

# **Barriers and Facilitators for Academic Success and Social Integration of Refugee Students in Canadian and US K–12 Schools: A Meta-Synthesis**

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Volume 46, Number 4, Winter 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109146ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.5859>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Education

ISSN

0380-2361 (print)

1918-5979 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Antony-Newman, M. & Niyozov, S. (2023). Barriers and Facilitators for Academic Success and Social Integration of Refugee Students in Canadian and US K–12 Schools: A Meta-Synthesis. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 46(4), 980–1012. <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.5859>

Article abstract

Despite the status of Canada and the United States as major destinations for refugees worldwide, school-age refugee children in their K–12 schools continue to face significant challenges. To better understand barriers and facilitators for refugee students after resettlement, we carried out a meta-synthesis of 34 peer-reviewed articles that shed light on the educational experiences of refugee students in this geographic context. Our analysis shows that refugee students face such barriers as inappropriate grade placement, deficit thinking of teachers, language barriers, lack of trauma-specific counselling, and misunderstandings in family-school communication. Nevertheless, refugee students benefit from culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy and the availability of cultural brokers and liaisons. The key theoretical and policy implication of this meta-synthesis is the need to shift the focus from the type of refugee programs (integrated or separate) to the presence of facilitating factors that enhance the academic success and social integration of refugee students.



# Barriers and Facilitators for Academic Success and Social Integration of Refugee Students in Canadian and US K–12 Schools: A Meta-Synthesis

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## Abstract

Despite the status of Canada and the United States as major destinations for refugees worldwide, school-age refugee children in their K–12 schools continue to face significant challenges. To better understand barriers and facilitators for refugee students after resettlement, we carried out a meta-synthesis of 34 peer-reviewed articles that shed light on the educational experiences of refugee students in this geographic context. Our analysis shows that refugee students face such barriers as inappropriate grade placement, deficit thinking of teachers, language barriers, lack of trauma-specific counselling, and misunderstandings in family-school communication. Nevertheless, refugee students benefit

from culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy and the availability of cultural brokers and liaisons. The key theoretical and policy implication of this meta-synthesis is the need to shift the focus from the type of refugee programs (integrated or separate) to the presence of facilitating factors that enhance the academic success and social integration of refugee students.

*Keywords:* refugee education, immigration, meta-synthesis, culturally relevant pedagogy, K–12 education

### **Résumé**

Malgré le statut du Canada et des États-Unis en tant que destinations majeures pour les réfugiés du monde entier, les enfants réfugiés d'âge scolaire de la maternelle à la 12<sup>e</sup> année continuent de faire face à des défis importants. Afin de mieux comprendre les obstacles et les éléments facilitants pour les élèves réfugiés après leur réinstallation, nous avons réalisé une méta-synthèse de 34 articles évalués par des pairs qui mettent en lumière les expériences éducatives des élèves réfugiés dans ce contexte géographique. Notre analyse montre que les élèves réfugiés se heurtent à des obstacles comme un classement scolaire inadéquat, une compréhension lacunaire de leur situation de la part des enseignants, des barrières linguistiques, l'absence de services de soutien psychologique adaptés aux traumatismes, et des malentendus entre la famille et l'école lors des communications. Néanmoins, les élèves réfugiés bénéficient d'un programme d'études et d'une pédagogie adaptés à leur culture, ainsi que de la présence d'intermédiaires et d'agents de liaison culturels. La principale implication théorique et politique de cette méta-synthèse est la nécessité de ne plus se focaliser sur le type de programmes destinés aux réfugiés (intégrés ou séparés), mais sur la présence de facteurs facilitant la réussite scolaire et l'intégration sociale des élèves réfugiés.

*Mots clés :* éducation des réfugiés, immigration, méta-synthèse, pédagogie culturellement pertinente, éducation de la maternelle à la 12<sup>e</sup> année

## Introduction

Increased international conflict and the devastating consequences of climate change over the last decade have led to a significant rise in the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, with estimates reaching 84 million in 2021 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021b). Most recently, 6.6 million Syrians and 5.6 million Ukrainians became refugees (UNHCR, 2021d, 2022). Almost 30% of refugees are children (UNICEF, 2021), and their education has been the centre of attention of international organizations for several decades (UNHCR, 2019, 2021c). Educational researchers have increasingly focused on refugee students in Europe, North America, and Australasia (Arar et al., 2022; Bogotch et al., 2019; Lemke et al., 2021; Shapiro et al., 2018). Despite such long-standing attention and efforts to improve access to and quality<sup>1</sup> of refugee education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019) and to create more inclusive learning environments (McIntyre & Hall, 2018), there are still numerous unresolved issues related to academic achievement and social integration of refugee students in K–12 schools (Bal, 2014; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Rah et al., 2009).

Due to their relative social stability and high income levels, countries of distant resettlement<sup>2</sup> are seen as “desirable” places for refugees fleeing wars, environmental disasters, and human rights violations (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Nevertheless, refugee students in such countries as Canada and the United States still face serious issues, including discrimination, racism, stigma, and educational exclusion in schools (Walker & Zuberi, 2019). To better understand such experiences, we carried out a meta-synthesis guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the barriers to academic success and social integration<sup>3</sup> of school-age refugee students in Canada and the United States,

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1 Quality education is defined as education that is delivered by well-trained teachers, is guided by inclusive education policies, and ensures that students demonstrate learning and meet national academic standards (UNHCR, 2016).

