

Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools

Lisa Sadler and Nancy Clark

Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured. And every young farmboy knows that the hardest and noblest wood has the narrowest rings, that high on the mountains and in continuing danger the most indestructible, the strongest, the ideal trees grow.

— Hermann Hesse, *Bäume: Betrachtungen und Gedichte*

A tree stands strong not by its fruits or branches, but by the depth of its roots.

— Anthony Liccione

It has been suggested that a refugee is similar to a tree that has been cut off from its roots and transplanted into foreign soil (Bastin, 2009). Without their roots, refugees do not have the capacity to be successful in their new lives. Rebuilding this root system takes time, patience, and a broad community support system.

Trees are made up of intricate, complex systems. Every leaf and every branch is connected to the tree trunk, but the health of the tree can be attributed to what is unseen: the large, complex root system below the ground that sustains the tree with water and nutrition. If the tree is cut off from its roots, it will quickly wither and die. Likewise, a tree that has been transplanted without special care does not thrive in its new environment. While the tree is not dead, it needs time, patience, and special care to graft a new root system to give life again and sustenance to allow the tree to thrive.

Generally, immigrants are able to tend to every root carefully, gently removing it from the soil, preparing for months, even years, to say goodbye to family, friends, and all of the pieces of their home that have been so firmly established. This period of mental and emotional adjustment and closure is critical, and while there are many challenges for immigrant families on arrival in Canada, the pre-migration experience plays a significant role in the adjustment of many newcomers.

On the other hand, the journey of refugees usually begins with persecution causing them to flee their homes and homeland; unlike immigrants, they have been uprooted without a choice. As a result,

refugees around the globe have endured some of the greatest resettlement challenges. Many refugees are persecuted due to their race/ethnicity, political affiliation, religion, or gender. In some cases forced migration has also been the result of war, genocide, and natural disaster (UNHCR, n.d.). Because of these experiences, many refugees have not had time to prepare for migration and to say goodbye to friends and family; they face ongoing uncertainty about their future. In the process of fleeing, many have been separated from loved ones or have witnessed and experienced horrible atrocities (Citizenship Immigration Canada (CIC), 2008, 2012; Grove & Zwi, 2006). Their life stories often include trauma, torture, rape, lost loved ones, prolonged time spent in refugee camps, ongoing violence and insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition (Beiser, 2005; 2009; Keyes, 2000). This trauma can result in ongoing psychological challenges such as complex trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when they arrive in Canada (Beiser, 2005, 2009; Keyes, 2000; Kinzie, 2006, 2008; Kirmayer, Lemelsen & Barad, 2008). Furthermore, refugee trauma is related not only to pre-migration stress but also to ongoing experiences of discrimination, structural violence, lack of social support, and stress during the resettlement process (Agic, 2012; Beiser, 2005; Newbold, 2009; Porter & Haslam 2005).¹ This trauma is further compounded by challenges related to access to employment, language skills, education, and health (Dow, 2010; Morris, Popper, Rodwell, Brodine, & Brouwer, 2009; Porter & Haslam, 2005). These challenges make it difficult for refugees to rebuild healthy root systems in Canada.

In relation to the social and structural challenges of resettlement, refugee youth are considered to be one of the most vulnerable populations in Canada (Beiser, Hou, Hyman, & Tousignant, 2002; Doughty & Klinge, 2008; Shakya et al., 2010; Kanu, 2008). Globally, approximately, 44% of refugees and 31% of asylum seekers are children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2010). In Canada, refugee youth represent approximately 48% of all refugees accepted into Canada on humanitarian grounds (CIC, 2008). In addition to discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, intergenerational conflict, and resettlement stress, access to education is a challenge for refugee youth (Kanu, 2008; Shakya et al., 2010; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Kirk & Cassity, 2007). Education can play a pivotal role in the lives of refugee youth at a time when larger social structures such as racism and intergenerational conflict, as well as personal identity formation, affect youths' mental health and well-being (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). Yet literature on refugee youth access to education is limited. We argue, as do Shakya et al. (2010), that there is a pressing need for understanding and supporting refugee youth in accessing education that is culturally sensitive and trauma informed.² Culturally sensitive, trauma-informed practice will address the unique

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

challenges and barriers that refugee youth face within the education system and will ultimately increase youth engagement and success. On the other hand, a lack of trauma-informed practice might lead to negative school experiences and ultimately affect youth mental health and well-being during resettlement. With this understanding in mind, our efforts to build community capacity to engage youth in the education system ought to address the complex root system that is required for enhancing the success and resilience of refugee youth.

