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RESILIENT LEARNERS: EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN REFUGEE YOUTH IN ADULT EDUCATION IN QUEBEC[1]

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Abstract

Young adult Syrians who arrived in Canada with "disrupted education" in recent years are in a vulnerable position as they are transitioned into an education sector designed for independent and self-directed adults. This study examines how the objectives and psychological well-being of young adult Syrian refugees are supported in the adult education (AE) sector in Quebec. Specifically, how do they navigate the AE system to achieve their educational goals? How do they perceive the progress of their learning in the AE system? Data were collected from 10 Syrian students (18 to 24 years) through in-depth individual and group interviews. Findings revealed that despite their strong self-motivation and drive to achieve their educational goals, these students are vulnerable due to several factors—among them, the different methods of teaching in Syria, and unfamiliarity with independent teaching methods in AE in Quebec that make it difficult to navigate this new system, all while having to learn new languages.

Résumé

Les jeunes adultes syriens qui sont arrivés au Canada récemment et qui ont eu une « éducation interrompue » sont en situation vulnérable, car ils font la transition

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vers un secteur éducatif conçu pour des adultes autonomes. Cette étude examine les soutiens offerts aux jeunes adultes syriens réfugiés dans le secteur d'éducation des adultes au Québec, notamment en ce qui a trait à leurs objectifs et leur bienêtre psychologique. Comment naviguent-ils le système d'éducation des adultes de façon à atteindre leurs objectifs éducatifs? Quelle est leur perspective sur leurs progrès et leur apprentissage dans le système? Les données ont été recueillies de 10 élèves syriens (âgés de 18 à 24 ans) lors d'entretiens approfondis individuels et en groupe. Les conclusions révèlent que, malgré leur motivation et leur désir d'atteindre leurs objectifs éducatifs, divers facteurs rendent ces élèves vulnérables, notamment les différentes méthodes d'enseignement en Syrie et la méconnaissance des méthodes d'enseignement autonomes au Québec. Ces facteurs rendent difficile la navigation d'un nouveau système, surtout vu que les élèves doivent aussi apprendre de nouvelles langues.

Keywords

> *Syrian refugees, young adults, adult education, Quebec*

Since 2016, Canada has resettled over 73,000 Syrian refugees (Kalata, 2021), with the majority settling in English-speaking Ontario and French-speaking Quebec (Perkins, 2021). Refugees who arrive in Canada through the Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR)   (https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/resettle-refugee/government-assisted-refugee-program.html) and the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) (https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/guide-private-sponsorship-refugees-program.html) programs receive permanent residence on arrival,[2] which gives them most of the same rights and entitlements as citizens, including access to education.

Education programming in emergency contexts is one of the biggest recipients of assistance (Brock-Utne, 2010), as it prevents the potential return of refugees to their home country and promotes their potential integration into their host society. This is no less the case in the context of the Syrian displacement across the major hosting countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of humanitarian programming to enable refugee students to access education in host countries, there are several barriers that prevent this, especially for youth. Human Rights Watch (2016) listed on its website that most Syrian refugee youth remain outside formal education in countries of first asylum. There is no data on those students who "aged out" of the education system in these countries.

This study aims to advance our knowledge and understanding of the support needs and psychological well-being of young adult Syrian refugees (aged 18 to 24) and similar at-risk refugee youth enrolled in adult education (AE) centres in Quebec. This article first reviews the literature on adult refugee education, education in Syria, disrupted education in countries of first asylum, and the Quebec AE system. Next, it reviews the theoretical

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2   The GAR program helps individuals who have been referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency. The PSR program allows members of organizations and groups, citizens, and residents to sponsor refugees from overseas.

framework and the methodological approach. A portrait of the participants is followed by a description of our results from individual and group interviews with 10 Syrian students. The article concludes with a review of findings and proposes policy solutions.

Literature Review

Agency in Adult Refugee Education

Refugee youth in countries of first asylum are often presented as vulnerable and in need of assistance. This can have a negative impact on their experiences attempting to access services, including education. Alternatively, when they are perceived by social services to be high performing or highly functional, refugees can be denied access to services or support (O'Higgins, 2012). This binary approach to understanding vulnerability, and thus personal agency, is reflected in the deficit approach (MacDonald, 2015) that is adopted when well-intentioned educators tend to focus on what refugee youth lack rather than focusing on their strengths (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). This approach is probably influenced by dominant narratives about refugees (Hattam & Every, 2010). Literature on immigration in Canada often portrays young immigrants and refugees as vulnerable and at-risk individuals who have difficulty actively participating in their lives (Selimos & Daniel, 2017). This view is problematic because service providers (e.g., education practitioners) might label refugee students as victims lacking agency and control and may fail to consider their individual abilities and understand the ways in which each of them is vulnerable (O'Higgins, 2012; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). Specifically, refugee students have their backgrounds, school experiences, and skills diminished because they are allophones[3] (not fluent in French or English) or are not familiar with Western pedagogical approaches. Consequently, research on refugee students calls for a shift from a deficit approach to an education system where educational practices and opportunities are aligned with the backgrounds, educational history, goals, and needs of refugee students.

