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Impact of COVID-19 on Refugee Families in Winnipeg

Fadi Ennab

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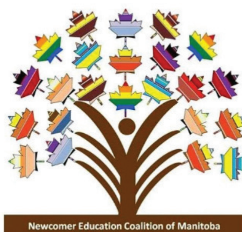

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5 **Introduction**

8 **Methods**

11 **Findings And Discussion**

Refugee Families and the COVID-19 Crisis:
"Waiting in Isolation and Falling Through the Cracks"

Schooling Experiences of Refugee Children and Youth

Remote Learning or Remoteness Without Learning?

Physical Distancing in Schools: "I Can't Breathe or Understand With a Mask"

Toll of the Crisis on the Academic Outcomes of Refugee Students

Coping With Stress and Limited Social Capital

23 **Recommendations**

Provide More Enhanced School Supports for Refugee Families

Promote and Maintain Social Capital for Refugee Families

Addressing Socioeconomic Inequities Through an Equity Lens

29 **Conclusion**

31 **References**

Introduction

THE COVID-19 CRISIS has exacerbated existing inequities in racialized communities and has made it more difficult for structurally disadvantaged groups, such as refugees (Feinberg et al., 2021; Kluge et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2021). The crisis increased refugee exposure to discrimination, disease, poverty, heightened mental illness, communication challenges, and educational disruption (Brickhill-Atkinson & Hauck, 2021). These negative social experiences, along with the closure of services and programs, created a precarious situation for some refugee families who have "fallen through the settlement service pandemic cracks" (Shields & Alrob, 2020, p. 25). Similarly, a recent study exploring the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Yazidi refugee families in Calgary demonstrated, "how resettlement provisions and social isolation along with pre-migration histories have furthered the conditions of social, economic, and affective inequities for Yazidis" (Banerjee et al., 2022, p. 33). Thus, the crisis made it more difficult for refugee families to cope during their migration and resettlement experiences.

Refugee families face many challenges during their migration experience, including before and after migrating to Canada (Haene & Cécile, 2020). Refugees are forced out of their countries of origin to flee persecution and violence, which is a disruptive process that can have deep social and psychological consequences (Simich & Adnermann, 2014). Some of the effects of such experiences include living in chronic social stress, family separation, and interrupted educational experiences (Ennab, 2017). The

pre-migration experience refugees go through can compound the challenges they face during and after migration.

Refugee families also encounter post-migration stressors. Many refugees deal with trauma, lack of English and French language ability, few financial resources, limited social capital, and overcrowded housing (Shields & Alrob, 2020; Rabiah-Mohammed et al., 2022). Refugee families must also deal with discrimination and learn to navigate complex systems, such as education, with limited, if any, supports (Ennab, 2017). These postmigration stressors can have an even stronger impact on refugee mental health than their premigration experiences (Norris et al., 2011). One way to support refugee families is through promoting social capital.

Social capital refers to the resources possessed or acquired by social groups through relationships or networks (Allan & Catts, 2012). Social capital can be individual, community-based, and/or institutional, and it can be mobilized by groups for various reasons (Tan et al., 2021). One can utilize social capital for practical supports, such as accessing information, or for emotional supports, such as companionship and sociability (Ryan et al., 2008). Social capital is also related to political and social changes that can challenge power dynamics in society (Hanley et al., 2018). Thus, social capital is a "concept that captures both a buffer function of the social environment on health, as well as potential negative effects arising from social inequality and exclusion" (Uphoff et al., 2013, p. 1). For these reasons, it is important to examine how social capital can help refugees cope with the challenges they experience.

In particular, social capital can positively influence the pathway to accessing the education system for refugee parents and their children. Research on refugee families has shown that they rely on formal and informal ways of bonding and bridging to support their children's education (Smyth et al., 2012). However, in times of crisis, refugees are limited to relying on social connections with those who share a language and culture (Ali, Zendo & Somers, 2021, p. 1). For these reasons, promoting and maintaining social capital for refugee families is important, especially as COVID-19 worsened their situation.

In discussing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the educational experiences of refugee families, research has highlighted challenges with remote learning, including access to technology, living in crowded homes with multiple children, and lack of interpretation and translation for families (Santiago et al., 2021; see also Endale et al., 2020). The crisis has also added more risks and responsibilities on refugee youth to support their families

(Couch et al., 2021). These findings show that empowering and providing supports for refugee families is crucial to mitigate the inequities they face.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on refugee parents and on their children's education in Winnipeg. This study also examines what forms of social capital are utilized or missing for refugee families to mitigate the stressors they face. Finally, this study offers recommendations to support and empower refugee families.

