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Résumé de l'article

L'implication des parents réfugiés à l'éducation de leurs enfants est cruciale pour la réussite scolaire et l'intégration sociale. Cependant, le personnel de l'école semble souvent avoir du mal à trouver des approches susceptibles d'accroître l'implication scolaire des parents réfugiés récemment arrivés. Bien que les parents réfugiés ne soient pas un groupe homogène, beaucoup sont confrontés à des défis similaires et croisés. En utilisant une approche de recherche qualitative, plus spécifiquement des entretiens semi-structurés, cette étude examine les perceptions d'un groupe de parents arabophones réfugiés récemment arrivés quant à leur implication dans l'éducation de leurs enfants après leur arrivée au Canada. Les résultats indiquent que les éléments suivants constituent des obstacles à leur participation : (1) une maîtrise limitée de la langue ; (2) des besoins fondamentaux concurrents ; (3) le manque de devoirs ; (4) la compréhension interculturelle et interreligieuse limitée des enseignants ; et (5) l'éducation à la santé sexuelle étant un espace partagé contesté. Si les conclusions mettent en lumière ce que certains parents réfugiés récemment arrivés considèrent comme des obstacles, la discussion met les responsables de l'éducation et les décideurs politiques au défi de remettre en question, de manière critique, le modèle normatif dominant d'implication parentale qui est utilisé et leur recommande de recadrer leurs conceptions de la participation parentale comme un engagement social avec une communauté scolaire. Un tel recadrage pourrait mieux soutenir l'intégration des parents réfugiés récemment arrivés dans leur nouveau pays d'accueil.



# Reframing Parental Involvement as Social Engagement: A Study of Recently Arrived Arabic-Speaking Refugee Parents' Understandings of Involvement in Their Children's Education

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## **Abstract**

The involvement of refugee parents in their children's education is crucial for academic success and social integration. However, school personnel often seem to struggle to find

approaches that will increase recently arrived refugee parents' involvement with the school. While refugee parents are not a homogenous group, many face uniquely similar and intersecting challenges. Using a qualitative research approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, this study examines the perceptions of one group of Arabic-speaking, recently arrived refugee parents' perceptions of being and becoming involved in their children's education after their arrival in Canada. The findings suggest the following factors act as barriers to their involvement: (1) limited language proficiency, (2) competing basic needs, (3) lack of homework, (4) teachers' limited cross-cultural and interreligious understanding, and (5) sexual health education being a contested shared space. While the findings illuminate what some recently arrived refugee parents regard as barriers, the discussion challenges educational leaders and policy makers to critically question the dominant, normative model of parental involvement that is employed and recommends they reframe their conceptions of parental involvement as social engagement with a school community. Such a reframing may better support recently arrived refugee parents' integration into their new home country.

*Keywords:* parental involvement, recently arrived refugees, integration

## Résumé

L'implication des parents réfugiés à l'éducation de leurs enfants est cruciale pour la réussite scolaire et l'intégration sociale. Cependant, le personnel de l'école semble souvent avoir du mal à trouver des approches susceptibles d'accroître l'implication scolaire des parents réfugiés récemment arrivés. Bien que les parents réfugiés ne soient pas un groupe homogène, beaucoup sont confrontés à des défis similaires et croisés. En utilisant une approche de recherche qualitative, plus spécifiquement des entretiens semi-structurés, cette étude examine les perceptions d'un groupe de parents arabophones réfugiés récemment arrivés quant à leur implication dans l'éducation de leurs enfants après leur arrivée au Canada. Les résultats indiquent que les éléments suivants constituent des obstacles à leur participation : (1) une maîtrise limitée de la langue ; (2) des besoins fondamentaux concurrents ; (3) le manque de devoirs ; (4) la compréhension interculturelle et interreligieuse limitée des enseignants ; et (5) l'éducation à la santé sexuelle étant un espace partagé contesté. Si les conclusions mettent en lumière ce que certains parents réfugiés récemment

arrivés considèrent comme des obstacles, la discussion met les responsables de l'éducation et les décideurs politiques au défi de remettre en question, de manière critique, le modèle normatif dominant d'implication parentale qui est utilisé et leur recommande de recadrer leurs conceptions de la participation parentale comme un engagement social avec une communauté scolaire. Un tel recadrage pourrait mieux soutenir l'intégration des parents réfugiés récemment arrivés dans leur nouveau pays d'accueil.

*Mots-clés* : participation des parents, réfugiés récemment arrivés, intégration

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## Introduction

Two critical factors that continue to challenge educators' contemporary conceptions of how best to support the academic and social integration of recently arrived refugee students are the sheer number of those who have been and will continue to be resettled in Canada, and the complexity of their social and learning needs. The Government of Canada's commitment to refugee resettlement demands, from both researchers and educators, a deeper understanding of the factors that increase the likelihood of their successful transition into Canadian school contexts.

The arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees in a short period, from late 2015 into 2016, brought to the fore the challenges for arriving refugees in the education context. A former Federal Citizenship and Immigration Minister, the Honourable John McCallum, highlighted this reality in 2016 with respect to the rapid Syrian refugee resettlement program by stating that "the government was surprised by the number of Syrian refugee children they admitted in the last year. The large number of children poses challenges for schools and finding appropriate housing" (Glowacki, 2016). While the resettlement goals set by the Canadian government to bring in 25,000 Syrian refugees upon election in 2015 were laudable, arguably Canadian society may not have been prepared for the number of children who would be resettled and the ways in which they would challenge existing school structures and resources (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016).