The small body of literature focused on young refugees in AE (Arvanitis, 2020; Jowett, 2020) reveals the drive refugee students have to succeed in education, despite the barriers that they encounter. Nonetheless, refugee students often feel confused and alone as they attempt to navigate what can be a complicated education system without enough guidance and support (Baffoe, 2006). While educational institutions may have financial limitations that make it hard to act according to the different needs refugee students might have, these students struggle because there is no awareness at the policy level of distinct services and supports they require, compared to the needs of non-refugee AE students. In effect, education authorities not only disregard the change in AE student populations, but they also discount the increasing heterogeneity and diverse needs of the AE student body, and treat the students, refugees included, as a homogenous group (Ghosh et al, 2022).

As other research with immigrants and refugees highlights, concepts of teaching methods must be understood in tandem with the lived experiences of individual refugees, their household and work responsibilities, and their exposure to traumatic events (Slade & Dickson, 2021). This would suggest that when considering approaches to learning, educators

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3   Allophone is a term used in Canada to describe people whose mother tongue is neither English nor French.

need to pay more attention to the individual, how they learn, and how they can best be supported. To do this requires a movement beyond static understandings of vulnerability and agency (Gateley, 2013; O'Higgins, 2012). Literature on refugee education highlights the relevance of appreciating and acknowledging pre-migration and post-settlement factors in a student's educational trajectory (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018).

Education in Syria

Prior to the Syrian conflict, education in Syria was mandatory and free. Most schools were publicly owned and operated. In contrast to the dialogical pedagogical approach in countries such as Canada, teaching approaches in Syria are known to be disciplined and teacher-centred, and the education system is very rigorous (Economou & Hajer, 2019).

The Syrian conflict began as a peaceful movement against President Bashar Assad's regime on March 15, 2011. As of March 22, 2022, UNHCR published on its website that the conflict had descended into a civil and proxy war that continues to this day, though its nature has evolved (AP News, 2025). The war has caused the largest displacement of people of our time. The ongoing complex crisis has had a huge impact on children's mental, physical, and social health inside and outside Syria. UNICEF (2021) reported on its website that in 2021, 2.4 million Syrian children remained out of school in Syria. The clearest reason for this relates to the vagaries of war and limited access to education in conflict-affected settings. The impact has mostly been experienced by Syrians living in rebel-controlled areas, with over 7,000 schools being destroyed or abandoned (UNICEF, 2018).

(Disrupted) Education in Countries of First Asylum

Limited access to education was also the case in countries of first asylum (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey) (UNICEF, 2015). In response, the humanitarian community mobilized to attempt to address this issue. Although enrolment progressively improved, 40% of Syrian refugee children in neighbouring countries remained out of school in 2018 (Their World, 2018). Importantly, this figure does not reflect the number of students who were unable to finish their education because of their displacement and who have since aged out of the school-age bracket.

There are several reasons why children and youth were unable to continue with their education in neighbouring countries, all of which require an understanding of the multiple variables impacting their access. Some variables include direct and indirect costs associated with education, such as transportation; perceived lack of quality education provided to Syrians compared with nationals of the country; and the need for children to work to supplement the family income (UNICEF, 2015). Furthermore, government policy played a significant role in whether students could access education. For example, in Jordan, to be registered in a school, parents were initially required to provide documentation that many Syrians did not have.

Education of Refugee Adolescents and Adults

While there is little research focused on young adult refugee students (Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015), evidence shows that Syrian youth (aged 13 to 24) and young adults (aged 18 to 24) were more severely impacted than children (aged 0 to 12) across countries

of first asylum (Mercy Corps, 2016). The 15–18 age group were, and still are, characterized by very low formal education enrolment, with the youth category of 16–24 even further disadvantaged, with vastly insufficient educational services available to them (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2020). For example, UNESCO (2016) found that funding was generally tied to basic education and was limited for post-secondary education. Syrian youth and young adults fall in between these two sectors.

In line with the No Lost Generation strategy,[4] UNESCO (2016) initiated a program titled Bridging Learning Gaps for Youth across the crisis-affected areas, with the aim of enrolling 50,000 young Syrians in secondary school. While there is little publicly accessible information about the program's results, due to ongoing challenges in schools alongside the extreme pressure to work to survive (Chopra & Adelman, 2017), it is reasonable to assume that the numbers were not reached.

