

# Behind Successful Refugee Parental Engagement: The Barriers and Challenges

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## Abstract

This two-year study examined the barriers and challenges encountered by refugee parents as they negotiate their children's successful transition into a new school system. The researchers sought to determine what can be learned from parent and educator experiences of these obstacles in order to optimize parent-teacher collaboration for refugee families. Contextualized within a LEAD (Literacy, English and Academic Development) program in an urban centre in Western Canada, the study triangulated data from focus groups comprising Syrian and Iraqi Arabic-speaking families, teachers, and settlement workers. The data were qualitatively analyzed by incorporating Epstein's six types of parental involvement, a culturally responsive model accounting for parental engagement within the context of home-school-community collaboration (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). From this model, the researchers make recommendations that include province-wide initiatives to support leadership and teacher training, mandated programming to support refugee and immigrant youth, and the establishment and expansion of board and in-school settlement best practices province-wide.

*Keywords:* Syrian refugees, Iraqi refugees, Arab refugees, literacy, English-language development, parent-teacher engagement, education-parent participation

## Résumé

Cette étude de cas, réalisée sur une période de deux ans, a examiné les défis et les obstacles que rencontrent les familles réfugiées et les écoles qui accueillent leurs enfants. La recherche a tenté de déterminer ce qui peut ressortir des expériences des parents et des professeurs afin d'optimiser la collaboration parents-enseignants pour ces familles. Contextualisée dans le cadre d'un programme *Literacy, English and Academic Development* (LEAD), dans un centre urbain de l'ouest du Canada, l'étude a triangulé des données provenant de groupes de discussion composés de familles arabophones syriennes et irakiennes, d'enseignants et de travailleurs d'établissement dans les écoles. Les données ont fait l'objet d'une analyse qualitative intégrant les six types de participation d'Epstein, un modèle adapté à la culture qui tient compte de l'engagement des parents dans le contexte de collaboration entre la communauté, la maison et l'école (Epstein et Sheldon, 2006). À partir de ce modèle, les

chercheurs formulent des recommandations qui incluent des initiatives à l'échelle provinciale pour soutenir le leadership et la formation des enseignants, des programmes obligatoires pour soutenir les jeunes réfugiés et immigrants, ainsi que l'implantation et l'expansion des meilleures pratiques d'établissement dans les conseils scolaires et les écoles à l'échelle de la province.

*Mots-clés* : réfugiés syriens, réfugiés irakiens, réfugiés arabes, littératie, développement de l'anglais, engagement des parents et des enseignants, éducation et participation des parents

## Introduction

Under the Canadian government's 2015–16 Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, Canadian classrooms welcomed the children of more than 40,000 individuals. Beyond providing basic education, school districts seek to identify best practices for inclusion and are important partners in the resettlement process (e.g., Calgary Board of Education, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, 2008). Services include needs assessments and referrals, information and orientation, language assessments and training, and community connections (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). Welcoming and supportive educational opportunities that are sensitive to and integrative of families' ethnocultural identities, as well as learners' adaptive, affective, and academic needs, aim to build on strengths and promote resilience and positive learning outcomes for the children of this refugee group (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010, 2011; Dooley, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Stewart, 2011).

This study is centred on the particular experiences of Arabic-speaking refugee families in Calgary, Canada, as they engaged with a public education system. Focusing on the Literacy, English and Academic Development (LEAD) program aimed at refugee English language learners with limited formal schooling, we analyze opportunities for enhancing the relationship between parents and teachers and suggest ways that schools can optimize parent–teacher collaboration. The data gleaned from our research were based on responses to the following questions: What are the barriers and challenges to optimizing refugee parents' engagement with their children's school? What are some proposed solutions?

## Literature Review

Traditionally, literature on parental engagement has tended to prioritize forms and contexts that reflect the dominant groups in society. Researchers increasingly point out that the focus must shift toward frameworks that are more inclusive of components that recognize and are responsive to stakeholders' cultural backgrounds (Amjad, 2016; Bernhard, 2010; Bushaala, 2016; Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). Research indicates that parent engagement—understood here as parents' commitment to the academia of their children's lives both in and out of school—is positively correlated with student learning behaviour

and academic outcomes (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Hamilton, 2004; Jeynes, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010; Young & Chan, 2014). Parent integration and acculturation are also cited as key factors in their engagement with their children's schools (Bassani, 2008; Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010).

Canadian educational policy documents acknowledge that refugee learners often hail from unstable or conflict-ridden locations. Added emotional and psychological stress stemming from their individual situations can result in specific needs that must be met before some sense of normalcy can prevail in their lives (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Some provincial and school district authorities have developed educational guidelines that specifically aim to address these needs (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018; Calgary Board of Education, 2013; Manitoba Education, 2011, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). These guidelines have resulted in the school system becoming a critical component in promoting successful resettlement and social inclusion. For example, the Waterloo Region District School Board's Accelerated Basic Literacy Education program (Waterloo Region District School Board, 2008) offers three years of tailored language learning, including a settlement worker assigned to each student's family and transportation to a specific "congregated class" at a centrally located school (Hird-Bingeman et al., 2014, p. 178). The Vancouver School Board similarly employs multilingual settlement workers and offers a Settlement Workers in Schools program that promotes learner and family engagement in schools and communities through community referral, advocacy, and supported relationship building. That program hosts orientation workshops and regular information drop-in clubs during the school year, working closely with multicultural liaison workers who provide cross-cultural understanding, interpretation, and translation (Vancouver School Board, 2021).