Although Canadian school personnel may experience a certain level of challenge in striving to accommodate recently arrived refugee students and their parents, these students' new schools offer a tremendous stabilizing factor in their largely unsettled lives (Ager & Strang, 2008; Matthews, 2008). Schools offer critical educational opportunities and provide a significant means through which to socially integrate immigrant children into their new host society (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996). Research suggests that parents of these children face barriers alongside them, such as dealing with issues of economic survival, acculturation and adaptation, limited English proficiency, and differing cultural and social norms associated with parenting (Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996).

Refugee parents, like all parents, play a significant role in assisting their children as they begin to trust teachers and principals as guiding adults in their lives (Barowsky

& McIntyre, 2010). In the case of recently arrived refugees, research findings suggest that, without parental involvement in their schooling, refugee children are at greater risk of failing both socially and academically (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). The positive relationships that have the potential to be formed between school personnel and parents are critical to a refugee child's in-school successes (Barowsky & McIntyre, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2000; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). According to Rah and colleagues (2009), increasing parental involvement in children's educational experiences is, in general, associated with increasing indices related to student success. Significant to the particular population under discussion is that this positive association "may be even more salient for communities marked by violence, trauma, displacement, linguistic isolation and cultural contradiction and dissonance" (p. 361). However, these exact societal conditions are ones that would tend to create barriers to parental engagement in schooling.

For many refugee parents, the Canadian school system, the school's or division's policies (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b), and the implicit "Canadian" expectations of "good parenting" (Thomas et al., 2015) can be overwhelming to decode (Lightfoot, 2004). Without a clear understanding of the societal and institutional contexts in which they operate, refugee parents are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to offering their children support during their induction into a new educational system. Often, the concept of parental engagement is presented in the literature as universally understood and seamlessly applicable cross-culturally (Epstein et al., 2009). However, the reality is that schooling and education both take varying forms in different cultures; while there may be some similarities, there can also be profound differences (Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

Given Canada's long-standing and recognized commitment to refugee resettlement (Labman, 2019), surprisingly little research has focused on recently arrived refugee parents' perspectives on involvement in their children's new educational school contexts (Ennab, 2017). As a response to this gap in research, the goals of this interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars of education and law were to:

1. Gain an understanding of the perceptions that recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents have with respect to the challenges that they face in supporting their children's education in Canada;

2. Examine their perceptions against the Epstein et al.'s (2009) framework of parental involvement with schools; and
3. Illuminate any gaps that may exist between parents' perceptions and the Epstein et al. (2009) model so that parents might be better positioned to be involved with their children's schools in ways that might better support their social integration into their new host communities.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of this study, the operational category of "recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees" was not an attempt to essentialize distinct groups of people with distinct histories and experiences into a single category (Moscovici, 1988). Rather, the category was created at the request of the two not-for-profit partner agencies who supported the project and who work with local refugee communities. They believed that such an expansive category might lessen some of the divisiveness and tensions that existed within the local refugee community because of the national attention paid to, and targeted research funding directed toward, recently arrived Syrian refugees.

## **Parental Support and Educational Success for Recently Arrived Refugees**

Over the past 40 years, research has demonstrated that finding ways to involve parents in their children's education is an important supportive factor that can lead to an increase in a student's academic success (see, for example, Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2005; Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Lightfoot, 1978). Such conclusions confirm what James Coleman and his colleagues (1966) suggested 50 years ago, which was that involved parents are connected to improved school-related outcomes for students.

According to Henderson and Berla (1994), "the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status but the extent to which that student's family is able to: 1) create a home environment that encourages learning; 2) express high, but not unrealistic expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and 3) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community" (p. 160). It seems reasonable to conclude that when parents are involved in and with the education system and a particular school's personnel, their children tend perform

better in school and stay in school longer than their peers who do not have such supports (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

However, the particular needs of refugee students challenge educators to foster an environment that facilitates their academic and social success (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). In a recent research study conducted in Manitoba, Ennab (2017) stated that “families from refugee backgrounds are often marginalized by an educational system that does not recognize their unique social needs and does not provide culturally sensitive supports due to limited funding and over reliance on Eurocentric approaches” (p. 2). This finding is problematic because, as Ager and Strang (2008) noted, refugee children and their parents experience schools “as the most important place of contact with members of local host communities, playing an important role in establishing relationships supportive of integration” (p. 172).

Of the limited number of studies that have focused on the successful integration of refugee students into Canadian schools, virtually none has focused on parents’ perspectives of their own involvement in their children’s’ new school(s) (see, for example, Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996). Instead, researchers have considered the ways in which parents and school personnel can cooperate to support student success based on understandings of parental involvement from the perspective of the school. Remedies suggested by these studies involve informing parents of how they can become more supportive of school actions; however, this information is offered almost exclusively from the perspective of the teachers, school administrators, or educational policy makers (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996). In other words, it is a didactic process rather than one that recognizes that parents may have something valuable to contribute to a conversation that is, ultimately, about a partnership in which they participate.

Findings from a review of the extant literature suggest that refugee parents understand parental involvement quite differently than do the majority of teachers and school-based administrators in Canada, who tend to be school personnel who have been educated in and through Westernized educational contexts (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996). In fact, it appears that scant research has focused on practices within the school system that may serve to engage and/or limit recently arrived refugee parents’ involvement. If one of the desired outcomes of teachers, administrators, educational leaders, and education policy makers is to encourage recently arrived refugee parents’



participation in their children's education, schools need information from which to develop programs and services that will reflect diverse and culturally representative understandings of what constitutes parental involvement.

