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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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The Survivors: Syrian Young Adult Refugee Experiences Navigating the Quebec Education System

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ABSTRACT

Canada resettled over 74,000 Syrian refugees since 2015. However, education programs lack awareness needed to successfully promote refugee academic integration. Little research focuses on young adult refugees (YARs) aged out of traditional schools due to asylum displacement and disrupted education, left with adult education schools as their only alternative to complete high school. Drawing upon 29 semi-structured interviews with Syrian YARs in Montreal, findings suggest that this subgroup is unintentionally excluded by educational policy-makers. Although YARs are survivors, their drive was found to be insufficient when confronted with systemic barriers that prevent at-risk students from proceeding smoothly through school to reach their highest potential.

KEYWORDS

Syrian young adult refugees; academic integration; systemic barriers; adult education; educational fairness and inclusion; social justice

RÉSUMÉ

Le Canada a réinstallé plus de 74 000 réfugiés syriens depuis 2015. Cependant, les programmes d'éducation manquent de la conscience nécessaire pour promouvoir avec succès l'intégration scolaire des réfugiés. Peu de recherches se concentrent sur les jeunes adultes réfugiés qui ont été exclus des écoles traditionnelles en raison du déplacement lié à l'asile et de l'interruption de leur scolarité, et qui n'ont plus que les écoles pour adultes comme seule alternative pour terminer leurs études secondaires. S'appuyant sur 29 entretiens semi-structurés avec des jeunes adultes réfugiés syriens à Montréal, les résultats suggèrent que ce sous-groupe est involontairement exclu par les décideurs politiques en matière d'éducation. Bien que les jeunes adultes réfugiés soient des survivants, leur motivation s'est avérée insuffisante face aux obstacles systémiques qui empêchent les étudiants à risque de poursuivre leur scolarité sans encombre et d'atteindre leur plein potentiel.

INTRODUCTION

Canada is globally known for its response to conflicts and worldwide disasters as in the resettlement of over 74,000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2019 (Alhmidi, 2020).

Although refugees have been invited to rebuild their lives in host societies such as Montreal, awareness is growing that education programs for refugees fail to consider specific challenges refugee youth and young

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adults face (Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015; Ghosh et al., 2022; Ratković et al., 2017). Getting through the education system in a resettlement country such as Canada is particularly difficult for young adult refugees (YARs) with disrupted years of education (Hou & Bonikowska, 2016; Kanu, 2008; MacNevin, 2012).

Indeed, refugees between 16 and 24 years of age, disadvantaged due to vastly insufficient educational services available to them across countries of first asylum (Human Rights Watch, 2020), prompted UNESCO (2016) to launch the program No Lost Generation. Although there is an appreciation of the difficulties YARs face, little literature exists that focuses on this population and their academic integration in resettlement context. Moreover, returning to a school environment at an older age, in a foreign place, with the financial worries resettlement brings can create anxiety and hopelessness in these young adults (MacKay & Tavares, 2005), which can lead YARs to abandon the idea of going back to school (Baffoe, 2006; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Kanu, 2008).

What difficulties do these students encounter? What needs do they have, and what support is available to them? This paper seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature on YARs by highlighting their experiences in Quebec's adult education (AE) sector. The findings stem from a broader study funded by the Quebec government, the Fonds de recherche de Québec—Société et culture (FRQSC), which examined the Quebec AE system, specifically focused on support needs and psychological well-being of Syrian refugees between 18 and 24 years enrolled in this education system. This research reveals that these Syrian refugee students are survivors—that despite the challenges faced navigating Quebec's AE system, they are determined.

This paper begins with a literature review focused on refugee education exposing the research gap on YARs, followed by a brief outline of the theoretical framework and the methodological approach. The results from interviews with 29 YAR students are presented. These data reflect the self-identified challenges faced by Syrian refugee students and their perceived existing support systems within, and outside of, the school. The conclusion calls for greater awareness, at the ministerial level, of the challenges and needs of refugee students and similar at-risk subgroups in the AE system. The findings are generalizable to allophone¹ migrant youth of a minority culture who are challenged with learning the local language and unfamiliar with Quebec's AE system. This study underlines the responsibility of educational policy-makers to address the reality that is academic attrition, which forced migrants, such as Syrian YARs, confront in Quebec's AE system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualizing Disrupted Education

It is necessary to situate refugee learner populations within context, not only as refugees but as previous students who had limited access to formal education due to circumstances such as war. This approach is in line with other research demonstrating the importance of acknowledging and building on the individual pre-migration and post-settlement factors in students' academic success (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). The war in Syria has caused immense interruption to the education of many Syrian students. Prior to the instability caused by the crisis, school attendance was steady and consistent in Syria compared with

¹Allophone is a term used in Canada to describe people whose mother tongue is neither English nor French.

that in other countries in the Middle East (Kolstad, 2018).