Programs such as these often establish partnerships with community organizations and incorporate settlement support staff, family-school liaisons, mental health professionals, language learning specialists, and educational assistants. Depending on the school district's resources and the number of learners with limited prior formal learning, programming may be concentrated in selected schools or offered in a more decentralized fashion. This typically entails a refugee reception centre informing families about education options, initial language and literacy assessments, and establishing a connection to relevant schools and programs.

Policy makers recognize a lack of Canadian research about effective school community supports available to optimize refugee parental/family engagement (Ennab, 2017). The overarching objective of any education system as it relates to this demographic should be to create policy that ensures refugee students are able to view themselves as learners who will eventually find newfound self-confidence in their adopted homeland and begin to contribute to the classroom and school community. This involves processes of parental engagement and relationship building (Nordgren, 2017) and foregrounds the need for strategies to promote home–school connections and parent or guardian involvement.

It is for this reason that the researchers in this study chose Epstein’s Six Types of Parental Involvement to inform and provide the analytic framework for our research. We found this widely adopted organizing and framing tool appropriate because of its simplicity, easy-to-follow characteristics, and alignment with our methodology. Table 1 provides a schemata of the model.

**Table 1**

*Six Types of Parental Involvement in Their Children’s Schools*

Type	Description
Parenting	Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
Communicating	Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home.
Volunteering and attending events	Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school.
Learning at home	Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal-setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks.
Decision making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations.
Collaborating with the community	Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities. Enable all to contribute service to the community.

Adapted from “Partnering With Families and Communities: A Well-Organized Program of Family and Community Partnerships Yields Many Benefits for Schools and Their Students,” by J. L. Epstein and K. C. Salinas, 2004, *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), p. 15. Copyright 2004 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

The overlapping types of involvement recognize the key stakeholders in student learning as family, school, and community (Center for Family, School, Community Engagement, n.d.; Fazily, 2012; Manitoba Education, 2011). Furthermore, the model provides holistic parameters in the context of home-school-community collaboration through which a thorough and complete analysis can be undertaken (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). The framework highlights “the need for reciprocal interactions of parents, educators, and community partners to understand each other’s views, to identify common goals for students, and to appreciate each other’s contributions to student development” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006, p. 4). Epstein’s framework also offers a classification system for providing possible solutions in overcoming the barriers and challenges to refugee parental engagement.

## **Study Design**

### **Context**

The research is contextualized within the Literacy, English and Academic Development (LEAD) program in Calgary, Canada. The program enrolls English language learners (Grades 4–12) with limited or interrupted prior schooling experience. As a short-term accelerated language learning program, LEAD supports learners to transition into mainstream classrooms and English language learning courses, usually within two years. Specialized features include access to psychologists who assist learners in overcoming difficulties associated with trauma, support from Diversity and Learning Support Advisors (DLSAs) and in-school settlement practitioners (ISSPs), and English language learning assistants in all classrooms. Typically, classes have no more than 15 students. Upon completion of the program, students relocate to their local designated school.

### **Participants**

Participants included 11 Arabic-speaking parents of LEAD students (six families represented by one single mother and five couples), as well as 19 LEAD teachers and three in-school support workers (two DLSAs and one ISSP). All parent participants were

originally from Syria or Iraq and had experienced displacement for three to seven years. Some families had accessed formal or informal schooling delivered in Turkish, English, Arabic, or a Kurdish language prior to arriving in Canada. The teachers (five elementary school teachers, seven junior high school teachers, and seven high school teachers) represented all 11 LEAD program schools in the school district.

## **Method and Procedure**

Through a cooperative inquiry approach based on a shared agenda and interests (Heron & Reason, 1997), we engaged in cycles of action and reflection to elicit and analyze the experiences of parents, teachers, and in-school support workers within the LEAD programs. University and school district partners (the authors of this article) collaborated in the design and implementation of this research. Arabic-speaking research assistants recruited parents within the community who were invited to participate in focus groups that were held entirely in Arabic to ensure their understanding and encourage participation. Of importance, the families in this study were all of the Muslim faith, and typically, men and women are segregated in formal settings. Based on this premise, we separated the focus groups by gender and conducted them after school hours with warm halal Middle Eastern meals and babysitting provided. A semi-structured interview format encouraged contextualized responses, providing Arabic-speaking facilitators with a framework for guiding discussion. This limited any undue personal, political, or uncomfortable conversations that might surface in light of the complex experiences that often characterize refugee migration. Follow-up telephone interviews in Arabic were conducted with five mothers and three fathers. Individual interviews were also conducted with two ISSP and two DLSA workers. Three focus groups were conducted with 19 teachers in the LEAD program. Following this, an online focus group discussion was created in which teachers were presented with findings extracted from the first round of discussions compiled by the research team. Seven of the teachers responded to the online forum and their responses were included in the triangulated data.

