Challenging traditional paradigms in early childhood studies: Using post-foundational frameworks to inspire equitable conceptualizations of refugee children and childhoods

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Author's Notes

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Key words: Refugee children, early childhood studies, post-foundational theories, black feminist thought, sociology of childhood

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Abstract

Using a postfoundational lens, this article questions established deficit discourses about refugee children and childhoods and the overwhelming singular gaze on their trauma, weakness and vulnerability. By inviting voices and lived experiences of young Syrian refugee children in Canadian contexts this paper details a research study that disrupts discourses of universality and normality of the refugee experience in the contexts of schooling. It draws on post-foundational theories from the margins, such as Black Feminist Thought and childhood studies to offer a nuanced understanding of the resettlement experiences of young refugees, with a focus on equity and social justice. Positioning refugee children as experts and competent social actors, this study affords possibilities to learn from them about their world, social relations, understandings, identities and experiences of resettlement.

Introduction

Everyday interactions between children and their multiple environments are important contexts to study issues of equity and social justice because these interactions influence children's identities, social relations, and their understanding of their worlds. These environments either perpetuate or challenge societal inequities, making them essential contexts to understand how children navigate these and are influenced by them. In these everyday encounters researchers observe tensions and intimacies of family life and those that arise from the encounters of children and their diverse environments. Thus, schools and familial environments that young children encounter can be viewed as contexts of

continuous negotiation between private and public domains which influence identities and the sense of belonging of children and families (Farmer, 2017). Situating children as living theorists within their mundane, everyday lived experiences allows us to challenge foundational paradigms and bring to the forefront equitable conceptualizations, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and practices that address concerns in early childhood education and childhood studies (Collins, 2000; 2008; Pérez, 2017). Over the last two decades, reconceptualist scholars have recognized the value of these everyday encounters to disrupt established discourses about childhood and trouble knowledge that is considered foundational (Pérez, 2017, 2020; Perez & Saavedra, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Rooted in developmentalism, a foundational paradigm, the dominant narrative of loss, weakness, and vulnerability has become deeply ingrained in early childhood studies, particularly in relation to refugee children and families. This single story of deficit is one that is firmly attached to the refugee child (Adichie, 2009). Seen as different and existing outside of the discourse of 'typical' or 'normal' childhood subsumes their voices and lived experiences, shelving their perspectives into the space of vulnerability and suffering and essentially labels them as the Other. In this paper, I challenge this prevailing deficit discourse that shapes our understanding of refugee children and their families. Drawing on post-foundational theories such as the sociology of childhood and Black Feminist Thought, I explore assumptions surrounding equity, social justice, and power within the context of young Syrian refugee children's schooling experiences during resettlement in Ontario, Canada. This paper draws from an exploratory feminist ethnography that examines the everyday interactions between young Syrian refugee children (ages 6-12) and their families in relation to their environments.

Canada is and continues to be a country that welcomes refugees from various parts of the world. This is more significant than ever in our present context, as displacement and resettlement is the experience of millions of people globally. In the context of refugees from Syria, Canada has welcomed approximately 45,000 individuals since 2015 (IRCC, 2024). What is significant is that Canada was particular about sponsoring families with young children; about 85% of state sponsored refugees were families with young children from ages 0-14 (Statistics Canada, 2019). It is documented that Syrian families arriving as refugees were young with multiple young children. Toronto and the GTA was a popular destination for these families with about 55% of Syrian refugees resettling in this area (Statistics Canada, 2019). Even though young children constituted a majority of the refugees who arrived in Canada from Syria, the stories and experiences of young refugee children are often missing in research *on* or *about* them (Ali & Jibran, 2020).