The war changed all of this; enrollment and attendance significantly declined (UNICEF, 2015). Syrian refugees were in countries of asylum before being sent for resettlement in Canada and other countries. Some Syrian students continued to miss years of education in countries of asylum due to various obstacles, including the need to work to survive (UNHCR, 2017; UNICEF, 2015). Although international monetary assistance and programs were structured to provide basic schooling, in their temporary homes, limited attention was directed towards youths' inability to access education (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014).

Once in their resettlement home in Canada, the focus on school-age children continued to be a priority for education policy-makers throughout the nation as most Syrians were younger than refugees of other nationalities (Statistics Canada, 2019). Of the three categories under which refugees were admitted in Canada, most Syrian refugees were government-assisted refugees (GARs)² and, to a much lesser extent, privately sponsored refugees³ and blended visa office-referred refugees. It is important to note that while the federal government provides limited income support to GARs (one year), refugees from the two other immigration categories receive equivalent financial support from their sponsors and from federal and private funding, respectively.

Adult Education in Quebec

Education in Canada is decentralized. With the extraordinary arrival of thousands of Syrian refugee learners to Canadian provinces

since 2015 (Kalata, 2021; Perkins, 2021), questions of the reception and integration of refugees in Quebec communities, including mandatory education, have been brought to the forefront. Great measures are taken by the Quebec government and school boards to ensure integration of refugee children entering traditional school systems through a streamlined process, including government-run programs for newcomers to learn the local language in this French-speaking province. However, limited attention was placed on the education of YARs (over age 16) who were unable to complete their high school diploma pre-resettlement. Upon arrival, these refugees were ineligible for public education in the youth sector, as they had "aged out" of traditional high school, with only the AE route available to complete their secondary school certification (Potvin et al., 2014).

The AE sector in Quebec, distinct from continuing education programs offered by universities, was originally intended for dropouts, displaced labourers, the jobless, and the illiterate (Direction de l'éducation des adultes et de l'action communautaire [DEAAC], 2009). Many subfields such as language learning and vocational and skills training make up the AE sector. From a historical perspective, AE provides an opportunity to autonomous, independent students to learn and/or relearn their studies at their own pace. AE holds an important social justice decree offering sidelined communities an invaluable and accessible second chance to return to school. While AE is generally for adults with low levels of education, the YAR participants did not have low-level education; nor had they failed high school. For YARs, such institutions provided the opportunity for educational progress.

The academic program in Quebec's AE sector is structured for a self-directed adult student, who is assumed to be responsible

²The Government-Assisted Refugee program helps individuals who have been referred to Canada for resettlement by the UNHCR.

³The Private Sponsorship of Refugees program allows members of organizations and groups, citizens, and residents to sponsor refugees from overseas.

for their own success (DEAAC, 2009). This is reflected pedagogically with students taking subjects based on their academic needs through an independent learning approach, which encourages students to determine their own pace. This is apparent through comparison with the findings of Villate and Marcotte (2013), wherein Québécois 16- to 24-year-old students preferred working alone through the AE system because such autonomy minimized school stress as compared with high school.

These students were of the dominant culture, spoke French as their first language, and were accustomed to, and understood, the norms and values at school. For these local learners, studies at education institutions in Quebec was not foreign. Students between 16 and 24 years of age, like the Syrian YAR participants, vacillate between adolescence and adulthood in their development (Lukes, 2011, 2015). For students of this age, this time of life involves self-sufficiency and independence, which shape the experiences of emerging adults (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). However, for some students, such as refugee learners, AE independent learning methods require skills they may not have to succeed (Britton et al., 2018).

In Canada the AE system is not mainstream, offering the opportunity to many mature students to learn and/or relearn, a mandate that proposes a path outside the traditional academic track (Walker, 2022). Yet this sector remains marginalized nationally in terms of best practices, its student population and staff, and its budget (Walker, 2022)—a reality found in the province of Quebec as well (Maraj et al., 2022). Conventional schools in Quebec's education system incorporate preschool, elementary (grades 1–6), and secondary (grades 7–11) levels administered by both English and French school boards. Higher education starts at

CEGEP⁴ and continues to university. AE is located and governed within the secondary level of this education sector's budget. Although, for now, mandatory schooling in Quebec's official language does not apply to AE students, French is required for vocational and other licensing and employment in the province.