The Quebec Education System: Adult Education Sector

Given that 50% of Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada between 2015 and 2016 were below the age of 18 (IRCC, 2019), policy makers have focused on the integration of children (younger than 16 years old) into Canada's public education. In Quebec, there was much less attention given to those students who were older than 16 (compulsory school age limit). French is the official language of Quebec, and education in French is mandatory in the province until students reach age 16 (usually grade 11). Under the Charter of the French Language, instruction at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels is given in French, except in the case of students who are eligible for instruction in English because their parents (or parent) are Canadian citizens and did most of their school studies in English in Canada. Post-secondary education, including adult general education and CÉGEP,[5] may be given in French or English, although that is under threat at the present moment as there are few English-language CÉGEPs, and the Quebec government is limiting enrolment numbers at them.

In school, refugee students below the age of 16 must first enter the *classe d'accueil* (welcome class), which is an integration-style language program, to learn French. If individuals older than 16 arrive in Quebec and have not completed secondary school, they are encouraged, though not obliged, to attend the francization program, a year-long program in which new allophone students participate in classroom discussions and activities in French (Steinbach et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the benefits of this program, several studies, especially that of Conseil supérieur de la langue française (2018) as well as the report of the Vérificatrice générale du Québec (2017), found that, in terms of academia and employment, the Quebec government program fails to develop sufficient proficiency in French to achieve successful integration (Ducass, 2018).

AE in Quebec is designed to serve individuals above the age of 16 who are citizens or permanent residents, or who have an accepted asylum claim. While AE programs are offered by English or French school boards, the official secondary school diploma that

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4   No Lost Generation is an initiative co-led by UNICEF and World Vision that was established in 2013 to support the education of vulnerable children and youth affected by the Syrian crisis.

5   A CÉGEP is a publicly funded college unique to the province of Quebec.

they provide includes knowledge of French as a requirement for vocational and professional licensing and employment in Quebec. More importantly, AE predominately follows a student-centred independent-learning approach (DEAAC, 2009), aimed at adults pursuing autonomous and independent learning, as opposed to teacher-led classes that are more common in the youth sector. The pedagogical approach applied in many AE centres, especially in the French sector, assumes that learners can take advantage of in-person instruction by taking the subjects they need, going at their own pace, and only approaching teachers when they need them (Ghosh et al., 2022). This student-centred approach appears to be positive because it empowers students in terms of motivation, agency, and autonomy. Adult students, many of whom are working, want to get a secondary school diploma so they can get better jobs, but they need flexibility to move at their own pace.

Recent literature focused on newcomers' language learning underlined the importance of placing the individual learner at the centre of learning in order to allow students to participate in what is learned and how it is learned (Carson, 2009; Severinsen et al., 2018), rather than placing them in traditional transmission classrooms that centre the teacher, who transmits information to students. The goal is to build learners capable of taking control of, and being responsible for, their own learning as prerequisites to independent living (Carson, 2009). While such an approach to teaching demonstrates respect for diversity in classrooms, researchers who focused on learner-centred approaches to education found that such methods often undermine principles of equity, as some learners may arrive at a class without the requisite resources of autonomy to be independent learners. Thus, they lack the skills needed to succeed (Britton et al. 2018). Indeed, not all students are able to function as self-directed learners. Specifically, refugee students who have only been exposed to a traditional teacher-centred learning approach in their home countries require more guidance and attention than adult students who have more experience with independent learning (Maraj et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Capability Approach

Conceived in the 1980s by Amartya Sen, Nobel laureate in economics, as an alternative approach to economic theories of development, the capability approach focuses on what people can do and be, if they choose to do so, and the quality of life they can actually achieve—what Sen came to describe as *functionings* (Nussbaum, 2009; Robeyns, 2017). The literature on the capability approach emphasizes the critical link between people's ability to convert different resources and public goods (means) into functionings, and the real (or feasible) opportunities (i.e., socio-economic conditions) that allow them to achieve their personal objectives (Byskov, 2020).

Founded on the work of Sen, the political philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) built a concomitant capability paradigm for social justice. She highlighted the need for all governments to distinguish the fundamental rights that allow people to be and do, and to guarantee these rights for *all* citizens (Nussbaum 2009). To this end, significance is given to freedoms and opportunities (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021) for people to, for instance, be able to form a conception of their objectives and reflect about the planning of their own lives (Garret, 2008).

The worth of the capability approach is that it places at the centre of the analysis a new way of evaluating how well the lives of individuals progress by placing freedom in the opportunities, choices, and public values (well-being and justice) of the societies in which they live (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). Both Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) provided a lens we can use to observe the extent to which people have genuine access to functionings (López-Fogués & Cin, 2017). Further, many scholars use the capability approach as a framework to analyze complex aspects of immigration. For instance, Lee & Wechtler (2024) indicated in their research on refugees' cross-cultural experience that refugees develop vital capabilities associated with resettling and integrating into the host country's schools. In De Haas's (2021) conceptualization, the capability approach helped researchers grasp a richer understanding of the ways in which change (migration) influences people's migratory agency and potentially enhances their well-being. Preibisch et al. (2016) observed, however, that the future application of the capability approach requires greater attention if it is to successfully resonate with decision makers "without compromising the approach or separating migrants from their intrinsic human rights" (p. 13).