## **From Parental Involvement to Engagement**

For decades, researchers have proposed that parental involvement is an effective support strategy that, to a degree, ensures student success; this belief is based on an encouraging, but ultimately correlational, relationship between parental involvement and a child's academic in-school performance (Barnard, 2004; Desimone, 1999; Hill & Craft, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Epstein and associates' (see Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2005; Epstein et al., 2009) seminal work identified a typology of six dimensions of parental involvement that reflect various forms of cooperative relations between schools and parents. According to Epstein et al. (2009), the dimensions are as follows:

1. **Parenting:** The basic obligations of parents to provide the at-home necessities of life conditions, such as housing, health, nutrition, and safety, that support basic learning from kindergarten to Grade 12.
2. **Communicating:** Involvement in the school-to-home-to-school communication (reading newsletters, report cards, attending conferences, returning phone calls) and at-home follow-up (materials outlining school courses, programs, activities).
3. **Volunteering:** Volunteering time and talents at school-related activities.
4. **Learning at home:** Helping children with homework and setting educational goals.
5. **Decision making:** School-based decision making participation (school councils, parent organizations).
6. **Community collaboration:** Involvement in partnerships with community resources and services.

Despite this framework's limitations (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Fernández & López, 2017), the Epstein et al. (2009) model of parental involvement is pervasively adopted for promoting and gauging parents' involvement with their children's educational

experiences. Yet, with respect to recently arrived refugees, each dimension of the Epstein et al. model presents *prima facie* obstacles in terms of language barriers, limited time, and other extended challenges of refugee settlement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Fernández & López, 2017).

Expanding on the initial work of Epstein and associates (Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2005; Epstein et al., 2009), which represents a somewhat unidirectional and transactional model of school involvement for parents, Barton et al. (2004) proposed the concept of “parental engagement” as a more “dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools and among school actors” (p. 3). From the perspective of Barton et al. (2004) and the researchers who have adopted their lens, parental engagement is focused on establishing agreed-upon school-related priorities and nurturing the requisite mutual and respectful relationships between parents and educators to find ways to share power and authority with respect to a child’s school-based education (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). This is the concept that the present study employs.

Parental engagement offers insight into the important roles that “both space and capital play in the relative success parents can have in engaging in the academic venue of schooling” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 3). That conception of parental engagement aligns well with the ecological systems perspective developed by Pillari (2002), which suggests that dynamic interactions exist amongst individuals, families, social groups, social institutions such as schools, and the macro environments in which they all operate. Of particular importance is the fact that Pillari’s ecosystem perspective “was developed to arrange, integrate, and systemize knowledge about the interrelationships of people with each other and their environments” (p. 7). The value of such a dynamic perspective has been important to the work of scholars such as Stewart (2011, 2014a, 2014b), who developed a framework to better understand the needs of war-affected refugee children and youth in their new host schools’ contexts using a bioecological systems perspective.

## **A Framework for Socially Connected Refugee Parental Engagement**

As was previously stated, schools, as largely public, social institutions, play a significant role in socializing recently arrived refugees and their parents in a novel context (Ager & Strang, 2008; Barowsky & McIntyre, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2000; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Yau, 1996). As such, there are social connections that refugee parents make with the adults who teach their children and the other families who form the community or the ecosystem of the school. According to Ager and Strang (2008), these social connections may take the form of social bridges, social bonds, or social links. Noting these connective forms provides researchers with an opportunity to better understand the nature and substance of the relationships that mediate or provide the connective tissue between the intersections of society's social institutions such as the education system and recently arrived refugee families.

Ager and Strang (2008) posit that social connections involve different social relationships and networks that support social integration and serve to connect recently arrived refugee parents to the wider community in which they have resettled. The three forms of social connection, according to Ager and Strang, within the context of integration are:

- **Social bonds:** Refugees themselves understand that a sense of belonging to a particular group or community is crucial. Without this sense of identification with a particular ethnic, religious, or geographical community, integration could become a form of assimilation.
- **Social bridges:** Establishing social connections with those of other national, ethnic, or religious groupings—a social mixing—is essential to establish the dynamic interaction that lies at the heart of many understandings of social integration. Creating bridges to other communities supports social cohesion, opens up opportunities for broadening cultural understanding, and may widen economic opportunities.
- **Social links:** Engagement with local governmental and non-governmental services, such as the education system and its sector-actors like principals and teachers, demonstrates a further set of social connections that may support

integration. Linkage into schools and with educators provides a third dimension of social connection—alongside bonds with one’s own community and bridges to other communities—that is relevant to social integration.

While it is, perhaps, impossible to identify a single, generally accepted definition, theory, or model that captures all of the factors associated with the social integration of recently arrived refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008), FitzGerald and Arar (2018) propose that there is a need to stretch the existing theories that serve to underpin the dominant conceptualizations of refugee resettlement and social integration to better understand the dynamic social processes that influence them. Essentially, because prominent existing theories have been crafted from a Westernized perspective, they do not seem to allow for inclusion of other cultural frameworks.

In many respects, the measured levels of access and success in the social sectors of employment, housing, health, and education can serve as indicators of social integration for recently arrived refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008). In particular, when examining the social integration of recently arrived refugees to Canada and their integration into the various provincial and local education systems, Barton et al.’s (2004) concept of parental engagement provides access to understand the social connections as experienced relationally by refugee parents with their child’s school. When parental engagement is examined within Ager and Strang’s (2008) framework, it is possible to analyze critically the extent to which schools support the social connections and connectiveness of recently arrived refugees from both a processes and outcomes orientation that leads to parental engagement.