Methods

Research Approach

Community-based participatory research (CBPR), also known as participatory action research, was adopted for this research project (MacKinnon, 2018). This approach focuses on highlighting the lived experiences of participants to challenge the oppression they are facing in society. Scholars and community activists use this approach to represent community voices and advocate for social and policy change (MacKinnon, 2018). In Winnipeg, I have previously used CBPR to examine the experience of refugee parents and their involvement in their children's education (Ennab, 2017). The current research study uses a CBPR approach to show how refugee families are "structurally disadvantaged," especially during the crisis (WRHA, 2015, p. 2). The term structurally disadvantaged is used:

> To highlight the pre-existing structures and systems that drive health outcomes with certain audiences. The purpose is to recognize structures such as the conditions, circumstances, and determinants of health that influence opportunities for health. Since structures have been created through cumulative policy choices over time, they are not fixed and can be changed through different discourse and subsequent policy changes. The term supports our identification of solutions that modify the systems and structures –including institutions, policies and practices – that cause health inequities (WRHA, 2015, 2)

While this study is not focused on the health outcomes of refugee families, understanding their social and education experiences from a structural and policy perspective is important to avoid individualizing the challenges they face.

Research Procedures

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Winnipeg's Research Ethics Board. This project was done in partnership with the Newcomer Education Coalition (NEC), a coalition of racialized newcomer advocates, community members and organizations, school staff, and members of the Manitoba Department of Education. The goal of NEC is to improve the educational outcomes of newcomer children and youth in Manitoba's school system. A research proposal was developed to examine the experiences of refugee families during the COVID-19 crisis in Winnipeg. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the social and educational experiences of refugee families as they related to the COVID-19 crisis?
2. How does the availability or absence of social capital affect the experiences of refugee families?

The method of data collection was in-depth, qualitative, one-on-one interviews with parents, youth, and other key informants. Parents and youth were selected using a criterion sampling strategy central to the framework of the research project: parents had to identify as a refugee and have children attending schools in Winnipeg; and youth had to identify as a refugee and currently or recently attended a school in Winnipeg. Key informants included individuals associated with a service provider or a community organization that offer support to refugee families in Winnipeg.

Parent and youth participants were recruited through NEC members, including the Community Education Development Association's (CEDA) Pathways to Education program and the Newcomer Employment and Education Development Services (N.E.E.D.S.) Inc., and through word of mouth. Refugee families and key informants were interviewed in-person, through phone or online via Zoom. Written or verbal consent was obtained from participants prior to the interview. Interviews were 20 to 60 minutes in length, and participants other than key informantswere given a $30 gift card as an honorarium for their participation. Children under 16-years-old

were given $15 gift cards. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, Dari, English, and Tigrinya. The author audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. The transcripts were analyzed using a thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved re-reading interview transcripts and coding data extracts, which are collated together within each code. Codes were grouped into key themes (social experiences, schooling experiences, and coping with stress) and sub-themes (e.g., remote learning and physical distancing). An inductive approach was used in which study findings emerged from the interview data and through the researcher's interactions with the information. This approach avoids predetermined theoretical assumptions and allows findings to be drawn directly from interviewee experiences.

Participants

Participants with lived experience as refugees included 18 parents: 10 were male and eight were female. Interviews also were conducted with 10 children (under the age of 16) and eight older youth (over the age of 16). Nine of the youth/children were female and nine were male. The participants were from 12 unique families: eight families were government-assisted refugees, and four families were privately sponsored refugees. Seven families were from Syria and the other families were from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Chad, and Eritrea. These families have lived in Canada between one and seven years. Most of them lived in the downtown area of Winnipeg. The number of children in each household ranged from two to 10 children. In addition, four key informants were interviewed.

Findings and Discussion

Refugee Families and the COVID-19 Crisis: "Waiting in Isolation and Falling through the Cracks"

A main theme that emerged from talking to refugee families is that the COVID-19 crisis limited their access to social networks, supports, and opportunities. While many refugee families were resilient, the limited access to social capital exacerbated the impact of the crisis on them and their neighbourhoods.

COVID-19 and the public health measures for social distancing limited social interactions in the community. Many refugee participants struggled with not being able to socialize in person with their friends or community members. As one parent said, "Before [the COVID-19 crisis] we were like a parrot free to fly outside in space, but now we are in a cage bounded by so many COVID rules." This was especially the case for participants who spoke no English or French and had recently arrived in Winnipeg during the crisis. For example, several participants described how they had no friends or family in Canada; the only relations they had were in their countries of origin or where they lived temporarily before moving to Canada. Thus, for many refugee families, COVID-19 limited their ability to establish or grow their social network in their new neighbourhoods.