Additionally, there is a direct link between the capability approach and the construct of resilience in the context of at-risk individuals. Resilience offers a valuable perspective when analyzing services for young people. Aburn et al. (2016) highlighted the use of resilience to describe the complexities of individual (and group) responses to experiences of adversity. More relevant to our analysis, resilience refers to the interaction between youth and the contextual resources that creates actions that support individual resilience (Pelley & ProQuest, 2022). In line with Luthar et al.'s (2000) thinking, the idea of resilience helps us increase our understanding of processes affecting refugee youth. In the context of this paper, the capability approach highlights the challenges refugee students face in attaining education (a fundamental capability) and personal development, while the concept of resilience explores the factors in AE that support resilience in young adult refugees.

This paper offers insight into the experiences of Syrian refugees in Quebec as they navigated the AE system. Using the capability approach to analyze the circumstances in which refugee students make decisions helps us understand the reasons behind their choices for achieving their goals in Quebec. We therefore address the following questions: How do young adult refugee students navigate the AE system to achieve their educational goals? How do they perceive the progress of their learning in the AE system?

Methodology

We used a qualitative methodology to understand phenomena from the perspectives of refugee students as their voices are particularly essential when exploring culturally specific information (Mack et al., 2005). We used interpretive inquiry to achieve an in-depth understanding of participants' interpretations of their experiences.

We collected data from audio-recorded individual and group interviews with 10 Syrian students—specifically, four in-depth, semi-structured interviews and three group interviews with two students in each. The collection of group interviews served to corroborate or disconfirm emerging results (McMillian, 2000). Importantly, through this engagement, a sense of trust was further developed. Participants were two women and eight men of 18 to 24 years of age. Seven of the students were in AE centres in Quebec, and three students were enrolled in CÉGEPs after taking language courses in Quebec or Alberta. While these

are distinct institutional contexts, the experiences of the three students at the CÉGEPs strongly mirrored and reinforced those of the students in AE.

Recruitment was done using snowball sampling through existing connections of the research team and the participants' connections. We assessed eligibility for the study on three bases: participants were Syrian, were over age 18, and had studied in AE centres in Quebec. Although interviews were offered in either Arabic, English, or French, all participants chose to be interviewed in English. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team at a quiet place of their convenience between 2019 and 2021. The average interview duration was about one hour. In all interviews, we asked participants a set of pre-established questions about the support and challenges they found in AE.

We conducted inductive thematic analysis of the data, which was developed collaboratively and in an iterative manner (Cornish et al., 2014). First, we transcribed interviews (I) and group interviews (GI) verbatim to become familiar with the data (Morehouse, 2012). Then, salient data units were coded and decoded, and emerging patterns were refined and categorized independently, based on similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2013), by three researchers (MC, AM, DS) as a form of analytical triangulation (Patton, 2002). Next, rules of inclusion for categories were developed (Morehouse, 2012) and initial themes were identified through dialogue in team meetings. Following the discussion, the themes were shared with the principal investigator (RG) to review and refine them by examining coherency and relations among them, which increased credibility. Additionally, we established an audit trail by documenting the research process in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to address confirmability (Shenton 2004).

Portrait of Participants

All participants were transnational migrants. We used the term transnational to capture the understanding that all participants are embedded in several societies (Morrice et al., 2017). Additionally, participants' transnational migration experiences indicate intersecting differences of knowledge of official languages in Canada, time spent in countries of first asylum, and level of education outside Canada, all of which shape their outcomes in AE in Quebec. It is important to specify, however, that all participants were forced migrants from Syria, had been in the same educational system in Syria, were not high school dropouts but had aged out of the school system, and strongly aspired to higher education. They had arrived in Canada since 2016. Some arrived through the GAR program and others through the PSR program. On arrival, participants were between 15 and 21 years old. Their education levels were largely impacted by whether they had spent time in a country of asylum and how long that time had been. Three participants had lived in Saudi Arabia most of their lives and had thus largely progressed along an uninterrupted secondary school schedule. Two participants had lived in countries of asylum in neighbouring areas for more than four years and did not complete any educational studies there. Most participants had lived in Syria for most of their lives. Some of them had lived in Syria apart from a short sojourn in Lebanon until their migration to Canada was finalized. These latter students did not miss formal education except for short periods in asylum, while the two participants who spent the most time in countries of first asylum had only studied to the primary school level.

Most participants had no knowledge of French, with two indicating basic knowledge. Three students arrived with no English or French, with three indicating basic knowledge of English. The other students indicated either advanced proficiency or intermediate levels in English. Table 1 gives a portrait of the participants in our study.

