

Introduction

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us...we already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (Edmonds, 1979, p. 23)

How do issues concerning refugee and war-affected children fit into the current social, political, and educational context?



iStock. Teacher and students in a classroom. File 3962686.

The multicultural face of Canada is constantly changing and evolving because of immigration and other societal and demographic factors. This document is in line with contemporary publications which have sought to raise the collective awareness of the changing nature of our diversity and the value of this diversity, through family and community traditions and experiences. Educators throughout Manitoba and in other jurisdictions have endeavoured to respond appropriately to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population in many schools. However, at times some have struggled with the reality of teaching in a context that is emotionally demanding and necessitates excellent cross-cultural and multilingual teaching skills and competencies.

Of the more than 43.7 million refugees and displaced persons globally in conflict or war zones, over half are children and young people. Canada is one of 16 countries with an established refugee resettlement program. This has resulted in up to 16,000 refugee children and young adults (24 and under) resettling to Canada each year. During the 2006 to 2010 period, total refugee immigration to Canada ranged from 25,000 to 32,000 persons each year. Soon after arrival in Canada, school-aged children and youth enrol in the education system.

In many schools, newcomer families, children, and youth are often from refugee or war-affected origins or backgrounds. Many of these individuals come from refugee camps, or directly from war-affected communities or countries. These families come seeking a peaceful place to rebuild their lives and the opportunity to grow and flourish. They face many challenges in their quest, which tests their resiliency and ability to survive in their new social, cultural, and physical environments.

1 billion children are deprived of one or more services essential for survival and development

500 million – 1.5 billion children have been affected by war

18 million children are living with the affects of displacement

From the State of the World's Children (2010) Executive Report, UNICEF

Every refugee I meet is my teacher. (R. Mollica, 2008)



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Although most schools in Manitoba have had experience with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, many have not yet worked with students of refugee or war-affected experience. While this document necessarily makes some generalizations about the experiences, culture, language, levels of education, and resettlement experiences of these students, it is important that students be treated as individuals with their own unique story and experiences.

Educators and others who work with students with refugee and war-affected experiences find it to be an enriching and fulfilling experience. Although the work can be challenging and complex, the wealth of life skills, different perspectives, strong survival skills, and motivation that these students bring with them and demonstrate in the resettlement process is inspiring. In order to help meet the related challenges and to support students appropriately in acquiring a good education and rebuilding their lives, all school staff need a good understanding of these students' backgrounds and the possible influence of trauma on their learning.

The terms *trauma* and *child traumatic stress* are defined in Part 2 of this document. [Click here](#) if you wish to see those definitions now.

Experience and research have gradually raised awareness of the short- and long-term effects of grief and trauma on families, which may affect several generations. This has led to many service providers focusing their attention on war-affected newcomer children and youth, and their families. While many Canadian families have experiences with trauma and grief issues in their family histories, remembrance of war and personal experiences as victims of torture or other forms of violence are very recent and relatively new for many newcomer families. Many come to Canada directly from present-day war and conflict zones and many have lived in camps for displaced persons for extensive periods. Not surprisingly, many have fresh memories of grief and losses that other Canadians have only seen in a more distant past.

Many students with refugee experiences have had their education extensively disrupted in their country of origin and education facilities in refugee camps are generally quite limited. In times of war and extensive civil conflict, schooling is all too often one of the first casualties. In light of these experiences and the many transitions these children and young people have undergone, their capacity for learning will be affected.

The challenges which await them upon arrival to Manitoba may include an unfamiliar social system in which they need to find housing, medical facilities, employment or income support, and education. They may experience alienation, anxiety, malnutrition, and the complexities and interconnections of low socioeconomic status and poor health. They may have problems with literacy, numeracy, and other academic foundational knowledge and skills. In addition to such practical challenges, as many are coming from systems which may have been oppressive they will also need to develop trust and a feeling of safety in a new cultural context. Forced by persecution to leave their own countries and even



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countries of asylum, they arrive in Manitoba with multiple losses, great personal changes, grief, traumatic stress, and very little information about Canada. Therefore, education is vital for newcomers with refugee experiences, whatever their age. For parents and older youth, first priorities may include: language support and training; finding employment (which often is not in their area of experience and expertise) to support the household after the initial sponsorship period ends; adapting and absorbing many clues as well as much information and learning through their exposure to the dominant culture.



© United Nations Photo. April 1, 1999. Kukes, Albania. UN Photo/x. Kosovo refugees. CC license. <www.un.org/av/photo/>.