Ager and Strang’s (2008) description of social connections aligns well with Canada’s long-standing policies regarding the social integration of newcomers and refugees (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1970; Statistics Canada, 1959). Broadly speaking, the Canadian government’s approach toward social integration is founded on the principles that the processes should: (1) be voluntary in nature, (2) be a shared social responsibility between an individual and the host society, and (3) allow individuals to retain their linguistic, ethnic, religious, and cultural identity in accordance with Canadian law and support them to access and participate in Canada’s democratic institutions (Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, 1970; Statistics Canada, 1959). This approach was initially developed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Using a parental engagement framework to analyze recently arrived refugee parents' perceptions within and across the social contexts of schooling ought to provide insight into how educators, the curriculum, and the policies contribute to the structure and ongoing structuring of the educational system (Ager & Strang, 2008; Alba & Nee, 1997, 2003; Raffo & Gunter, 2008). It should also allow for the critical analysis of how these factors may enable or limit opportunities for recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents to engage with the people and processes that shape and direct the system in which their children are educated.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to seek a better understanding of the experiences of one specific group of recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees. In particular, the experiences under study were analyzed relative to the dynamic relationships that exist between the concepts of parental involvement and parental engagement with children's schooling and the types of social connections that might link these two distinct and yet interrelated concepts (Ager & Strang, 2008; Barton et al., 2004).

## **Research Design**

Methodologically, the study was framed as interpretive, interactional qualitative research, which is a type of research process that is focused on developing an understanding of people's lives, particularly during what might be considered a critical period (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 2002). Interpretive interactionism directs the researcher's attention to focus on: (a) the interactional processes and the meanings people make of them, (b) the turning point moments where the underlying social patterns are most likely to become obvious, and (c) the private troubles of individuals and how these are related to the broader social structures and processes (Denzin, 2002). For recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents, the transition of their children into Canadian schools and their initial integration into the Canadian education system can be regarded as a critical period of their lives.

Specifically, the study focused on the perceptions of recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees who had resettled in Winnipeg, Manitoba and whose resettlement had been supported by Welcome Place, which is operated by the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), or the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM). At the time, both Welcome Place and IRCOM were Winnipeg's two

leading organizations that supported refugee sponsorship, settlement, and housing. All of the research protocols and instruments used in this study were approved by the relevant institutional research-ethics board.

Welcome Place and IRCOM were contacted about hosting an initial meeting with recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents. The information meetings were facilitated through and translated by their respective staffs and, at the meetings, the staffs described the nature of the proposed research study and distributed an “Invitation to Participate” letter. Based on expressions of interest, qualitative, semi-structured individual interviews (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 2002) were scheduled and held with interested parties at either Welcome Place or IRCOM. Twenty-one individual interviews with either one or two parents (i.e., married couples) were held to collect data on the perspectives of recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents whose arrivals in Canada happened between July 2014 and August 2016.

Twenty-one interviews is a sufficient sample size given that “qualitative studies with more than 20 or so participants are rare” (Gay et al., 2012, p. 143). In addition, the sample size allowed for data saturation to be achieved; data saturation is a valued characteristic of qualitative research in general (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were conducted by two bilingual Arabic-English graduate students, one male and one female. The participants were asked if they preferred being interviewed by a male or female interviewer, and were accommodated based on their preference.

The interviews were comprised of eight broad questions. The first three sought to collect some basic demographic information about the parents prior to their status of becoming a refugee, such as the number of children in the family and the highest level of educational attainment and career obtained within the immediate family. The remaining five broad questions and more specific sub-questions focused on uncovering the ways in which the parents understood the concept of parental involvement and on identifying the challenges they believed they faced as a result of becoming refugees and being involved in their children’s education in Canada.

The interview data were initially transcribed verbatim in Arabic and member-checked by the participants (Creswell, 2013). The member-checked transcripts were then translated from Arabic to English by the two bilingual research assistants (who were graduate students), who then verified each other’s translated interviews for accuracy and corrected as required. Next, the English-language interview transcripts went through a

first and second level of coding (Creswell, 2013), and then were finally analyzed by the three authors.

For the sake of presenting the data, the term “participant” refers to a single interview wherein either one or both of the parents (in a single family) who participated in the study were present. In many cases where there were two parents involved in the interview, one of the parents did the majority of the talking. Each interview is regarded as and presented as if it represented a unique “participant” (constituting either one parent or a married couple).

Table 1 provides some background information about the individuals who consented to be interviewed. This table provides demographic information related to the participants’ highest level of formal education and their occupational or industry category.

**Table 1**

*Demographic background of participants*

	Highest level of educational attainment of one of the parents prior to refugee status	Occupation and/or industry of one of the parents prior to refugee status
Participant 1	Completed high school	Syrian Airline
Participant 2	Completed elementary school	Tailor
Participant 3	Completed elementary school	Manual labourer
Participant 4	Completed high school	Interior decorator
Participant 5	Completed elementary school	Ceramic floor/marble cabinet installer
Participant 6	Completed college/university education	Mechanical engineer
Participant 7	Completed high school	General labourer
Participant 8	Completed elementary school	Mechanic
Participant 9	No formal education	Poultry industry labourer
Participant 10	Completed elementary school	Bakery worker
Participant 11	Completed elementary school	Construction labourer
Participant 12	Grade 9	Technician with petrol company
Participant 13	Completed elementary school	Fabric/textile labourer
Participant 14	Completed elementary school	Cement labourer/owner fruit & vegetable shop

	Highest level of educational attainment of one of the parents prior to refugee status	Occupation and/or industry of one of the parents prior to refugee status
Participant 15	Completed some high school	Farmer
Participant 16	Completed elementary school	Farmer
Participant 17	Completed some high school	Electrician/plumber
Participant 18	Completed high school	Construction labourer
Participant 19	Completed high school	Retail fabric store employee
Participant 20	Some college/university education	Medical laboratory technician
Participant 21	Completed elementary school	Customs agent

The data were coded inductively and recoded and then developed into tentative themes using an iterative thematic coding process by analyzing the transcripts against both the Epstein et al. (2009) model and the framework developed for this study to analyze the data with respect to socially connected refugee parental engagement (Ager & Strang, 2008; Barton et al., 2004). The analysis involved examining the data for congruence, similarities, and unique dissimilarities (Creswell, 2013). Finally, tentative themes were further developed, analyzed, and collapsed as determined necessary and are presented thematically in the following section (2013).