Table 1
Portrait of Participants

Name	Gender	Age on arrival	Highest level of education outside Canada	Time spent in country of first asylum	English/ French knowledge on arrival in Canada	Year of arrival
Participant 1	M	16	Finished primary	4 years	None/None	2016
Participant 2	M	18	Finished high school	Most of his life	Basic/None	2016
Participant 3	M	17	Finished primary	4 years	None/None	2016
Participant 4	F	17	Grade 10	1 month	Basic/None	2016
Participant 5	M	15	Grade 10	2 months	Intermediate/ Basic	2016
Participant 6	M	15	Grade 9	Most of his life	Advanced/ None	2017
Participant 7	M	16	Grade 10	Most of his life	Advanced/ None	2016
Participant 8	F	18	Finished high school	6 months	None/None	2016
Participant 9	M	17	Finished high school	5 months	Advanced/ Basic	2016/ 2017
Participant 10	M	21	Finished high school/ started university	15 days	Basic/None	2015/ 2016

After arriving in Quebec, all participants except one, who stayed in Edmonton for a year before arriving in Quebec, were placed in either the *classe d'accueil* or francization. After entering the education system, their journeys were not linear. All participants attended multiple schools, sometimes simultaneously, and two of them had been to five schools in the Greater Montreal area. This can be explained by several factors, which will be discussed in the next section, such as desire for instructional learning (as opposed to the independent learning approach), scheduling issues, a drive to finish as fast as possible, and other personal circumstances. Additionally, all participants lived with immediate family at the time of the interviews. All but one took minimum-wage jobs while studying full time. Eventually, all participants ended up in the English AE system although they started in the French system.

It is important to underline that several factors defined this group of young adult Syrian refugees as a sub-group. First, they have the same cultural background, which places a high value on education. Second, many of them did not have the opportunity to complete their high school. Third, they have similar aspirations for higher education and have shown resilience by attending several AE centres while taking minimum-wage jobs with no to limited knowledge of French in order to reach their goals. In the next section, we explore the narratives of participants and present our findings organized around three themes: motivation as a key to education, navigating a cultural disjuncture, and independent learning as a barrier.

Findings

Motivation as a Key to Education

1) Intrinsic motivation. All participants were highly motivated to complete their secondary school diploma as soon as possible so they would be able to develop capabilities for higher studies or training programs. Although they had been in a particularly vulnerable position due to their disrupted education, they were self-motivated "to be and do." Because they had not attended school for varying periods of time, most of the participants felt motivated to enter AE school to strengthen their capabilities by improving their language skills and building social networks. More importantly, participants' self-generated motivation and personal agency helped them progress through and out of the AE system and carry on to their next steps. They shared:

> I only had one goal in my mind: just to finish my high school and go to college. (I 4, 2)

> [Motivation] is inside yourself. (GI 1, 4)

> No one helped me and told me to go and do this and that; I did [it] by myself. (GI 2, 4)

The self-motivation of participants to obtain their high school diploma was instrumental in tackling challenges. Participants claimed that the limited classes available in AE centres and the lack of adequate advisory support to map out the program challenged their opportunities to conclude the program in less time. Nevertheless, they were persistent and resourceful enough to look for the mandatory courses offered at different AE

institutions to overcome the timetable challenge and avoid spending extra time in AE. To achieve this objective within a specific time frame, they strategized a study-work balance and chose to attend multiple AE centres at the same time, while taking low-paying jobs to help their families.

It must be noted that contributing to the family household is an aspect of participants' native culture. Taking responsibility for their families, as underscored in a recent study (Maraj et al., 2023), only added to their motivation to make plans to overcome the obstacles so they could finish the program as quickly as possible and achieve their personal goals. Two participants explained:

> I checked many [AE] schools . . . when I found out that my second [AE] school was not that good, I went . . . to so many schools, French schools, to see if they are better. [I] looked for so many. (I 2, 3)

> I went to four adult centres to finish it [secondary school diploma] as fast as possible. I will be done in the end of November to start in CÉGEP. (GI 3, 1)

To explain just how dedicated he was to achieve his aim of finishing the AE program, a participant explained his journey to take summer school:

> It was in summer, and it was an hour and a half from my home . . . so we had to wake up at six a.m. We had to wake up really early, and take the metro and then two buses, and change. (GI 3, 7)

2) Extrinsic motivation. In addition to participants' self-motivation, we found an additional factor that increased their motivation for learning. Participants often compared themselves to peers who had already concluded their secondary school studies in Syria and elsewhere. Showing that they excelled in comparison with their Syrian friends was an extrinsic motivator that added to participants' drive to achieve their educational goals and feel competent. A participant explained:

> My goal is, as I told you, I want to finish as fast as possible. I do not want to lose any time because my friends back home already graduated three months ago. So, looking at it, I just want to be with [like] them. (GI 3, 14)

In later interviews, participants reiterated this sense of sadness of being behind their peers academically (Maraj et al., 2023). A participant claimed:

