Receiving Syrian Refugees in Our Schools:
Thinking Through our Roles as Teachers and Citizens
Written by STA Members: Julia MacRae, June James, Phyllis Minsky, Joanna Shniad, Poonam Kainth, Helen Kelsey-Etanski

As members of the STA’s International Solidarity and Anti-Poverty Committees we have been concerned about the issue of refugees escaping Syria and the stories of struggle going on all over the Middle East and Europe. So far, Canada has received more than 25,000 refugees, and children from these families will soon be making their way into our classrooms. While we hope and expect the Surrey School District and the provincial government will make resources available to successfully accommodate these students’ needs, we also want to provide a special newsletter with the hope that you may find inspiration and ideas about how to support refugee students in your class. When these new students arrive, it may not be a smooth transition. We know that some of these new students may be seriously traumatized or have lost family members, or may have had long journeys full of risk and confusion. Of course we all know kids are amazingly resilient and are born to learn, but we also know that the best chance to succeed for any child in school is enhanced by a warm welcome from a teacher. Here are some pointers we have gathered and researched that may be helpful to you before and after the students arrive.

Some immediate pointers:
- Don’t be afraid to be a leader in your school on this issue. You can easily bring ideas about making your school more welcoming to your school’s staff committee and start the conversation.
- Spend some time learning about the background of our students. Teachers can learn more about the conflict in Syria. As a place to start, check out the list of articles and videos included on the last page.
- Notice how you feel about receiving these new students. If you feel stressed about it, think how stressful it is to be a refugee: probably more stressful than we can imagine. Remember, students notice your reactions, so let’s all do our best to be kind, welcoming, and positive. First impressions can last a long time.
- If you are personally interested in doing more to help, find out if a local church, mosque, gurdwara, community group or even a group of friends or family is sponsoring a family near you; perhaps offer to do a fundraiser to help offset their costs, which are onerous. Or host a refugee family yourself! Many Canadians are offering temporary housing for refugees – See wehostrefugees.org to offer to receive people into your guest room or extra space in your house, even for just a few days while they are in transition.
- It is a hardship for refugee students not to be able to return to their country, and they worry about all of the at-risk, missing, or murdered family left behind. Let’s receive any refugee students who may come to Surrey with grace and generosity. We have the capacity, training, gentle hearts and skills to make our schools true places of refuge. Surrey teachers can do it!
Warm and gentle welcome:
We know that the single most important factor for an at-risk child’s success in school is a warm and welcoming teacher. Think about the daily classroom routines. Are there any triggers that you need to plan ahead for? Imagine arriving and being mystified by some things that we accept as customary. Help new kids understand the reasons behind daily events and routines. Remember that the child’s day includes lunch breaks and recess. Where will they go and what will they do? Help to orient them. Perhaps start a welcoming committee or friendship circle for new arrivals.

Prepare your other students if possible:
- Spend some time talking to your class about the arrival of new students and asking them to be buddies/helpers.
- Prepare your class by showing age appropriate videos and by talking to them.
- Invite a former refugee as a guest speaker to tell their story about how hard coming to Canada was for them to enhance awareness.
- Clarify that a refugee is not the same as an immigrant because refugees are fleeing persecution and violence.
- Children are not in charge of where they live and where they go to school, so compassion and acceptance are the most important behaviours to foster in ourselves and our students.

Classroom environment:
- Be aware that loud noises may trigger a reaction in a traumatized child. Explain that dismissal bells go off every day; think ahead to fire alarm drills as well.
- Make it easy to participate in your class by having plenty of supplies and materials to share.
- Give students a choice to participate in activities or not.
- Assign a Canadian buddy to each refugee student;
- Encourage group work and peer connections;
- Provide a smaller class in at least one course if possible;
- Make sure the refugee student knows about upcoming school events so they feel included.