## Findings

Five central themes that reflect the participants' perceptions of parental involvement as a means of becoming and being socially connected through their children's school experiences surfaced during the analysis (Ager & Strang, 2008; Barton et al., 2004; Epstein et al., 2009). These five themes are: (1) limited language competency and confidence are barriers to engagement, (2) competing basic needs leave little time to be engaged, (3) homework is viewed as a prerequisite for engagement, (4) an increased understanding of Islam and Arabic cultures might facilitate engagement, and (5) responsibility for sex education is a contested social space for engagement. Each of the themes is described below and representative examples of the data are included in order to provide some context about how the themes were inductively developed.



## **Limited Language Competency and Confidence**

All of the study's participants mentioned their lack of fluency with the English language as a barrier to simple communication with the schools' personnel and to understanding what is required from and of them as parents. They acknowledged that their limited English proficiency curtailed their ability to participate in their child's schooling experience.

More specifically, the participants stated that their limited language competency made it difficult for them to become involved in myriad activities typically taken for granted by Canadian parents, such as helping with homework, volunteering at school, or participating on parent councils. As a participant commented:

We are still struggling with our English language proficiency level and that is the reason why we don't keep a close contact with the school. Once our English improves then we can deal with the school and what the school needs. For example, when we spoke with the teacher for the first time we only said three words, then ten and hopefully next year we'll have a regular conversation. (Participant 1)

The participants highlighted experiencing difficulties in monitoring their children's schoolwork due to the language barrier. They also mentioned not being able to understand the content of letters that were sent home from school, and a number of the participants spoke of needing to enlist their children to translate the letters from the school for them. They mentioned difficulties with understanding voicemails from teachers as well as the content of face-to-face meetings with them. Some participants mentioned a lack of available translators or long delays in accessing translators. A participant noted:

For the first couple of months, there was a translator who would send us papers in Arabic. But, now there is no one. The school continued to send all these papers and forms to our house but we have no idea what it's about. It could be regarding a school meeting. Maybe it's about lunch. Or they want money. We have no idea. We often gather these papers and take them to [name redacted] so she can read them for us and tell us what it's about. There was a lady called [name redacted] who ended up staying for only two and a half months and now there is no one who speaks Arabic at school. Ever since we started living in our area, we were the

only Arabs living there, there was another family for a couple of months, but they moved and only our family remained. (Participant 21)

The majority of the participants expressed that they felt that they were not aware of how they could become involved with the school beyond responding to the occasional offer from the school for volunteer opportunities. In general, they expressed a sense of concern over the fact that their parental roles had changed with respect to their children's education because of the language barrier, and some even directly referenced the change in this role. Many participants relied on their children to translate for them in a variety of contexts, including schooling contexts, medical contexts, and other day-to-day situations. Another participant said, "We try to work with them but the language barrier is still one of the problems that we have, so we ask my elder [child] to help his younger siblings [with their homework]" (Participant 10).

Over the course of the 21 interviews, limited English-language proficiency was the most common theme that surfaced as a barrier to parents becoming involved with their child's education and to becoming engaged with the school. This single barrier served as the most pressing obstacle participants perceived that they needed to overcome.

Optimistically, a number of the participants commented that they were taking English classes outside of their work hours, simply to improve their English-language proficiency or as a stepping-stone to gaining employment, and they felt that this would allow them to be more involved with their children's classrooms and schools.

### **Competing Basic Needs**

Almost every one of the participants noted that attending to the basic needs of finding employment so that they could afford to pay for shelter and food was a greater and more weighty priority than engagement with their child's school. For many of the participants, the notion of having spare time to devote to their child's educational experience was necessarily limited as a result of the need to work and/or upgrade their formal education or English proficiency as a prerequisite to working. The participants appeared to find the lack of time for engagement to be regrettable, but they also remarked upon the necessity of devoting nearly all their waking hours to taking care of and providing for their families. As a participant noted,

We have not been involved in any volunteer activities since there was not enough time and most of my time was at work. I did not go to my child's school unless there was something urgent. Actually, it is very important to be involved in the volunteer activities, but you should have enough time to do this. (Participant 2)

As a group, the participants seemed to be focused on the immediacy of dealing with the financial pressures associated with resettlement and they expressed a need to prioritize their time on making progress toward securing employment and financial sustainability. Although not expressed by participants, resettlement refugees receive 12 months of settlement support through the government or private sponsors which may amplify the sense of a prioritized timeline as "Month 13" approaches (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016; Lenard, 2019, p. 65).