> I am very upset, and I do not want to talk about this subject because it gets on my nerves. I cried a lot because it is not fair that all of my friends in Toronto, they are already going to university, and they are not behind. For me, I am little bit behind because I did all this that I talked about. For me, I still need to do a lot of work. (I 4, 8)

Navigating a Cultural Disjuncture

The participants encountered challenges while navigating the independent culture that the AE environment breeds. They felt vulnerable and confused about how to learn when there was an absence of classroom interaction and they had to complete modules independently. Participants believed that the approach in AE left them isolated and constantly needing

to ask their teachers for clarity as they felt the delivery of instruction was not correctly understood. They explained:

> [In AE centres] we were many students in the class, you know individualized [classes], you are by your own, but I have a lot of questions because it's [a] new language for me. So if you want to go see the teacher, you should write your name [on the list on the board first]. So maybe if you have chance, you will see him twice a day, so that's difficult because there is many students who write their names and ask [the teacher] questions. (GI 1, 6–7)

The challenge for refugee students was the lack of encouragement and guidance. To explain this, refugee students commented specifically on the disjuncture between their experiences in the youth sector in Syria or elsewhere and their experiences in AE in Quebec. They said:

> You will not feel that anyone is encouraging you. (GI 1, 12)

> They are not going to follow you. The system there is different from high school because . . . we know in high school, they kind of, they do advise you, they do tell you what to do, you can't miss classes . . . so the system in adult [education] is sort of different. Nobody is forcing you to be there, and as he said, that is actually one of the hugest problems. (GI 3, 5)

One participant stressed that there was support and encouragement offered by different members of the AE centre: "If you pay attention, there are really good teachers there . . . there are really people who actually want you to succeed" (GI 3, 3). However, most participants reported that they did not often access the support services available in the AE centre. They come from a culture in which school students are not encouraged to ask for help, so accessing services for something as fundamental as learning in AE appeared as a barrier for Syrian refugee students. They stated:

> I am not that type of people who goes like to somebody and talk. I always keep [my concerns] inside of me. I manage my stuff alone, but that affected my school. (I 2, 8)

> Yes, Syrians will not ask for help. (I 1, 11)

Knowing how the support staff would respond to them was an additional reason for participants' reluctance to seek help. Although participants did seek assistance from tutors and career advisors, they found it problematic to continually ask for support, rather than just being taught. These participants reported that they were encouraged to take their time and not to rush to conclude the AE studies:

> I do not go to an advisor anymore because I know what he will tell me [if I decide to talk about the difficulties I face in the centre]. They will say, okay we are in Canada; here no one asks you about your age, about your studies [in AE]. (I 4, 6)

> Again, every time that you go and ask a person they will give you, they will advise you what to do but they will always say like "take your time,"

"no need for rush," just "do everything as slow as you can, as well as getting good marks." (GI 3, 5)

Although participants initially saw the possibility of advancing through AE at their own pace as advantageous, speeding up their time in AE was critical for participants who felt the strong need to move on with their educational lives. They expressed frustration when they found that the pedagogy and individualistic culture in AE became barriers to reaching those objectives.

Independent Learning as a Barrier

Although other research has found that the independent learning approach is beneficial for adult students (Villate & Marcotte, 2013), most refugee students found this flexible approach inappropriate and especially challenging for young adult students who have experienced long periods outside formal schooling, are used to teacher-centred pedagogy, are behind in the curriculum, and must learn in new languages (French and English). The independent learning approach, which was envisioned to empower learners, left many refugee students vulnerable to failure or to abandoning their studies altogether. One participant talked about how intimidating the experience of going back to school as young adult refugees in Quebec had been for his friends. He pointed out that the application of resources based on refugee students' perspectives and challenges of going back to school could have kept his friend from dropping out of the program:

> I have several friends that I met in two years. They were living in Syria so they left school for five years, they came here and said, okay, I will work. Here is the problem, because this guy had left his school for five years [due to the war] and then he is coming here and went to AE school for a week but then he left. I believe that he needed help because there are a lot of intelligent students, but the problem [in AE] is that it is very hard to get back to school. (I 3, 6)

The extent of this problem was revealed by one of the participants who had not experienced significant disruption to his education. He had to take one independent math course over three semesters, amounting to nine months, because of the level of difficulty without teacher support, such as tutoring and the so-called remedial periods, when students are given the opportunity to catch up on missed work. This considerably delayed his goal to attend college. It also revealed to us that for students with even marginal disruption to their education, and who must learn in a new language, the independent learning approach does not function the way it was intended in terms of flexibility and adaptability.