The focus groups and interviews (held over the span of two years) were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English as necessary, with any identifying markers anonymized. We used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2014) thematic analysis to analyze the transcript data in two stages, first in aggregate and then synthesized. The first stage

involved in-depth analysis of each transcript, extracting emerging themes. In the second stage, we collectively analyzed the themes, weaving a thread through all of the data and extracting shared themes and findings that address the research questions. The reflections of the parents, teachers, and in-school support workers were triangulated to develop an understanding of Arabic-speaking newcomer refugee parent involvement in schools.

## **Findings**

Parents, teachers, and in-school support workers articulated perceptions that intersected at several points and resonated with literature findings in the context of policy, school, teachers, and parents. The data gleaned and analyzed using Epstein's model as a theoretical framework deepened our understanding of the tensions that were uncovered during research and brought the resourcefulness of parents, teachers, schools, and in-school supports into perspective. Building on Epstein's model, we were then able to present our own suggestions for moving forward toward optimizing refugee parental engagement.

### **Parenting**

Epstein's model highlights the significance of parents' level of education, parenting skills, supports for learning at home, and the importance of assisting schools in understanding families' backgrounds. The researchers assumed that much of the parents' role in supporting their children's learning came predominantly through interaction with the school. To support this statement, one of the teacher participants commented:

You know maybe different ideas of how school works. You know when you're speaking with people who, you know, are born and raised here. They have a better idea of how school works and they're.... I find often when I'm working with parents of kids who were immigrants, they just say "whatever you say."

The parents' interactions with the school regarding their children's learning produced some of the most informative challenges that were found in this study. Language barriers prevented many parents from being able to initiate all but brief exchanges with teachers when dropping off a child, and messages were often delivered via their children. (Fathers' Focus Group). One parent described an effort to engage by saying, "I went more

than once and took my eldest son to translate for me and everything stayed the same” (Fathers’ Focus Group). The foundational problem here seemed twofold: an issue that the older child could not adequately bridge the communication barrier between the two parties, and a perceived lack of receptiveness from school personnel. The father’s comment regarding the static nature of the school’s reaction highlighted the importance of two-way communication between parents and the school.

Epstein’s model suggests parents’ support for their children’s learning implies a unification of sorts where all stakeholders possess similar goals and values for their child’s/student’s education and well-being. However, one aspect in which parents felt the school fell short was in not upholding the parents’ sense of culture, language, and faith. They perceived a defined lack of school support and staff familiarity with these three factors of the child’s history before they had entered the LEAD program. As a result, parents commented that the responsibility fell largely on them for maintaining their culture, language, and faith as they witnessed the interplay between their children adapting to a new culture and language, while still trying to maintain the traditional aspects of what they had known in the past and wanted to preserve.

Parental support was also an obstacle as it related to the teachers’ strategy of phoning parents if there was a concern or a necessity for some sort of communication. Teachers commented that phone calls often proved to be ineffective. In part, this seemed to have roots in various factors:

The undependability of phone numbers, the frequent inability of parents to pay their phone bill, resulting in cancelled accounts, and multiple phone numbers attached to one child (including parents, other family members, support people, and sponsors). (Teachers’ Focus Group 1)

The school’s ability to implement web-based technology to support parents proved to be equally challenging. Translation apps, email, and educational learning management system messenger programs “sounds like a great idea in theory” (Teachers’ Focus Group 1) but failed to meet the needs of LEAD program families, many of whom did not have reliable access to this technology. One teacher remarked, “Email’s set up, but then the password’s forgotten, or they have like five email accounts, and it’s like ‘which one did I give to you?’” (Teachers’ Focus Group 2). Another teacher added, “Maybe

internet's cut off, because they don't pay the bill and then the cycle goes again. They have to set it up" (Teachers' Focus Group 2).

Nevertheless, while meeting optimal levels of Epstein's parenting model for supporting children's learning was often challenging, the value of ongoing efforts was expressed well by one teacher, who commented on the ostensibly unending attempts needed to keep up good communication and the value of frequent endeavours to do so:

Texting, calling, having them come in, keeping available, and working through the DLSA worker.... Sometimes you have an interpreter that you go to just [to] help you. And just keep at it because it's so hard and it's so easy to just not do it. But it gets better the more contact that you have. (Teachers' Focus Group 1)

Some parents attempted to create different strategies in an effort to increase verbal understanding. For example, they would sometimes request their child audio-record a conversation with a teacher (Fathers' Focus Group) in an effort to better understand any ongoing issues with their child. Another strategy described by one father established "an agreement between me and the teacher" to exchange messages in his child's agenda that are translated by "a neighbour who is well-learned and speaks Arabic" (Fathers' Focus Group). Asked if they had ongoing communication with the teacher, parents answered affirmatively and described their presence and readiness to engage: "Yes there is, I reach out regularly with the teachers.... Whenever they need me to, I'm there" (Fathers' Focus Group).

## **Communicating**

Epstein's model reiterates that communication plays a vital role in ensuring there are two-way channels of interaction, especially regarding students' academic progress.