Critical and reconceptualist scholarship in early childhood actively questions taken-for-granted practices and discourses that are deemed inherently political (Moss, 2019). This paper critiques the prevailing deficit-based narratives surrounding refugee children and their experiences, which are often grounded in developmentalism and presented as universal truths. By incorporating post-foundational theories, it encourages nuanced, alternative and diverse understandings of refugee children and their childhoods, framed through the principles of social justice and equity. Developments in the field of childhood studies over the past three decades have challenged developmentalist notions of children. Young children are situated within social relations as active participants, possessing the expertise to navigate and articulate the complexities of their interactions with the world around them (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2000, 2005; Spyrou, 2018). This study affords possibilities to learn from young refugee children, recognizing them as competent social actors and experts in their own lives. By acknowledging their abilities, this paper positions refugee children as knowledge producers, highlighting the value of the insights that emerge from their everyday lived experiences, particularly in relation to their understanding of the world, social relations, identities, and resettlement experiences (Collins, 2000; 2008; Pérez, 2017).

As an immigrant, woman of color, mother, social justice scholar, and educator, I am deeply committed to sharing the stories of individuals with whom I identify. Over the past decade, I have built meaningful relationships with newcomer families, settlement organizations, and early childhood educators, driven by a dedication to understanding the resettlement experiences of young children. My identity intersects in ways that often lead to my being perceived as 'different,' particularly within academic spaces focused on early childhood education. This experience of difference is frequently framed as "a problem rather than simply a different mode of being" (Chimni, 2009, p. 22). In order to better understand how 'difference' is perceived and its connections to equity, power, privilege, and social justice, I actively seek to engage with the experiences of individuals similarly labeled as 'different' or the 'Other'.

This article critically examines the limitations of foundational paradigms in early childhood education, specifically those that position refugee children within a deficit framework. The theoretical and methodological approach guiding this study is then outlined, followed by an exploration of two significant findings drawn from refugee children's experiences in schooling during resettlement. By offering these insights, this paper seeks to contribute to broader conversations about children, families, and schooling on a global scale, fostering opportunities for exploration and transformation. It calls for a rethinking of traditional methods of studying these concepts, advocating for more inclusive and dynamic approaches that better reflect the complexities of the refugee experience.

The Danger of Hegemonic Foundational Epistemologies and Discourses

Developmentalism, a foundational theory in early childhood and the pragmatic brainchild of the minority world, is underpinned by theories of biology, medicine and developmental psychology (Burman, 2016; Pérez, 2017, 2020). Heavily leaning on the values of Enlightenment and pure 'scientific' objectivism of European (mostly male) scholars, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lev Vygotsky and others, this paradigm made popular 'child development' as a scientific study of children (Burman, 2016; Davies, et al., 2022; Pérez, 2017; 2020; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Child development presented a particular image of the child, channeled through scientific and systematic recording of their growth and development toward the creation of norms and standards, which formed the foundation for how we know, understand, evaluate and categorize children (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 2007; Pérez, 2017, 2020; Wells, 2015; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Some of the key concepts that developmentalism touts are that of normality and universality. This dominant framework essentially created the 'normal' or 'typical' child seen as the embodiment of Eurocentric, colonial values, projecting a certain pre-prescribed set of behaviours, and systematically maturing along ages, stages and milestones as they grow to become responsible adults (Gabriel, 2014; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Evaluated against the idealized notion of the 'normal' child, newcomers, immigrants, and particularly refugees, are often perceived as abnormal and in need of some form of intervention. Positioned at the intersection of being both a refugee and a child, these individuals experience war, displacement, loss, mental health challenges, and barriers to education—issues compounded by colonial, Eurocentric values that define education in narrow terms. Developmentalism shapes the perception of refugee children as weak, vulnerable, and entrenched in a discourse of deficiency, including a lack of education, maturity, language proficiency, and social support (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Dominant developmentalist discourses sustain this deficit view, which in turn justifies increased surveillance and regulation of children and families particularly those from marginalized groups, despite these discourses representing a biased view of a particular paradigmatic position. Across the globe, research, education, and practice in early

childhood continue to uphold developmentalism as the 'gold standard,' positioning it as the primary lens through which young children and families are understood. This dominant framework persists in shaping research, early childhood education, programs for children and families, teacher education programs, and both local and international policies (Burman, 2016; Davies et al., 2022; Pérez, 2017, 2020).