Francization

Entry into the education system in Quebec requires non-francophone children under age 16 to gradually learn the province's official language and way of life and progressively integrate regular classes in French. This intensive French-language and culture immersion program is called *classe d'accueil* (welcoming class) and is located within youth sector schools. For immigrant students over age 16, this government-assisted immersion program is called francization and is offered in AE institutions. Although attendance is not mandatory for francization, non-francophone newcomers are encouraged to take this yearlong course and receive a small monthly financial incentive for their participation.

The provincial government strongly encourages all non-francophone immigrants to learn and study in French, and learning French is mandatory to get schooling. However, those above the age of 16 have the legal right to attend AE centres in French or English to obtain their high school diploma. For many non-French-speaking immigrants to Quebec, including YARs, linguistic challenges add to integration difficulties (Ducass, 2018). A recent study by Ghosh et al. (2022) underscored a disjuncture between the basic skills Syrian refugees acquired in integration language courses in Quebec and the standard skills needed in academic settings,

⁴CEGEPs serve as community colleges for some students whereas for others it provides the Diploma of College Studies, which is required for university admission in Quebec.

including higher education institutions. For immigrant and refugee students arriving with diverse levels of education and skills in Canada's two national languages, the possibility of choosing the linguistic line to attend AE in Quebec proves to be a significant consideration.

Refugees and Education

Research has consistently highlighted the importance of school for the integration of resettled refugee children (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Rousseau et al., 2005; Tavares & Slotin, 2012; Wilkinson, 2002). Schools represent a major link between these children and the community at large, promoting students' strengths, focusing on scholarly progress and behaviourally and socially appropriate conduct (Ficarra, 2017; Timm, 2016). Moreover, much literature on this population focuses on the significance of mental health in students to invest in their new way of life and persevere (Alisic, 2012; Birman et al., 2005; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Rousseau et al., 2005; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008; Stewart, 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Arriving in an unfamiliar host society is another adjustment for refugees. Steinbach (2010) posited that there are cultural differences between individualist values found in Quebec and community values of immigrant and refugee newcomers in terms of respect for authorities and reliance on family.

Most of the literature deals with students in primary and high school; there is a considerable gap in knowledge about YARs who have aged out of the youth sector. There is some research from Germany on YARs; however, in higher education milieus, Karakaşoğlu et al. (2022) underlined the challenges refugee students face due to ascribed insufficiencies and the need for both academic and social support. Other studies in the United Kingdom (Stevenson &

Willott, 2007) and Germany (Schneider, 2018; Vogel & Schwikal, 2015) have noted obstacles to refugee academic success due to language and financial barriers.

The small body of literature focused on YAR populations (Baffoe, 2006; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Jowett et al., 2020; Kanu, 2008) is often found incorporated in more general works about immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and other marginalized populations, inclusive of a wider category of migrants but not explicitly age specific or focused on forced migrants (Ficarra, 2017; Hos, 2016; Lukes, 2011; Ratković et al., 2017). However, Jowett et al. (2020) explored refugee integration from a policy perspective focused on forced migrant students in Manitoba. Their findings recognized the persistence of these students to succeed despite challenges and obstacles. Lukes's study (2015), focused on aged-out Latino immigrant students' experiences obtaining high school diplomas in US alternative schools, reiterates the need to examine pre- and post-migration factors pertinent to students with interrupted education (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021; Klarenbeek, 2019).

Considerable research on refugee resettlement and integration issues disregards the refugee perspective (van Heelsum, 2017). Research has revealed that refugees' intrinsic motivation stems from their agency and resourcefulness (de Haas, 2011). Education is an enabling right (UNESCO, 2015); therefore, ensuring access to meaningful and motivating education is essential to guarantee the full benefit of education for developing capabilities (Sen, 1985), contributing to long-term integration. However, many refugee-background students feel confusion and isolation when faced with deciphering a complicated system with little to no guidance (Baffoe, 2006; Britton et al., 2018). In recognizing students' need for support, the

idea of “scaffolding” within the classroom (Gibbons, 2015), as in the education system more broadly, becomes essential.