COVID-19 interrupted access to social networks, but also interrupted access to programs and services that refugee families may rely on for social and educational support. Many parents felt the crisis disrupted daily life and made it difficult to access programs in the community, or do 'everyday'

things, such as paying bills, getting a medical appointment, or buying groceries. As one key informant said:

> A lot of folks survive on the idea of social capital in the community. This support was cut, which means everybody for themselves and God for us all. [Refugees] are left to themselves and with no supports.... Anything that will help you adapt to your new environment is completely gone.

To take another example, refugee children were not able to go to after-school programs to get help with homework or socialize with friends. As a result of the disruption of social networks and supports during the COVID-19 crisis, some refugee families found themselves in a precarious situation (Shields & Alrob, 2020). As a key informant explained:

> Lots of refugee families were waiting in isolation and falling through the cracks.... It became very apparent during the pandemic that there are huge gaps and lack of connections for newcomer refugees not just with the organized sector, but also with the informal grassroots sector.

Consistent with participants' experiences, research shows that even before the disruptions related to the COVID-19 crisis, most newcomers in Western Canada do not access support services from organizations (Wilkinson & Bucklaschuk, 2014). This is because racialized newcomers often face individual and structural barriers to accessing resources in their new communities (e.g., limited English language ability, limited transportation, lack of culturally appropriate and safe services).

One main resource that the COVID-19 crisis interrupted for refugee parents was English language programs. Most parents interviewed noted that they were attending English Language programs but with the ongoing crisis their education was either interrupted or delayed. Although there was an option for parents to continue their programming remotely, some were not able to. It was difficult for parents to learn English online at home, especially when they had to help their own children with remote schooling in the same space. As one parent shared:

> At home, we got very little instruction and information. To understand, you need to translate everything from English to Arabic and it is hard on me. For the first two semesters I did it online, but then I stopped going because my wife works part time and I had to be home with the kids.

For reasons such as these, many parents reported that the COVID-19 crisis negatively impacted their education, putting them behind in their ability to communicate in English.

Other participants noted that the pandemic made it harder to retain and find employment. As one key informant explained:

> The economic impact of the crisis was quite substantial and disproportionately affected racialized newcomer families in precarious employment. We saw lots of families losing their jobs. It is an unfortunate phrase, but they are [treated as the] "last hired and first fired."

Not being able to have stable work reduced refugee families' household income and sometimes made it difficult to meet basic needs. For these reasons, some participants felt the COVID-19 crisis disproportionately impacted refugee families, especially those who were living in poverty or with limited income.

The COVID-19 pandemic also made employment riskier. Some participants noted that working during the crisis was stressful because they were concerned about getting infected by the virus or bringing it home to their families. (Notably, in Manitoba, the first healthcare worker who died of COVID-19 was a refugee from Congo [Da Silva & Sanders, 2020). Research has also shown that in addition to having little stability at work, many refugees had less protected service sector jobs during the COVID-19 crisis, which placed them at a greater risk of exposure (Clarke et al., 2021; Shields & Alrob, 2020).

Housing for refugee families was also negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Some parents and key informants noted how refugee families often lived in overcrowded and poorly equipped households, which made it difficult for families with a mixed-age group of children to use space to study or engage in activities such as playing or exercising. Overcrowding made it difficult to quarantine when one member of the household got infected with COVID or was a close contact to someone who was infected. As one key informant explained, "When one family member gets it [COVID-19], they all do. There is no such thing as isolation." Thus, having limited space at home made it harder to engage in activities without disruption, but also riskier due to potential exposure.

Research illustrates that finding adequate and affordable housing is a widespread and ongoing issue for refugee families in Winnipeg (Carter & Osborne, 2009; Ennab, 2017; Silvius et al., 2021) and in larger cities, like Toronto and Vancouver (Shan, 2019). As Wissö & Bäck-Wiklund's (2021) study on Syrian refugees in Sweden have shown, "They were forced to live in close physical and emotional proximity both before and during the crisis" (p. 10). Not surprisingly, research on refugee families during the COVID-19 crisis shows that overcrowded housing was a main factor in higher rates of COVID infections (Clarke et al., 2021; Greenaway et al., 2020; Shields &

Alrob, 2020). Thus, for refugee families, as Rabiah-Mohammed et al. (2022) argue in Canada, COVID-19 has "thwarted their housing stability goals and decreased their likelihood of improving their housing conditions" (p. 10; see also Hamilton et al., 2022).

Furthermore, refugee parents and youth noted that being at home with family increased their responsibilities. Many refugee mothers noted that they had to help their children with schooling and do more childcare. Some older youth also said that they helped their younger sibling with homework and troubleshooting issues with remote learning. Similarly, a few girls noted that they were doing more house chores, such as baby sitting, cleaning, and cooking. For these reasons, participants felt that the COVID-19 crisis had made their housing situation more stressful than it had been previously.