One obstacle to optimizing Epstein's two-way communication model was the language barriers cited repeatedly as a key challenge to establishing meaningful contact with the school. Interpreters are the voice for refugee families, and without them families are unable to self-advocate. Teachers noted that in some instances, when parents rely on translation by a friend of the family, "that family friend isn't as good at English as the family thinks they are, and so the message gets scrambled" (Teachers' Focus Group 3). A frequent source of parental concern was inaccuracies during informal translation and the

unintended privacy breaches that can occur. Because of the limited language resources available to them, the school could only fulfill part of its mandate with respect to communicating to parents. It was then up to the parents to find ways to comprehend, leaving the school to hope that they understood the full impact of what was being said.

Given the value that Epstein places on communicating well, the study found that parents were typically only invited to the school for parent–teacher interviews or when a conflict occurred. Moreover, the parent–teacher interview uncovered the limitations of the 15-minute time limit placed on this process. The teachers acknowledged that in class, ELL students are inevitably given extra time to complete assignments due to language barriers. Therefore, using the same reasoning when conducting parent–teacher interviews, it would seem logical to afford the families the same adaptations during interviews. As one teacher remarked, “[There is] the language barrier, and then it’s just so rigid, and if we were booking translators, we need more time than what that system allows us” (Teachers’ Focus Group 2). Another teacher remarked:

Time for parents for whom English is their second language, and the time that we need to have an interpreter to explain what we are saying.... That’s double the time, because we’re talking, and the interpreter needs to talk. So minimum, the system needs to allow parent–teacher interviews for ELL and LEAD students at least 30 minutes per student. (Teachers’ Focus Group 1)

The researchers perceived this as highly problematic, as it further reduced the amount of anticipated and effective communication with this demographic. To further complicate the matter, all schools currently host interviews within roughly the same two-week block, and thus compete to schedule interpreters. One parent shared that she had refused a parent–teacher interview without an interpreter “because I will not understand what is being said about my children. There needs to be an interpreter present” (Mothers’ Focus Group). Adding to the frustration, an online booking system also proved to be somewhat ineffective due to issues with technology access and familiarity with the system for refugee families.

A further source of tension between families and the school was the handling of cases of inappropriate student behaviour and the ensuing request for communication. In some cases, when a conflict arose between students and parents were asked to come in to discuss the issues, they were not provided with an interpreter and, in some instances,

were simply left to review security footage of the incident. Not only was there minimal parent–teacher contact, but parents were coming into a conversation around a negative school experience that they did not understand. The researchers identified a lack of accountability on the part of the school in being able to supply an effective number of translators. Inevitably, the parents’ increased stress and pressure was perceived by them to inhibit their ability to address the situation adequately.

Whether informing them about difficulties or seeking to collaborate with them about possible solutions or consequences, teachers also cited examples where parents seemed unable to engage effectively in light of broader family dynamics. The sense of shock and distress seemed to be a prevalent factor in how parents were able to cope with day-to-day life. One teacher commented:

I’ve noticed some of the parents who are strictly [experiencing] mental illness, whether it’s related to their trauma or other things going on, that they’re, they’re just trying to hold it together... It’s hard for them to make meetings or ensure that their kids have a lunch or are getting to school on time and things like that because they’re just trying to survive. (Teachers’ Focus Group 3)

El-Khani and colleagues (2016) established that parents’ own trauma (e.g., trauma related to anxiety or anger), feelings of guilt (overusing harsh discipline or poor caregiving), lack of confidence, and past traumatic experiences (e.g., exposure to violence and fear) are all indicators of difficulties related to establishing good communication with them. In our study, the data revealed numerous examples of parents who felt overwhelmed by their situation. One parent, for example, was explaining how they were having anxious moments because they were not literate: “Having not had the opportunity to go to school when I was younger, it was very difficult coming to Canada because everything requires reading, writing, and learning.”

Another parent commented how a previous serious medical incident in a Turkish refugee camp convinced the government authorities that he needed to “get out.” There were several parents who expressed the anxiety they felt around financial pressures and the fact that they seemed to have no control over their children. With these emotions dominating so much of their lives, it was a challenge for parents to create a sense of normalcy, including the amount of communication with the school in which they could effectively engage.

Nevertheless, despite the perceived barriers to good communication, the parents' focus group participants described home–school interactions in generally positive terms. Participants expressed appreciation for the teaching, the sense of security given to the children, the “excellent manners” the teachers displayed, and the rate at which the children learned the language and excelled. One parent said, “I feel a sense of safety and security. Those dealing with my kids are giving them their rights and not treating them any differently than the Canadian kids” (Fathers' Focus Group). Another parent stated:

I wish for increased collaboration between the school and the parents to support that beginner learner to go up to intermediate, and the intermediate to become confident. I just wish for increased collaboration so we can help the students achieve that progress. Of course, I understand that this is an English school, but learning the mother tongue and learning Arabic at home will help with their English language acquisition because that skill transfers. (Fathers' Focus Group)

Overall, parents found that having the consistency of good communication with the school was advantageous, whether it involved a Centre of Immigration Services volunteer or someone from the Syrian community to help with paperwork. Additionally, all teacher focus groups identified in-school support workers as essential to enabling more effective communication with refugee parents. One teacher said, “Our parents mostly contact our bridge settlement worker to talk to us. She is usually the liaison between—the parents phone her, she emails us, we email her, and then she calls the parents back” (Teachers' Focus Group 3).