Although refugee students are highly motivated, they face several barriers in realizing their goals and aspirations and must make choices within societal structures found in their resettlement home (Morrice et al., 2020). Indeed, the idea of choice may be delusory, contingent on socio-political and cultural realities and restrictions confronting vulnerable migrant groups (Lukes, 2015), including refugees. Nonetheless, despite obstacles, education remains the focus of refugee learners (Bonet, 2016; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a background to examine opposing educational outcomes focused on elusive social and established systems rather than individual and intentional prejudices and attitudes (Cabrera, 2018; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2020). Refugees are often thought of as vulnerable, sidelined, socially deficient groups (Crenshaw, 1991; Said, 1995), whereas CRT focuses on minority diversity and cultural strength (Kyriakides et al., 2018). Intersections such as gender, race, mental health challenges, income, class, and religion are elucidated by the cultural differences found in students' educational performance and life chances (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 1993; Kyriakides et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005). Marginalized and minoritized students endure a disparity of opportunity, which for many results in dropout, failure, and exclusion (Anyon, 2014). As a theoretical framework, CRT guided the analysis of this study, revealing the systemic barriers that create exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

For this research study, a qualitative methodology—narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)—was employed to explore refugee youth experiences and the meaning attributed to these experiences. Interviews were used as the primary tool to collect data (Polit & Beck, 2008). Rich data were collected from open-ended, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with 29 YARs (14 female and 15 male, ages 18–24). When engaging with all participants, a sense of authenticity—and therefore credibility through an atmosphere of confidence—was established, promoting honesty (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). A thematic inductive approach and an iterative process of coding themes (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017) was adopted. Transcribed data and field notes were reverified for accuracy (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Almost all students were living with immediate family at the time of the interviews. All but one participant held a job while attending school. Knowledge of the official Canadian languages, English or French, varied on arrival; however, most students had none to basic levels. Almost all participants spent years in a country of asylum; five lived all their lives in Gulf countries. Participants were recruited through the research team's existing connections and referrals from other students due to difficulty reaching students through schools, school boards, and community organizations. While interviews were offered in Arabic, French, and English, 90% of the participants chose English. Interviews were conducted at AE centres between 2019 and 2021; they lasted one hour and were audio-recorded. The last five interviews were carried out online via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with ethical consent granted. The transcribed data were interpreted through an inductive the-

matic analysis using a collaborative approach (Cornish et al., 2014).

RESULTS

The YAR participants were very reflective and vocal about the barriers to their learning in AE, noting stressors such as cultural conflicts, learning in a new language, and adapting to a new pedagogical approach—problems faced by many allophone immigrants. For YARs who felt they lost years due to the Syrian war, these challenges impeded their learning experience. Administrative issues due to lack of funding led many students to feel that AE was not a government priority; they remarked on uninviting school environments, unexpected extra schooling costs, lack of resources, and lack of sufficient courses offered as other challenges.

Language

The language was the biggest challenge. I think the only challenge. (Interview 2)

Students who did not have a strong command of either French or English initially faced challenges. Most participants agreed that learning a new language to be used to understand and function in a new education system was complicated. While all the students had progressed through *classe d'accueil* and francization, not all felt adequately prepared for academic content in those languages on arrival into AE. In addition, participants' sense of belonging to Quebec society was also challenged due to the intertwining of culture and language (Hou & Beiser, 2006):

Even if it is a small thing like conjugating a word, you do not want to miss that. ... That was so stressful even if you talk to someone. ... Like I take my time to answer the question, until I build the sentence in my brain. That was a big challenge for me. (Interview 21)

It was unanimous that learning French was a challenge. Indeed, most interviewed students had moved out of the French-language system into the English-language system, where they were interviewed for this study. Some tried several French-language schools before deciding to leave for an English-language school. Students agreed that learning French was more complicated than English and that ultimately trying to master French was an obstacle to progressing through the education system. As the following quotes indicate, participants had deep concerns about wasting time linked to learning French:

Because I can say that I wasted two years of my life in Canada. ... I am trying to learn English and French. ... I could say that if I chose English from the beginning it would be better for me. At least, I would be in the university right now. (Interview 22)

I stay for three months, but I think I didn't progress; I did not achieve anything [in the French school]. (Interview 10)

English-language AE centres were preferred overall because they gave students hope of completing their studies faster—of not losing or wasting time. Despite this, participants admitted that learning in a foreign language, whether French or English, was challenging:

[Having to learn the official language is] difficult because you do not speak their language ... English and French. You should like study from zero. It's short time and long stuff; like, math, English, and French in three months. It is a lot! (Interview 16)

These refugee students clearly noted that without academic-level English or French skills, progress through the AE system presented a problem as teachers were unable to consistently provide individualized support and had to move through the curriculum dependent on the language abilities of the broader class:

Like [for the] exam [in] physical science you need to have academic English. It was very difficult for

me to translate the question; I know the idea, if I understand the question I can answer. But sometimes, I had hard time to answer. I always was asking the teacher to translate the question to me. (Interview 7)

Cultural Differences

Some students indicated their hesitation to access the structured support services available within the school due to their own shyness:

I am not that type of people who goes like to somebody and talk. I always keep inside of me. I manage my stuff alone, but that affected my school. (Interview 20)