Research about schooling experiences of refugee children in Canadian contexts lean heavily upon these developmentalist values even as schools are committed to protecting and caring for refugee children (Guo et al., 2019). Considered as key sites for socialization, schools offer care and education, stability and safety through established routines and predictable environments (Guo et al., 2019). Alongside consistency and continuity, schooling also perpetuates the marginalization of refugee children by imposing a "one-size-fits-all" model of childhood, founded on developmentalist beliefs, often overlooking cultural, socioeconomic, and individual differences (Yohani et al., 2019). Assessed against Western developmental ages and stages, refugee children are pathologized (Yohani et al., 2019) and undervalued, their identities and strengths interpreted as problems to be fixed (Guo et al., 2019; Yohani et al., 2019; Yu, 2012).

In Canadian contexts, research on refugee children's education often emphasizes their dependence, vulnerability, and development, highlighting the impact of war-related trauma that affects various aspects of their growth, including physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural, and social domains (Guo et al., 2019). While this focus has its merits, for example, focusing the wider society's attention on the experiences of refugee children, creating an awareness, sensitivity and an understanding of the human consequences of war and destruction, it also makes these children invisible. In other words, these children are silenced, their stories and voices subsumed within these vociferous and loud narratives of trauma, harm, loss of potential and the lost generation (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). These narratives also convey a deeper implicit message of passivity and a lack of agency that place the refugee child as an innocent, a vulnerable one, who is acted only upon by their world. Additionally, refugee children are identified as having severe needs in language learning with developmentalist discourses fueling discourses of illiteracy, lack of English language skills, barriers to English language acquisition and the inability to perform well in English language-based assessments (Ayoub, 2014, Kaplan et al., 2016; Guo et al., 2019).

Even though this paper emphasizes the influence of developmentalism in creating deficit images of refugee children and families, it reveals how developmentalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism act together to shape worldviews and create a system of knowing (Burman, 2016; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Tuck, 2009). These systems of knowing highly influence and often underpin educational systems, often reinforcing existing inequities while imposing standards that may not align with the identities and cultural values and knowledge of marginalized children and families (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Educational systems in Canada are heavily influenced by colonial logics, while developmentalist ideals prioritize Western norms of child development (Burman, 2016; Davies et al., 2022; Pérez, 2017, 2020). Neoliberalism further complicates this by introducing market-driven policies that emphasize efficiency and measurable outcomes, using standardized curricula, assessments, and methods of teaching that are aligned with a linear model of development (Karmiris, 2021). The result is an education system that marginalizes minority children and families' knowledge and inclusive educational practices while promoting homogenized standards that serve neoliberal interests.

Using Post-Foundational Theories and Methodologies to Disrupt Dominant Ontologies

Post-foundational theories and methodologies in early childhood education critically interrogate traditional frameworks and approaches to understanding refugee children and

childhoods. This paper deliberately aligns with post-foundational paradigms to challenge the scientific objectivism of modernity and the assumptions inherent in foundational theories that place young refugee children within deficit frameworks. Drawing on the sociology of childhood and Black Feminist Thought, this study moves beyond rigid, universal truths to assert that knowledge and meaning are socially, culturally, and historically constructed rather than fixed. Moreover, this theoretical approach illuminates the hegemonic hierarchies within the field of early childhood education by amplifying the knowledge of marginalized populations. Through this process, an epistemological shift is proposed, reshaping how refugee children and childhoods are understood in both research and practice.

Drawing from a post-foundational paradigmatic framework, this paper critiques dominant Western and developmentalist perspectives on children and childhood, challenging the deficit portrayal of the refugee child—a construct rooted in developmental psychology through its reliance on age-based stages, classifications, and norms (Moss, 2019, p. 52). Moreover, it challenges the static understanding of refugee children and childhoods, which are often perceived as "objective, stable, and accurate representations of a pre-existing reality" (Moss, 2019, p. 54). In contrast, Black Feminist Thought, and the sociology of childhood offer alternative views that regard childhood as a fluid, diverse, and context-dependent experience. These frameworks move beyond a singular, universal notion of childhood, creating space for multiple perspectives, including those of young refugee children and their families.