Within this context, teachers noted the level of assistance that in-school support workers can provide depends on the workers' caseload, which traditionally varies depending on the school in which they are working. As the case load goes up in any given school, the amount of time and depth that could be given to individual students decreases. Hence, some schools are able to offer more support than others.

The study also reiterated the important role these workers play in “repairing” home–school relationships that can become strained due to communication difficulties:

The school may have tried so many times to connect with the parent and that leaves their relationship broken sometimes.... You come to make sure everyone, the school and the parent, is aware of each other's perspective and how relative it

is to the education of the child and wonderful things happen out of that first connection and first understanding. (DLSA interview)

Teachers also expressed a positive interpretation of the home–school interactions. As one teacher said, “I was surprised to see my student’s mother and she said, ‘I can speak English now. I’m confident and I’m here to take control of my children’s education’” (Teachers’ Focus Group 2). The teacher recognized the value of this statement in that it emphasized the interest and energy this parent was willing to invest in her children’s education and the importance she placed on good communication.

### **Volunteering/Attending Events**

Epstein suggests incorporating strategies that can lead to an improvement in recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. The model also advocates for educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. The researchers noted that with limited prior volunteering experience, parents in this study did not consistently feel incentivized to participate in school learning activities. One father’s comment resonated with many others: “We don’t do that in our country. That’s not something parents ever did” (Fathers’ Focus Group). Parents also reported that although they were aware of Canadian norms for parent volunteering and participation, they had not done so “because, to be honest, no one ever requested it” (Fathers’ Focus Group). If the perception exists that parents are rarely invited into the school, the onus is therefore on the schools (and the teachers themselves) to explore increasing alternative, informal opportunities for engagement. However, teacher participants shared mixed feelings regarding how they could accommodate parents in a volunteer role: “I’m not quite sure what I would get them to do...how I could use their expertise or their knowledge” (Teachers’ Focus Group 1). With a nod to Epstein’s model, the researchers acknowledged the role the DLSAs and community liaisons could play as a potential source of help and guidance for the teachers to develop and improve volunteering opportunities for refugee parents.

Several parents had been provided participation forms to sign but the school did not follow up. One father commented, “We wish they would request something...of us, or for us to join them” (Fathers’ Focus Group). A teacher’s comment was, “In order to volunteer they have to be able to complete a police security clearance” (Teachers’ Focus

Group). It is important to note, however, that a person new to Canada cannot submit to any police security clearance unless they have a valid work permit, further barring some of the parents from volunteering, even if they were willing.

Several fathers also noted language barriers left them feeling uncomfortable attending field trips and other similar extracurricular activities. As one stated:

I never volunteered in Syria, but I know over here sometimes they like for parents to participate. Most of the kids all speak English, but I lack the language. So how am I supposed to interact with them or help when I don't have the language myself? This is the biggest challenge for me. (Fathers' Focus Group)

Additional factors that restricted parental volunteerism were the difficulties experienced by some in accessing transportation and the realization that parenting responsibilities for other children also had to be taken into account. Some of the fathers also expressed their reticence at missing their ELL classes. Restrictions on the number of absences permitted would further prevent them from being able to volunteer or participate in their children's school activities.

In spite of these perceived barriers, overall, the teacher participants viewed the notion of parent volunteerism as being useful and meaningful. Furthermore, by incorporating the levels of Epstein's framework to brainstorm possibilities, teachers could expand on their ideas regarding school parental involvement:

Trying to tap into some of the skills that the moms have and even the dads... would be awesome. You don't need to speak English to teach weaving.... It can be a real sharing. They are coming with skills. I'm looking for knitters and weavers right now. I'm not having much luck, but I would love anybody to come into my classroom. (Teachers' Focus Group 2)

and

If they're literate in their first language and I can find a dual-language book, I've asked parents to come and read their language part of the story and I read the English part. But that's the challenge with Kurmanji [a Kurdish language; Kurmanji-English books are not readily available]. I've used it with Arabic parents who are readers in the past. (Teachers' Focus Group 3)

## **Learning at Home**

Epstein's model calls for supporting parents to help learning at home through goal-setting exercises and she encourages teachers to design homework that involves sharing and discussion with interesting tasks. However, this study uncovered issues that impacted this potential level of parental engagement. Diversity and Learning Support Advisors (DLSAs) met regularly with families and noted that not only did parents not have sufficient time to work with their children at home, but that they also felt inadequately prepared. The workers themselves felt they too were not well-versed enough in teacher expectations and lacked a clearly defined role. As noted by one DLSA worker, "I don't tell them what you should be doing.... You tell me how you can support within your capacity and I'll support you in that" (DLSA interview). Clearly, more work needed to be done through the LEAD program design in defining roles and expectations for both parents and DLSAs and how they could support home learning.