Two students explained in relation to culture:

I do not go to an adviser anymore because I know what they will tell me. They will say, okay we are in Canada; here no one asks you about your age, about your studies. (Interview 15)

Yes, Syrians will not ask for help. (Interview 1)

Nevertheless, the students were comfortable approaching some forms of general support. They saw teachers as the first line of support, not only in an academic sense but also as a source of encouragement and fun. Although YARs reported limited use of services such as mental health support, some appreciated AE practitioners' willingness and availability and even approached them informally just to talk:

They gave me hope to not lose my hope. (Interview 4)

I couldn't imagine the support she gave me. ... She was like "it's okay, I will give you some extra time. You don't need to be worried about other people. Everybody has some problems in their lives." (Interview 11)

Students viewed some of their teachers as extremely accessible individuals who would go out of their way during lunch breaks and even after school to support students. Importantly, students' interactions with these

support services were informal. For example, some students reported seeking support from career advisers not for career advice but rather for managing emotions, stress, anxiety, cultural expectations, and judgement. One student discussed how she felt she could approach the career adviser because she shared the same ethnic background as her:

Sometimes I would go to [the adviser's] office to talk to her about problems ... not just about career stuffs, but some psychological stuff. But I felt like, she was very close to me, and whatever questions I had I would go and ask her, and she will answer me. (Interview 18)

Others enjoyed the fact that they could rely on someone other than their friends to assist them in studying, which helped to boost their confidence:

I sat with her [the tutor] and talked. ... It's just about having a good teacher to talk to me in French. ... And when my exam came it truly helped. (Interview 19)

Cultural differences were also apparent in the learning style, which was foreign to the YAR participants, whose expectations of teacher and student behaviours differed compared with what they were used to pre-resettlement. The following findings expand on these challenges.

AE Pedagogical Approach

As an alternative to completing high school for a diploma, AE has traditionally employed an individualized learning pedagogical process for autonomous learners who are responsible for completing their own education. If students require academic help, they are encouraged to seek assistance. The AE system encourages independent learners to take their time with no pressure, an approach very much appreciated by some (Villate & Marcotte, 2013). Initially, the AE learning

style was considered an advantageous approach for YAR participants who felt they were behind. However, as they progressed through the system, YARs came to view this aspect of AE differently. As the quotes below attest, the individual approach to learning left them vulnerable:

[In high school] we were many students in the class, you know individualized you are by your own, but I have a lot of question because it's new language for me. So, if you want to go see the teacher, you should write your name [on the board]. So maybe if you have chance, you will see him twice a day, so that's difficult, because there are many students who write their name and ask questions. (Interview 5)

Nobody is forcing you to be there, and [it] is actually one of the biggest problems. (Interview 23)

The student quoted above was referring to their pre-resettlement schooling experience in Syria, where teacher accountability and responsibility for students was very high. In AE, on the other hand, there was a notable absence of scaffolding support, of guidance through the school system. Feeling left alone without adequate assistance, YARs worried that being responsible for their own advancement equated to the possibility of failure. Unfortunately, several students did fail classes. They felt AE practitioners did not understand their refugee reality: that they had already lost so much time due to displacement and were struggling not to lose any more. Teachers positively interpreted the pedagogical approach and going at one's own pace, but this perspective did not resonate with YARs who needed to catch up as they already felt left behind.

Every time that you go and ask a person ... they will advise you what to do but there 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." (Interview 25)

While motivated to move through AE as soon as possible, the independent learning

approach did not serve to inspire YARs but rather strongly discouraged them. There was a clear desire for a more structured and guided approach to education, much more akin to a traditional Syrian high school experience. The laissez-faire approach to AE greatly differed culturally from that of YARs, who desired a more rigorous and regulated teaching method as they believed they would progress faster under such a regime. For example, students arriving late or not attending class should not be tolerated, according to one participant: "I believe that it should be stricter on this" (Interview 3).

Refugee students were surprised and discouraged that many of their non-refugee classmates had spent years in AE and still had not completed their study programs. Since non-refugee students attending AE have greater advantages than forced migrants, it was unfathomable for the YAR participants to grasp what appeared to be a permissive approach to schooling. YARs were surprised that the national students, although they spoke the local language and were of the dominant culture, often did not come to class, slept during class, or disrupted lessons: "If you are going to come to our school, you are going to be frustrated because of the students. You will enter the classes; you will be frustrated. Everyone is sleeping" (Interview 27). The YAR students expected non-refugee AE students to follow school etiquette and for teachers to be firmer. However, it is crucial to avoid stigmatizing non-refugee students in AE who exhibit signs of disengagement, such as sleeping in class, because they might be coping with their own systemic barriers and inequalities (Flynn et al., 2011) and, as highlighted in CRT literature on education, may face their own challenges.

