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# SHIFTING ASPIRATIONS:

# THE EXPERIENCE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN ADULT EDUCATION IN QUEBEC

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## Abstract

Transnational shifts experienced by Syrian refugee young adults disrupt their lives. Many start their journey as children, transition into adolescents often in countries of asylum, and resettle as young adults in countries such as Canada with the dream to rebuild their lives. Too old (+16) for the traditional school cycle, they are encouraged into adult education (AE) as their only choice to complete their high school diplomas to obtain minimum wage jobs or continue to higher education. Their progress through AE continues their destabilization, particularly in terms of their aspirations, hopes and dreams. We focus on the educational journeys of this population who have largely been forgotten by policies and programs for refugee integration. Drawing upon 29 interviews with Syrian refugee young adults in Quebec, using a theoretical framework of migration/aspirations and critical race theory, we highlight how disruption is perpetuated in their education after their arrival rather than stability.

**Keywords**: aspirations, agency, im/migrants, refugees, critical race theory, marginalization, disruption, equity and equality in education, inclusion

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## Introduction

Aaron was 14 when he left Hasakah, the capital of Al-Hasakah governorate in north-eastern Syria. He always loved school and despite the conflict he managed to finish grade 10 before his family made the difficult decision to leave and move to Lebanon. Like many other Syrian refugee families in Lebanon, Aaron's family struggled: unable to attend school or find decent work, they ran through their savings quickly after 6 months. Ultimately, they made the decision to leave again, this time to a country in West Africa where some of their relatives were

already living. Here Aaron initially tried to go to school but found it difficult without strong abilities in English. He decided to, as he says, "work, work, work" during the day and his mother tried to teach him English in the evenings. When they finally made it to Canada, Aaron was just shy of 18 and was not allowed to enter a traditional secondary school being above the mandatory age of education (16). Through the advice of his local school board, he made his way to an adult education (AE) centre where he was told it would take one and half years for him to complete the requisite courses to obtain his high school diploma. He was excited: he would finally be able to get back on track to study towards his dream of being a doctor. Yet, his time in AE did not go as planned. Faced with many challenges and continual delays moving through AE, he ultimately decided to go into construction to at least ensure an economically stable life.

Aaron is one of 29 Syrian refugee students with whom we spoke attending AE in Quebec. *Aged out* of mandatory education, AE, viewed predominantly as a place for 'dropouts', was their only option to continue their education. AE was not what they expected. Despite refugee students' enthusiasm and motivation to advance, AE turned out to be a continuation of disrupted education. This chapter seeks to contribute to literature focused on the education of refugee young adults; to highlight the transnational shifts in, and the disruption to, the lives of Syrian refugee young adults many of whom start their journey out of their homes as children, transition into adolescents (often in countries of first asylum) and end up as young adults in a country of resettlement. Theirs is a story of shifting, starting in Syria and eventually leading them across the world to Quebec, Canada. Notwithstanding the disruption to their lives, these refugee young adults cultivate life goals along their transcontinental journey through geographical space and time, influenced by social, economic, and political conditions but nonetheless are guided by

subjective aspirations (Boccagni, 2017; Borselli & Van Meijl, 2020; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Shakya et al., 2012; Van Heelsum, 2017).

Globally, very few forced migrants are chosen to resettle permanently, contingent on the willingness of receiving countries to accept (Shapiro et al., 2018). However, Canada has shown an exemplary humanitarian position in tripling its number of refugee intake since 2015 for Syrian refugees (Alhmidi, 2020). Our study focuses on the journeys of young adult refugees who were welcomed but largely forgotten by policies and integration programs in resettlement contexts (Morrice, et al., 2020; Bonet, 2018). Specifically, we aim to highlight how Syrian refugee young adults continue to experience disruption to their education in their lives post-resettlement in Canada. We contend that the pressures and obstacles Syrian refugee youth encounter attending school at AE institutions greatly impede their sense of inclusion and significantly build frustrations and isolation. We argue as well that the environment they have settled into influences their career aspirations and life chances.

Indeed, as Mohamed Afify reiterates, Syrian refugee young adults have resettled in Canada while rising attitudes of "[i]slamophobia (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018) and xenophobia (Bricker, 2019)" (2020, p. 6) fury throughout the Western world; a time where "[a]nxieties about migration and resettlement have fuelled a rise in anti-establishment and nationalist sentiment among voters in a number of countries" (Shapiro et al, 2018 p. 2). School and societal experiences therefore have a bearing on how refugee students acculturate as they integrate and can negatively impact the realization of their aspirations. We assert that students face these challenges because the AE sector in Quebec was not envisioned for those who are not the traditional type of mature adult students, usually from the dominant Francophone or Anglophone groups and are not familiar with the education system here. Consequently, disruption continues

as they journey to complete a high school diploma, in a foreign land with little to no understanding of the Quebec educational system, and as allophones, with little to no knowledge of Canada's official languages.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Migration/Aspiration Theory*