This framework advocates an ontological shift by positioning refugee children as the primary authorities of their own lives, challenging the prevailing narratives of vulnerability and innocence associated with refugee childhoods. It recognizes young refugee children as active social agents who shape the world around them as much as they are shaped by it. By promoting the visibility of stories from marginalized populations, it confronts the enduring influence of dominant deficit-based theories and assumptions that often go unchallenged (Collins, 2000, 2008). This approach embraces the complexity and diversity of refugee childhoods, amplifying voices that are often marginalized or overlooked. It calls for a deeper examination of knowledge emerging from the lived experiences of pain, suffering, love, joy, and resilience, seeking to understand how refugee children experience power and life through their bodies, subjectivities, practices, and discourses—elements that may be regarded as ordinary or insignificant (Collins, 2000, 2008; Pérez, 2017). Rooted in principles of social justice and equity, this framework highlights the power dynamics inherent in our relationships, bodily experiences, and the dominance of developmental ideologies. It challenges hierarchical structures that position children as passive recipients and strives to amplify their voices, experiences, and agency. Furthermore, it questions the dominance of deficit perspectives that promote linear, universal conceptions of refugee children and childhoods, while foregrounding the political and ethical implications of early childhood research.

To emphasize the relational nature of childhood—refugee children's identities, learning, and well-being are seen as deeply interconnected with others (e.g., peers, educators, families) and with their environments, Black Feminist Methodology was used as the central methodological framework. Static, individualistic views are questioned, encouraging a perspective that sees refugee children's experiences as dynamic and context dependent. Additionally, it creates opportunities to highlight subjugated knowledge that is often overlooked in early childhood studies (Pérez, 2017).

In this study, Black feminist Methodology and storytelling allows us to witness refugee children's multiple intersectionalities along race, class, language, and gender and engage in discourse through the power of narratives. This approach presents possibilities for multiple, potentially conflicting positionalities, challenging standard research processes

to provoke transformative changes in the roles of knowledge producers, hierarchies, and methods traditionally rooted in deficit thinking. This study used theories and methodology from the margins to situate knowledge as "fragmentary, contingent, partial and situated and as an outcome of power relations" (Spyrou, 2018, p. 19).

Storytelling centering political and relational ethics involved gathering stories with refugee children and families using principles and tools from the Mosaic approach and Enabling methods. These methods bring to the forefront not only the power of narratives afforded through multiple modalities, but also positions children as experts in their own lives and calls to our attention their capabilities, imaginations and competencies in telling their own stories of childhood (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2011; Farmer, 2015, 2017). It also allows for a sharing of power with children and in doing so disrupts the patriarchal, transitional, and scientific methods that are considered foundational in early childhood research (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2011; Farmer, 2015, 2017). By sharing decision making with refugee children and witnessing their narratives, this study valued and validated their research contributions. Making space for young refugee children to take up space in research acknowledges them as living theorists and social agents capable of knowledge production that is valued in research and practice.

Research with Refugee Children and Families

The narratives in this paper were gathered through a multi-case research project that explored the resettlement experiences of sixteen Syrian refugee children and eight mothers in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada. To emphasize the relational nature of childhood and everyday experiences as deeply interconnected with others, an adult was invited to participate from each family. This paper highlights case studies of two children from the group of sixteen, along with their mothers. The stories of the children and mothers are shared together since the children and mothers participated jointly and frequently conversed with one another. The participants were encouraged to share details about their resettlement experiences related to schooling in Canada, which were examined within the broader framework of their daily resettlement experiences.