Even with sufficient supports and expectations in place, the researchers recognized there were limits to how much parents could do to help their children's learning at home, especially given the circumstances they faced:

Those families who are under the federal government sponsorship are mandated to go to their ELL [English Language Learning] classes, and if they miss a certain number of days, their funding will go down. Then they have medical appointments, they have surgeries, there are many things happening; they have lots of kids—so it impacts their attendance. And we ask them to be engaged with their children at home, for example. Well, how can they be engaged if they go to school 'til 5, 6 p.m.?... They're exhausted themselves. (DLSA interview)

A common barrier to parents participating in learning at home activities were the misconceptions about education stemming from their own educational experiences in their home countries:

Chances are they don't because they came from a vastly different education system where you sit with the parents and say that your child is struggling. The parent looks at you and says, 'Oh, you're the teacher, you are the second parent, so whatever you decide, you are the captain of the ship.' Here we try to empower parents to say there's nothing a teacher can do for your child without your own

consent, without your own engagement, without your own voice. Your voice is very important. So, while I'm educating them about the LEAD program, once again, I'm educating them and informing them about the education system here. I'm also putting them in that leadership position, meaning that you are always going to be the captain of the ship. (Teachers' Focus Group)

The teachers and support workers in this study recognized that a key step in the successful transitioning of refugee students and their corresponding family units is to establish an awareness that the school has a responsibility in helping refugee parents understand their authority over their children's education in their current environment. By helping both parents and students understand the value of learning at home *and* at school, they work towards optimizing parental engagement. This practice is intended to help their children gain a stronger foothold as they enter the Canadian academic sphere.

## **Decision Making**

Epstein's model advocates for parents as participants in decision making. This includes being part of school councils, committees, and parent organizations. Some of the challenges around decision making to promote parental involvement in such roles were directly linked to seeking parental consent and understanding. These factors were tied into parents' literacy levels, language barriers, limited time resources, and student engagement. Some participants commented that the forms sent home were hard to understand because "I do not have anyone to translate them" (Mothers' Focus Group), and that school newsletters are not necessarily "ELL family-friendly" (Teachers' Focus Group 1). Parents also felt there were too many written communiques considering the effort needed to understand them. One mother said,

The schools send me four to five forms a day, and sometimes more. It is really difficult to translate every word. This is a problem for me because I do not have time. I also work and take care of a household. If the forms could be sent home in Arabic, that would be really helpful. (Mothers' Focus Group)

Another parent remarked that the school wants permission for things like field trips and vaccinations, as well as overall understanding from parents: "They ensure that we have read and understood the details of what is being asked before agreeing to

anything” (Mothers’ Focus Group). Teachers agreed with this opinion: “We don’t even know that families are able to read in their first language.” Others expressed concern that parents may be signing forms for activity participation “when they don’t understand the safety component” (Teachers’ Focus Group 1).

Several parents also explained that their lack of formal schooling made it difficult to engage with any written form of decision making. For example, one mother commented:

It was very difficult coming to Canada because everything requires reading, writing, and learning. I receive a lot of paperwork for my kids and have to pay close attention and memorize letters and numbers to understand what is being said.  
(Mothers’ Focus Group)

Teachers remarked that some students were hesitant about parents being involved at all. These teachers indicated the students also felt that the home experience should be kept separate from their school and classroom experiences. In turn, some parents were perceived as feeling uncomfortable with saying something that may contradict a teacher, tending to defer to teachers in conversations in which parental insight and collaboration were sought in decision making or problem solving: “I find often when I’m working with parents of kids who were immigrants, they just say, ‘Whatever you say’” (Teachers’ Focus Group 1). This would occasionally frustrate teachers who wanted to encourage more input from parents: “This is my opinion, [but] you know your child; you know what’s best for him and her. Sometimes I don’t always know the best” (Teachers’ Focus Group 1). In that teacher’s opinion, getting to know their students better through parental contact and decision making was an important step in optimizing parental engagement.

Epstein’s model supports a growing body of research that confirms the importance of parents’ role in optimizing a school’s operations (Kelly, 2020). Parents in this study emphasized how they valued that teachers and the school regularly sought their input in the decision-making process.

The best thing about these schools is that they inform us before doing anything with the children.... Nothing is done without parental and student consent, as they don’t force our child to do something she is not comfortable with. (Mothers’ Focus Group)

Incorporating Epstein's model as a framework for our study guided the researchers to findings that acknowledge the value of parental engagement through their involvement in different decision-making initiatives. This gives schools the opportunity to get to know the parents on a deeper level and work more productively with refugee students, breaking through some of the barriers as they develop a clearer understanding of individual families' concerns. As a result, a relationship of mutual trust can begin to develop when barriers are reduced because parents are more confident in the school system and more willing to participate in the process.

### **Community Collaboration**

The importance of coordinating resources and services for families is also an integral component of Epstein's framework. These include businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and post-secondary institutions. Throughout the study, the notion of disconnect surfaced frequently "among the students, the school community, and then afterwards with the parents" (DLSA interview). For example, student participation in extracurricular activities was somewhat curtailed because of their limited linguistic abilities and general lack of understanding as to how the school's extracurricular framework functions. To help mitigate this, the in-school support workers made recommendations to families about educational and social programs that could benefit the entire family (DLSA interviews), and some teachers referenced connections with community organizations, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters, which provide mentorship programming in one-to-one and group formats (Teachers' Focus Group 3). Mental health practitioners were also cited as important supports and links to the broader community (DLSA interview; Teachers' Focus Groups 1, 2, and 3). These resources include the Alberta Children's Hospital Family and Community Resource Centre, the Calgary Counselling Centre, and Family Services.