Research illustrates that the COVID-19 crisis has added more responsibilities on youth to support their family, not only with house chores or caring for and teaching siblings, but also with providing their parents with new information related to the crisis (Cameron et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021; Wissö & Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, refugee youth supported their families by adopting various roles, including becoming navigators and cultural brokers, providers, caregivers, and innovators (Couch et al., 2021). While these roles show how resilient and creative youth can be, youth participants spoke about the toll the crisis took on their mental health and well-being. Helping one's family navigate complex systems and information can put youth in an inappropriate position that can add additional stress (Ennab, 2017).

For many refugee families, living in overcrowded homes and not being able to improve their social conditions or access the resources they need was stressful and impacted their mental health and well-being. In discussing their feelings or concerns, participants used words such as "anxious," "depressed," "isolated," "imprisoned," "scared," "stressed," and "under siege." As a key informant explained:

> If you are a refugee coming from trauma or bombardment, [and now] you live in isolation, family is conflicting, housing is crunched, and you are not able to meet family needs, COVID just made it worse for your family.... tomorrow they can get a severe mental health breakdown.

For these reasons, participants were concerned about refugee mental health and well-being especially during the compounded stress of the COVID-19 crisis. Some parents were upset because they felt that the Federal government

had been “neglectful by bringing refugees here and then throwing them in homes, where you feel like in prison.”

Consistent with the evidence given, research shows that COVID-19 exacerbated mental illnesses in refugees by limiting access to resources and worsening existing inequities (Cameron et al., 2021). The disruption related to the crisis also can trigger previous traumatic stress in refugees (Browne et al., 2021). For example, the lockdowns and empty streets can evoke memories of forced isolation and hiding (Brickhill-Atkinson & Hauck, 2021). Moreover, the lack of supports, along with experiencing heightened racism, can create a feeling of “suffocating tightness” in racialized communities (Tan & Umamaheswar, 2021, p. 1). For these reasons, most participants felt that the COVID-19 crisis has increased the stressors that refugee families face in the community.

Participants who arrived during the COVID-19 crisis especially noted the mental health stress they faced upon arrival. Several refugee parents noted how they were required to isolate upon arrival to Winnipeg, which made becoming self-sufficient harder than it might have otherwise been because the isolation limited their ability to get to know their new environment or go find the supports they needed. New arrivals, in particular, also highlighted how their inability to communicate in English and their limited access to resources added to their isolation and depression, especially in the winter season. A few parents and children shared they repeatedly cried during the crisis because they wanted to leave Canada to “go back home,” where they had existing social networks, the ability to speak without interpreters, and a deep longing for a sense of belonging.

Schooling Experiences of Refugee Children and Youth

A second theme that emerged was that the COVID-19 public health measures made schooling more challenging for refugee students. With school closures and moving to remote learning, refugee students faced several challenges that made it difficult for them to learn and study.

Remote Learning or Remoteness without Learning?

A main issue participants identified with remote learning was their limited access to technology. Several families did not have enough computers or devices for all their children to use at the same time for remote schooling,

especially at the start of the COVID-19 crisis when schools suddenly closed. Some children had to use small phone devices with limited internet connection for their schooling. Even when families had the technology and no internet problems, some did not have the technological or language skills to use them. As one young refugee student explains:

> My head gets tired from typing. You need to learn typing before you even do anything online. You also need to know what to do or where it is. [For example,] Google classroom there is so many tools, but how to learn using them is hard.

Not being able to use technology caused students to miss out on educational instruction and activities.

Another challenge for refugee children with remote learning was the difficulty they encountered in understanding discussion and instruction during class time. Several participants noted that it was harder for students, especially those who are not fluent in English, to follow class discussion online because they could not always see facial expressions or body language that they usually relied on to understand what is being said. This made students miss a lot of information, which as one parent explained, would "go in one ear and out the other." Thus, many felt that remote learning created sizable gaps for refugee students in learning

In addition to not being able to absorb information, participants felt that online learning made it more difficult for refugee children to participate in class discussions. Many refugee students reported it was easier to get help and interact with school staff and peers in in-person classroom settings. Some students did not participate in online class discussions, and reported they kept their video off because they felt shy sitting at home and self-conscious on screen ("feeling like everyone is watching and listening").

In addition, several participants felt remote learning made it more difficult for children to understand and participate in class discussions because their home was too loud and chaotic. Students often had to share space with their siblings of differing ages and grades. This made it harder to focus on class discussion without getting distracted by their family.

Studying from home also involved limited educational instruction and support for refugee students. Many families and key informants felt students were getting less instruction from school staff online. It was also harder to ask teachers for help with assignments or clarifying comprehension of class discussions online. As a young refugee student explained:

> I hate remote learning. Teachers will give us a lot more homework. I wouldn't do them because I needed help. Math was especially difficult. When I asked for help, I didn't understand because they would respond back in text. Then I stopped asking. I would not join team calls that much.