Findings and Discussion

This paper presents and discusses two key findings that emerged from the analysis of narratives shared by children and their mothers regarding their schooling experiences during resettlement. The first finding focuses on the stories of twelve-year-old Maha and her mother, Karima, who were displaced from Syria to Jordan at the onset of the war and later migrated to Canada in 2016. The second finding examines the narrative of ten-year-old Zayed and his mother, Daneen. Zayed, born in Syria, fled with his family when he was only seven months old, moving first to Jordan, then to Egypt, before arriving in Canada in 2019.

Maha and Zayed expressed enthusiasm when sharing their schooling experiences in Canada, a sentiment that was shared by all the child participants in this study. For many of them, school represented the first significant social connection in their new community, marking an initial step in their integration into the social fabric of resettlement. One of the first resettlement actions undertaken by the families, often with the assistance of settlement agencies, was enrolling their children in local schools. The findings of this study regarding the role of schooling align with those of previous research on refugee children in Canada. Participants viewed schools as essential spaces for socialization, offering support, stability, and consistency through routines and continuity (Farmer, 2017; Guo et al., 2019; Hyndman, 2011; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Both children and mothers highlighted the sense of safety schools provided, where they could access education without the fear of physical harm.

The findings are presented below, followed by the discussion and the implications for research and practice. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the confidentiality of all participants.

Schooling as a Mechanism for Promoting Assimilation and Universalization

Maha and her mother Karima talked in length about their experiences of schooling in resettlement. One of the things Maha said was that she felt nervous when she started school in Canada because she did not know English. She said, "It was hard at first to understand but then after the teacher helped me and my friends, I started to learn". She elaborated on how her teacher would spend time with her, teaching her grammar, and helping her learn English through repeating words and phrases. Maha also said that she attended "a program where they teach you math and English for newcomers. I would go there, and I stayed there for one year. There I had my Arabic friends. They were also newcomers. They were also there, and we would talk in Arabic and discuss the work and stuff like that. They were only in this program, otherwise they were not".

In sharing her perspectives, Karima elaborated on her children's experiences as well as her own interactions with the school and educators. Discussing the challenges the family experienced during schooling, Karima says "...the first is language, the language, it was very difficult to make a friend because all of the Syrian students in the same, the same school but the school doesn't like to put for example, two people of the same language in the same class, because I that time, I feel please put someone who speak the same language they say they say no, they have to learn. If we put they will make sure someone helped them. So, we don't do that thing. We have to put different classes, different language, even if not English, but different language. So, it was difficult for them. But day by day, they were learning from teachers, from student from somebody else, and they fine then".

Maha and Karima chose to speak in English during our conversation and I have made the intentional decision to share our conversation 'as is', so their voices can come through to the audiences clearly. In the vignette shared above, Maha and Karima reflect on the intentional practice in schools of placing refugee children in classrooms with non-Arabic speakers. To facilitate Maha's acquisition of English, the dominant language of instruction, her teacher dedicated considerable time to working with her, employing various strategies to enhance her language skills. Additionally, Maha attended English Language Learning (ELL) classes, a remedial or intervention program designed to address gaps in skills such as language and mathematics. Examining Maha and Karima's narrative provides insight into the practices employed in schools to support English language acquisition. However, alongside this supportive discourse, there is also a contrasting narrative that highlights the schooling environment's disregard for the language and cultural strengths of the child and family. The stories shared by the participants reveal how schooling practices perpetuate developmental, colonial, and neoliberal values, reinforcing ideologies of assimilation, standardization, and universalization.

Historically, schooling in Canada was used as a tool for social control, assimilation, and the suppression of Indigenous cultures (Battiste, 2013; Tuck, 2009). Colonial powers created schools that forced Indigenous children to adopt the colonizers' languages, religions, and values, creating an educational system that reinforced colonial hierarchies. Karima's and Maha's narrative highlight how colonial and developmentalism work together to maintain assimilative practices that reinforce societal hierarchies through schooling practices. This also marginalizes the knowledge of disadvantaged populations and enforces policies that disregard their perspectives, as demonstrated by Karima's experience. Despite Karima recognizing the detrimental effects of assimilationist

practices on her child and raising these concerns with the educators, her insights were dismissed.