Participants took stock of their situation with respect to their own aspirations and sought more traditional instructional approaches to learning (rather than autonomous ones) that better suited their learning habits. This is evidenced by students who chose to study in another language and moved from French-language AE centres to English-language AE centres that provided instructional learning, thereby indicating agency among refugee youth. As one student explained:

> I stay [in the French AE centre] for three months, but I think I didn't progress anything; I did not achieve anything [there]. (GI 1, 6)

Moving to English AE institutions, however, did not resolve all of the students'

problems. Students struggled with the pace of the instruction, which did not meet the learning needs of young adult refugee students. These were very different from the learning needs of traditional AE students, as one student articulated:

> [The teacher] always likes to give us activity and subject and said finish
> it fast-fast-fast . . . Like I need time to understand it, I cannot finish
> it without understand. I told him that, he said he cannot [go slower]
> because the school board gave me specific time and program I have to
> finish. And that for me it is difficult because I came to learn English, not
> to finish exam and do exam. That's the only thing I found it in class. (GI
> 1, 8)

Participants' reflections and transitions to instructional centres indicated that there was a pedagogical and linguistic disjuncture between these students and the approach of AE (Lukes 2011). This underscores the difficulty some refugee students have in AE classrooms where there are insufficient support services adapted to the current needs of young adult students. Exacerbating this, the differences in the extent of disrupted education, official language fluency on arrival in Canada, and working while attending school are factors that may contribute to the difficulty of adapting to a new mode of instruction. Nevertheless, all refugee students demonstrated resilience in the face of the hardships they had experienced and were highly motivated, engaged, and interested in demonstrating their abilities to progress through their current level of education to obtain a secondary school diploma.

Discussion and Conclusion

AE in resettlement countries has a role in facilitating and supporting the social and labour market integration of young adult refugees. We see that despite the disruption in their education, the participants were highly motivated to pursue their studies in the AE sector, which would allow them to not only obtain a secondary school diploma and improve their skills in the official language(s) but also explore and enhance employment prospects in Quebec. Our findings show that participants had a high level of "need for success"; they aspired to make the best use of their time and get on with their lives, and saw education as the only means to achieve their life goals. Nevertheless, our research shows that as committed as participants were to study, they also were acutely aware of the struggles they faced in the AE system. They were able to identify the challenges they were experiencing and demonstrate how they relied on their own resilience to overcome them. As such, participants adjusted and overcame the timetable challenge by finding alternative means to take the courses in other centres, thus reducing the time spent in the AE sector and also building social connections in the different centres. Deploying risk-taking strategies to overcome the structural barriers to their educational development, while also performing work responsibilities, reflects not only a mixture of active agency and determination but also a combination of capabilities to fulfill their potential in academics. Furthermore, our findings suggest that participants' self-determination could also be linked to the value of family orientation, with individuals providing for and protecting their families.

We contend that even with government efforts to facilitate the means for students in AE services, such as francization for allophone students, participants were disappointed by and encountered a sense of loss at the lack of follow-up and guidance in AE centres,

making them feel they must struggle in isolation as individuals and members of a young group of refugees.

Getting back to school and progressing along a perceived linear educational path is of primary importance to young adults who have experienced disruption of their fundamental freedom—education—and who perceive themselves to be left behind by their peers. Students were deeply frustrated by the struggles that they encountered in AE, which they saw as slowing the achievement of their personal objectives. These participants mainly attributed their struggles to the distinct pedagogical approach in the AE sector, which requires them to learn independently. Findings indicate that participants' capabilities were not fully developed, as the approach to learning applied in AE limited their real opportunities to take advantage of it. Further, although the individualistic approach of AE in Quebec is presented as a tool of empowerment for students, our results show that this approach was not fully empowering for all participants. Indeed, they had diverse learning trajectories due to the different countries that they ended up in and also by their frequent moves from one country to another. They had not been taught how to learn independently, especially when learning in languages they did not know before they came to Canada. In addition, missing years of education only worsened the situation of Syrian refugees, who expressed sincere frustration and disappointment at their inability to progress rapidly.

Our findings connect with literature discussing the negative effects of learning within an unfamiliar pedagogical approach. We argue that because of the independent learning approach in AE, the disjuncture between the prior and post resettlement learning and competencies of participants was particularly challenging. This supports existing literature, which suggests that independent learning approaches can be inequitable (Britton et al., 2018). Employing the evaluatory lens of the capability approach, we found that the institutional, cultural, and personal circumstances of young adult refugee students in AE—such as experiencing disruption to their education—did not have a negative impact on their drive to pursue their goals. This is clearly seen in their sheer perseverance to conclude their secondary education rapidly so they could progress onward. Indeed, despite being vulnerable to failure and playing the recipient role due to cultural educational practices, participants displayed agency and control in their active participation and abilities to pursue their own educational objectives. Equally significant, participants developed a strong capacity for resilience because they had to deal with many substantial changes through their pre-and post-settlement experiences, while transitioning to adulthood. They became skilled navigators (Arvanitis, 2020) of the Quebec AE system through the development of a proactive approach to identifying and attempting to overcome obstacles to their integration. At the same time they embraced stability (Amro, 2020) by pursuing education, access to employment, and social ties, which indicates an engagement with the new Quebec society. In line with the work of Simich et al. (2009), focusing on immigrant mental well-being in Canada, we report that participants engaged in a personal adaptation process that enabled them to transform mental distress into mental well-being. Indeed, they displayed agency in seeking and improving their well-being during their adaptation to AE.