Because the YAR participants lacked knowledge of the local language, culture, and general know-how, having missed key stages

of their education, whether due to brief or prolonged absences, they expressed a need for more support to navigate the unfamiliarity of AE and make progress. Originally AE was not intended for individuals who faced circumstances such as forced migration or those still in developmental stages of life. Authorities are therefore tasked with the complex dilemma of addressing the needs of young adult students seeking a more traditional educational approach.

The findings seem to imply that the voluntary nature of AE leads to a lack of motivation. The interviewees shared that students' lack of incentive and classroom behaviour did not seem to matter to teachers and that teachers were not disturbed by students' indifference and disengagement in learning as they did not address it. Based on their schooling in Syria (Al Hessian et al., 2016), YARs reported it was inconceivable to them that teachers would disregard students and leave them to fail because the expectations of teachers and the school system, as well as their own, were culturally influenced. At times, interestingly, teachers were depicted as indifferent or apathetic when they showed little concern for student disengagement; however, they were also recognized as the primary source of support for students.

Administrative Issues

The Syrian YARs voiced frustration regarding the lack of classes and teachers, as well as the demotivating environment, including the lack of resources and what they considered were hidden costs of education. The days and times of scheduled mandatory courses were spread out, causing frustration. The inability to finish required subjects in one semester necessarily meant having to wait until the next semester. Blocked by a timetable that prevented them from moving at their desired pace, YARs were exasperated:

They put it in the schedule in the same period so I cannot take it. So, I should switch it, like I lose three months. ... And the same problem in the next semester, and this semester also. ... Open more courses ... to study English, math, and French. Now, because of that I will lose three months. (Interview 19)

Some students addressed the school administration regarding scheduling conflicts but were told there was a lack of funding that limited the increase of AE instructors and therefore more class scheduling options: "I just told him about the schedule, and they said we cannot we don't have enough money to open classes. ... The administration ... every time ... they said, 'We cannot.'" (Interview 24). To address this challenge, some students took it upon themselves to fill their timetables with classes from various AE centres to quicken their progress: "If I did not get to go to other schools and searched which one gives this course and which one can give me that course, I would probably still be there [in the AE system]" (Interview 10). The participants' self-perceived sense that they were behind their peers, and thus wanting to finish as fast as possible, propelled their motivation to find alternative options for themselves. The fact that the system that was meant to enable them to move at their own pace did not allow them this was a cause of major annoyance.

Student narratives drew attention to factors outside of the classroom that impacted drive to study and ability to concentrate, such as poor lighting and dark-coloured walls. Some YARs felt the environment was depressing and had a negative impact on their mood and motivation. Some drew attention to classrooms that were almost empty of students and others where many were sleeping, which highly disheartened the interviewees. Students pointed out that authorities must consider all aspects of student daily learning, including atmosphere, which influences

well-being and performance. One student who had progressed through many AE centres put it like this:

Even the lighting of the school affects the student's mood. ... You feel like you are going to some horror movie or something. You do not have the mood to study or stuff like this. ... [It] affects a lot, at least for me. (Interview 2)

Students noted that resources—such as functioning computers or even good internet connection—were severely lacking within the schools they attended. AE practitioners confirmed this inequity in reference to other education levels in Quebec, noting that school boards ignore the needs of AE centres because they are not considered a priority.

And they need stuff, like computers and internet. If I don't have internet, I cannot study there. The teacher sometimes gives us activity to do it in the phone, so if [students] cannot afford the internet on his phone, they cannot open like us. And the computer, it's really slow. We will finish and the Google still rolling. (Interview 1).

Added to the lack of adequate school resources and student study spaces, these students expressed that AE centres need further attention to create a more motivating environment.

The students noted that financial support to cover additional costs such as books was needed to study at AE centres; such additional costs were often not mentioned until after enrollment. Participants wanted to bring to light the cost of things that need to be bought every term, which was an obstacle for some:

I know for the registration is free, like \$100, it's nothing, but for the books ... I paid for French only book \$60 for one semester and imagine [the total amount because] I [also] have English and mathematics. ... You should count it [too]. (Interview 28)

If a student did not have the required material (whether forgotten or not bought due

to cost), entrance into class was forbidden. Students considered this an unfair policy. According to YAR interviewees, school authorities should try to understand that some students have financial problems and/or problems affecting class attendance:

If you have a book, you study, and if not, the teacher kicks you out without knowing your situation; like, maybe I cannot afford a book. I saw that many times in the French class. If you do not have a book, out. We do not need you. He does not ask you why you do not have a book. (Interview 14)