Wider school environment:
- Identify language helpers - There may be Arabic speakers on your staff or student body who can be of assistance.
- Think about what food is available at school and whether it will be suitable for the student. Can it be adapted to fit their needs?
- Get to know the surrounding community better; find out what services are available at local institutions such as the library, clinics, public transportation etc—so you can direct people to what they need.
- Get the school clubs involved—promoting welcoming activities, awareness of what can help etc.
- Encourage the PAC to take a leadership role.
- Provide a tour of the school and grounds to family and provide a map;
- Have a Canadian family give the refugee family a tour of the neighbourhood;

In 2011, before the war in Syria began, 91 per cent of primary-age children in Syria were enrolled in school. By 2013-14, primary enrolment in Syria had fallen to 38 per cent.
## Possible Signs of Culture Shock

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Signs</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becomes ill easily (e.g., upper-respiratory infections, low-grade infections or weight loss)</td>
<td>Encourage family to keep the child home if they begin coughing or showing signs of a cold.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tires easily/Has difficulty sleeping/Needs frequent sleep</td>
<td>Encourage family to practice cold and flu prevention (e.g., dressing their child for the weather, washing hands frequently, having a balanced diet and getting lots of sleep).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is listless, lacks energy or is unable to sit still/Has increased nervous habits (e.g., nail biting)</td>
<td>Allow the child to sleep more often and for longer periods.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Emotional Signs</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Extreme anxiety on separation</td>
<td>Encourage a gradual separation and assign one consistent caregiver for the child and family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss of emotional control</td>
<td>Move in more rapidly if the child seems aggressive.</td>
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<td>Emotional display is more volatile or more passive</td>
<td>Provide outlets for emotional expression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regressive behaviour (e.g. wetting pants, sucking thumb)</td>
<td>If the child is staying in one area, bring toys to them or guide them to another area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Withdrawn or apathetic</td>
<td>Create a “safe haven” where children can retreat to when they are not ready to engage in play.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unable to engage in play</td>
<td>Encourage the child to join in activities but do not require it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remains in one area of the room</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Waits for instructions from caregiver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacks focus, easily distracted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Displays different behaviour at home</td>
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<tr>
<th>Social Signs</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent on one caregiver</td>
<td>Allow time to observe others. Model language and play strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prefers to play alone – fearful of others or unaware of them</td>
<td>As the child grows more confident, encourage broader interactions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remains rigid when picked up</td>
<td>Help build friendships by engaging two children in play and then gradually retreating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive OR very passive in their play with others</td>
<td>Provide the words needed for social play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty forming relationships with others. May avoid eye contact</td>
<td>Do not use complex phrases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observes others for long periods of time</td>
<td>Use playful ways to engage the child.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reduce expectations and pressure in play/learning.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage the family to use their first language at home.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage all parents/caregivers that speak the child’s language to use it.</td>
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Are BC Schools Ready for Syrian Refugees?

With 1,000 kids on the way, critics say more teacher training and resources are needed.

By Katie Hyslop, 21 Nov 2015, TheTyee.ca

Grade 12 student Thumn Al-Rawe, who came to Canada as a refugee, speaks at Guildford Park Secondary’s Remembrance Day ceremony Nov. 10, 2015.

Syrian refugee Thumn Al-Rawe is beating odds in more ways than one.

Al-Rawe’s family left their home in Iraq for Syria in 2005 after her father was kidnapped and later released. She was seven years old.

In 2012, a year into Syria’s ongoing civil war, Al-Rawe, her parents, and three siblings left Syria and arrived in Vancouver as refugees. Today the family lives in Surrey.

"I love school, I love studying," said the now 17-year-old Grade 12 student. While English Language Learning (ELL) secondary students like Al-Rawe spend an average three and a half years in ELL classes, she finished all six English levels in one year.

Al-Rawe excelled in non-ELL academic classes, too, getting As and Bs on her report card. Any free time she has left is spent volunteering with school committees, the City of Surrey, and helping other newcomers adapt to Canada.

"All of this stuff, I've done it to improve myself," she said. "My sisters and I, we’re trying to make our parents very proud of us and get the education that they couldn't have."

B.C. is expecting 3,000 Syrian refugees to land in the province by early next year -- an estimated 1,000 of which are under 19. But researchers and settlement service staff warn success stories like Al-Rawe’s will be difficult to achieve without more teacher training and resources.

Chris Friesen, director of settlement services for Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, says supports for refugees in school districts all over B.C. have been examined and found lacking.

"I'm talking about system issues," he said. "Does the school board have additional English as a Second Language resource teachers? Are the classroom teachers prepared to deal with children of refugee backgrounds? Is the high school counsellor or the school psychologist able to intervene in dealing with children who may be in crisis with refugee backgrounds?"

While additional supports are needed "especially outside the Lower Mainland" where immigrants don't typically settle, Friesen says administrators and educators within the region are telling him they need more money for training and resources to help refugee youth, too.