Many participants expressed a desire to be involved and engaged with the school, but they stated that they do not do so because of the sheer number of responsibilities that they felt they had to prioritize over volunteering at school. A few participants mentioned that they needed to inform their children of their time constraints because the children were asking them to become involved in more activities at school. As a participant stated:

If someone has the time to volunteer, then they definitely should, but I don't have the luxury of time. We both go to school every day to learn the language. My husband stays at school [until] 3:30 p.m. I was asked to attend school in the afternoon as well. But I told them that I can't because of my responsibilities at home. I also go to the clinic for physical therapy for my injured hand, which takes up to an hour and a half. I told them that I can't go to language school in the afternoon and by the time it reaches sunset the day is almost over. My daughter comes back from school at 3:30 so she can't do very much. We don't want to ask her to leave school and help us. We want her to stay in school and learn. We left our country and we've been through so many struggles just to secure their future. That's all we want. (Participant 15)

The following example illustrates the complex intersection of how limited time and competing basic needs impacted the participants' abilities to think about being involved with the schools:

We have a problem when it comes to dividing our time. We have two children who don't go to daycare. One is 11 months old and the other is 3 years old. I go to school at 9:00 a.m. and go back home around 1:00 p.m. Then my wife goes to school from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. When she gets back home, I leave from 4:00 [until] 6:00 p.m. It's important for me to learn the language, so I can work and provide for my family. (Participant 11)

### **Homework Is a Prerequisite for Engagement**

The participants expressed feeling disconnected from their children's in-school studies. Primarily, this was expressed through their concerns over the lack of homework being assigned to their children. Often, concern over the lack of homework was raised alongside an assertion that homework was common in their home country's education system and that it provided a means through which they could monitor their children's progress in school. For example, one participant said:

I do have an observation when it comes to the Canadian education system. Whenever we are interviewed and we are asked about our opinion, we always tell the school that we need the child to bring some homework back home. So, every time my son comes back home from school, he spends his time playing on his computer or PlayStation or even some football. Every time I tell him to go and study, he says that he has studied already at school. The case was completely different in our country, we always had homework and we would study or memorize information to be ready for school the next day. I don't understand, maybe the education here is so strong and there is no need to take some homework back home. We would just rather for the boy to keep himself busy with homework and to read and write instead of playing all day long. (Participant 12)

Similar sentiments were echoed by the majority of the participants. They seemed to feel that their children were not being given enough school-related work to complete at home. Over the course of the interviews, many of the participants expressed a concern that their child was spending too much after-school time playing, as opposed to spending time learning by doing homework. One participant said, "One thing we wish [we] could change is once the child comes back from school he should have homework because the

child spends all his time playing instead of reviewing what he took in school” (Participant 3).

A number of the participants expressed that homework enabled them, alongside other caregivers such as extended family members, to participate with the children in their formal education process. The concern over the lack of homework appeared to be twofold: (1) it made it difficult for parents to track their children’s progress through school, and (2) it left them feeling at a loss as to how to participate in their children’s education.

In addition, the participants also appeared to be facing some adjustment to parenting expectations related to the lack of homework. Owing to the fact that they were no longer expected to monitor their children’s homework progress for a significant period of time each day, the participants found themselves trying to figure out what to do with their children during the afterschool hours. Some of the participants even explained how they had attempted to persuade teachers to give more homework for the above reasons, but to no avail. As a participant explained, “They don’t give them any homework though. I would love it if I see my son is working on his homework and improving at his studies” (Participant 14).

As an exception to this general theme, one of the participants had asked for less homework to be assigned to their children, as they perceived that the volume of work was well beyond their children’s abilities. It is worth noting that the participant couple who made this comment was a pair of parents who, prior to being resettled in Canada, had themselves only completed elementary school. Their limited education may help to explain their perception of the schoolwork.

## **Understandings of Islam and Muslim Cultures Facilitate Engagement**

Many of the interviewees mentioned that they understood and valued the fact that people have freedoms that are respected in Canada, which exist as rights enshrined in law. In addition, they admitted that they were learning what that meant within a school context. As one participant noted, the transition was not easy:

In Syria schools have...prestige and respect, while here in Canada the students behave as [if] they are in a club, they eat during the class, every guy is sitting next to his girlfriend and they are flirting with each other. From my perspective, it is

disrespectful behaviours, but Canadian schools have a different view that I [must] respect. (Participant 9)

Having noted some differences in cultural views, a number of the participants described situations in which they contacted the school about conflicts between the curriculum and their religious beliefs and that they appreciated how alternate arrangements were made for their children.

On the one hand, a participant remarked, “We have explained our Arabic customs and traditions to them as well as our religion. We may have left our country, but we are not leaving our religion” (Participant 15). On the other hand, a number of other participants expressed some concern that their children might lose their connection with their religion through their exposure to the Canadian school system.

Further still, when asked a broad question about whether they had any suggestions for Canadian schools, some participants stated that they would like the Arabic culture and/or language to be taught in Canadian schools. Some perceived this as a way for their children to see that their culture is legitimized in Canada and considered important, while others viewed it as a way to maintain fluency in language, and others still thought it would be beneficial for encouraging their children’s social integration with other students (i.e., if those other students learned about Muslim culture, they might be more easily accepting of Muslim students). As a participant expressed, “Canada is a country where different cultures can mix. Therefore, when cultures are taught in school, students will be able to understand and respect each other’s cultures” (Participant 5).

As a group, they seemed to view Canada as a place that had promised intercultural respect and they wanted the school system to help enact this promise. One of the main priorities of these participants appeared to be showing respect to other cultures in return for respect for theirs. They wanted to ensure that their families could pass on their culture to the next generation and not lose their culture and language.

## **Sex Education Is a Contested Space**

Several participants identified the sex education curriculum in public schools as problematic. A few felt that the coverage of such a personal topic was unusual and, in some cases, unwanted because it conflicted with cultural sensibilities. One participant was firm

in stating the following concern: “We hear they study things of sexual nature and I’m against my daughters being taught anything like that” (Participant 21).