2 Countries, which are geographically distant from the countries of origin of refugee students. Such countries tend to be high-income destinations with relatively well-funded schools in contrast with countries of the first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Distant resettlement countries include Canada, the United States, Western European countries, Australia, and New Zealand.

3 We understand academic success as a holistic concept that includes “academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives, and career success” (York et al., 2015, p. 9), while social integration refers to belonging at school (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

(2) What are the facilitators to academic success and social integration of school-age refugee students in Canada and the United States, and (3) How are integrated or separate programs<sup>4</sup> for refugee students in Canadian and US schools associated with barriers and/or facilitators of academic success and social integration?

Canada and the United States are the two major destinations for resettled refugees (UNHCR, 2021a), and that is why it is paramount to have a clear understanding of the major barriers school-age refugee students face in North American schools. It is even more important to identify success stories, due to their potential to improve school experiences of refugee students in Canada and the United States with the help of the strength-based approach, where students' knowledge, skills, and experiences are valued rather than seen through a deficit lens (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). This is the first meta-synthesis since the review by McBrien (2005) that combined recent empirical data from Canadian and US schools, which could have implications for other distant resettlement countries (Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand).

Focus on the academic and social integration of refugee students in Canadian schools is especially salient due to the commitment of the Canadian government to resettle more refugees as part of its immigration plans (Government of Canada, 2022a). While Donald Trump's presidency from 2016–20 resulted in a significant reduction of the number of refugees accepted in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2019), Canada resettled 45,000 Syrian refugees in 2015–20 (Government of Canada, 2021) and welcomed more than 140,000 Ukrainians in 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022b). The number of refugee students in Canadian K–12 classrooms is likely to increase in the future (Government of Canada, 2022a), which makes it urgent for Canadian teachers, school leaders, and policy makers to acknowledge barriers to and facilitators of academic success and social integration of refugee students. Refugee students experience their education in Canada differently compared to immigrant students whose families moved to Canada voluntarily (Dryden-Peterson, 2015), which also contributes to differences in their academic outcomes (Hou & Bonikowska, 2017). This divergence makes it salient to view refugee students separately from voluntary migrants to better prepare teachers to meet the unique needs of refugee students in Canadian K–12 classrooms.

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4 Integrated programs place refugee students in general classes together with all students who attend a given school. Separate programs place refugee students either in separate schools or in separate programs within local schools. (Cerna, 2019; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017)

## **Education of Refugees: Access, Inclusion, and Whole-School Approach**

Forced displacement has detrimental psychological, economic, and social effects for refugee students and disrupts their educational trajectories (UNICEF, 2009). Globally, only 68% of refugee students have access to primary education, and the participation rate at the secondary level plunges to 34% (UNHCR, 2021c). Access to school education is the first step necessary to fulfill the educational rights of refugee students and has to be accompanied by inclusion and belonging (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

Genuine inclusion of refugee students in the classrooms requires curriculum and pedagogy that truly address students' concerns and needs. Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) advocate for the critical transnational curriculum, which (1) builds on diversity to provide learning opportunities, (2) encourages "translanguaging," (i.e., a dynamic and integrated use of languages represented in a classroom) (Li, 2018), (3) views civic engagement as part of the curriculum, and (4) fosters multidirectional aspirations to prepare students for multiple possible futures (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Schools also need to appreciate high academic expectations among refugee students and provide them with practical tools for success after graduation (e.g., how to receive financial aid for post-secondary education, ways to secure meaningful employment, etc.) despite unique barriers that refugee students face (e.g., trauma, disrupted education) (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017).

Successful inclusion of refugee students also requires whole-school initiatives at the organizational and leadership levels (Arar et al., 2022). Taylor and Sidhu (2012) distinguish the following key elements for systemic support of refugee students in schools: targeted policy and support that come with dedicated funding, commitment to social justice, holistic approach to education together with welfare of students and their families, and focus on specific learning needs of refugee students. The combined work of school administrators, teachers, and staff members is likely to succeed in including refugee students in the classroom (Pugh et al., 2012). The overarching goal of such inclusion lies in ensuring that refugees are integrated into the host country society, rather than run the risk of assimilation and marginalization (Berry, 2006).

Education of refugees takes place in a particular historical and socio-political context shaped by the way refugees are negatively constructed in the public and media discourse (Triandafyllidou, 2017) and positioned in ideological struggles (Mayblin &

Turner, 2021). For example, in the United States, the overall anti-immigrant stance of Donald Trump's administration led to a sharp decrease in the number of refugees resettled in the country in 2017–20 (Krogstad, 2019). Such factors inevitably influence a range of policy solutions available for refugee education (UNHCR, 2019).