As a result of limited supervision or attention from school staff during remote learning, several participants said that refugee students "lacked motivation" to study. As one parent put it, "Kids don't follow the rules sometimes. They may open Zoom and then go to sleep. There is no teacher over their head. I got a lot of complaints [from school staff on my son's behaviour]." For these reasons, many participants felt that being in school was more engaging and supportive for students.

Parents struggled to support a mixed-age group of children with their education at home. Many parents had limited language and educational backgrounds, which made it difficult to help their children with schoolwork or technology before and after the crisis. As a key informant explained,

> Some [refugee parents] are victims of conflict and are still learning their language and may not be educated. It is hard for them to be always present and be teachers to help their children that is one of the biggest challenges.

Thus, many refugee children were not getting the educational supports they needed from their family or school staff.

An additional reason why remote learning was not engaging for students is because they lost the social aspect of schooling. Participants said that it was boring and isolating for children and youth to sit at home and study without being able to socialize with their peers in school. As one youth said, "It was boring as hell, no sports, nothing to do, and a lot of free time." Some children also said that remote learning made them miss out on sharing food and physical touch like hugs or high fives with their peers. These interactions make education feel fun and engaging. But it's also the case that these assessments are not outside the 'ordinary' complaints heard from children and parents within and outside refugee communities. However, for these children, comments from refugee parents and children need to be contextualized: the missing interactions are those very activities that help facilitate learning language and culture. As one key informant explained, "For newcomer refugee children, of course all peer-to-peer interactions have been missing and that forms an important part of their adaptation, culturation, and formation of identity and belonging."

Consistent with these themes, other research shows that refugee students in Manitoba often lack the educational supports they need from their parents or the school system (Cranston et al.,2021; Ennab, 2017; Kanu, 2008). The COVID-19 crisis has made it harder than it already was for refugee students to participate in school. Refugee parents also found it difficult to support their children with remote learning from home because they struggled with accessing technology and understanding teacher instructions (Endale et al., 2020). These difficulties constitute "threats to accessible and equitable education" (Santiago et al., 2021, p. 335).

Physical Distancing in Schools: "I Can't Breathe or Understand with a Mask"

COVID-19 impacted the education of refugee students not just with remote learning, but also after they were physically back in school. While participants often viewed physical distancing requirements as necessary, several refugee students said wearing a mask all day in school made learning harder than it already was for them. Some noted that not being able to see someone's mouth or facial expressions as they spoke made it more difficult to hear and understand. This was especially the case with students who struggled to communicate in English.

In addition to making it more difficult to communicate or participate, a few students noted that they were not able to do group projects or activities, which, again, made it less fun to be in school. In addition, some felt that wearing a mask for a long time was not comfortable and sometimes made it hard to breath, especially when they were being physically active in school. As one youth said, "I can't breathe or understand with a mask on all-day in school." For these reasons, participants felt that the COVID-19 crisis impacted the social and educational outcomes of refugee students.

Regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic, many participants felt that refugee students are not getting adequate supports in schools. As one refugee student explained:

> The teacher talks to you in English, and they will continue talking even after you tell them that you don't understand. When we first arrived in Winnipeg [during the COVID-19 crisis] the teacher would translate to us using an iPhone in the classroom, but now with everyone back it is difficult. There are more students and more requests, so the teacher stopped translating for us

Instead of getting the supports and motivation they need, these students felt they were left on their own to figure it out and reported being "given" a lot of "free time" in school.

Toll of the Crisis on the Academic Outcomes of Refugee Students

Given that refugee students and parents faced heightened challenges during COVID-19, many participants were concerned about the educational achievement and progress of refugee students, especially those with interrupted schooling and limited English language ability. Participants felt that the lack of supports for refugee students during the crisis have pushed them further behind in their education. As one parent said, "New people coming to Canada need more help because in 2020, they didn't learn a lot. So, they must wait or maybe take another year [of school]." Some students noted that they "almost failed" their grade level or "feel dumber" when they went back to the classroom.

Several key informants were concerned the crisis caused more refugee students to be pushed out of schools with E-credits, which are adapted English language courses often given to students who do not have the necessary level to graduate with a high school diploma (Jowett et al., 2020). Receiving E-credits means that a student cannot go to post-secondary education after high school; instead, they need to go to adult education to qualify for university. As two key informants shared:

> Some refugee students arrive to Winnipeg with interrupted schooling. So, the first time they go to high school is when they are close to being 18. They can stay in school until they turn 21. A lot of these young students are sent to adult education [after receiving an E-credit]. This is not support. They just made connection to school and now they must move. We see them as adults, but in terms of education and learning they are not there yet.

> Refugee students have a limited time. Losing two academic years [because of the pandemic] is a lot and some of them are of [graduating] age, which pushes them out to graduate with E-credits. This is very detrimental to them because it does not allow them to enroll in college or university.