A critical impediment to family participation in such programs was the fact that many have "no sense of belonging in the city" and "lack of language (i.e., not being able to complete an application), accessibility...and financial readiness for those programs in the city." Furthermore, the activities families accessed did not necessarily help them build connections with "other mainstream Canadians" (DLSA interview).

A further challenge to community engagement with the refugee students was the hesitancy of some families to permit their daughters to participate in community programming. One in-school support worker explained, ““No, she’s a girl, she can’t go that far, she cannot do this, oh I don’t want her to be in this program’...there are so many...excuses.... We’re trying so hard to work with the family” (DLSA interview). Coupled with gender norms, social considerations were also an impediment factor, as one father explained why he does not get involved with other children and families:

When I first came here, people started to get very nosy with their questions: How did you get here? How old are you? What’s your banking information? How much money do you have? So, I stayed away. I don’t ask any Syrian or Canadian anything personal. (Fathers’ Focus Group)

The hesitancy to answer personal questions was perhaps due to participants’ cultural perceptions and past experience that may have led to a general sensitivity toward dishonesty and fraud.

Other barriers to community participation and collaboration included the prevalence of parents’ busy schedules, lack of transportation, and concern about the distance that children would be from home or how late a program would run in the evening. Nonetheless, the teachers and school continued to encourage students and their parents to participate in extracurricular activities, all with noble objectives. The teachers felt that, once the families could break down some of the barriers, community collaboration initiatives would become more commonplace.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Our study revealed that a variety of intertwining factors impede optimal refugee parental engagement with their children’s school. We were able to categorize these factors by referencing the levels of parental engagement outlined in Epstein’s model. These factors are due principally to circumstance and a cultural, linguistic, and faith-based nescience stemming from both refugees and Canadian education systems. The ensuing issues from these societal differences resulted from a lack of trauma-informed supports, an insufficient number of multilingual and multicultural in-school support staff, and a dearth of

varied modes of home–school communication (and in different languages). Additional challenges included parent–teacher conferences and information nights with a limited time block or insufficient number of interpreters available. Participants also recognized a rigidity in curriculum content, and a uni-dimensional approach to accessing community networks, professionals, and community agencies.

The implications of our discoveries suggest that the resultant chasm between refugee parents and their children’s school can be greatly narrowed by acknowledging the needed pertinent resources that would benefit from embracing models of improvement such as Epstein’s framework. The school’s responsibility encompasses everything from helping refugee parents be more effective in their new home country, to working toward engaging in an affirming and productive citizenship.

Epstein’s model helped us realize the necessity of developing trust and good communication channels as well as acknowledging the need for robust relationships. A positive first step comes with assisting parents with skills in developing strong families and helping the school understand the cultural, religious, and linguistic needs of its refugee students. This results in a symbiotic relationship among parents, students, and the school. In essence, language and culture, as well as religion, become a lens for learning for all students, and in particular English language learners. As teachers engage in more culturally relevant teaching, they can stimulate their students to achieve deeper levels of thinking and higher levels of personal achievement. The researchers suggest that this relationship can be enhanced and optimized through public cultural celebrations, evidence of language samples throughout the school, or demonstrations of cultural significance when appropriate.

A vital factor in the whole process is the development of effective parent/school communication, and acting liaisons are crucial stakeholders in developing strategies to accomplish this. These include the Diversity and Learning Support Advisors, In-School Settlement Practitioners (DLSAs and ISSPs) as well as the teachers and administration, all of whom play a critical role in maintaining and supporting this relationship. The in-school support workers also play an important role in developing mutually reinforcing parent–school trust and communication between parents and school, facilitating opportunities for parents to bring forward questions about curriculum content and children’s learning. Responding “to their fears” (ISSP interview) with respect and kindness can help

dispel any misunderstandings and lead to a greater awareness of Canadian school culture among refugee parents.

Parent–teacher interviews provided an example of how policies and procedures can be unintentionally alienating for families. Improvement strategies such as providing childcare, coordinating transportation, and arranging for discussion facilitation in the mother tongue with interpretation for English-speakers, all position LEAD Program parents to take a more active role in the dialogue. Also worthy of consideration is the provision of additional time for ELL parent–teacher interviews and more encouragement and accountability from the school. The researchers suggest a school that encourages home visits may prove to be beneficial, not only because these visits can allow parents additional time to feel more comfortable, but they also afford teachers insight into students’ funds of knowledge. By implementing even small changes, parental engagement, as suggested through Epstein’s model, could be more adequately optimized.