### **Refugee Education in Distant Resettlement Countries Versus Countries of First Asylum**

Refugee education is situated at the crossroads between “global promise of universal human rights, the definition of citizenship rights within nation-states, and the realization of these sets of rights in everyday practices” (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, p. 473). While the education of refugee students is seen as a human right (UNHCR, 2010b), the access to education is negotiated nationally (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Consequently, it is critical to better understand what happens to refugee students in schools and classrooms at national and sub-national levels. Currently UNHCR envisions four possible futures for refugees: resettlement to a distant country, return to the country of origin, long-term integration in the host country, or fluid mobility traditionally defined as transnationalism (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Refugee education has recently moved away from the assumption that refugees would soon return to their home countries, and toward a new goal that “refugee and host community students are prepared equitably to succeed in national systems wherever they live” (UNHCR, 2019, p. 2; see also Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). This realization contributes to the organizational shift away from separate schools for refugee students to their integration in regular schools. Although most refugees are hosted by neighbouring countries, a small but significant minority is resettled in countries geographically distant from their home nations (UNHCR, 2021b). Canada and the United States are two of the top destinations for distantly resettled refugees (UNHCR, 2021a). Notably, education for distantly resettled refugee students differs from education for refugees in neighbouring host countries due to difference in medium- and short-term plans for students in the countries' education systems. The share of refugee students in the total student population in countries of distant resettlement is smaller, whereas a guaranteed pathway to citizenship adds to the permanence of refugee settlement in the host country (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). While the imagined futures of refugee students hosted in the neighbouring countries could still be seen in returning to their home countries, students

who have reached the distant resettlement countries are generally there to stay, and are expected to be eventually integrated into the local education systems.

Refugee education in distant resettlement countries often has a focus on the psychological dimensions of refugee experience, which leads to the individualization of such experiences and downplays the sociological factors involved in their integration in the host countries. As Matthews (2008) puts it, “Preoccupations with therapeutic interventions locate issues at an individual level and overlook broader dimensions of inequality and disadvantage” (p. 32). Socially just and genuinely inclusive refugee education should not disregard the socio-political conditions in the host countries and issues of racialization, acculturation, and resilience (Matthews, 2008). In fact, all needs of refugee students—learning, social, and emotional—have to be treated holistically (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Finally, we need to shift from the emphasis only on barriers that refugee students face (McIntyre & Hall, 2018; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012) and adopt a strength-based approach rooted in “funds of knowledge” (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011) that refugee students and their families bring to the classroom. Luckily, several studies that adopt a strength-based approach to the education of refugee students have been recently published (Lopez et al., 2020; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). These studies showed how teachers can build on students’ bilingualism as a strength, rather than view students’ developing English skills as a deficit (Lopez et al., 2020); similarly, rich pre-migration experiences of refugee students (e.g., overcoming adversity, developing agency, and showing critical awareness) can be seen as strengths for academic and personal growth (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017).

Both Canada and the United States are federal countries and most policies guiding the education of refugee students operate on the provincial/territorial/state level. In Canada, most provinces and territories have strong policies ensuring access of refugee students to K–12 education and the provision of language education in the shape of English as a Second Language/French as a Second Language (Volante et al., 2020). However, there is lack of specific policies aimed at refugee students’ mental health support, accelerated education for students with interrupted education trajectories, and special education offerings (Schutte et al., 2022). Unlike Canada, the United States has a federal Department of Education, so the policies enacted in each state combine both federal and state provisions. All children in the United States, regardless of immigration status, are guaranteed access to public education and all programs provided through the school system, including free lunches, English language support, and special education (Culbertson et al., 2021).



## Methodology

The goal of this article is to provide a systematic synthesis of research on refugee education in Canadian and US K–12 schools. McBrien (2005) analyzed the educational needs and barriers for refugees in the United States by reviewing the literature published in the 1980s to early 2000s, but no systematic synthesis of refugee education in Canadian or US schools has been undertaken to date.

Meta-synthesis is used here to accumulate and integrate qualitative data from primary studies to identify patterns and categories across analyzed studies (Hoon, 2013). Synthesis allows better understanding of a phenomenon and generates new knowledge that will be more visible for researchers and policy makers (Sandelowski, 2004; Suri & Clarke, 2009). Meta-synthesis increases the generalizability and trustworthiness of primary studies (Hays & McKibben, 2021), allows researchers to see gaps in existing literatures, and makes research accessible, both to educators and policy makers (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Hays and McKibben (2021) recommend six phases for qualitative meta-synthesis, which we follow here: (1) planning phase, to develop the rationale, research design, and research questions; (2) search phase, including establishing the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the search of primary studies; (3) mapping phase, which requires developing a coding frame and subsequent coding of primary studies; (4) appraisal, which focuses on collating the codes; (5) synthesis phase, which allows the identification of themes from collated codes; and (6) report and recommendations phase, including presenting findings and providing recommendations for research, practice, and policy.

Studies were selected for this meta-synthesis in accordance with the following inclusion criteria: focus on the education of school-age<sup>5</sup> refugee students in Canadian and US K–12 schools, empirical studies, publication after the year 2000, and publication in peer-reviewed academic journals. We searched for all studies on refugee education in Canadian and US schools with the help of the following databases: ProQuest, Scholars Portal, and JSTOR. The following keywords were used to retrieve the studies: “refugee education,” “education of refugee students,” “education in refugee families,” “refugee students in Canadian schools,” “refugee students in US schools,” and “resettled refugees in

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5 Some refugee youth in synthesized studies were older than 19 due to the interruption of their schooling when fleeing countries of origin. Our focus here is on the K–12 education system, where some refugee youth in their early 20s were placed. See findings for more details about the age of refugee students and their grade placement in Canadian and US schools.