Our community's unique circumstances necessitated the need for multiple partnerships to build community capacity to support refugee youth in schools. While Canada receives approximately 220,000 to 240,000 immigrants annually (CIC, 2008), the community of Langley, British Columbia, has remained fairly homogenous: its citizens are predominantly white and middle class. However, during the period 2007 to 2009, more than 800 Karen refugees were resettled in British Columbia, landing mostly Langley and neighbouring Surrey (ISS of BC, 2010). This large influx of refugees arrived from remote camps on the border between Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand with very high needs, including complex medical, educational, and social challenges. At the time of their arrival, refugee support services were non-existent in Langley, and the local school system was not prepared to receive such a large number of youth with various educational needs. This lack of preparedness highlights the challenge to offer culturally relevant educational services for refugee youth faced in many smaller communities that do not normally receive high numbers of immigrants or refugees. Nevertheless, this challenge also presents a unique opportunity to develop collaborative partnerships that can strengthen the community and allow refugee youth to flourish. In this chapter we provide a narrative of experiences in Langley, located in the Metro-Vancouver region of British Columbia, Canada, where community capacity was built to support Karen refugee youth in schools.³ This holistic community-development approach offers a helpful framework for educators and other social service providers to draw on as they support refugee youth in their education and resettlement as they rebuild their lives and roots systems in communities across Canada.

A Community Development Approach: Challenges and Strategies for Building Capacity

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

Community development is a school of thought that seeks positive community engagement through empowerment, collaboration, and capacity-building and can be accomplished through tools and methods that build on the strengths or assets of a particular community or population (Brown & Hannis, 2008; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). While definitions of community development vary widely, for our purposes it is a process of building capacity within and between individuals and communities. In this context, a community-development approach is not a solution but rather a collaborative method that weaves a holistic support network around refugee children, youth, and families to develop new root systems and to mend broken ones. The process aims to strengthen and support existing assets and to empower individuals to effect change in their own lives and communities. Rather than a top-down approach, where goals and processes for change are imposed from above, there is growing support among scholars and activists for a bottom-up, grassroots approach to development, where the community determines its appropriate goals, objectives, and strategies (Brown & Hannis, 2008). Here we discuss our community's capacity-building process that has integrated service development and collaboration to address the unique challenges and experiences of Karen refugee youth in schools. While we highlight some unique challenges, we also wish to provide a framework for innovative strategies for success. In our community-development approach, we discuss how building both individual and community capacity through collaborative community relationships can holistically promote social inclusion, a sense of belonging within community, and access to education.

Social inclusion refers to a community's capacity to adapt to and accept newcomer groups in society. It is equally critical, however, for newcomers to feel a sense of belonging. More specifically, a sense of belonging includes a refugee youth's subjective experience of whether or not he or she felt included and the processes that facilitate a sense of belonging to a particular place. For example, Sampson and Gifford (2010) refer to sense of belonging to place as being shaped by environments that form therapeutic landscapes in refugee youths' everyday lives. Landscapes are social conditions of environments that are conducive to healing and promote well-being. In our context, building capacity for Karen refugee youth in schools includes facilitating environments that promote social inclusion, belonging, and learning. Thus, a community-development approach to education is holistic—it considers all aspects of a student's life, including psychological, physical, social, and spiritual domains that promote access to education. Teachers and those who work to help integrate belonging and social

inclusion within schools must be aware of the pre- and post-migration conditions that challenge or support refugees in the context of their resettlement.

It is equally important to consider youth in the context of their family unit, as many refugee youth experience family resettlement stress (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996) and may require increased family support to be successfully engaged in education. Thus, rebuilding healthy root systems among refugee youth in schools requires the ongoing collaboration and knowledge exchange among school staff and other community services, which may include health services, settlement workers, recreation services, volunteers, and other local non-profit organizations. Just as building a healthy root system requires various conditions, the building of relationships among and within community can support refugee families to ensure the retention of refugee youth in schools and maintain ongoing support in their adaptation to local communities in which refugee families are resettled.

Despite the resilience of refugee youth, they face many challenges to their success in the Canadian school system. Pre- and post-migration experiences and circumstances such as age on arrival, lack of previous education, culture shock, mental health problems related to trauma, the school environment, and the availability of social supports play a role in refugee youths' access to education and experience in schools. It is also important to note that these social categories are not exhaustive; further, they may be interrelated and may not be experienced by all refugee youth in the same way. However, acknowledgement and integration of the way these social categories play out in the context of resettlement for refugee youth in schools shaped the capacity-building strategy in our community.

