



# CCPA

## research for communities

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

April 2017

## Being involved in uninvolved contexts: Refugee parent involvement in Children's Education

**T**he involvement of refugee parents in their children's education is crucial for academic success and community development. Yet schools often struggle in promoting the involvement of newcomer parents, especially in contexts where there are language, cultural and socioeconomic challenges separating the school system and its staff from the communities and families they serve. While refugee parents are not a homogenous group, they face unique, multiple, and intersecting challenges that can negatively impact their involvement in their children's education to the point of potentially being uninvolved.

Manitoba continues to accept refugees. Between 2000 and 2010, Manitoba accepted 11,215 refugees at a rate of about 1,100 a year, or roughly 10 percent of all immigrants, with most settling in Winnipeg. The Newcomer Education Coalition is dedicated to improving the educational opportunities of newcomers to Manitoba. Coalition members describe many cases where newcomer youth are not completing high school and where parents are struggling to engage in their children's schooling. Various stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers and other education professionals in different school divisions are aware that this is a problem and reports have been generated over the years highlighting the issues and proposing ways to respond. However, there continues to be a lack of a

systematized plan of action in Manitoba schools. Supports offered in schools vary within and between school divisions.

The coalition asked Shauna MacKinnon of the Manitoba Research Alliance if she would be interested in doing research to analyse the situation from the parents' and educators' perspectives and provide recommendations to help refugee parents be more involved in their children's education. Researcher Fadi Ennab worked with the coalition and wrote the report *Being Involved in Uninvolved Contexts: Refugee Parent Involvement in Children's Education*. The report is based on 23 interviews with refugee parents mostly from the Middle East and Africa, focus groups involving 16 school staff and 14 refugee students, and 27 surveys completed by school staff. Funding for this research was provided the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through the Manitoba Research Alliance.

### **Why Focus on Refugee Parental Involvement in Children's Education?**

There is a large body of academic research demonstrating a strong relationship between parent involvement in children's education, student academic success, and community empowerment. Not supporting parent involvement for groups at risk of marginalization, such as refugee families, can reduce the rate of return on educational

### **CCPA-MB**

309 - 323  
PORTAGE AVE.  
WINNIPEG  
R3B 2C1

### **PHONE**

204.927.3200

### **EMAIL**

CCPAMB@  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

### **WEBSITE**

WWW.  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

### **BLOG**

WWW.POLICYFIX.CA

### **TWITTER**

@CCPAMB

RESEARCH - ANALYSIS - SOLUTIONS

spending and undermine other supports already provided to them. Teachers also benefit by having parents involved because they can work more collaboratively with families and increase understanding about the parties' shared expectations. For these reasons, it is important to promote and maintain involvement in education, especially among refugee families.

In spite of the increasing amount of research documenting the improved outcomes for refugee students when their parents are involved in their education and the challenges facing refugee families in integrating and acculturating, it is difficult to find research specifically focused on the involvement of refugee parents in Manitoba.

### **Re-conceptualizing Parent Involvement**

Traditionally parent involvement focused on school participation and student academic performance which often privileges already advantaged parents, such as white middle-class parents, who face fewer barriers compared to refugees parents. Children from middle-class homes already perform better in these two measures. This focus also ignores other forms of invisible or hidden involvement of refugee parents at home. Instead of understanding the needs of refugee families and incorporating parents' life experiences and knowledge, parent roles, and family desires into the school communities as valuable educational contributions, traditional conceptions of parent involvement have ignored or misrepresented those needs as parent deficits.

More critical conceptions of parent involvement try to include the experiences of oppressed and marginalised groups, such as refugees, from a more empowering perspective that shows how involvement is socially structured, culturally mediated, and psychosocially enacted according to individual resources and relationships within families. This means we need to look at parent involvement inside and outside of the formal school environment.

### **Parent Perceptions**

Most parents in this study felt that their involvement in their children's education was "good" even though their interactions with the schools could be limited. Parents also placed a high value on involvement, as one refugee parent from Somalia emphasized, "Involvement in education is the best thing to solve problems. If you know your child and how is he adapting at school by asking the teacher". Furthermore, many refugee parents tried to be role models for their children and provided emotional and material care to them. Some parents even expressed a sense of sacrifice by placing their children's needs above their own, as one Syrian refugee mother explained, "I don't care about myself, if I learn or not. I care about my children to learn... My children's future is my future". Finally, some parents often encourage their children to study by sharing their migration experiences with them and they taught their children responsibility through emphasizing on the importance of extended kin networks, respect for elders, and mutual cooperation.

### **Barriers Facing Refugee Parents**

The following points explain the various barriers and challenges participants face when they engage in their children's education:

#### **Social and Psychological Challenges**

- Past migration experience: All the refugee parents in the study fled their homes due to violence in their countries of origin. The violence took many forms including war, civil conflict, ethnic persecutions, and poor social and economic conditions. Parents were often stressed by the conditions they experienced in their source countries and the neighbouring countries they first fled to.
- Family Separation: Being separated

from people they love, including their family members and even some of their own children, and relations that connect them to their lands and cultures is a common theme among refugee families. Feelings of mourning, longing, or guilt related to loved-ones can limit emotional capital of parents to interact with their children.