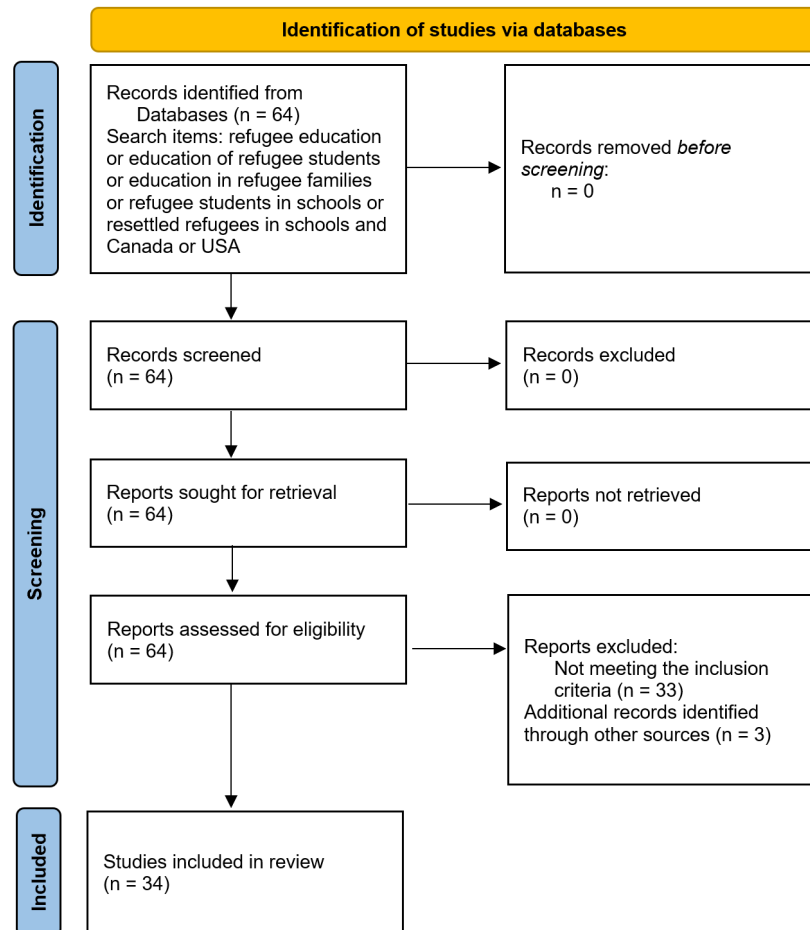
North American schools.” Our search results returned 64 studies. We also used references in the studies we found initially to look for additional articles that dealt with all aspects of refugee education, including students’ academic achievement and well-being, parental and family engagement in schooling, and the role of teachers and educators. This resulted in the inclusion of three additional studies. We decided to focus only on studies published after the year 2000 due to the changes in the political and discursive landscape around immigrants and refugees after the 9/11 attacks (Chishti & Bolter, 2021). The choice of the time frame (2000–21) was also made to avoid possible overlapping with the review by McBrien (2005), which mostly covered the last two decades of the 20th century. Peer-reviewed articles were selected to ensure the methodological and theoretical rigour of synthesized primary studies, which excluded grey literature, dissertations, and book chapters. As far as we only included empirical studies, theoretical articles and reviews were intentionally not part of our search. Such articles would not have allowed us access primary empirical data, which we needed for our meta-synthesis. As far as refugee students have experiences and needs distinctive from those of immigrant students (i.e., trauma in countries of origin/transit and often precarious legal status) (Ratković et al., 2017), we did not include articles that combined data from immigrant and refugee participants.

After applying the above-mentioned inclusion/exclusion criteria, our search resulted in 34 studies, with 19 presenting the US data and 15 studies coming from Canada. During the mapping phase (Hays & McKibben, 2021), we coded the primary studies. First-level codes represented a combination of pre-set codes, informed by the broader literature on refugee education, and emergent codes from the data. At the appraisal stage, we took descriptive first-level codes and reorganized them into a smaller group of second-level codes (e.g., barriers to parental involvement, difference as deficit, culturally relevant pedagogy), which were further refined to form categories (Saldaña, 2021). During the synthesis phase categories were used to identify themes, which helped us to answer our research questions.

For example, when looking at the inclusion of refugee students’ cultures, we took first-level codes (*use of first language, embracing learning styles from home countries, books that resonate with students’ cultures*) and refined them into a category “culturally relevant pedagogy” (second-level coding). Finally, we combined the category of “culturally relevant pedagogy” with another category, “use of cultural brokers,” to develop a theme: “facilitating factors” (third-level coding).

**Figure 1**

*Results of Selection of Studies for the Meta-Synthesis in Accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)*



Note: Based on Page et al., 2021.