Others explained that they simply wanted to know what was being taught so that they could make comments to their children on the curriculum from their own cultural perspectives. A few participants also expressed the concern that perhaps their children were being taught about the subject too young. The parents making these comments had children who fell into the age range of late elementary school through high school. Based on these reactions to the Canadian curriculum, particularly because participants were not asked specifically about sex education, it seems that this particular aspect of the curriculum represents a significant departure from cultural norms for these participants. The two example comments that follow illustrate some of the concerns raised by the participants:

I only heard good things [about the school], except I heard that sex education is being taught at school and that scares me a lot. I told them if that lesson is being taught, to remove him from the class and not teach him about it. (Participant 12)

I heard about the sexual education for students at schools. As for me, I do not have any problem in teaching the sexual curriculum in schools, but I would prefer if the student starts learning it when he is mature enough, so he can know what’s right and what’s wrong. (Participant 2).

It is interesting that in the first comment the participant indicates that the topic of sex education provoked direct engagement with the school as referenced by the statement, “I told them,” whereas in the second comment the participant expresses a preference. However, as the second quoted comment illustrates, there is no indication the participant’s preference has been discussed with the school or teacher.

Throughout the interviews, both in making reference to sex education and in responding to other topical questions, there seemed to be a sense that the Canadian education system was quite different to the systems in the participants’ home countries. While in many cases this difference was expressed in a way that sounded favourable toward the Canadian system, it is clear that some important cultural barriers exist. In the case of sex education, it may be helpful for refugee parents to be briefed on the content, via an interpreter if necessary, in order that they may feel connected with their children’s learning

in this area and so that they may feel capable to comment on it from their own cultural perspectives.

## Discussion

While recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees are not a homogenous group, they do, in fact, experience similar and intersecting challenges that can detrimentally impact their real and perceived abilities to both become and continue to be engaged with the professionals responsible for their children's school experience (Ennab, 2017). As is the case with most parents, the recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents who participated in this study have positive attitudes toward their children's schools and educational experiences, primarily because they felt that their children's teachers were caring and helpful. It is important to note that these parents respect and appreciate their children's teachers, and are thankful for all that the teachers offer to their children.

While arguably not all parents will necessarily agree on a singular definition of what constitutes effective parenting, the findings of this study and of others (see, for example, Barnard, 2004; Desimone, 1999; Hill & Craft, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Zellman & Waterman, 1998) suggest that most parents understand the benefits associated with becoming and continuing to be involved, if not engaged, with their children's formal education. However, if educators want to increase the involvement and, hopefully, engagement of recently arrived refugee parents, they may want to consider the implications of this study.

This study demonstrates that there is a need for scholars and practitioners to understand the perceptions and experiences of recently arrived refugee parents so that these parents might be better supported in navigating an educational system that is unfamiliar to them. As they become better at successfully navigating the system, they can then begin to negotiate the spaces and structures of schooling and to develop the social capital that will allow them to become and continue to be more engaged with their children's education (Barton et al., 2004).

In order to communicate with teachers and school-based administrators, recently arrived non-English speaking refugee parents, as well as other newcomers, would benefit from well-developed translation services and interpreters who could be available to



support them when they need to attend school meetings and conferences or need to speak with teachers. In this particular study, even though the semi-structured research interviews were facilitated by university graduate students who were fluent in both Arabic and English, it became increasingly obvious, not only from the demographic information that interviewees provided, but also from their difficulty in understanding some of the initial interview questions, that many of the study's participants had relatively low levels of fluency in their native Arabic language.

Given the 2015 report by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2015) that identified that approximately 84% of the Syrian population was literate, the interview questions had been developed at a high school-equivalent comprehension level. However, it was not until the interviews were conducted that it became evident that approximately half of the study's participants had only completed elementary school or less in Syria prior to becoming refugees. Their formal achievement in Arabic-language fluency—their first language—can be assumed to be limited if fluency is understood as the ability to use a language automatically, spontaneously, and without a lot of hesitation, such that the communication goal is achieved without undue strain on anyone involved (United Nations, 2018). Based on this, educators should be aware that when they are translating English information from the school into Arabic for parents, they must understand that although the school-to-home communication is sent home in Arabic, it still may be written at a level above the actual reading comprehension of some recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees. Therefore, care should be taken to use clear and understandable forms of language to increase the likelihood that parents will understand the messages from the school.

In addition, language barriers are typically the most commonly cited reasons that immigrant parents do not attend school events or seek out community-related resources (Vera et al., 2012). It is important for educators to recognize that recently arrived non-English speaking refugee parents are themselves language learners and that they juggle language-learning pursuits along with a variety of other daunting tasks. They need to find employment, secure stable and affordable housing, and navigate a series of social systems that are often quite foreign to them. There is a very real need for them to be given tangible support to navigate and interpret an educational context in which they do not yet feel like they belong.

With respect to homework, while there continue to be pedagogical debates about its value in supporting student learning in relation to its intrusion into familial life (see,

for example, Kohn, 2006; Trautwein & Koller, 2003), the participants generally believe that homework has value as a mechanism to support their children's learning. They also saw it as an avenue for parents to become more engaged with their children's in-school experience. Their commentary reflects the reality of their familial lives and parenting roles prior to becoming refugees and it is a reality that is understandably quite hard for them to relinquish. It may be that other parents, non-refugee parents, simply self-initiate further learning-related work outside the classroom for their children, whereas the participant parents, all recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees, lack the tools or time to engage in this parent-initiated home learning.

Parents' cultural beliefs about their role in the education of their children can also be a factor in limiting their involvement. In some cultures, asking a teacher questions about his or her methods of assessment of a child would be considered to be disrespectful (De Gaetano, 2007). The lack of cross-cultural and intercultural training that educators receive can lead to misunderstandings between teachers/school administrators and recently arrived refugee parents. These misunderstandings can create a chasm between the school and the home. Research has demonstrated that the majority of educators would benefit from professional development activities that expose them to cultural and religious traditions that are different from ones held by the majority of the teaching workforce (Brewer & McCabe, 2014; Ennab, 2017; Kanu, 2008).