- **Acculturation stress:** Acculturation refers to the social and psychological changes that take place in interactions between individuals of different cultures. For refugees acculturation can be stressful, sometimes resulting in cultural shock, especially for those who are from a racial or linguistic group that cherishes values different from white middle-class Canadian families
- **Internalized racism:** Some parents held discriminatory attitudes towards their own ethnic group, which can lead to self-hatred and embarrassment about one's family. Holding such views towards their own ethnic or cultural backgrounds can limit parent interactions with school staff.
- **Perceived loss of parental authority:** Some refugee parents in this study felt that the re-settlement process jeopardized their position in the family. These feelings were often a source of constant emotional stress. The loss of control was sometimes associated with their children's school performance and/ or adulthood. It was also associated with the "role reversal" between parents and children, when the latter helps the former in dealing with issues such as interpretation and navigating between systems.
- **Lack of social supports:** Refugee families often lack the supports needed to navigate the stresses they experience, which can limit the amount of 'free time' that parents can dedicate to their children's educational needs and concerns. This was especially the case for single parents who were employed full-time.

- **Lack of affordable and quality housing:** Housing vulnerability and negative neighbourhood characteristics in the inner city, such as poverty and crime, which is more common in the inner city, affect the re-settlement experiences of refugee families. It is very difficult to find an affordable and suitable home near a school for most refugee families due to their larger size. Almost half of the parents interviewed in this study noted challenges with their housing conditions, especially on arrival. Living in poor and often crowded homes was not always conducive for positive parent involvement.

### **Parental Education and Language**

**Challenges:** The most cited issue among participants in this study was relating to language barriers, especially on arrival, and not being able to help children academically because of lack of education. Most parents do not have a high school diploma and struggle with communicating in official languages, which made it difficult for them to help their children with homework or to participate in schools. It also made families feel stressed and isolated.

### **Lack of School Supports**

- **Lack of communication:** Most parents and school staff in the study noted that communication is often a barrier between them and refugee parents who often speak little to no English. Parents said that their schools often send documents or automated-phone messages in English only and they struggle to understand them. School staff interviewed noted that even if documents are translated, some parents are unable to read in any language. The struggle to communicate also sometimes made it difficult to fully understand and deal with their children's behavior issues.
- **Lack of support for teachers:** School staff indicated that their schools are lim-

ited in offering supports such as translators and support workers. Some felt that instead of receiving more supports to better deal with an increasing number of refugee families, they are receiving fewer supports as a result of limited funding available to schools.

- Lack of diverse staff and culturally sensitive training: we found that there can be a mismatch between parent and teacher expectations and that a teacher's performance can be hindered by limited or lack of knowledge and exposure to parents from refugee backgrounds. Some parents expressed a different cultural understanding of interacting with teachers and disciplining children.

### Recommendations:

Participants provided the following insights and recommendations:

- Consider parent experiences to avoid misunderstandings
- Refugee parents can be motivated to help their children even when they cannot help themselves.
- Recognize the unique needs and challenges refugee parents experience.
- Provide more accessible and inclusive schools.
- Change the manner in which students are assessed for grade placement (older students with interrupted schooling are struggling academically).
- Provide more timely and appropriate translation and interpretation services.
- Increase diversity among staff.
- Provide wrap around supports through the use of cultural brokers.
- Offer more culturally sensitive training and supports for staff.
- Develop a best practices guide related to refugee involvement within school divisions.
- Offer more social and academic supports
- Improve access to and quality of after-school programs.

- Help parents help themselves through community supports and opportunities (most parents are unemployed and living on assistance with limited network of support).

### Conclusion

It is evident that newcomer refugee parents face multiple and intersecting barriers to being involved in their children's education. Parents often faced a range of psychosocial challenges as a result of their migration to Winnipeg. These challenges were compounded with education and language barriers and the lack of school supports. Even though parents struggled with helping their children academically and were not actively involved in the schools, they still felt very involved in their children's education and life in general. However, at times, it seemed that their children were struggling in school and at home in spite of the parents' efforts and desires.

It is imperative that supports for refugee families offered by the schools, community and governments are increased, in quantity and quality, and continued beyond their arrival. Supporting refugee parental involvement meaningfully and effectively requires educators and policymakers to consider the context of their experiences so that they can be better supported and empowered as parents and individual members of the community. In addition to improving the social opportunities and personal skills of parents, all stakeholders must try to involve them in ways that are based on their experiences. Failing to do this will keep refugee families in assimilative and precarious contexts that continue to create and maintain the power inequities they experience.

*Fadi Ennab is a researcher, lecturer, and trainer on issues related to migrants.*

#### CCPA-MB

309 - 323  
PORTAGE AVE.  
WINNIPEG  
R3B 2C1

#### PHONE

204.927.3200

#### EMAIL

CCPAMB@  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

#### WEBSITE

WWW.  
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

#### BLOG

WWW.POLICYFIX.CA

#### TWITTER

@CCPAMB