## Findings

Before answering the research questions about the barriers and facilitators that shape educational experiences of refugee students in Canadian and US K–12 schools, we provide descriptive findings from 34 articles (19 from the United States and 15 from Canada). One-half of the reviewed studies focused on refugee students from one country, with Somalia clearly

at the centre of researchers' attention (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Birman & Tran, 2017; Georgis et al., 2014; Oikonomidou, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Roxas, 2010a, 2019). There was diverse geographical representation, with studies of refugee students from Bosnia (Mosselson, 2007), Burundi (Gahungu et al., 2011), Iraq (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010) Sierra Leone (Davies, 2008), the former USSR (Bal, 2014), Sri Lanka (Kovinthan, 2016), and Syria (Gagne et al., 2018). A significant number of studies combined data from several countries; for example, Kanu (2008) had participants from Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia; McBrien (2011) studied mothers from Vietnam, Somalia, and Iran; and Zaidi et al. (2021) focused on parents and students from Iraq and Syria. Several studies were even more comprehensive in the number of countries represented in their sample: Bartlett et al. (2017) interviewed students from nine nations, Roxas (2010b) talked to teachers of refugee students from eight countries, and Wilkinson (2002) worked with students from seven countries.

In terms of data collection, all studies adopted the qualitative design and relied on individual or focus group interviews (Bartlett et al., 2017; McBrien, 2011; Mendenhall et al., 2016; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). To produce a richer description of refugee students' experiences, eight studies were ethnographies where interviews, observations, and document analysis were combined (Bal, 2014; Birman & Tran, 2017; Georgis et al., 2014; Koyama & Kasper, 2021; MacNevin, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Roxas, 2010a, 2019). The number of interviewed participants ranged from less than 10 (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2017; MacNevin, 2012; Msofe, 2021) to an average of 15–20 (e.g., Bal, 2014; Gagne et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2019). Several studies had a relatively large-scale pool of participants to interview—for example, Wilkinson (2002) interviewed 91 students, while Kanu (2008) had 58 participants.

The richness of data has been ensured by exploring the educational experiences of refugee students in Canada and the United States in depth by interviewing and observing students, teachers, and parents in a single study (Bal, 2014; Kanu, 2008; Roxas, 2010a), or focusing on under-researched stakeholders such as cultural brokers (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2019; Georgis et al., 2014) or guidance counsellors (Bartlett et al., 2017). While many studies presented data from teachers and educators (Gagne et al., 2018; Rah et al., 2009; Roxas, 2010b), the voices of refugee students (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2019; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018) and their parents (Bal, 2014; Koyama & Kasper, 2021; McBrien, 2011) were quite well-represented in the articles reviewed for this meta-synthesis.

## **RQ 1: What Are the Barriers to Academic Success and Social Integration of School-Age Refugee Students in the United States and Canada?**

Refugee students face unique barriers in schools after resettlement (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Morrice et al., 2019). Firstly, the involuntary nature of their migration often leads to interruptions in education (UNHCR, 2021c) when refugee students flee their home countries, spend time in refugee camps, and navigate the educational space between home country schools and classrooms abroad (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Secondly, due to the nature of international migration, refugees often belong to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of students due to higher levels of poverty (UNHCR, 2017), language barriers (Abu-Ghaida et al., 2021), and unrecognized immigration status (Merry et al., 2017). Finally, many refugee students experience the consequences of the emotional trauma of going through or being witnesses to the violence that caused the forced migration of their families, accompanied with material, financial, and human loss (Flood & Coyne, 2019).

Many of the above-mentioned barriers are especially salient in countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2015) but what are the experiences of refugee students in Canadian and US K–12 schools? We found that refugee students faced a range of barriers in school (inappropriate grade placement, teachers' low expectations, lack of culturally appropriate counselling, culturally insensitive pedagogy, language barriers) and at home (mismatch between parental engagement strategies practised by parents and those expected by teachers, breakdown in home-school communication).

The first set of barriers is in the school domain. Refugee students are often resettled in Canada and the United States after years of interrupted schooling at home and in countries of first asylum. As a result, educators have difficulty ensuring appropriate grade placement of refugee students (Fitzpatrick, 2018). If students are placed in grades based on age, which is the usual practice both in Canadian and US schools, those with interrupted schooling might need to overcome a gap of several years of missed schooling (Wilkinson, 2002, Kanu, 2008). This requires significant classroom support that is not always available (Kanu, 2008). Placement based on English language skills rather than academic ability can lead to students being placed in a lower grade, which decreases the motivation of refugee students (Kanu, 2008). Students who are placed in Grades 11 and 12 particu-

larly may struggle to get the necessary high school graduation credits and also face the time constraint of completing secondary education before the age of 19, when free public education comes to an end in many US and Canadian jurisdictions (Wilkinson, 2002).

Another barrier faced by the students is their teachers' low expectations and deficit approach to refugees in their classrooms (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Roxas, 2010a). Teachers in one US study believed that behavioural issues experienced by Somali refugee students in class were due to "problems" at home; for the most part, teachers never acknowledged the role of trauma, knew little about students' families, and generally held beliefs that African parents were not interested in education (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Interviewed teachers were not aware of the detrimental effects of culturally inappropriate pedagogy and classroom materials on many of their refugee students (Roy & Roxas, 2011). In one school in the southwest United States, a group of refugees from the former USSR were seen through a deficit lens when they followed their own cultural norms in school (sitting together in class, collaborating during individual worktime) (Bal, 2014). Students' academic struggles and behavioural issues were not addressed properly: students were sent to a separate ESL class, and if they could not pass the English test, they were referred to a special education class (Bal, 2014).