These experiences created future disadvantage for families because E-credits limited the education and employment outcomes of students. Unfortunately, as one key informant noted, sometimes refugee parents did not know about

E-credits until after their children had receive them at a "graduation ceremony," which was a disappointing and an "out of this world" experience.

Research in Manitoba also showed that refugee students are disproportionately streamlined into lower-level education because of school policies and lack of supports given to them and their families (Dykshoorn, 2009; Kanu, 2008). As I have argued elsewhere, before the COVID-19 crisis, refugee families were "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" (Ennab, 2017, p. 2). The misuse of E-credits and how they can result in "misunderstandings and disappointment" for refugee families because their use makes leaving school an end point rather than a supported transition (Jowett et al., 2020, p. 20) remains a concern. While refugee students with E-credits in Manitoba can enroll in adult education, they often are not well supported to gain high school diplomas or to transition successfully to post-secondary education. This means refugee students, as Silver (2022) argued, will continue "falling through the cracks of a[n] [education] system whose rules and regulations are byzantine" (pp. 31–32).

Coping with Stress and Limited Social Capital

Given that programs and services in the community were closed at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, refugee families turned to informal networks for support. One main source of support for refugees to cope with stress was family and friends.

While the COVID-19 crisis meant that some refugee families spending more time in crowded living quarters, which can be emotionally and financially stressful, participants also noted that family was a source of support to mitigate the stress. As one refugee young adult said, "generally, the way how I get away from stress is through having interactions with my family members and calling family members abroad." Some parents and youths felt that being with their family through socializing, playing, and caring can make life not just busy and chaotic, but also meaningful. Being with their family gave them a sense of purpose and helped reduced their sense of isolation.

In addition to being with family, some participants said that youth coped with stress during the COVID-19 crisis by talking and/or playing video games with friends using their cell phones or computers. These friends were often from the same social group as them. Some of these friends were living

not far from them in the city, while others were from outside Canada. For example, a few Syrian youth mentioned that they try to feel better by talking to their extended family in Syria and by playing video games with friends in Jordan, where they lived temporarily after being forced out of Syria. For several refugee youth with limited access to resources and limited language ability, being able to virtually connect with friends was the "only exit." This helped ease stress and provided youth with an option to share information about school or get help with understanding class material.

Since most communication with friends and family was through technology, some participants were concerned about the impact of technology on refugee children's health. Instead of going outside to be active and socializing in person, children were looking at a screen, some with "red eyes," for long hours. Thus, while refugee youth were able to maintain transnational social capital during the crisis, they were isolated from the broader community they were living in.

Consistent with the experiences shared, research illustrates that family and friends are an important source of social capital that give refugees access to emotional, informational, and logistical supports (Tan et al., 2021). However, research also warns against generalizing the benefits of social capital to all contexts because it can be a "double-edged" phenomenon—not all effects are always positive (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017, p. 104). Having access to social capital, and maximizing the benefits from it, depends on one's relationships, identity, and social position. While family for refugees can be a "core of social capital" by providing support and a sense of belonging (Tan et al., 2021, p. 1), family also can influence individual behaviour in ways harmful to one's health and well-being, especially when parents or children are struggling to find time to rest and recover (Wissö & Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). Similarly, for racialized migrants and refugees, having tight networks within one's own ethnic and/or racial group can "signal social disadvantage and ghettoization" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 686; see also Tan et al., 2021; Uphoff et al., 2013). This is because newcomers face structural barriers and discrimination, which can push them away from the broader community and toward their own racial or ethnic group.

Beyond relying on family and friends to cope with stress, a few participants said that they coped with stress by relying on themselves or adapting to the situation. As one youth said, "What matters is you, and you need to use resources and opportunities around you. You also need to be determined to learn and work hard." Similarly, as one parent said, "Go with the flow, use an umbrella when needed.... There is no choice but to survive, even when

you are dying every day." Thus, while some expressed resiliency in the face of daily challenges, others were exasperated because regardless of their individual efforts their family continued to face structural barriers such as poverty and precarious employment in the community.

Recommendations

PARTICIPANTS IN THIS study had various suggestions to support and empower refugee families during and after the COVID-19 crisis. These suggestions included providing more enhanced school supports, promoting access to social capital for refugee families, and addressing the inequities they face in their neighbourhoods.

Provide More Enhanced School Supports for Refugee Families

Participants in this research study felt that refugee students would benefit from having more enhanced supports in schools to cope with the compounded impact of the COVID-19 crisis and improve their educational outcomes. As two key informants said:

> There is a period called learning recovery that needs to happen. So, it should not be business as usual [after the COVID-19 crisis]. There should be additional and enhanced supports provided in school and during the day in the classroom.
>
> Now after the pandemic, is there any way for refugee youth to move forward? Are there any activities we can organize for them? Ask the youth what their challenges are with studying, employment, and mental health, and where they can go for support?