Educational Challenges of Refugee Youth

On arrival, most refugee youth have very high needs. The difference between life in a refugee camp and life in Canada is enormous, and the learning curve is very steep. In many situations, students must learn English, adjust to a new culture, make friends, and learn basic life skills. In addition, refugee youth struggle with issues related to health, poverty, and identity (Shakya et al., 2010; Anisef, 2005; Wilkinson, 2002). Furthermore, immigrant youth who arrive in Canada as older students are more likely to drop out of secondary school than Canadian-born students and students who immigrate to Canada as younger children (Corak, 2011). Corak's (2011) study on the age of immigrant children and their education outcomes posits that children who arrive in Canada after the age of nine arrive during an

important transitional stage in their lives, and “migration may have long-lasting impacts on their capacities to become successful and self-reliant adults, impacts that may be much more costly and difficult to remedy at a later stage” (Corak, 2011, p. 7). Refugee youth experience greater challenges compared to native-born youth. Additional stress for refugee youth may include lack of language ability and experiences of discrimination from their Canadian peers.

Moreover, the trend to drop out of secondary education may be more pronounced for refugee youth because of their lack of access to quality English-language education in their refugee camps. In addition, because of ongoing resettlement issues, refugee youth do not have the time to catch up to their peers academically. Simply put, refugee students do not have time to rebuild their roots in Canada because of the many social and cultural challenges they face, including the need to support their family, trauma issues, and culture shock. Citing figures from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Shakya et al., (2010) note that “on average refugees 15 years and older are four times more likely than economic immigrants to have nine years or less of schooling” (p. 65). Refugees often have large gaps in their education; for many, schooling has been interrupted by war or unrest or is of poor quality due to protracted stays in refugee camps (Ministry of Education, 2009). Although access to education is a universal right, this right is not extended to many refugees who remain in camps for extended periods (Shakya, et al., 2010). In particular, Karen refugees have experienced limitations on their access to education because of restrictions imposed by the Thai government (Shakya et al., 2010). In some cases, however, refugees living in Thai refugee camps have been able to access education beyond grade ten through non-government organizations and international aid (personal communication, Karen refugee, January 2012). More specifically, the quality of education provided in many refugee camps is poor due to lacking teacher qualifications, inadequate school structures, and limited learning resources (Oh, 2010). This problem is not specific to Karen refugees but is reflected in many refugee camp populations (Shakya et al., 2010).

The lack of previous education creates immediate and long-term challenges for refugee students. On arrival in Canada, many Karen youth in our community were unable to read or perform at grade level in math and science. Several years later, we have found that some Karen youth have made great progress in their reading and writing while others continue to struggle with literacy and numeracy skills. This difference may be due to lack of access to education for youth who were living in refugee camps or to the fact that many of the youths family members are illiterate in their own language and have not

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

had access to education. Unfortunately, these youth also struggle to be successful in other academic classes, and the struggle affects their integration into the mainstream student body. Another finding from our work is that many of the Karen youth continue to struggle to catch up to their Canadian-born peers and grew too old to attend secondary school before they were able to obtain enough credits to graduate. This observation is reflected in research that shows that refugee students struggle to be successful in secondary school (Roderick et al., 2006; Yau, 1996; Wilkinson, 2002). Many refugees have “severe psychosocial and physical health concerns, limited or no labour market skills, little or no formal education, and, for children, greater developmental challenges” (Presse & Thomson, 2008). Several pre- and post-migration experiences contribute to these challenges, and while not all of the problems have easy solutions, community strategies can support refugee youth to become successful in accessing education in their new country.

In our experience, the educational needs of Karen refugee youth became a pressing concern as many were not integrated well within the regular school system and required extra support to ensure their ongoing engagement and retention in school. We found that many Karen youth placed a great value on working hard to support their families. Many Karen refugee families experience great social and economic demands, and it is not uncommon for students to feel pressure to contribute to the family’s income (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). Finding a job was also related to the stress incurred by their need to pay off their transportation loans.⁴ As a result, many Karen youth left school to take low-paying jobs to support their families. However, Karen youth also realize the importance of education and English-language skills to get a good job in Canada, and some go back to school as they continue to build their roots in the community. Our experiences are concurrent with the research of Shakya et al. (2010), which studied refugee youth in Toronto and suggests that refugee youth must often balance their family responsibilities against their own educational goals.

Meanwhile, while refugee youth face significant challenges on arrival, in our experience their needs evolve as they adjust to life in Canada. The resettlement and integration process can take many years; five years after their arrival in Canada, many Karen youth continue to face challenges related to literacy and language skills, posing ongoing challenges to their integration into mainstream academic classes. As a result, programs and support services must also continue to adapt to new needs that may emerge, such as connecting youth with job training or specialized education programs that can enhance language ability, individual skills, and connections with peers. Ongoing evaluation and collaboration with

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

teachers and service providers can ensure that strategies for integration and engagement also evolve as the needs of refugee youth change or as new needs emerge.