Not surprisingly, many refugee students face linguistic challenges when, after resettlement in Canada and the United States, they have to master a new language of instruction (McBrien, 2005). Many students who moved from refugee camps or countries of first asylum felt disoriented: "It was difficult because everyone spoke English. It was strange for them. They felt like strangers" (Guo et al., 2019, p. 95). Accessing content in English was not always easy, especially at the high school level (e.g., "sometimes, I don't understand what I am reading in the social studies textbook" [Kanu, 2008, p. 924]). Most schools have provisions for additional English language instruction, but many teachers lack training and support for working specifically with refugee students (Bal, 2014; MacNevin, 2012), who have a higher likelihood of interrupted education and first language literacy barriers than other plurilingual learners. In addition to academic interactions, language barriers make it difficult for refugee students to make friends at the beginning of their school journeys in Canadian schools (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). Some refugee students also experience bullying due to language barriers (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018) and cannot access appropriate trauma counselling services in their preferred language (Gagne et al., 2018).

Due to pre-settlement experiences of trauma, many refugee students in Canadian and US schools face barriers in classroom interactions due to lack of awareness among teachers and fellow students (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Davies, 2008; Roy & Roxas, 2011) or situations that trigger painful memories of violence (Birman & Tran, 2017). Students need appropriate counselling to deal with emotional trauma. As long as the education system is not sufficiently equipped with the necessary counselling services and partly relies on teachers rather than professional counsellors to deal with students' social-emotional issues, refugee students are likely to remain underserved and their trauma-related issues unresolved (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017). Although well-meaning, teachers have no specialized training to offer counselling to refugee students, and often their encouragement for students to "move on" from their past traumatic experiences leaves refugee students isolated in US and Canadian schools (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; MacNevin, 2012).

The second set of barriers is related to parental engagement in children's education (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) and communication between refugee families and schools. Many refugee parents are not proficient in English, face time constraints due to long working hours, and treat educators with deference (Rah et al., 2009). Parental expectations toward education and school-family division of labour (e.g., parents are responsible for children at home, while teachers are an authority in school) often do not match those of teachers in Canadian and US schools (e.g., regular communication between teachers and parents and active involvement of parents in homework, school matters, and governance) (Georgis et al., 2014; Kanu, 2008). Refugee parents are also more likely than immigrant parents to be unfamiliar with the school system in the new country (Zaidi et al., 2021), which might negatively impact learning at home. Parents and refugee students themselves have high expectations toward their education (McBrien, 2011), but lack of familiarity with a new, complex, and unequal school system leaves refugee students at a disadvantage (Schroeter & James, 2015), especially when making subject or program choices that shape their educational or employment trajectories after graduation.

## **RQ 2: What Are the Facilitators to Academic Success and Social Integration of School-Age Refugee Students in the United States and Canada?**

To ensure the successful inclusion of refugee students in Canadian and US schools, we need to know more about the factors that facilitate the academic success and social integration of refugee students. We found two sets of facilitating factors: adoption of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), and the presence of cultural brokers, liaisons, and mentors in schools.

A key successful facilitating factor that helps refugee students succeed academically and socially is the use of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Birman & Tran, 2017; Davies, 2008; Kanu, 2008; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Nykiel-Herbert (2010) highlights the successful implementation of a culturally relevant approach to teaching Iraqi refugee students in one New York school classroom, where educators strive to create a hybrid culture between the homes of refugee students and the dominant US classroom culture. Students' home cultures, languages, learning preferences, and past experiences were validated, and students were supported as they developed a hybrid Iraqi-American identity in the new country, which resulted in good academic performance and enhanced well-being (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). The use of culturally relevant books and learning materials often works well in the classrooms (Birman & Tran, 2017; Kanu, 2008) as well as the use of children's first and home languages (Mendenhall et al., 2016). Davies (2008) presented the findings from teachers who worked with refugee students in New York City and reported that their students benefited from a locally designed curriculum that responded to students' needs.

Another very successful factor that facilitated academic and social integration of refugee students was the use of cultural brokers, liaisons, and mentors by schools (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2017; Georgis et al., 2014; Koyama & Kasper, 2021; McBrien, 2011; Rah et al., 2009; Yohani, 2013). Koyama and Kasper (2021) describe a scheme in one Arizona school district, where mentors were hired by the school district to "support refugee students and their families and to increase the academic achievement of refugee students" (p. 53). Mentors helped improve communication between schools and families of refugee students: they explained the structure of the US education system to families, made home visits, and dealt with parents' concerns. Refugee families were respectful of mentors and grateful for support and advocacy (Koyama & Kasper, 2021). McBrien (2011) provides an



overview of the liaison program organized by a non-profit in another US jurisdiction that helped Vietnamese, Iranian, and Somali refugee parents. The program facilitated communication between parents and teachers, offered additional after-school activities for children, and settlement help for adults. As a result, parents mentioned that they communicated with the school more and increased their parental involvement (McBrien, 2011). Brar-Josan and Yohani (2017) and Yohani (2013) describe successful work of cultural brokers employed by a settlement agency in Western Canada, which offered services to schools. Cultural brokers were strengthening school–community partnerships, provided bicultural role models for refugee students, delivered settlement services to families (housing, employment, education), connected them with mental health practitioners, helped school transformation efforts, and advocated with schools on behalf of refugee students and their families (Brar-Josan and Yohani, 2017; Yohani, 2013).