For children and youth, their experiences at school and in the neighbourhood are their first introduction and experience of living in Canada. Sponsors, hosts, and settlement agencies provide much support at first and play an important role in easing the transition to school, and welcoming the children in their new schools. Newcomers from war-affected origins and backgrounds will benefit from educational initiatives that are inclusive, that recognize and respond to their educational needs, and that offer a welcoming environment.

However, while inclusive, welcoming, and positive school experiences will help with the integration of the new students and contribute to the healing, these alone are insufficient for many students coping with the damage caused by war and their refugee experiences. Unimaginable experiences of violence, loss, and grief leave deep wounds that take time to uncover and heal. In addition, new wounds are created by the stress, grief, and guilt that result from leaving behind surviving family members in refugee camps, in difficult and unsafe conditions, needing further sponsorship, or needing help to return to their country of origin. Not surprisingly, the path to self-sufficiency and a fulfilling new life for the family at times challenges the natural resiliency of children and youth. It is important to recognize that refugee and war-affected children and youth will reflect a spectrum of responses to the stress and traumatic events they experienced before and during resettlement. Many exhibit enormous resiliency, while others may be severely traumatized and exhibit a range of post-traumatic stress responses.

What is the purpose of this resource?

Life After War: Education as a Healing Process for Refugee and War-Affected Children is a resource that seeks to help strengthen the capacity of school communities at all levels (early, middle, and senior years) to provide an appropriate and supportive school environment for refugee and war-affected learners and their families: an environment that will nurture their mental health and well-being, and that will enhance their educational and life outcomes. This resource provides a summary and a discussion of the research and the experiences of educators concerning the following:

- common experiences and needs of war-affected learners
- appropriate programming and practices
- promising programming models and strategies

This resource also promotes partnerships and collaboration between refugee families, immigrant and refugee serving organizations and agencies, and the school community.

It is intended to be a practical guide for educators working with and providing educational supports to newcomer students and families with war-affected backgrounds. It includes a summary of research and important information on newcomers from

***For information concerning
EAL curriculum, see
Manitoba Kindergarten to
Grade 12 Curriculum
Framework for English as an
Additional Language (EAL)
and Literacy, Academics, and
Language (LAL).***

refugee and war-affected backgrounds and some practical ideas and suggestions for increasing school capacity and implementing appropriate programming, as well as a list of resources that are available to educators. It aspires to encourage and assist educators in creating new partnerships and circles of support and solidarity for war-affected families and children through grassroots programming that honours and respects newcomers and listens to their voices about their world, their needs, and their solutions.

How is this document organized?



© United Nations Photo. Photo ID 462320. January 24, 2011. Forobaranga, Sudan. UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran. Darfur classroom. CC license. <www.unmultimedia.org/photo/>.

The document is divided into six parts.

- **Part 1: Immigration and Settlement of Newcomers of Refugee Origins** provides information on refugees worldwide and immigration and settlement patterns in Manitoba.
- **Part 2: The Effects of War and Resettlement** provides a summary of the effects of war, displacement, and resettlement on the mental health and general well-being of children and families. Resiliency as well as protective and risk factors are discussed. Finally, the major challenges facing newcomers, which may affect their ability to successfully integrate and learn, are explored.
- **Part 3: Supporting Student Success in the Classroom** provides some practical suggestions, ideas, and resources for schools and educators to consider in developing and improving school and classroom programming for newcomer children and youth from refugee and war-affected backgrounds. Topics covered include building resiliency; information on good practices and examples of promising programming; dealing with disclosure, storytelling; and the importance of after-school and summer programs.
- **Part 4: Supporting Teachers and Staff Working with Refugee Children and Families** discusses the impact on teachers and school staff of working with refugee and war-affected children.
- **Part 5: Helping Refugee Children and Youth in Schools** focuses on whole-school approaches, refugee readiness audits, and planning for action. Topics covered are whole-school approaches; building resiliency; information on good practices and examples of promising programming; dealing with disclosure, storytelling; and the importance of after-school and summer programs.
- **Part 6: Learning More About Refugee and War-Affected Learners and Families** provides information on web-based and other resources for educators wishing to continue their professional learning with respect to the topics and themes covered in this resource.

Companion documents

Two companion documents have been published separately but were developed as part of this initiative. These are:

- **Life After War: Professional Development, Agencies, and Community Supports**
- **War-Affected Children: A Comprehensive Bibliography**



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