Financial support for refugee students to attend adult high school was not sufficiently covered by the government because school and life costs were restrictive. Consequently, YARs had to work to make money while studying. All interviewees but one had jobs on the side, although they would have preferred to concentrate only on school if financially possible:

The past year was very crazy year to me. I will finish in this May, this semester, and then I will stop studying for one whole year because I am broke! I cannot afford my education. (Interview 22)

Even me, I work, I cannot study in the weekend, also after the school it's too hard. ... Like I don't study, I don't practice ... so if I fail, I deserve that ... because I do not study. (Interview 13)

The research findings contribute to an academic understanding of refugee students' experiences in resettlement contexts. The Syrian participants were challenged by the foreignness of the Quebec education system and the cultural barriers they encountered. Nonetheless, the findings reveal that these forced migrants leaned on their intrinsic motivation to succeed. Student participants also expressed strong connections with their parents, including culturally linked reverence and respect (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Steinbach, 2010). Although most worked and studied full time, their determination

led them to AE schools, and some attended multiple schools simultaneously:

No one helped me and told me to go and do this and that; I did it by myself. (Interview 2)

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

The reason why I wanted to finish ... to get to college, is to prove to them [parents] they did not sacrifice all the things that they did ... for nothing. (Interview 3)

DISCUSSION

The data from this study reveal that YAR students, like those in the study by [Jowett et al. \(2020\)](#) in Manitoba, were fundamentally motivated to complete secondary school, despite the challenges and obstacles they faced in AE. These refugee-background students worked and studied, attended multiple schools, and sought support from family and friends. They were motivated by clear objectives for their future and to show gratitude to their parents. Indeed, YARs' narratives correspond with the literature stating that through intrinsic motivation, their educational goals remained their focus ([Bonet, 2016](#); [McWilliams & Bonet, 2016](#); [Shakya et al., 2010](#); [Stevenson & Willott, 2007](#)). However, aspirations do not necessarily translate into high achievement or successful completion of studies. Motivation, although essential, was insufficient for Syrian refugee students to reach their goals. In fact, aspects of the AE system served to slow down YAR participants, impacting their life chances ([Kyriakides et al., 2018](#)).

The classroom culture and teaching methods used at AE centres were not aligned with YAR participants' usual way of learning and were therefore structural impediments to their academic success. This is most apparent through comparison with the findings in the study by [Villate and Marcotte \(2013\)](#), whose participants were of the majority

culture and for whom studies and norms at AE institutions were not foreign. In AE, students are encouraged to go at their own pace and take their time, but this policy is incongruent with YARs' plans. Participants emphasized that they had no time to waste. This is an important point in that it reflects refugee students' sense of pride and their hopes to rebuild their future. Yet systemic obstacles as simple as scheduling got in the way. Additionally, AE centres where students fall asleep, are late, or just do not show up to class create frustrations and a sense of unimportance. This education sector lacks funding to support the needs of YAR students: more teachers to offer more classes, reduction of scheduling conflicts, and more school materials, including computers. The Ministry of Education must prioritize AE institutions rather than treating this education sector as if it were a marginalized sector serving a marginalized student body.

Resettled refugee students' education and school experience have great bearing on their integration trajectory into the future, and that of their families, as this study's data and the literature show ([Morrice et al., 2020](#)). The Syrian YAR interviewees found that the AE system was not only foreign to them but difficult to navigate, creating a sense of exclusion ([Anyon, 2014](#)). Indeed, these students expressed frustration, isolation, and uncertainty at school rather than experiencing it as an opportune site to enjoy and develop networks ([Ghosh et al., 2022](#)). Although the individualized pedagogy of AE strives to meet the needs of a certain kind of student, it does not meet the needs of the minoritized and marginalized, revealing the structural and cultural barriers CRT uncovers.

To traverse this system, YARs drew upon their tenacity and informal support, as much literature claims ([de Haas, 2011](#); [van Heelsum, 2017](#)). Yet YARs still faced difficult-

to-overcome barriers. Because of their in-betweenness—incorporating their family responsibilities and expectations about themselves at their age (Lukes, 2011)—these students experienced a lot of pressure. They were not always comfortable asking for formal support, and when they did ask, they often found the response wanting. Yet support is exactly what they needed—help in understanding the difficult and unfamiliar education structure and the norms of their host country.