School Environment

The school environment is critical for refugee students to feel safe, welcome, and supported. Unfortunately, research shows that the opposite is often the case for immigrant students, who frequently feel isolated from the mainstream school population (Gunderson, 2000). In fact, the school environment is a primary place for refugee youth to develop a sense of belonging (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). A safe social environment can have a significant impact on decreasing resettlement stress while fostering recovery from trauma and promoting well-being (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). In particular, Sampson and Gifford suggest that “during the early period of resettlement ... youth seek out and value places that promote healing and recovery” (p. 116). Creating an environment where youth feel valued may enhance engagement with education and promote retention in schools. Similarly, Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) argue that the school has a particularly significant impact on the lives of refugee youth because it defines and affects one’s sense of community. Importantly, the sense of belonging and connectedness that refugee youth experience also has positive effects on academic outcomes (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

We found that many Karen youth find it difficult to integrate and find spaces where they felt welcomed. Thus, creating safe spaces in schools for youth to tell their stories may increase awareness and understanding of youth experiences and build connections with existing community and peers. The place to start building a support network around a refugee student is within the school. In our case, this step included ongoing dialogue with classroom teachers, school administration, English-Language Learner (ELL) teachers, school counselors, and settlement and multicultural workers who worked toward meeting both the collective and individual needs of Karen youth. We were fortunate to have a Karen multicultural worker who was able to provide interpretation and translation services within schools and to offer valuable cultural insight in many situations. In addition, collaboration and networking within the school allowed ELL teachers to share their wealth of knowledge and experience in working with English-language learners and to provide useful information and resources that could assist refugee youth in the classroom setting. Unfortunately, many smaller school districts are not as fortunate to have built-in programs where multicultural workers and settlement workers are available for diverse refugees.

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

Having the resources to integrate multicultural workers and translators can build a strong connection to schools and thereby create safe, supportive places.

Furthermore, many refugee students struggle with language differences and so this experience increased social isolation, stigma, and discrimination (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Gunderson, 2000; Sampson & Gifford, 2010). In schools it is therefore important to build bridges between Canadian students and refugee students that foster social inclusion. Gunderson (2000) found that because immigrant students are generally placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, they have little opportunity to interact with Canadian-born students, although interaction may be the best way to learn Canadian culture, improve language skills, and ultimately adjust to Canadian society. Many refugee students find the stigma attached to taking specialized English classes makes them “second-class students” (Gunderson, 2000) and may further contribute to their sense of isolation and identity. From our experience, school staff worked to ensure that Karen youth felt safe and comfortable by introducing them to the school environment gradually, pairing them with a student who speaks the same language, and taking steps to understand their unique background, culture, and family situation when possible.

A supportive school environment may engage refugee students in leadership activities and extra-curricular programs and may create opportunities for refugee students to give back and share their own unique strengths at school. Schools can create opportunities for student dialogue, sharing culture and empowerment and ultimately offering a safe place where refugee youth can heal from their past and build a new life and identity. One promising activity we found was to identify potential student leaders, including Canadian students and previous refugees or immigrants, to work with Karen youth as peer mentors or cultural ambassadors. In elementary school, for example, these students might have the responsibility of showing a newcomer around the school, eating lunch with her/him, or playing on the playground with her/him. In secondary schools, a peer mentor may be trained and supported to provide homework support, in-class support, or friendship to a new student.

Schools are places of community, and supportive environments will help refugee students feel safe and engaged. However, to promote social inclusion and to ensure that refugee youth’s holistic needs are met, a supportive and welcoming school environment must go beyond the academic system. Our community development approach is one example of how academic support can be enhanced

through building social networks more broadly and may have positive implications for long-term educational engagement.

Building Collaboration and Capacity within the Local Community

Local schools are the backbone of many communities and provide the perfect place to practise the community-development approach to refugee education and integration. Generally, there are several ways in which school staff can help refugee students to rebuild their root systems through community partnerships. While schools generally focus on a child's academic success in order for refugee youth to be successful and engaged with education, in our experience support services must be holistic. As such, we have built community partnerships to support the Karen youth outside of school. For example, we partnered with a community initiative designed to engage youth in sports and academics concurrently through recreation opportunities and an after-school homework club. Meanwhile, volunteer organizations, settlement workers, and other service providers have worked to provide family support and access to services. The recognition that Karen youth were part of family systems with complex, multi-faceted needs allowed school staff and community service providers to work together to support families in a way would not have been possible if these resource staff had worked in isolation.

School engagement and success of refugee students is related not only to their migration experience but also to their personal resilience and social resources (Kanu, 2008). The social context, including the role of family and availability of resources, can promote or challenge refugee youth's engagement in schools. For example, parents may not be able to support a youth's learning as they are often struggling with accessing language services and in some cases may be illiterate in their own language. This reality presents challenges for youth who may benefit from extra parental support in relation to their educational needs such as reading and writing. However, strong partnerships among community agencies and schools can enhance resources for the unique learning needs of refugee youth. These kinds of partnerships may include collaboration between various organizations and services including sports and recreation, education, faith, culture, language, government, and business to enhance resources that can meet specific refugee youth needs.