Providing more enhanced academic supports for refugee students can be done in several ways. Participants suggested more academic instruction for refugee students to help with English language and other subjects, like math or science, be made available. Some participants said this could be accomplished by hiring more staff or reducing the number of students in classrooms.

Another way to support refugee students is by providing more translation and interpretation supports for them and their families, especially for those who are new and do not know English. This would help students better understand and participate in class discussions and would help parents to be more involved in the education system.

In addition, some participants felt that schools can offer more social and financial support for refugee students. Support could include offering transportation, bursaries, or access to computers.

All participants agreed that refugees would benefit from more supports, but not all students wanted more academic support. For example, one refugee student felt that it would be more helpful if they received more practical learning "using your hands," instead of academic instruction because they struggled with many subjects. A school counsellor encouraged this student to "just go to class and learn as much as you can to pass." While this advice can be considered 'supportive,' by encouraging the student to avoid dropping out, it also included an underlying racist assumption that racialized students underperform in school (Silver, 2013).

To enhance academic outcomes for refugee students, their education needs to be empowering and explicitly anti-racist and anti-oppressive. To do this, one key informant suggested the need for more racialized staff, representative of the student population, and more consequences for acts of racism in schools. Another key informant suggested the educational curriculum be revised to make it more inclusive and engaging for refugee students. As the key informant put it, the curriculum is currently "culturally inappropriate" and "very scattered and disparate to me. Not easy to use and learn from." Thus, offering support to refugee students needs to be understood as a problem the current curriculum does not adequately address.

Schools also need community engagement to ensure families are involved and supported both inside and outside of schools (Cranston et al., 2021; Ennab, 2017). Similarly, research on refugee families during the crisis highlighted the importance of social support located at schools that help meet basic needs, provide information in multiple languages, and connect to resources for supporting mental health and well-being (Santiago et al., 2021).

Promote and Maintain Social Capital for Refugee Families

Many participants felt that refugee families need more access to resources or social capital in their neighbourhoods. One way of doing this would be providing greater access to community organizations and programs.

Since some refugee families interviewed already rely on community organizations for social and educational supports, their call was that existing supports need to be enhanced and promoted in the community. As one key informant explained:

> There are some models [used by] various non-profits that are excellent. They offer not only first-language interpretation and up-to-date information, but they also provide cultural brokering. This is where you have the unique capacity of trusted leaders to help spread information that is accurate and that motivates people to act more and take care of their health or access services and so on.

Providing cultural brokering and advocacy through community-based non-profits was cited as effective during the COVID-19 crisis because many refugee families were not otherwise well-connected to social services or health systems. Similarly, one key informant recommended that "after school programs in the community need to be well-funded [by government] to provide the enhanced support to help youth and children recover and catch up or get to where they need to be in term of academic progress."

Consistent with participants' experience, research shows that community organizations can play an important role in helping refugees find opportunities in the community. For example, as Thomas (2017) argued, "services designed to assist newcomers find or re-start careers can reduce the impact of obstacles such as limited social capital, unfamiliarity with the Canadian workplace, losing hope, and the lack of credential recognition" (p. 54).

Community organizations provide a space where refugee youth feel valued and cared for during and after the COVID-19 crisis, but participants noted that the current capacity of organizations fall below the needs of the community. Doing so would require additional resources to support programs and policies that focus on supporting refugee youths' networks and providing empowering spaces, where they are given leadership roles (Couch et al., 2021; Keary et al., 2022). It would also require initiatives that are multilevel, family focused, culturally and linguistically tailored, and focused on access to services (Browne et al., 2021).

In addition to providing access to community organizations, refugee families need more opportunities to socialize and connect with their family. Given that family support can be a buffer against stress, it is important to promote initiatives that allow refugees to be able to sponsor their extended families, facilitating reunification which is known to be a more durable "social network support and mitigate mental health deterioration" (Rabiah-Mohammed et al., 2022, p. 27).

Some participants also wanted more social activities, like gardening or picnics, which would allow them to connect with others and learn practical skills. Social activities, like gardening that is land-based, can be helpful in coping with the impact of forced migration and provide time or space to heal and exert independence (Banerjee et al., 2022). While some community organizations do provide social opportunities, offerings are limited and well below need. Participants noted that funding for "grassroots" efforts, community groups and leaders would be recommended. As one key informant explains:

> There is a lot of mental health and well-being concerns, and we need more activities, like celebrations and events, but we do not have funding. Most funding is going to these [larger community] organizations. Governments also need to consider community leaders [or groups] because we can support each other in terms of mental well-being. We are trying to get back to connect to each other, but it is challenge because of time and resources.

