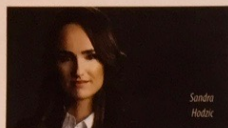
PROTECTING refugee children from GANGS



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Canada is a multi-cultural country, comprised of hard-working newcomers who are seeking a better life. Now, more than ever, people from war-torn countries are seeking refuge here. In 2015/16 alone, Manitoba welcomed 1,100 Syrian newcomers, all of whom were refugees (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, August 2016).

The refugee experience is typically very different from the immigrant experience in that refugees are forced to leave their homes in hast to escape violence or political unrest, with no time to plan, and often without documents, money or cherished possessions, or a chance to say goodbye to relatives (MacKay & Tavares, 2005, p.7-14). Refugees carry a painful burden of having witnessed and experienced inhumane treatment in concentration camps or the places they were driven out of. Consider Bosnian Muslims and their children who were the victims of genocide in the former Yugoslavia during the second-largest European massacre since the Holocaust (United to End Genocide, 2016). Innocent civilians, many of whom were children, witnessed the cold-blooded murder of their parents, friends, and neighbours, and a general sense of loss due to the life they had to leave behind. Those who were lucky enough to escape the brutality of the Srebrenica massacre were forced to leave their homes on the basis of their identity and religion (Vollen, 2001).

Many struggle with a feeling of non-belonging that lingers long after they have left their countries of origin. Refugee children also share the persistent feeling of marginalization in their new homes, which drives many towards delinquent behaviour. Dipietro and Mcgloin (2012), for example, examined 1,799 Chicago youth over a five-year period and they concluded that immigrant and refugee youth were more susceptible to gang recruitment due to an intense desire to belong, at any cost. In his recent research into gang involvement among refugee youth in Manitoba, Matt Fast made the same observations.

The newcomer children and youth eventually become Canadian citizens. Some are taught the value of hard work from an early age, watching their parents persevere in a new country, often working two jobs to provide a better life. But what happens to the kids while their parents are working multiple jobs, attending English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes, and struggling to make ends meet? Many lose their way due to a profound and inescapable interruption in their childhood, and a constant pursuit to belong in society, in their new homes, and at school. This is where our refugee children associate with anyone who is willing to take them in and offer them a sense of belonging or friendship. This can be a good thing and an offering of resources they need to flourish; however, other times, it can lead to a path of destruction and criminal behaviour if they fall into the wrong crowd.

Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) found that visible minority youth, and/or those whose first language is other than English or French, tended to be more unequally represented in Canadian jails, compared to other Canadians. Their research also found that marginalized refugee youth are at higher risk of running astray of the criminal justice system, becoming involved with gangs, violence, theft, drug use, and other delinquent behaviour.

MacKay and Tavares (2005) examined 690 public schools in Manitoba, and found that 400 of those schools had adolescents that use EAL. In Manitoba, 202,164 adolescents were reported to be enrolled in school systems from kindergarten to Grade 12, and of those, 6,174 adolescents were eligible for EAL. This research also found that school-aged newcomers, including refugees, comprised 50 per cent of all newcomers to Manitoba, which sheds some light on their challenges with resettling. Newcomer adolescents face multiple challenges integrating into schools, including literacy issues, poverty, cultural differences and unfamiliarity with new environments, family stress, trauma of resettlement, racism, lack of role models, marginalization, slower pace of learning, curriculum and resources that may be culturally ethnocentric, teachers lacking resources and support to be culturally aware and competent, separation from family and lack of academic support at home, fear and distrust of authority figures, fast-paced curriculum, acculturation, and limited resources for EAL training (MacKay & Tavares, 2005, p.40). Many others have mental health issues stemming from psychological trauma, untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Henley and Robinson, 2011). Thirteen years after the MacKay and Tavares study (2005), refugee children and adolescents still face some of the same challenges. This calls for reinvention to service delivery that will better meet their needs, especially in light of the current influx of newcomers to Manitoba (Chrismas & Chrismas, 2017).

First, we need to educate our educators on the assimilation trajectory that refugee children and their families face when coming to a new country. This includes understanding the challenges that these vulnerable individuals experience in their new homes and connecting them with the appropriate supports early on. We know that there's a lack of psychological services available to refugee children and this needs to change, in light of recent research (Henley and Robinson, 2011). Schools should be equipped with trained mental health professionals who are able to make informed needs assessments and connect refugee youth with the right resources. Second, schools and governments must offer coordinated and thoughtful resources for refugee children. If we want to see a real difference, we have to make it about something more than just adhering to a strict policy or curriculum. This will involve broad-based discussions with multiple players and sectors that serve refugee children, youth, and their families to create a child-centered dialogue. Last but not least, somewhere in the midst of service delivery, empathy will be critical.

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