The collaboration among various services and community volunteers led to the development of the Refugee Advisory Committee (RAC). RAC members included community volunteers, settlement workers, members of a local faith community, managers and frontline workers from immigration services, adult English-language service providers, and health service workers. The role of the RAC was to share experiences, collaborate on ongoing community needs related to Karen refugees, and to partner with other organizations. Through this community development approach, the RAC has remained open to various members of the community who serve refugees, and the membership has evolved as needs have changed or as new service providers have come forward. Meanwhile, the RAC has provided opportunities for knowledge exchange among services providers and teachers; through this process the RAC has been able to identify areas of concern for Karen refugees in our community, which have included identifying youth at risk, mental health issues, problems with accessing health care, and language support. At the same time, advocacy and collaboration within the RAC have allowed members to develop strategic partnerships and innovative approaches to resettlement and integration such as recreation services, youth job-training programs, volunteer-run initiatives, and other programs to support refugee youth and their families. These increased supports would not be possible if the RAC had not been developed.

Refugee youth often face medical issues that can affect their schooling, or have family issues related to housing, employment, or settlement issues. The RAC was able to build strong connections with mainstream services such as local public health agencies to work collaboratively with schools and staff to identify needs and ensure that refugee youth and their families are able to access health care and other social services. Simich (2009) has discussed how creating opportunities for increasing health literacy for newcomer families requires going outside of medical settings to promote health and well-being for new immigrants. In addition there is a need to include broader social policy structures from all levels of government (local, provincial, national) and community to create conditions for health and human development. Working together, through taking a bottom-up and top-down approach, communities and governments (at all levels) can create conditions for the health and well-being of the whole community. For example, RAC members were able to provide educational, social, and health services on the frontline and are able to dialogue with managers and directors of community services who also sit on the RAC. Thus the RAC provides a space for ongoing dialogue for both service providers and policy planners on issues related to community's needs, issues for newcomer youth, and the way

policy influences access to education in schools. Through this forum we can work at initiatives that inform current policy on immigration and youth as well as collaborate on more local issues affecting refugee youth.

Thus, the RAC became an important forum for dialogue, networking, and advocacy to ensure that organizations like the school district, churches, community services, and public health could work together to fill gaps and ensure that Karen refugees were able to access a broad spectrum of services so that their needs were being adequately met. Many communities, particularly those in large urban centres, have a wealth of community services to offer refugee families, such as settlement workers, employment programs, or recreation programs. In our community, access to these specialized services and programs was difficult without the development of the RAC.

In addition to the development of the RAC, strategies for community development also included enhanced sports and recreational initiatives that could support Karen youth's engagement with education while building connections that could foster belonging and social inclusion. These recreation opportunities ultimately helped to create a stronger root system that enhanced the youth's individual capacity for learning and staying engaged in their education. These activities are consistent with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC, 2012) Best Practice Guidelines on promoting welcoming communities. Involving newcomer youth in sports can ultimately help to build knowledge, resources, and skills for newcomer youth and enhance belonging (CIC, 2012).

Engaging Youth Through Sports, Recreation, and Mentoring Activities

Through ongoing collaboration and capacity-building with community organizations, school staff have been able to use recreation as a tool to enhance school engagement and help Karen refugee youth develop strong social networks. One of the most effective school–community partnerships for Karen youth has been accessing an organization called PuCKS (Promoting Community Through Kids in Sport). Initially, this partnership created opportunities for many Karen youth to play hockey and receive academic support through an after-school homework club. This component of PuCKS is run by a collection of volunteers who help support youth in reading, writing, math, and science. While enhanced learning and literacy are an important component of the PuCKS program, the relational mentoring that has occurred with volunteer tutors has also shown to be significant for Karen youth. Anecdotal evidence

and subjective reports from the youth themselves have shown that volunteers have been positive role models and have established important relationships with the youth at a critical time in their life. Furthermore, these relationships have increased the youths' sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion in the community. On the other hand, the Karen youth have also benefited from the tutoring support and having a space to complete homework that is outside of their school and within their community. Karen youth have self-reported that this has helped them to manage their homework and increase understanding of specific subjects such as math, science, and English. Many of the youth have brought their report cards to the after-hour school program associated with PuCKS and have shown improvement as a result of having extra support.