Considerable research on refugee resettlement focuses on the forced migrants' integration into their new home; however, understanding refugee integration through state rhetoric and outcomes (Ager & Strang, 2008) disregards the refugee perspective (Van Heelsum, 2017). With the aim of adapting, acculturating, assimilating, and incorporating, integration policies tend to conform newcomers to a dominant set of values and behaviours for them to *fit in* (Damaschke-Deitrick & Bruce, 2019; Phillimore & Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2017; Valtonen, 1998). This policy driven assumption is oriented towards goals set by the welcoming nation while disregarding the previous and current experiences of newcomers gained in and out the new country unnoticed (Borselli &Van Meijl, 2020; Carrera, & Atger, 2011; Klarenbeek, 2019).

Refugees, although forced to migrate, show agency when they decide to move from one country to another, often dependent on having access to varying resources and capacity from which to choose (de Haas, 2021; Sen, 1999). Studies on refugee youth show that despite academic obstacles encountered, education remains the focus of their aspirations (Bonet, 2016; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Shakya et al., 2012; Stevenson & Willot, 2007). To better understand life after migration from the perspective of refugees themselves (Borselli & Van Meijl, 2020; Van Heelsum 2017) researchers consider migration, whether voluntary or forced, as a social process which relates to individuals' capabilities and aspirations (de Hass, 2011). Indeed, Amartya Sen posits in his Capabilities approach (1999) that agency allows an individual to seek,

without restriction, what he/she values and aspires to accomplish in life (Walker, 2005). From this perspective, if the refugee is understood as an agent with aspirations, then greater regard is allowed to them in terms of decisions, reasons, and choices to pursue varying paths (Van Heelsum, 2017). Conversely, research has found that when a refugee loses hope of reaching his/her goals and/or developing capabilities this can influence one's feeling of inclusion in a new society (Borselli & Van Meijl, 2020; Spencer & Charsley 2016; Van Heelsum 2017). Moreover, implementing agency, or capability, must be understood within the structural settings of the new host society which rule and regulate freedom to choose (de Hass, 2011). Refugees have agency but must make choices within structures (Morrice, et al., 2020). Critical race theory, as explained below, is an analytical tool which provides insight into societal structures to examine the educational exclusion of refugees.

***Critical Race Theory (CRT)***

As a well-established theoretical framework, CRT examines the relationship between racism and power based on the notion that race determines economic prospects of individuals, influences politics, and shapes the conduct of law enforcement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). This theory raises questions about fairness and provides a framework to examine the educational outcomes of certain groups resulting from social and institutional structures and forces rather than intentional biases (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2020). Inequality in academic achievement is linked to structural factors which reproduce and legitimize inequalities in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) resulting in dropouts, failures, and exclusion of marginalized groups (Anyon, 2014). Moreover, marginalized groups are often thought of as socially deficient (Crenshaw, 1990). Schools are structured on claims that academic success is achieved by merit, that a student has choice, agency, and motivation. Indeed, liberal democratic assumptions promote academic

achievement contingent on hard work only (Zamudio et al., 2011); an idea challenged by CRT. Education is not an equalizer and cultural differences in students' educational performance and life chances must be recognized (Yosso, 2005).

Race is understood as a social paradigm creating a racial hierarchy found in structural and political systems and is used to determine who is worthy of opportunities and who is not (Razak, 2004; Said, 1995). The French hegemony in Quebec participates in the racialization of minorities because control of social and economic structures by the culture in power stems from a belief that everyone has equal opportunity, ignorant of the racial, ethnic, and linguistic domination minorities endure. Therefore, understanding the way racialization affects the learning and educational needs of non-dominant im/migrants, like Syrian refugee young adults, signifies that schools must take accountability and endorse solutions that promote an equitable chance for the marginalized (Ianinska et al., 2013). Both CRT and the Capabilities theory marry well to uncover the structural factors which may impede marginalized groups from accessing opportunities and pursuing their life goals. This paper integrates both theoretical frameworks to enable consideration of micro as well as macro perspectives (De Hass, 2011) which are useful in examining different ways refugees experience exclusion.

**Background: Syrian Refugees in the World and Canada**

The ongoing Syrian war has reached its 10th year. More than half of Syria's pre-conflict population is still displaced, with 13.5 million Syrians displaced inside the country and beyond. According to UNHCR, 6.7 million Syrian refugees have been hosted in 128 countries of which 80% migrated to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Turkey has exceptionally supported the Syrian exodus by welcoming 3.6 million refugees, mainly in the city of Istanbul. Lebanon followed with 1 million refugees. Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt host together over

1 million displaced Syrian (Todd, 2019). It is worth mentioning that the history of migration in the Middle East is based on a solid tradition to generously grant asylum to strangers in need, with Syria being a preeminent case in welcoming Armenians, Kurds, and Palestinians (Todd, 2019).