Maha and Karima's stories make visible schooling practices that empower colonial and developmental beliefs that force refugee children to adopt the colonizers' languages, religions, and values, creating an educational system that reinforced colonial hierarchies. Assimilation into the dominant language promotes erasure through asserting the cultural values of the dominant group (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These stories highlight the practices and values of a system rooted in colonialism and White supremacy, causing harm to children, families, and communities from culturally, linguistically, and racially marginalized groups. Garlen (2021) argues that "Western educational practices can be understood as concrete manifestations of the ideologies that inform a modern conception of childhood" (p. 23). Schooling acts to further the colonial and racist agenda of the wider society through social control, assimilation, and the suppression of minority cultures which draws the boundaries of inclusion and belonging (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017).

Maha and Karima's stories highlight how schooling practices of separation and intervention uphold exclusionary values which are rooted in White monolingual and monocultural beliefs (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). By delineating the difference of the participant children and families as a problem to be remedied, schooling maintains a deficit paradigm, ignoring the language strengths, cultural values and experiences of refugee children and families which frame their identities and learning. We learn from the stories that conforming to society's rules, assimilating into the dominant language and culture, and changing oneself was needed to feel a sense of belonging. Belonging in the case of this family comes with conditions that define who are (and who are not) accepted and included in the wider community which is embedded with unspoken and imbued meanings of unbelonging. These lived experiences allow us to understand belonging as intricately intertwined with politics, power hierarchies, and hegemonies of exclusion (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Belonging as a tool to border and order makes visible codes that define conditions around exclusion and inclusion. Defined with the frame of identity, language and citizenship, belonging is intricately connected to boundaries erected to exclude and marginalize the Other who stand in opposition to the norm. The processes of assimilation, standardization, and universalization, as illustrated by the narratives, perpetuate the disregard for the culture and language of marginalized populations within educational settings (Kirova, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This reinforces the power imbalances present in schooling, where the cultural and familial knowledge of refugee children and their families is overlooked, undervalued, and excluded from the teaching and learning process.

The stories of Karima and Maha highlight the need to recognize how everyday interactions can sustain systems of oppression. However, these daily negotiations also serve as spaces of active resistance. Despite attempts to position schools as sites of separation and assimilation, Maha challenges these efforts by fostering a social network within the English Language Learning classes. Through this network, she forms friendships, uses her native language, and exchanges cultural beliefs, values, and strengths with other newcomers and refugee children. In contrast, Karima resists by asserting her beliefs and values, sharing her perspectives with educators who hold power and privilege. Their narratives counter the dominant deficit paradigm, disrupt universal discourses and invite us to trouble the normality of assimilative colonial logics by centering "the experiences and knowledge systems of peoples outside the dominant paradigm" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 260). These counter narratives provide us with an

invitation to engage in the politics of schooling, assimilation and belonging, offering possibilities of creating ethical spaces of storytelling that not only focuses on the vulnerabilities of refugee populations but also their agency in problematizing universalizing practices within the contexts of their lived experiences. It allows us to rethink the supposed innocence and neutrality of schooling practices to open avenues for conversations about how these practices are not outside of intersectionality markers such as race, ethnicity, language, citizenship, immigration status and others which bring to the fore front the "grids of power relations in society" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199).

Souto-Manning (2021) argues that belonging must be reconceptualized as the right of every child, a critical component of enacting social justice in education and a fundamental responsibility of educational systems as well as the wider society. It is essential to challenge narrow definitions of what constitutes valid knowledge in schools and expose and address various overlapping forms of injustice embedded within educational practices. Rather than evaluating the diverse and complex cultural practices of all students based on a single dominant standard set by those in power, it is imperative to adopt alternative teaching approaches that foreground the brilliance of refugee children (Pérez, 2020; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017).

Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol (2018) argue for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies as "counterstories to monocultural teaching practices grounded in cultural deficit and inferiority paradigms" (p.203). Pedagogies that are culturally responsive and affirming challenge the false narrative of education practices and schooling as neutral. They act as spaces of resistance against the harm and subjugation perpetuated by assimilative, colonial, developmental frameworks, methods, and norms that exclude and disadvantage young children, families, and communities belonging to the global majority. Rather than portraying members of the global majority as deficient or incomplete, culturally responsive and sustaining teaching approaches argue that existing pedagogies, curricula, and practices are inadequate and must be transformed. These approaches dismiss the terminology of academic, developmental, or linguistic deficiencies that place blame on individuals and families. Instead, they recognize the existence of an education debt that has historically, economically, and socially disenfranchised people and communities of color, while enforcing various intersecting systems of oppression (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018).

Problematizing Trauma in the Context of Schooling during Resettlement

It is widely known that refugee children and families experience trauma due to war and displacement (Bailey et al., 2023). This study acknowledges the extreme violence experienced and witnessed by these participants. In fact, many mothers shared detailed experiences of trauma during our conversations. Respecting these experiences and carefully considering them is an ethical way to engage with refugee children and families (Clark-Kazak, 2017). In fact, many Canadian schools adopt trauma informed practice, as an instructional tool which involves making space for children to process trauma and not place the blame of trauma on the child (Bloom, 2013). In this section, I share Zayed's and his mother Daneen's perspectives and experiences of trauma in the context of schooling during resettlement.

Zayed expressed enthusiasm when discussing his school experience, often smiling and speaking positively about his educators and peers. He conveyed that he generally enjoyed attending school. However, as our conversation progressed, a more nuanced understanding of his schooling experience began to emerge. When prompted by his mother, Daneen, to reflect on the challenges he faced, Zayed revealed that he initially found school "very hard." He confessed that he was "scared of getting into situations where I don't know how to speak English and help myself". In fact, he shared that he cried every day because he could not understand his classmates or teachers, as all

communication occurred in English. Zayed described his confusion and frustration, stating that it was "very hard" and that he repeatedly told his mother that he wanted to return to Egypt. Daneen corroborated his account, noting that Zayed's desire to go back to Egypt stemmed from his struggles with language comprehension and communication, which left him feeling upset and helpless.

Although this study recognizes and acknowledges the trauma experienced by the participants, it questions our singular fixation of trauma experienced by refugee children due to war. I argue that using a lens of trauma as the primary and only lens is akin to maintaining the single story of deficit. It essentially decenters the refugee child, their voice and experiences and does not allow for multiple expressions of their experiences from their perspective. Discourses of trauma experienced by refugee children and families due to war and displacement are underpinned by foundational developmental beliefs based on psychology and mental health (Dona & Veale, 2011). Refugee children are frequently situated within a discourse of trauma, which reinforces a narrative of deficit by emphasizing their failure to meet developmental milestones and the disruption of their learning due to war and displacement. Positioned as children with significant needs and deficiencies as a result of the trauma they have experienced, they are often subjected to pity and viewed as problems requiring intervention (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Zayed's narrative highlights a different form of trauma. Both Zayed and Daneen chose to share their experience of trauma within the context of schooling during resettlement, specifically the trauma of being placed in an English-dominant environment while being proficient in Arabic. It is important to note that, although this paper presents Zayed's story as a case study, similar experiences of trauma were reported by multiple child participants in the broader study.

Zayed shared his experience of navigating the challenges of communication in English, a language with which he initially had no proficiency. He expressed feelings of frustration as he was unable to build relations with their peers and educators. His experiences of inadequacy, isolation and deep despair highlight the critical need for researchers, educators, and school systems to recognize resettlement as (re)traumatizing and a complex process that can impact language learning and communication. Additionally, his narrative calls for a deeper examination of the assumption that schools are always safe spaces, particularly for refugee children, who may face unique challenges during their resettlement process.