We have found that mentoring can foster relationships and provide positive role models at a critical time for refugee youth. Milliken (2007) has argued that mentoring should be the cornerstone of any program for at-risk youth or children, creating an environment where healthy relationships can flourish. He writes that “programs don’t change kids—relationships do. Every child needs one adult who’s irrationally committed to his or her future” (Milliken, 2007, p. 7). Many programs and community organizations like Big Brothers and Big Sisters offer in-school mentoring programs that encourage youth to stay in school, avoid risky behaviour, and have healthy attitudes and relationships with their families and peers (Big Brothers Big Sisters, 2011). Furthermore, many immigrant-serving organizations offer programs that connect youth or adults with community volunteers to assist in settlement and integration (ISS of BC, n.d.). School–community connections through initiatives such as PuCKS can help build self-esteem, increase the sense of belonging, and promote engagement with other youth in Canada. While adult mentors can provide positive role models and much-needed guidance for refugee youth, mentoring can also take place within the school environment where specially trained peer mentors can help youth build relationships and connections across cultural boundaries.

In addition, we found that sports are an equally important component of refugee youth engagement. Playing sports fosters individual skills sets and contributes to being a member of the team. For many students, sports can be a carrot that keeps them from dropping out of school while it increases their sense of belonging. One Karen youth previously explained that he likes to play football because he likes to help his school team—they rely on him. Meanwhile, Karen women and girls have also benefitted from involvement in sports. Women and girls represent approximately 47% of refugees of concern (UNHCR, 2010) and many have experienced gender-based violence, a lack of access to

education, and significant trauma pre-migration (Norsworthy & Khuankaew, 2004). As we have noted, many refugee girls struggle to fit in and experience racialization, making them increasingly vulnerable to social isolation and consequently to negative mental health outcomes (Berman & Jiwani, 2008). Less is known about gendered experiences of youth migration and resettlement and the ways in which social environments and community supports include or exclude refugee youth's engagement with education. In our community capacity-building approach with the PuCKS program, many Karen girls have been able to access sports such as local soccer and hockey teams. Thus, programs such as PuCKS may promote equal opportunities for sport. Our experience in creating opportunities and access to sports has also provided opportunities for Karen boys and girls to build connections with their Canadian peers and increase their sense of confidence, while at the same time fostering engagement with mainstream educational systems. In addition, through sports and recreation, Karen youth have had opportunities to engage in mainstream school activities as well as to show off some of their traditional skills such as playing caneball with their Canadian-born peers.⁵ These opportunities promote cultural exchange and enhanced learning for mainstream youth. It has been our experience in working with refugee youth that every child has a unique passion or an ability he or she excels at. Finding that passion or ability can help students gain confidence and resilience in the midst of a tumultuous time in their life.

Refugee youth face complex challenges that will require many community supports to rebuild their lives and identity. While positive, caring relationships will help youth to rebuild their roots through confidence and trust, such relationships are simply the foundation for addressing many of the complex challenges that refugee youth face during resettlement. Overall, the collaborative relationship between PuCKS, local schools, and other community organizations has built capacity and resilience in refugee youth by promoting a sense of belonging through sports in addition to caring relationships with volunteers, coaches, and other adults. These community strategies and capacity-building approaches may facilitate other communities to help support refugee youth to achieve their educational goals and dreams.

Conclusion

Clearly, refugee youth and their families face many challenges associated with resettlement. Arriving in Canada without a healthy, supported root system places these youth at risk for mental health, despite the fact that they also arrive with many unique gifts, abilities, and strengths. We argue

Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

that increasing community capacity to support refugee youth in schools must go beyond the educational system itself and provide opportunities for stakeholders and services providers to engage in dialogue and initiatives that address the various challenges for refugee youth. As the backbone of many communities, local schools can employ many strategies to build a supportive environment to engage refugee youth in systems of education. This process requires great collaboration among various levels of service providers and communities of practice and can increase educators' understanding of the challenges that refugee youth and their families face in relation to their pre-migration and resettlement contexts. Creating safe spaces for dialogue and community engagement as we have experienced with the RAC has broadened our knowledge of refugee experiences. Community initiatives such as PuCKS can also promote engagement in educational systems that seek to foster belonging and connection among diverse refugee youth. Through this community capacity-building process we have not only increased services and supports for Karen youth but have been changed by gaining increased cultural understanding of the significance of engagement in education for Karen youth and the strategies needed to build a strong root system that will allow refugee youth to flourish.

Notes

The authors would like to acknowledge our community partners who have contributed to the ongoing settlement of Karen refugee youth, including Zipporah Devadas - Karen Multicultural Worker, Margaret Kunst - PuCKS Program Operations Director, Sharon Kavanagh—CARL Project Coordinator and Volunteer, Karen Initiative volunteers, staff and teachers at Langley School District, and many others who have acted as supporters, advocates and mentors.