Student agency and motivation, as Sen posits (1985), is essential; however, progress is difficult even for the most outgoing students in the AE system who have no experience of severe interruptions to their education. This study points to the importance of understanding aspirations in tandem with the experiences students had prior to, and after, resettlement. YAR students voiced difficulties regarding disrupted education and past traumatic events, as well as having to find employment and addressing family needs, challenges raised in the literature (Stewart, 2017; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Attention must be paid, as CRT asserts, to the barriers within an education system that impede progress for non-traditional students, and especially for those who have missed years of school and do not have the required national language skills.

Essential for acculturation and integration for newcomers is language acquisition (Hou & Beiser, 2006). For the allophone Syrian YARs, mastering academic French or English while adapting to a new way of life in Quebec society was a struggle. Moreover, YARs found that the government language preparation, francization, was a waste of time because it did not support them in advancing through AE. All interviewees concurred with the literature regarding French immersion classes in Quebec (Buccitelli & Denov, 2019;

McAndrew, 2001; Steinbach et al., 2015), which highlights that such programs do not help students achieve their goals at school. Language was a structural barrier, as the basic French taught in these programs was insufficient for YARs in terms of accessing the necessary academic French to complete studies at AE centres (Ducass, 2018). Indeed, this was reflected by some YAR students who switched to English-language schools, a phenomenon worth future research to understand. More attention must be placed on providing academic-level language courses and support for YARs in resettlement countries to ensure that they are able to successfully advance.

Beyond the language issue, the YAR participants experienced difficulty advancing through the curriculum by themselves as they had insufficient assistance to meet their needs. To enable academic achievement, YARs required more classroom support, especially as the AE pedagogical approach was unfamiliar to these Syrian students, who felt largely on their own, abandoned, and vulnerable to failure. These findings concur with the limited literature, which confirms the positive outcomes of scaffolding. Designing scaffolding support for these types of students requires understanding how they learn best, rather than applying a pre-conceived notion of how adult students learn (Baffoe, 2006; Gibbons, 2015). For successful scholarship, support is required for students from allophone, minority culture backgrounds to transition from one learning approach to the other.

AE was historically structured for independent, self-directing adults who chose to return to school. For the study participants, the AE pedagogical approach was attractive because, in theory, it could allow them to move quickly through education; however, YARs' pre- and post-resettlement experiences indi-

cate that independent learning did not work for all (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). Many YARs reminisced about a more traditional approach to learning—that is, more instructional teaching. The disjuncture between the AE approach, focused explicitly on the individual, and the needs of YARs for teacher-centred learning exposes both cultural and structural obstacles to YARs' academic integration (Britton et al., 2018; Ghosh et al., 2022; Steinbach, 2010).

Policy-makers, school administration, and school boards must take heed. An approach to AE that considers YAR students' feedback would be for the betterment not only of refugee students but for all, as it would address the schooling environment and not just the student. To ease YARs' transition, they must be provided with the required language skills, proper structures of learning support, and, perhaps most importantly, smooth pathways to obtain the necessary credentials to enable them to progress into the workforce or onto higher education. They are ready and willing to do the rest.

CONCLUSION

The challenges that Syrian YARs faced help identify the support needs of refugee students, and similar at-risk groups, in the AE system in Quebec. This study highlights avenues for improvement to ensure that students can thrive in the classroom and in their ongoing process of integration. This research explored the experiences of Syrian YARs in AE in Quebec, drawing attention to the cultural and structural barriers that refugee students experience in their academic integration, which they perceive to slow progress towards their goals. Initially, this FRQSC research project aimed to identify the challenges refugee students encounter in AE and, based on this, develop strategies and practices to support these students' transition through

the system. What was revealed is something more systemic: strategies and practices may be insufficient to properly enable students to succeed within the current framework because language courses are not offering the necessary preparation for academic studies. Independent modular courses leave students vulnerable to failure, and scheduling issues slow their progress. Further, the culture of AE, with the onus to advance on the student alone, does not serve this refugee student population, who need more guidance and support on their path as new contributing members of the Quebec citizenry.

For refugees, Global North countries including Canada are seemingly the antidote to their tragedy, providing sanctuary where uninterrupted education is guaranteed. However, refugee young adults find themselves faced with barriers to obtaining a high school diploma—a journey filled with struggle and frustration that impacts their choices and aspirations. The AE sector provides an important avenue through which marginalized adults can be integrated “back into” society, yet this sector of education is itself marginalized. While resettlement offers opportunities, YARs experience ongoing disruption simply because of their age and the fact that they are immigrants. The findings are generalizable for all young adult allophone non-white newcomers attending AE in Quebec and elsewhere. As YARs are subsumed into systems that have insufficiently considered their learning experiences, needs, and desires, there needs to be more educational policy awareness, attention, and change—imperatives to ensure that refugee students at AE schools in Quebec can finish and flourish, not just survive.

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