Tracking 'disappearing' students

"Refugee" covers a broad range of education levels, from middle-class students who've never missed a day of class to people who grew up in refugee camps and lack literacy skills in any language. Trauma can further complicate their school readiness, too.

Most Syrian refugees are expected to stay in Lower Mainland cities like Surrey, Burnaby, and Coquitlam. Others could end up outside the Lower Mainland, especially if they're reuniting with family already in B.C.

B.C.’s education ministry uses a per-pupil funding formula to cover ELL and other supports for students who need them, including refugees. A ministry spokesperson said the government will carry out a pupil count in February 2016, and will reallocate funds for new students by April.

The government says it doesn't track how many school-aged refugees are currently in the province. Districts can identify refugee students in their funding applications, but they don't have to, and students' immigration status can change.

University of British Columbia literacy and language education researcher Lee Gunderson has been studying refugees’ education outcomes in B.C.’s schools since the 1990s. While achievement varies by student, Gunderson
says refugees typically do worse in school than their immigrant or Canadian-born peers. "The disappearance rate is very high, meaning they disappear from schools and school districts," he said.

A study Gunderson conducted with the education ministry tracking 1,300 refugee youth from their enrollment in B.C. primary schools in 1993 to 1995 until their expected graduation date in 2009/10, revealed the ministry had lost track of one-third of the students. "They were simply gone from the system," he said. "The ministry called it 'out-migration,' and they assumed that 80 per cent of that out-migration group would graduate. And I have argued, 'Well, there's no way to know.'"

**Teacher training needed: prof**

English and good grades didn't come as easily to Dina Ganan, a refugee from Colombia who came with her family to Surrey in 2007. Now 20, Ganan spent four years in ELL courses, some of which she believes were taught by teachers who weren't trained in ELL instruction.

Outside of school, she barely had time to keep up with her studies because she was her parents' English interpreter. "Everything my parents couldn't do I had to do for them because of the language barriers," she said.

UBC language and literacy education prof Sylvia Helmer says not all teachers working with ELL students in B.C. are properly trained. It's only been three years since UBC made it mandatory for teacher candidates to take one ELL training course, and it's still the only teacher education program in the province to do so. "I'd like to see a whole load more people trained, for sure," Helmer said, adding most schools have some ELL-trained teachers but not enough to accommodate current or anticipated needs.

Secondary students with little English training are often segregated in ELL courses, which the province funds for a maximum of five years per student even though it takes up to nine years to master the academic language required for high school courses. Even after finishing ELL, students still need English help that the majority of the provinces' teachers aren't trained to provide.

Doug Strachan, communications services manager for the Surrey district, admits it's possible for a student to have a teacher without ELL training. But while they might not have degrees or university credits, many teachers have ELL professional development courses under their belt, he said.

Workers at settlement centres in Burnaby and Surrey, the first stop for immigrant and refugee families arriving in both school districts, deny untrained teachers are an issue. "I've been working as a settlement worker since 2007," said Natalya Khan, cultural transitions coordinator at Burnaby's Welcome Centre. "I have never heard any complaints from parents saying the teacher is not trained enough or 'we don't think our [child's] language needs are met.'"

**Surrey's pre-classroom supports**

Helmer was teaching in the public system when B.C. took in some \textit{7,500 boat people} from Vietnam, many of them deeply traumatized, in the late '70s and early '80s. "Kids spent the first year bouncing off the walls and then after that they could actually get down to learning," she said.

"They were trying to figure out who they were, where they were, and deal with the trauma -- and often the guilt, because they survived and their friends didn't."

Both Vancouver and Surrey have special programs to help some at-risk students adjust to school culture. "Our goal is to integrate them into the larger school community," said Caroline Lai, manager of Surrey's Welcome Centre.

In Surrey, 21 of the 25 slots in the program are filled, but Lai says Surrey has capacity for more classes. However, students in the program are unlikely to graduate on time. "Usually when they're 18 years old, they'll come back to see us. We have another program that we partner with our adult education," said Lai. "We get them on their adult graduation path as well as helping them with work experience."

**Time is running out**

Former refugees Ganan and Al-Rawe have further
suggestions for improving education for future refugee students.

Ganan says she had teachers in her Surrey school ask if she knew former Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. She also criticized a social studies teacher who presented a slideshow on global trade identifying cocaine as Colombia’s major export.

"Have the teachers and school staff provided with anti-oppression, anti-racism, and cultural awareness [training]," she said, emphasizing a recommendation that comes directly from the Vancouver Foundation’s Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team, which Ganan is a part of.