## **Discussion**

Results of this meta-synthesis, based on the analysis of 34 studies from Canada and the United States, show that refugee students face a range of post-resettlement barriers, but there are several facilitators, which increase the chances of students' academic success and social integration in schools. Due to interruptions in their education, refugee students are often placed in grades not appropriate for their age and educational level (Kanu, 2008; Wilkinson, 2002). In the classroom, refugee students are often met by teachers who adopt deficit thinking (Roy & Roxas, 2011) and are not prepared to work with students who are just beginning to learn English (Bal, 2014). Past traumatic experiences of refugee students are often misunderstood, and their mental health needs often remain unmet (Birman & Tran, 2017). In the home domain, parental involvement and engagement are often undermined by different expectations that refugee parents and US and Canadian educators have around the role of the school and the family (Gahungu et al., 2011; Georgis et al., 2014; Rah et al., 2009). On the positive side, refugee students benefit from culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy when such practices are adopted in their classes (Birman & Tran, 2017; Davies, 2008; Kanu, 2008; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Similarly, refugee students tend to have better opportunities and outcomes when schools hire cultural brokers or liaisons to connect families of refugee students with educators (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2017; Koyama & Kasper, 2021; McBrien, 2011).

### **RQ 3. How Are Integrated or Separate Programs for Refugee Students in Canadian and US Schools Associated with Barriers and/or Facilitators of Academic Success and Social Integration?**

One of the key questions in refugee education is the choice between the integration of refugee students in regular schools or placing them in separate schools or dedicated programs within mainstream schools (Cerna, 2019; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017). Studies analyzed here provide mixed evidence, which makes it difficult or perhaps unnecessary to draw conclusions about the advantage of one approach over another (separate programs or integration). Several studies where refugee students successfully attended separate programs (Davies, 2008; Mendenhall et al., 2016; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010) highlighted the relevance of programs that adopt culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), support language development (including the use of students' first language), include positive teacher disposition, and provide availability for counselling. Students especially appreciated "the ways in which their 'culture' was supported and valued by their schools" (Bartlett et al., 2017, p. 113). However, not all separate programs helped refugee students overcome barriers. For example, one specialized program for newly arrived Syrian refugee students in Canada did not protect students from bullying and struggles with making friends with the rest of the school (Guo et al., 2019). Refugee students observed by Bal (2014) performed better when moved to a regular classroom, where they were not singled out and seen as deficient.

At the same time, despite many instances of barriers in mainstream K–12 schools (Kanu, 2008; Georgis et al., 2014), several studies carried out in mainstream classrooms also showed success when teachers and administrators were invested in helping refugee students reach their full potential by building community, having enough counsellors, and taking students' needs seriously (Msofe, 2021; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016; Roxas, 2019). In other words, neither integrated nor separate programs are associated exclusively with barriers to or facilitators of academic success and social integration of refugee students. It is not so much the type of program attended by refugee students, but the attitude of educators, curriculum, pedagogy, and available support that make a difference in refugee students' lives (Bartlett et al., 2017; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Roxas, 2019).

Table 1 below provides an overview of key barriers and facilitators for refugee students in Canadian and US schools and highlights the integrated and separate programs in selected studies.

**Table 1**

*Key Barriers and Facilitators for Academic Success and Social Integration of Refugee Students in Canadian and US K–12 Schools by Types of Programs (Integrated Versus Separate)*

Barriers (integrated/separate program)	Facilitators (integrated/separate program)
Inappropriate grade placement ( $n = 3$ : 1 IP)	Culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy ( $n = 5$ : 3 IP /4 SP)
Low teacher expectations ( $n = 3$ : 1 SP)	Use of cultural brokers and mentors ( $n = 6$ : 2 IP)
Language barriers ( $n = 7$ : 1 IP)	
Lack of trauma-specific counselling ( $n = 5$ : /2 SP)	
Misunderstanding in family-school communication ( $n = 6$ : 2 IP)	

Note. Some studies mentioned more than one barrier and/or facilitator, while several studies focus on non-key barriers and/or facilitators not included in this table. Hence, the total sum here ( $N = 35$ ) represents the prevalence of focus on seven selected key barriers and/or facilitators rather than the number of synthesized studies ( $N = 34$ ). Data on integrated or separate programs is given only for studies, where information was available.

## **Significance and Implications for Educational Practice and Further Research**

The significance of this study lies in three domains. In terms of practice, it provides synthesized access to 34 studies on refugee education in Canada and the United States highlighting key barriers to and facilitators of academic success and social well-being. Theoretically, it shows that it is not so much the type of program attended by refugee students (integrated versus separate) or type of acculturation (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization) that shape their outcomes, but the presence of facilitators. In the research domain, we highlight the dominance of studies that focus on barriers and call

for more research on facilitating factors that enhance academic success and social integration of refugee students.