The prevailing conceptualization of trauma in the context of refugee children often focuses solely on war and loss, presenting a limited and biased view of their experiences in educational settings. This perspective reinforces a deficit-based discourse that marginalizes refugee children's voices and knowledge, rendering them invisible in both research and practice. Dominant narratives of suffering, damage, and missed opportunities overshadow their identities, perspectives, and agency. The discourse of trauma positions these children as the Other, framed as individuals to be pitied and "fixed." This narrative perpetuates an image of helplessness, portraying refugee children as passive recipients of external forces rather than as active agents in their own lives.

Zayed's narrative underscores the urgency for researchers, educators, and educational systems to prioritize the voices and experiences of refugee children and families in both research and schooling practices. It is crucial that we listen to their perspectives on resettlement in Canadian contexts, and elsewhere, rather than relying on a universalized, one-dimensional narrative of the refugee experience. Refugee children must be recognized as competent knowledge producers, capable of articulating their experiences of being both a child and a refugee. Their insights into identity, power, injustice, and inequity, derived from their everyday experiences of resettlement, are invaluable for enriching our understanding of these complex issues. By positioning refugee children as holders and creators of knowledge, we can foster a more nuanced and multifaceted

understanding of their resettlement experiences across diverse contexts. This approach challenges prevailing developmental beliefs, colonial values, and neoliberal ideologies that intersect within educational settings. As Garlen (2021) notes, educational systems are deeply embedded with culturally and historically specific values, and dominant narratives within schooling practices must be critically examined in relation to broader hegemonic discourses. The narrow focus on trauma in early childhood education not only overlooks political and ethical considerations but also shapes pedagogical practices in schools, reflecting wider societal values and inequalities.

Conclusion

This article aimed to challenge the prevailing deficit discourses surrounding refugee children and their childhoods, particularly those rooted in developmentalism, which are often presented as universal truths. Drawing on post-foundational theories and methodologies, this paper critically examined the biased and normalized constructions of refugee childhoods. In doing so, it argued for the inclusion of children's lived experiences in research, advocating for a space where complex and diverse understandings of childhood can emerge from the perspectives of the children themselves. The study presented in this article offers a radical deconstruction of dominant deficit-based paradigms, opening the door to post-foundational frameworks such as the sociology of childhood and Black Feminist Thought. These frameworks invite equitable, multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory views of childhood, allowing us to see refugee children as active agents in shaping and being shaped by various discursive practices. Their identities are shaped by, and simultaneously contribute to, the discourses surrounding their lives, with their subjectivities emerging from the specific contexts of family, peers, educators, migration, displacement, and schooling.

When refugee children are recognized as experts in their own lives, they offer diverse and multifaceted understandings of their experiences in resettlement. The findings of this research call for a critical examination of how everyday interactions in schooling environments can perpetuate oppression. Even practices that may appear nurturing can serve to reinforce colonial and assimilationist values, erasing refugee children's identities and cultures by imposing the cultural norms of the dominant group. Additionally, children's stories of trauma provide an opportunity to re-theorize trauma itself, emerging from their lived experiences of schooling in resettlement. This invites schools, researchers, and educators to prioritize the perspectives and voices of refugee children in shaping policies, curricula, programs, and practices that are designed for them.

Transformative educational practices require a reframing of how refugee children are viewed—not as vulnerable bodies 'at risk,' but as individuals with inherent promise and brilliance (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These approaches focus on transformation rather than conformity, aiming to cultivate critical awareness and empowering children to become engaged citizens who analyze and challenge the injustices shaping their lives. By encouraging them to question and disrupt inequities, such practices promote a process in which children from marginalized communities take on active roles in advocating for social justice.

Learning from refugee children and families about resettlement in Canada positions them as living theorists, bringing knowledge from the margins to the center. This approach disrupts the status quo, positioning refugee children as knowledge producers and contributing to a paradigmatic shift in research. This shift is essential for conducting ethical, relational, and politically aware research in early childhood education. As researchers, it is our responsibility to continuously reflect on how we can tell ethical and meaningful stories about the issues that matter most to children.

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