Mentorship programs established between older, more settled immigrant and refugee students with younger, newer students could help acclimatize them to their new reality, she added.

But Lai says the district already has Connect Through Reading, a mentorship program that pairs older immigrant and Canadian-born students with Grade 6 and 7 students to help them read English and prepare for high school.

"So that when the Grade 6s and 7s do go to high school, they'll feel a little bit more comfortable and know somebody," she said.

Ganan said mentors from a similar cultural background are most helpful, but noted making friends outside ELL classes is also a challenge refugee students face. Al-Rawe agrees and suggests schools get immigrant students involved in extra-curricular activities to end the segregation.

But districts are running out of time to prepare. Refugees are expected to start arriving in B.C. by January, which will test districts’ capacity to absorb new students with highly specialized needs.

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Surrey District Info

Numbers: As of February 29th

◊ 1,522 government-assisted Syrian refugees have arrived in BC
◊ Another 2,000 or so refugees are expected in B.C. by the end of 2016
◊ School District #36 has received 67 students (compared with fewer than a dozen in Vancouver)
◊ Surrey top B.C. destination, with 283 people (65 families) finding homes in the city

Funding:

◊ Our main questions are on both the federal and provincial side – when will we know about resources.

Our advocacy:

◊ Our trustees met Jan 13 to discuss this and have already met advocating for funding both for the welcome centre and for our schools.

In the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, 39 per cent of school-aged Syrian refugee children are not taking any form of education.
A Poem by a Surrey Teacher:

Surrey Gardens - Part 1

Hazelnut Meadows Community Garden Newton... central Surrey
Cookie cutter houses in shades of grey and beige
line the opposite side of the street
In the distance, clearcut blocks climb the north shore slopes - native forest becomes suburban uniformity
In Hazelnut Meadows Park the cut blocks have turned grass monoculture into diversity of foodstuffs
Rectangular plots nestled into the hillside showcase edible and floral preferences from five continents
The Karen, newly arrived from Burma, grow successions of crisp greens, and beans with long unfamiliar pods
People from South Asia grow fist-sized squashes, greens for saag, and swaths of methi - harvested just when the flowers blush yellow
European plots grow in neat rows - straight edges border tidy pathways - vegetables hold themselves erect and try to behave
Sunflowers, corn, and beans planted by gardeners from Africa strive to draw sufficient warmth from our northern sun
The basil in these plots is grown for tea and not pesto
Year by season Dave and I try to shed our Euro-linear ways
we grow curved patches of beets and fight the impulse to plant kale in rows
use rags and foraged sticks instead of garden twine and milled lumber stakes place stepping stones to preserve precious growing space
At season’s end - the harvest celebration - a potluck of flavours and languages The Karen people perform intricate a cappella harmonies
while we all eat borscht prepared communally This is Surrey

Myriam Dostert

In hard-hit Aleppo, only a scant 6 per cent of primary children attend school.
Online Resources for teachers to learn more about assisting refugee students:

Syrian refugee children tend to be resilient but face unique health issues

Schools key to helping Syrian refugee children settle in

Teaching About the Syrian Refugee Crisis: A zero-prep, Common Core-friendly, interactive lesson; made by teachers, for teachers; ready for class today!

Lessons to be learned from Langley’s experience with Karen people

Stepping up to support refugee students
http://www.bctf.ca/publications/TeacherArticle.aspx?id=39095

Living On Hope, Hoping For a Bright Future: Syria’s Children
http://communitypsychologypractice.blogspot.ca/2015/10/living-on-hope-hoping-for-bright-future.html

Syrian Refugees Video Resources

Links to videos to consider showing to your class. Please preview for your grade level.

“Syria’s war: Who is fighting and why”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKb9GVU8bHE

“Understanding the Refugee Crisis in Europe, Syria, and around the World” John Green
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVV6_1Se9fM

“The war in Syria explained in five minutes | Guardian Animations”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5H5w3_QTGQ Animated Film

“Syria's child refugees: 'You feel that they have lost their hearts'”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WARQID-U-Jg Brief stories from children

“Syrian Refugees Explain Why They Fled Syria”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65gY5PRuT_E

Syria’s Lost Generation is a short documentary that provides an intensely personal account of two Syrian teenagers living unsettled lives as refugees.
http://talkingeyesmedia.org/syrias-lost-generation

In refugee camps and settlements, Syrian children often drop out because of school fees, bullying or language barriers.