AE authorities failed to assess refugee students' cultural and pedagogical backgrounds to determine whether they had the required skills and resources to achieve successful independent learning. More importantly, AE authorities failed to recognize the degree of heterogeneity of the AE student body (and its constantly changing composition) and

underserved the different abilities and learning needs of youth. Subsequently, young refugee students were placed at a great disadvantage as they worked to conclude their secondary school studies, which could potentially hinder their motivation, empowerment in making choices (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017), and capacity for resiliency (Simich et al., 2009).

Moreover, in a meritocratic system, the assumption is that students need to work harder to achieve more; however, the difficulties that participants encountered in AE were not due to a lack of capabilities to educationally succeed. From a capability perspective, the freedoms of participants to become empowered and effective agents of change were hindered. Agency must be contextual and relational, and therefore requires support for immigrant and refugee students to be/become autonomous and self-directed learners. The assumption that all AE students are autonomous and self-directed and can progress at their own pace without instruction can hinder the educational integration and success of transnational students (immigrant and refugee students included). We argue that such an assumption is not beneficial for young adults who are learning in new pedagogical systems, who are learning in new languages, and who may have lost academic years despite their self-generated motivation.

Drawing on Säljö's (2009) understanding of learning theories, we assert that an acceptance of the different ways in which AE students learn should be seen as a frame of reference from which to gain knowledge about young adult refugee students, open spaces for challenging fixed notions of learning (Morrice et al., 2017), and increase sensitivity for gauging to what extent and in what sense the independent and traditional ways of learning are compatible. Consequently, we suggest that AE authorities recognize the learning experiences of transnational students, validate group differences, and provide the essential constant guidance and support needed to exploit their potential for academic success. We argue that not addressing the educational differences between transnational and non-transnational student groups in AE could have a critical impact on the future inequalities between them in Quebec.

Complementary support services (Gibbons, 2002) directed to increasing knowledge and skills to the levels required to ensure competition in the labour market are necessary (Webb et al., 2016) to secure the educational success of refugee youth, and thus their social integration. Shan (2015) proposes a strength-based curriculum that supports youth well-being and is relevant to their lived experiences and linked to their cultural framework. Career counselling services also need to be evaluated to ensure compatibility with the strengths, needs, and culture of diverse student groups. Support services must stretch beyond the classroom to address the educational background of students, their experiences gained in other countries, their language abilities, and the specific institutional environment of AE. Introducing more appropriate support services within the existing system is not to suggest that students are not capable of self-led learning, or to dismiss the capacities of young adults. Rather, we highlight simply that independent learning, or learning to learn, is an acquired process for which students must be guided.

There is some research in Quebec on youths from immigrant background, first-, second-, and third-generation students, which identifies areas for reflection and action for decision makers (Potvin & Leclercq, 2014). Another study indicates the obstacles Syrian youth face while transitioning from youth education to AE (Lafortune & Audet, 2020). Taking a closer look, we see that not much research has specifically addressed young adult

refugees in AE (Arvanitis, 2020; Jowett, 2020), since this population is often found within more general works about immigrants, individuals with an immigrant background, and other vulnerable groups, such as high school dropouts. The present study attempts to fill this gap in the literature and examines the experiences of young adult Syrian refugees who were unable to complete their education due to displacement and have aged out of the school-age bracket upon their arrival in Canada. We highlight the significance of understanding the several aspects that shape the experiences of Syrian youth in the AE sector, such as their pre-resettlement approaches to learning and their strong aspirations for higher education. Facilitating the development of new capabilities they need to adequately transition into new pedagogical environments, such as the AE sector, is crucial. Awareness of the challenges refugee students face as they try to reach their goals would help decision makers understand how and why these students find the AE system difficult to navigate in Quebec. Our findings suggest that disrupted education, although significant, is not the only barrier to their advancement in education.

Our recommendations are intended to help policy makers improve the AE system in Quebec. Their understanding of the complex needs of this student population will greatly enhance the program outcomes. An increase in the funding for AE centres could significantly expand and tailor the support services adapted for refugee students. As the case of our participants demonstrates, this appears especially important in educational contexts that demand students be the agents of their own learning.

Limitations

As in any study, ours is not without limitations. Although our findings indicate several common aspects in the experiences of young adult Syrian refugees in AE centres in Quebec, they do not distinguish the experiences of students with disruptive education from those whose education was uninterrupted, nor does it compare the trajectories of male and female youth. Such examinations have the potential to further identify the supports young adult refugee students need to achieve their educational goals and thrive.

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