From this perspective, governments should provide increased funds to community organizations that are explicitly designated for community-member directed initiatives. Several key informants felt that funding ethnocultural or grassroots communities can help connect refugees to the services and opportunities they need during and after the crisis. Being connected to a social group also can give a sense of belonging and provide access to social and cultural capital.

Lastly, promoting social capital for refugee families should include forming bonds of solidarity with their neighbourhoods and the broader community outside of their own social group. While some participants had relations with a limited network of friends and family, they often lacked connections to community members from outside their social group who were seen as helpful not just for learning English, but also to access supports that they may need. In addition, while some refugees may access services targeted for them, these services do not necessarily create "respectful relationships, opportunities to cross social boundaries, and potential access to greater social capital" (Ali, Zendo & Somers, 2021, p. 10). Thus, promoting social

capital in refugee communities must consider both formal and informal support networks.

Addressing Socioeconomic Inequities Through an Equity Lens

Participants noted that while social capital is helpful, it is more important to address the structural disadvantages or inequities in the community. One way of doing this is through providing more educational and employment opportunities for refugees, which will require more active support and funding from government and private sponsors.

Moreover, to offer sustainable supports for refugee families in the community, several key informants highlighted the need for equity in creating and implementing policies and programs. As one key informant said, "We need to develop policies that are specific to those refugees … [because] not everyone has the same access or have lived in Winnipeg with this kind of life."

These recommendations are consistent with the voices of advocates and community organizations in Manitoba who want school divisions to be more "intentional and accountable" in addressing equity and supporting racialized newcomer students. Such calls would ensure that school staff, curriculum, and practices are more responsive to the education needs of racialized newcomer families, including refugees (NEC, 2020). One way of enhancing equity in schools is by measuring equity-specific outcomes. Doing so would require collecting and analysing data that could reveal systemic biases, holds organizations accountable by establishing baselines, and provide a means of tracking concrete change within the system (e.g., representation among school staff, streaming of youth by race) (Etowa & Hyman, 2021; Learning Network, 2020).

In addition to implementing equity initiatives and accountability measures, it is important that schools be well-funded. Investing in schools must be considered as a primary resource for racialized and refugee communities. This investment is necessary, as Santiago et al. (2021, p. 356) explains "for navigating future challenges and crises beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Crises often exacerbate disparities, but if strong supports are already in place, schools can mitigate challenges and promote equity for newcomer youth and families."

Addressing the social and economic inequities in the community can ensure that groups, like refugees, can access the social capital they need,

and be able to maximize its benefits in facing social or health challenges. Thus, in addition to supporting greater access to social capital, refugees need support to address inequities in their communities, as identified by members of the community. This would require "inclusive public policies grounded in principles of equity and justice" (Tan et al., 2021, p. 11), and would engage refugee families in the creation and elaboration of policies that will affect them. Failing to do so, in other words, maintaining the current status quo, remains within a neoliberal framework, which emphasizes the self-governance of individuals but does not consider the social and political context that structures or influences their experiences (Thomas, 2017). As others have described, neoliberalism is best understood as an "organized state abandonment," a strategy that tends and leads to the exploitation of the most vulnerable and racialized communities (Gilmore, 2015). Refugees will continue to be structurally disadvantaged in facing current and future crisis.

Conclusion

FOR MANY REFUGEE families living in Winnipeg, the COVID-19 crisis worsened the inequities they face in education and social contexts. Experiences shared in this study showed that refugee families found it difficult to navigate school closures and remote learning. Many refugee students faced barriers in accessing technology, participating in class discussions, and learning from home without the presence of school staff or their peers. At the same time, refugee students had to learn and study in a limited space with more siblings and responsibilities, and less academic supports from school staff and their parents. Refugee families had to cope with isolation, limited social supports, low-quality housing, and financial insecurities. These challenges pushed refugee students further behind academically and made families feel more vulnerable and concerned about their mental health and well-being.

But despite limited social capital and existing inequities, like poverty, racism and lack of services in their neighbourhoods during the crisis, many refugee families expressed resilience and perseverance by maintaining or deepening their ties with their family and friends. While these relations provided emotional and informational supports, they were often limited to online interactions and sometimes caused more stress, since larger families had limited space at home. Equitable education for refugee families will require enhanced supports and more access to resources, but also policies that considers and prioritizes their experiences without excluding or further disadvantaging them.

Given that many refugee families live in inner city neighbourhoods and have limited social networks outside of their social/racial group, future research should look at ways refugees and the services to support them could promote social relations with the larger community, including those who are Indigenous, racialized, and/or white. Future research on refugees should also consider social capital, during or after crisis, in relation to other forms of capital (cultural, linguistic, economic), and account for structural disadvantages in the community.

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