- 1 Structural violence is a complex term that refers to violence exerted systematically and indirectly by a particular society (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence is experienced in various forms such as racism, gender inequality, and violation of human rights, as well as widely through genocide and epidemic disease. In this chapter, we refer to social structures that violate refugee youths' inability to access systems such as education due to inadequate and inflexible systems that create barriers in education.
- 2 The term trauma-informed care has evolved out of building capacity on immigrant and refugee health and mental health services (Poole & Greaves, 2012). In the context of education, trauma-informed care would require teachers and staff to develop an increased understanding about the factors that shape the resettlement process for refugee youth. Many refugees have experienced trauma during their migration; however, the stress of resettlement may compound youths' previous traumatic experiences. Thus it is important that people working with refugee youth tailor education not only to be mindful about the refugee experience but also to recognize the way

mainstream education might add to youths' stress. Compounded mental health issues may be seen when educational practices fail to integrate refugee youth into mainstream systems of education.

- 3 Karen people represent one of many ethnic minority groups in the former British colony known as Burma, now referred to by the current government as Myanmar. In 2006, Canada resettled approximately 8,000 Karen people as Government-Assisted Refugees into communities across Canada.
- 4 Government-Assisted Refugees in Canada are required to pay back the transportation costs incurred during their resettlement process. These costs include medical expenses, transportation expenses, and a service fee. Canada is one of a few countries that require refugees to pay for their transportation and medical costs. If the loan is not repaid within three years, the government charges interest on the principle amount owing (Immigration Services Society of BC, 2010).
- 5 Caneball, also known as Sepak Takraw, is a traditional game in many Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), and Malaysia. It is similar to kick volleyball, where players use their feet, knee, head, or chest to touch a ball made of rattan (Sepak Takraw Association of Canada, n.d.).

References

- Anisef, P. (2005). Issues confronting newcomer youth in Canada: alternative models for a national youth host program. Toronto: Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement.
- Agic, B. (2012). Trauma-Informed Care for Refugees. In N. Poole & L. Greaves (Eds.), *Becoming Trauma Informed* (pp. 121–123). Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
- Bastin, J. (2009, April 30). Personal Communication. Langley, BC.
- Beiser, M. (2009, Dec). Resettling refugees and safeguarding their mental health: lessons learned from the Canadian Refugee Resettlement Project. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 46(4), 539–583.
- Beiser, M. (2005, Mar-Apr). The health of immigrants and refugees in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 96(Suppl 2), S30–S44.
- Beiser, M., Hou, F., Hyman, I., & Tousignant, M. (2002, Feb). Poverty, family process, and the mental health of immigrant children in Canada. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(2), 220–227.
- Berman, H., & Jiwani, Y. (2008). Newcomer Girls in Canada-Implications for Interventions by Mental Health Professionals. In S. Guruge & E. Collins (Eds.), *Working with Immigrant Women-Issues and Strategies for Mental Health Professionals* (pp. 137–155). Toronto: CAMH.
- Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

- Big Brothers Big Sisters (2011). In-School Mentoring. Retrieved December 18, 2012, from Big Brothers Big Sisters:
<http://www.bigbrothersbigsisters.ca/en/home/mentoringprograms/inschoolmentoring.aspx>
- Brown, J.D., & Hannis, D. (2008). *Community Development in Canada*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012). *Best Practices in Settlement Services*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/partner/bpss/index.asp>
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2008). *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview Permanent and Temporary Residents*. Research and Evaluation Branch, Citizenship and Immigration Canada: Ottawa.
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2008). *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview Permanent and Temporary Residents*. Research and Evaluation Branch, Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Ottawa: Author.
- Corak, M. (2011). *Age at Immigration and the Educational Outcomes of Children*. Ottawa: Minister of Industry, Statistics Canada.
- Doughty, W., & Klingle, Y. (2008). *Immigrant and Refugee Child and Youth Needs Research Study*. Final Report.
- Dow, D.H. (2010). An overview of stressors faced by immigrants and refugees: A guide for mental health practitioners. *Home Health Care Management Practice*, 23(3), 210–217.
- Farmer, P. (2004). An anthropology of structural violence. *Current Anthropology*, 45(3), 305–325.
- Grove, N.J., & Zwi, A.B. (2006, Apr). Our health and theirs: forced migration, othering, and public health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62(8), 1931–1942.
- Gunderson, L. (2000). Voices of the teenage diasporas. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(8) 692–706.
- Hyman, I., Beiser, M., & Vu, N. (1996). The mental health of refugee children in Canada. *Refugee*. 15(5), 4–8.
- Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). *Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools*. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