Epstein suggested that volunteering and participation in school-based activities are also a vital part of positive parental engagement. However, refugee parents are often inhibited from participating in and supporting their children’s academic activities because of their own perceived deficient literacy skills. School-based or school-linked family literacy programs that involve parents and children working together can provide a bridge to school culture as well as familiarity with in-school literacy practices. Literacy programs can increase parents’ sense of belonging, enhance knowledge of the local school system and curriculum, and improve awareness of opportunities for parent and family involvement (Bassani, 2008). If designed to be affirming of immigrant and refugee families’ home language literacy practices, they are theorized as spaces where families draw on the domains of both home and school and can exert agency (Anderson et al., 2011, 2017).

Providing diverse and robust opportunities with proper orientation can increase the quality and amount of parental engagement. Initiatives could take the form of having refugee parents and students share their culture, language, and religion at various opportune moments in the classroom. Initially encouraging refugee parents to be part of an audience, either at the school or on field trips, can help them gain confidence in their abilities. We suggest encouraging community engagement by inviting parents to be guest readers in the classroom (e.g., using dual language books with parents helping to read out

loud, or developing community groups through library programs including read aloud sessions and identity text creation).

The research also illustrated the difficulty many parents experience trying to be involved in their children's in-home academic learning. We suggest families can be better equipped to set goals, ensure homework is getting finished, and accomplish other curriculum-related activities through better communication between home and school. It is vital that teachers design homework that enables students to share and discuss various tasks with parents in ways that will empower them during the little time they do have. This could include the use of checklists, brief comment boxes, or short participatory activities where parent and child can interact within a specified time span. Also helpful is a bilingual component that enables the parents to respond in their first language.

Epstein's framework also reiterated the importance of family involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy activities (e.g., school councils, improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations). Our study helped schools to recognize the perceived barriers to effective decision making, thereby giving them the tools to create more "user-friendly" opportunities such as digital surveys, online input into decision making, or multilingual/bilingual meetings that can take place virtually, so members do not have to be physically present in order to contribute and participate.

Establishing an Action Team within the school, via Epstein's model, may be effective at generating contextually relevant partnership and involvement strategies. The Action Team, comprising teachers, administrators, community partners, and parents, can be tasked with developing annual plans for family and community involvement. This strategy offers scaffolding for parent involvement in other committees or councils in subsequent years of their children's education. This could be linked with the school council, focusing on providing childcare, coordinating transportation, and arranging for discussion facilitation in the parents' native language (with interpretation) in order to position them in a more active role in the dialogue.

The LEAD program, key to many refugee students' successful transition into mainstream society, played a fundamental role in our study. It seeks to engender the development of support networks through which refugees' knowledge, skills, and cultural diversity can be recognized and better leveraged for the benefit of the wider community. The researchers were able to determine that, in spite of the impediments brought out in the data, a number of parents described the goals and objectives of the LEAD program

as being honourable and enhancing their feelings of safety and security. They appreciated how it helped ease learners into the school system. The researchers felt this was important to know and ascertained it could be used as a foundational element in piecing together next steps in establishing even more positive parental engagement with the school.

Overall, the parents' support of their children's learning was largely stymied by linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers. These barriers often inhibited their ability to influence or encourage their children's academic success. The researchers suggest that, in order to be more engaged with the school, programs (such as the LEAD program) need to be well-organized, with clear objectives and goals, and represented by a highly sustainable partnership among parents, the school, and the community.

## **Conclusion**

Analysis of the findings indicated that the data seemed to point toward similar solutions. All stakeholders have a part to play in optimizing refugee parental engagement with the school. These stakeholders include the refugees themselves, government, sponsors, agencies, and schools. The findings from this study led the researchers to underscore how more inclusive education policies, professional development for teachers involved with refugee families, and school initiatives that encourage parental engagement with refugee newcomers all need to be part of the solution. Furthermore, any policy or model should be grounded in rights-based language, with the potential to precipitate the formation of communities of practice within the education system. These communities of practice can then be engaged as partners in inclusive design processes and help in forming relevant community partnerships. A two-way communication model, such as the one suggested by Epstein, encourages the school to be proactive in communication and collaboration.

Our own recommendation for such a model includes the following three areas of focus.

### **1. Explicit Programming to Support Refugee and Immigrant Youth**

We suggest there be a mandated province-wide standardization of programming and staffing qualifications. This would need to address linguistic and psycho-social needs of

refugee youth and their families to prepare them for successful entrance into the school system.

## **2. A Local School Board Support System**

It is important to establish and expand board and in-school settlement best practices province-wide. This includes interpreting services, in-school settlement programs, diversity support workers, assessment, and welcoming centres. Proper system-wide coordination of these elements gives better consistency and provides for more accountability.

## **3. Leadership and Teacher Training and Resource Development**

By using Epstein's model in our research, we see helpful ways to apply it to the post-secondary experience. Our model suggests developing pre-service and in-service professional development expectations at the post-secondary level. This includes incorporating empathic and culturally responsive pedagogy, language learning methodologies and resources, trauma-sensitive initiatives, and leadership strategies.

This study helped uncover some of the gaps in refugee parental engagement with their children's school and the importance of working to strengthen and maintain communication among all stakeholders, including family, school, and community. More work clearly needs to be accomplished to narrow the gap between the issues faced by refugee families and the vital role the education system plays in helping to resolve them.

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