It should be noted that the concerns of Muslim parents in general related to the content and age-appropriateness of sexual education programs is not the sole providence of recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees. Sexual health education has been and continues to be one of the most controversial subjects that is taught in schools (Larkin et al., 2017). The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (2018) has created and makes available a downloadable document entitled, *A Grade-by-Grade Guide for Muslim Parents with Questions and Answers*, which is intended to provide Muslim parents with a comprehensive understanding of the sexual education aspects of the Province of Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum for Grades 1–8. While it may not be realistic to anticipate a revision of the sexual health curriculum as a response to this study's results, it is important to consider ways in which this sensitive portion of the curriculum can be communicated to Muslim parents and, furthermore, parents of any religious backgrounds and/or sensibilities that find this portion of the curriculum in whole or in part to be

objectionable. Indeed, this may in fact serve as a strong opportunity to promote parental engagement.

The findings of this study confirm what other studies have found (see, for example, Barowsky & McIntyre, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2000; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011, 2014a, 2014b), which is that recently arrived refugee parents want to partner with school personnel to support their children's success in school. However, the findings also suggest that the dominant conceptual model used by educators to frame "parental involvement" (Epstein et al., 2009), is largely regarded as hegemonic (Cranston & Crook, 2020), which is not only limiting, but may serve to regulate parental behaviours toward their children.

What is needed are more robust frameworks of caregiver and school partnerships focused on engagement (Barton et al., 2004) rather than on control. A more robust framework anchored in principles of reciprocity, and respectful relationships between parents and educators would serve minoritized parents, such as the participants in this study, by establishing a more dynamic and interactive process in which parents are invited to share in some aspects of their child's in-school educational experience (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005).

The findings of this study are important signposts that might allow educators to become more aware of how their actions might act as systemic barriers that do not encourage parental involvement in meaningful ways. As a result, the dominant model of parental involvement (Epstein et al., 2009) used by school personnel and policy makers serves to buttress the education system from what are perceived to be non-professional influences into the schooling decisions made by professional educators but without parental involvement (Barton et al., 2004). Such obstacles serve as factors that aid and abet the reproduction of social inequality and social exclusion of recently arrived refugee families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Parents' experiences with the teachers, counsellors, and administrators at their children's schools set the stage for whether home-to-school communication and volunteering will be initiated or continued (Ariza, 2002). De Carvalho (2000) critiques idealized notions of school-and-family partnerships, such as those encoded in the contemporary and dominant models of parental involvement (Epstein et al., 2009). De Carvalho (2000) argues that such models simply disregard how family material and cultural conditions, and feelings about schooling, differ according to their social class. In the case of

recently arrived refugee families who lack access to the power structures and agents in the education system, such models impose on them a subordinate role in their relationships with schools and they serve to reify educational inequality.

## Conclusions

Taken together, the findings of this study offer thoughtful considerations for teachers, school and system administrators, and educational policy makers who are committed to finding ways to effectively support recently arrived non-English speaking refugee students' successful integration into Canadian schools and their parents' integration into Canadian society.

Firstly, this study adds to the empirical research on the subject and supports the contention that when recently arrived refugee parents' involvement and engagement is supported by the new host school community and built on more robust understandings of experiences and aspirations of these newcomer communities, "it can mobilize transformative local resources and become powerful tools of school reform and family and community engagement" (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012, p. 86). Exploring recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees' conceptions of parental involvement in their children's education is an important first step to bridge the sociocultural divide between recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugee parents and Canadian educators, along with Canadian society in general.

Epstein et al.'s (2009) framework for parental involvement is the one most commonly used by educators (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Fernández & López, 2017) yet it is guided by socio-political agendas that privilege and normalize the majority's ways of thinking about and romanticizing beliefs about a parochial form of familial life (Kymlicka, 2007). Arguably, Epstein et al.'s (2009) framework is problematic for many parents, and is particularly so for recently arrived refugee parents, who are left to navigate an unfamiliar educational system and to search for the power to parent their children within the education system, even though they do not possess much of the social or political capital that would allow them to do so (Cooper, 2009).

This study demonstrates that more culturally relevant understandings of parental engagement will help to initiate more collaborative partnerships between home, school,

and other refugee supports. Collaborative efforts that decrease the power differential that exists between parents and professional educators should lead to an increase in the long-term success of recently arrived refugee parents' initial involvement and long-term engagement in their children's education (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000).

Secondly, given Canada's historic and ongoing commitment to refugee resettlement, there is a need for more robust research focused on the perceptions and experiences of recently arrived refugees. The Syrian resettlement that commenced in 2015 shifted the landscape, with a significant increase in numeric admissions, but also more refugees coming to Canada without a family connection in the private sponsorship program or any pre-existing social capital to support their arrival (Labman, 2019). In the coming years, research should focus on how stress factors impact the ability of recently arrived refugee parents to become and continue to be engaged with their children's schools. Such factors include limited language competency, challenges associated with securing employment and affordable housing, and social isolation.

Finally, the findings of this study offer a way to conceptualize parental engagement with schools in a light that positions and empowers recently arrived refugee parents as agents, architects, and authors of a shared social future within the structures of formal schooling (Ager & Strang, 2008; Barton et al., 2004). Such a conceptualization of engagement rather than involvement positions a specific group of parents—who lack social and political capital—in ways that will better allow them to draw on their experiences and beliefs as assets to both their new host communities and the schools that their children attend. Parental engagement will only become a reality for recently arrived refugee parents if educators writ-large have an interest in, and make a commitment to, collaborating and sharing power with a segment of the population who have very little access to institutional and social power (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011).

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