- Immigrant Services Society Of British Columbia (2010). Changing faces, changing neighbourhoods. Government assisted refugee settlement patterns in Metro Vancouver, January 2005-December 2009 [Report].
- ISS of BC. (2010). Changing Faces, Changing Neighbourhoods. Vancouver: Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia.
- ISS of BC (n.d.). Settlement Mentors. Retrieved January 12, 2013, from Immigrant Services Society of BC: <http://www.issbc.org/prim-corp-nav/get-involved/be-a-settlement-mentor>
- Kanu, Y. (2008). Educational Needs and Barriers for African Refugee Students in Manitoba. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(4), 915–940.
- Keyes, E.F. (2000, Jun). Mental health status in refugees: an integrative review of current research. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 21(4), 397–410.
- Kia-Keating, M., & Ellis, B.H. (2007, Jan). Belonging and connection to school in resettlement: young refugees, school belonging, and psychosocial adjustment. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 12(1), 29–43.
- Kinzie, J.D. (2006, Dec). Immigrants and refugees: the psychiatric perspective. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 43(4), 577–591.
- Kinzie, J.D. (2008). PTSD among traumatized refugees. In L.J. Kirmayer, R. Lemelsen, & M. Barad (Eds.), *Understanding trauma: Integrated biological, clinical, and cultural perspectives* (pp. 259–274). Cambridge: University Press.
- Kirk, J., & Cassity, E. (2007). Minimum standards for quality education for refugee youth. *Youth Studies Australia*, 26(1), 50–56.
- Kirmayer, L.J., Lemelsen, R., & Barad, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Understanding trauma: Integrated biological, clinical, and cultural perspectives*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Kretzmann, J.P., & McKnight, J.L. (1993). Introduction. In J.P. Kretzmann & J.L. McKnight (Eds.), *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets* (pp. 1–11). Evanston: Institute for Policy Research.
- Milliken, B. (2007). *The Last Dropout*. New York: Hay House.
- Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

- Ministry of Education. (2009). *Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Guide for Teachers and Schools*. Victoria: British Columbia Ministry of Education.
- Morris, M.D., Popper, S.T., Rodwell, T.C., Brodine, S.K., & Brouwer, K.C. (2009, Dec). Healthcare barriers of refugees post-resettlement. *Journal of Community Health, 34*(6), 529–538.
- Newbold, B. (2009, Jun). The short-term health of Canada's new immigrant arrivals: evidence from LSIC. *Ethnicity & Health, 14*(3), 315–336.
- Norsworthy, L.K., & Khuankaew, O. (2004). Women of Burma speak out: Workshops to deconstruct gender-based violence and build systems of peace and justice. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 29*(3), 259–283.
- Oh, S.-A. (2010). Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, *The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education*.
- Poole, N., & Greaves, L. (2012). *Becoming Trauma Informed*. CAMH. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
- Porter, M., & Haslam, N. (2005, Aug 3). Predisplacement and postdisplacement factors associated with mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons: a meta-analysis. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 294*(5), 602–612.
- Presse, D., & Thomson, J. (2008). The resettlement challenge: integration of refugees from protracted refugee situations. *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees, 25*(1) 94–99.
- Roderick, K., Janzen, R., Ochocka, J., Westhues, A., Jenkins, J., & Sandbeck, B. (2006). *Pathways to Success: Immigrant Youth at High School*. Kitchener, ON: Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.
- Sampson, R., & Gifford, S.M. (2010, Jan). Place-making, settlement and well-being: the therapeutic landscapes of recently arrived youth with refugee backgrounds. *Health & Place, 16*(1), 116–131.
- Sepak Takraw Association of Canada (n.d.). Retrieved January 12, 2013, from Sepak Takraw Association of Canada: <http://www.takrawcanada.com/>
- Sadler, L., & Clark, N. (2014). Building Community Capacity to Support Karen Refugee Youth in Schools. In C. A. Brewer, & M. McCabe (Eds.), *Immigrant and Refugee Students in Canada*. Canada: Brush Education.

- Shakya, Y.B., Guruge, S., Hynie, M., et al. (2010). Aspirations for Higher Education among Newcomer Refugee Youth in Toronto: Expectations, Challenges, and Strategies. *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, 27(2), 65–78.
- Simich, L. (2009). Health Literacy and Immigrant Populations. Policy report submitted to Public Health Agency Of Canada And Metropolis Canada.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. (1997). School effectiveness for language minority students. NCBE resource collection series, no. 9. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, George Washington University, Center for the Study of Language and Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi/docview/62380793?accountid=15115>
- UNHCR (2010) Global Trends. Retrieved from www.unhcr.org.
- UNHCR (n.d.). Who We Help. Retrieved January 12, 2013, from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c11c.html>
- Wilkinson, L. (2002). Factors Influencing the Academic Success of Refugee Youth in Canada. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5(2), 173–193. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676260220134430>
- Yau, M. (1996). Refugee Students in Toronto Schools. *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, , 15(5), 9–16.