What are the possible recommendations emerging from the analyzed studies that can be used to improve the educational experiences of refugee students in Canadian and US K–12 schools? Many studies echo the facilitating success of culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy. Kanu (2008) presents voices of refugee students in one Canadian jurisdiction, who ask for culturally appropriate course content, counselling, and extra-curricular activities. Similarly, Ayoub and Zhou (2021) recommend creating culturally responsive classrooms by providing extensive literacy and numeracy support. This goes along with the need to reach out to parents and families of refugee students (Georgis et al., 2014; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016; Roxas, 2010b) to make sure they become engaged in their children’s education in a way that is more meaningful for families (Gahungu et al., 2011). To achieve the goal of genuine partnerships between schools and families of their refugee students, educators need appropriate training and support (Rubinstein-Avila, 2017), which at the moment is insufficient (Gagne et al., 2018; MacNevin, 2010). A renewed and deeper engagement with theory and practice of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) and recent developments in the decolonization of curriculum (Bhambra et al., 2018) will go a long way in offering such support. Critical approaches to curriculum development (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017), where experiences and needs of refugee students are centred, has the potential to make education in Canadian and US schools more inclusive for all. As far as the share of refugee students in Canadian schools is projected to increase (Government of Canada, 2022a), it is paramount for Canadian teachers and school leaders to be aware of the unique barriers that refugee students face in the classroom and be prepared to enhance the facilitators that can positively influence the academic achievement and social integration of refugee students.

In terms of research, more work is needed to focus on successful stories of refugee students’ academic and social integration. The dominance of studies that focus on barriers faced by refugee students in K–12 schools after resettlement (as evident from Table 1 above) can be a reflection of this policy problem (Bal, 2014; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Oikonomidoy, 2010; Rah et al., 2009; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Wilkinson, 2002), but it should be balanced with more studies that are explicitly trying to describe the conditions that facilitate the academic and social integration of refugee students in Canada and the United States.

The important conclusion, both in terms of theory and practice in refugee education in distant settlement countries, is that it is not the type of setting (separate or integrated program) but a combination of teacher beliefs, curriculum, pedagogy, and targeted support that make the most difference for the educational achievement and social integration of refugee students. This implication should inform the policy decisions about the most efficient approach to the education of refugee students in Canadian schools.

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## Appendix 1 Summary of Studies

Study	Number of Participants/Country of study	Country of origin	Participants	Age group of students	Methods of data collection
Ayoub and Zhou (2021)	6/Canada	Somalia	Students	12–14	interviews
Bal (2014)	24/USA	Former USSR	students, parents, educators	9–13	observation interviews
Bartlett et al. (2017)	28/USA	9 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia	students, teachers, guidance counselors	11–13	interviews
Birman and Tran (2017)	19/USA	Somalia	students, teachers	5–10	observations interviews
Blanchet-Cohen et al. (2017)	22/Canada	8 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia	students	15–30	
Brar-Josan and Yohani (2017)	4/Canada	Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraqi	cultural brokers	5–18	interviews
Davies (2008)	5/USA	Sierra Leone	students	16–21	interviews
Gagne et al. (2018)	15/Canada	Syria	teachers, administrators, settlement workers	5–18	surveys interviews
Gahungu et al. (2011)	18/USA	Burundi	families, students	8–18	observations interviews



Georgis et al. (2014)	46/Canada	Somalia	students, teachers, school leaders, cultural brokers, parents	3–15	observations interviews
Guo et al. (2019)	30/Canada	Syria	parents, students	10–14	interviews
Kanu (2008)	58/Canada	Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia	students, teachers, parents, community leaders, principals	17–24	observations interviews
Koyama and Kasper (2021)	36/USA	Burundi, Congo, Somalia, Bhutan, Iraq	teachers, principals, mentors, parents	5–18	observations interviews
Kovinthan (2016)	1/Canada	Sri Lanka	student	5–18	autoethnography
MacNevin (2012)	7/Canada	ND	teachers	14–18	interviews
McBrien (2011)	25/USA	Vietnam, Somalia, Iran	parents	5–18	interviews
Mendenhall et al. (2016)	11/USA	7 countries in Africa and Asia	students	14–17	interviews
Mosselson (2007)	25/USA	Bosnia	students, community members	16–24	interviews
Msofe (2021)	3/Canada	Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania	students	15–20	interviews
Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara (2015)	12/USA	Bhutan, Somalia, Thailand, and Myanmar	students	15–19	interviews
Nykiel-Herbert (2010)	12/USA	Iraq	students	8–11	program evaluation
Ogilvie and Fuller (2016)	1/Canada	ND	teacher	11–18	autoethnography
Oikonomidoy (2010)	7/USA	Somalia	students	ND	interviews

Okilwa et al. (2022)	19/USA	Iraq, Burma, French-speaking African countries	principal, teachers, administrators, parents	5–11	interviews
Rah et al. (2009)	9/USA	Vietnam	administrators, teachers, teaching assistants	ND	interviews
Roy and Roxas (2011)	64/USA	Somalia	teachers, parents, administrators, teaching assistants	ND	observations interviews
Roxas (2010a)	7/USA	Somalia	students teachers and parents of 3 students	ND	observations interviews
Roxas (2010b)	12/USA	8 countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America	teachers	ND	observations interviews
Roxas (2019)	1/USA	Somalia	teachers	ND	observations interviews
Ryu and Tuvilla (2018)	10/USA	Burma	students	15–18	interviews
Schroeter and James (2015)	13/Canada	Francophone countries in Africa	students, teachers, principal	15–18	observations interviews
Wilkinson (2002)	91/Canada	7 countries in Asia, Latina America, Europe	students	15–21	interviews
Yohani (2013)	8/Canada	6 countries in Asia and Africa	cultural brokers	14–18	interviews document analysis
Zaidi et al. (2021)	33	Syria, Iraq	parents, teachers, settlement workers	ND	interviews