized support from the classroom teacher(s)
- curriculum and learning experiences that ***draw on students' backgrounds, life experiences, and concrete, real-world skills*** (Freeman and Freeman, 2003)
- collaborative activities*** (student-student and teacher-student) that provide more opportunities for meaningful interaction and the shared construction of knowledge
- scaffolded instruction for language and content***—through visuals, manipulatives, models, graphic organizers, think-alouds, sentence frames, and so on, building step-by-step in manageable chunks toward independent learning; scaffolding begins with assessing the kinds of support students need to work independently just ahead of their current level and then, as that level is achieved, moving the scaffolds ahead to the next level—scaffolding always moves students ahead

- ❑ ***a balanced approach to literacy development*** that weaves together bottom-up and top-down processing, providing access to the written language they will find in their new environment in and out of school; often learner-generated texts, (e.g., the Language Experience Approach) based on individual or shared class experiences, can be a vehicle for connecting learners’ lives and oral language development with bottom-up reading skills (Vinogradov, 2009)
- ❑ ***explicit instruction of literacy skills, strategies, and knowledge of different kinds of texts required for academic purposes***; this should include substantial coverage in the key components of reading, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension, and provide extensive modeling (August et al, 2007; Calderón, 2007; Tuchman, 2010)
- ❑ ***a strong focus on numeracy skills***, which are often below the grade expectations; mathematical concepts, thinking, and the associated mathematical and language skills are essential foundations for learning and living in today’s developed world
- ❑ ***incorporation of arts*** as a vehicle of expression and a medium of learning; students may express a far greater sense of their self and their learning through non-verbal representation, whether dance, visual arts, music, or drama; drumming and jazz chants may scaffold language learning, and drawing may scaffold writing; for example, students may together form a living model of a cell structure with each one acting out a component; students who come from traditional oral societies may have sophisticated oral and non-print communication skills based on art, dance, singing, music, or other elements; these may provide a basis for the development of literacy and academic skills
- ❑ ***socialization into formal schooling***; students with limited formal schooling may need orientation to the expectations and practices of formal classrooms and schools, even though they may be well-developed informal learners (Williams, 2010); other researchers point to the mismatch of cultural values and expectations around schooling experienced by many LAL learners entering North American schools as another significant factor (De Capua & Marshall, 2011a; De Capua & Marshall, 2011b; De Capua *et al.*, 2009; De Capua *et al.*, 2007); they argue that this cultural dissonance is largely responsible for the lack of educational success that older students in particular experience; students need instructional approaches that build bridges between their own understanding of schooling and the new expectations and values that are part of their current school environment
- ❑ ***“school readiness” and study skills***; students may need explicit instruction and modelling of skills and learning strategies that are assumed present in students of their age, such as sequencing, classification, comparison, using reference tools, taking notes, transferring information from one context to another, organizing a binder, and following a timetable
- ❑ ***expanded learning opportunities***, through ***after-school, tutoring, weekend, and summer programming***, to continue filling gaps in learning and consolidate current learning; first language support and mentoring by older students who are role models of successful academic engagement can reinforce the work of the school
- ❑ ***a teacher or school team*** that has responsibility for ***monitoring the student’s progress*** and sense of well-being within the school and encouraging the home-school connection
- ❑ ***help with goal setting***; students new to Canada, but especially those from families that do not have connections to established communities (“social capital”), are often not aware of the huge range of career opportunities available and the varied pathways to them, some of which begin in high school; students need help in setting short- and long-term goals and developing a realistic plan to achieve them, as well as seeing the connection between schooling and future educational and career choices

- ❑ support toward *developing an identity of competence* (Manyak, 2004a & 2004b); often students experience frustration with the complexity of the educational challenges facing them; they need to see small successes from the beginning in order to begin to build confidence in themselves as learners;. students need to develop resiliency and persistence to achieve their goals
- ❑ *time, patience, and long term supports*; students and their families will have to deal with many other challenges in their lives, in addition to the challenges of learning a new language, academic content and subjects taught in that new language, and a new culture and ways of doing things, all the while trying to catch up with their age peers; it is important that schools recognize the need for sufficient time and duration of supports that will truly allow students to succeed; both learners and teachers will need to be patient to see the rewards of their efforts

Students who come from refugee and war-affected backgrounds can be very successful in their schooling, but they will need a whole-school approach that is attuned to individual needs and provides both appropriate programming and adequate time to progress toward their goals.

Teachers in some schools have worked with specialized agencies like the Cross-Cultural Counselling Unit of Mount Carmel Clinic to learn how to provide supportive learning conditions. Teachers are trained to recognize distress symptoms and to access professional assistance when needed. They are also trained to evaluate the suitability of topics, resources, and activities for use with these learners and to implement appropriate classroom strategies (e.g., working with aggression, distress, and inattention).



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