Since 2015, Canada has taken a leading role in resettling a historically high number of Syrian refugees, admitting over 74,000 individuals between 2015-2020 (Alhmidi, 2020). Most Syrian refugees have been welcomed to Canada through the Operation Syrian Refugees with people arriving either through the government sponsored program, the privately sponsored program or the Blended Visa Office Referred program which is a public-private sponsorship partnership. Regardless of their admissions category, Syrians received permanent residence on arrival and were sent to each of the 10 provinces and three territories of Canada, with the majority settling in Ontario and Quebec, and thus had access to the same rights and entitlements as citizens, except the right to vote. After three years of physical presence within the country, they can apply for citizenship.

Although welcoming refugees is a policy of the Canadian government, refugee *integration* largely falls to provincial governments in Canada's decentralized system (Jeram & Nicolaides 2018). Depending on their admissions category, resettled refugees receive services from either the government or their sponsors for their first year after which they are integrated into mainstream services. Children and youth have access to schools on arrival, which are provincially controlled. Research suggests that provincial authorities in charge of education were ill prepared to support the academic needs of Syrian refugee youth when they arrived, and this is notably the case in Quebec (Ratković et al., 2017). This is despite consistent research attesting to the importance of incorporating inclusive policies and practices in school systems (Ghosh et al., 2019). This is the case of newcomers who are not of the dominant culture, such as non-white

refugee youth, because of how such students can be racialized, which can breed insecurity and exclusion (Sanchez & Romero, 2010). This emphasises the importance of being prepared with policies and programs to support refugee needs (Ratkovic, 2017) and we would add to also support their strengths. Because so much of refugees' experiences are provincial, we consider the specific context of French Quebec, where our participants are located, and which has several differences from the rest of English-speaking Canada.

**Quebec for *les Québécois*?**

Quebec is the only French speaking province in Canada. Since the 1800s, nationalism for the *Québécois* people has been a battle to be recognized as a distinct political and cultural entity within Canada (Theriault, 2001). The differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada are often espoused. This is no less so in the case of immigration. Although the majority of Canadians value diversity, immigration, and globalization, including refugee intake, only 50% of the Quebec population agree with Canada's plan for welcoming refugees (Anderson & Coletto, 2017).

In 2019, the newly elected Quebec Premier Francois Legault advocated for the restoration of Quebec nationalism, emphasizing the term *popular* to justify his relentless majoritarianism policies. With great confidence, Legault declared to the Canadian Press news agency that there is no shame in being nationalist (Valiante, 2019) and, furthermore, that it was time to *set some rules* to show how things are done in Quebec (Henriquez, 2019). This government therefore promotes an ideology for the supremacy of a particular group, resonating with the famous Quiet revolution slogan *masters in our own house*. With an agenda to prioritize local businesses and to assert the Quebec identity, Legault intends to *nationalize nationalism* by bringing to the forefront policies on social and cultural boundaries (Dufour, 2019). Clear in

Quebec politics, policies and practices is the suggestion that minorities are a threat to the majority. The assumption being that by enhancing and concretizing Quebec values and distinctiveness, diversity will subsequently be curbed.

***Politics, Policies, Practices: A Problem***

In favour of patriotic choices and to secure *Québécois* control over migration, in 2019 the provincial government created Bill 9 to limit economic immigration. Through a selective process, applicants are chosen if judged acceptable based on Quebec's official language (French) and if their moral values are aligned with those of the dominant culture (*Assemblée Nationale du Québec*, 2019). Furthermore, Bill 9 resulted in the withdrawal of 18,000 applications for immigration to Quebec putting families already separated in further distress (CBC, 2019). It is a step backwards to reduce immigration by 20 % as making this political choice works counter to economic development needs in this province due to the significant lack of manpower. Counter to Quebec's policies, the federal government has put in place a program to grant permanent residence status to 90,000 international students recently graduated from Canadian universities to boost immigration (Keung, 2021).

For non-white, mostly Muslim Syrian refugees, the socio-cultural climate in Quebec is indeed worrisome. The law to uphold secularism or *laicité*, Bill 21, means absence of religion whereby all *conspicuous religious symbols* (such as the Muslim hijab or chador or Jewish kippah) are banned from public institutions, including in primary and secondary schools. This law, created in 2019, is veiled behind the idea of liberalism and freedom of religion, the separation of state and religion. Legault suggests that before choosing Quebec, a newcomer must remember that this province respects women and therefore no religious symbols are allowed in public service (Shingler, 2019) evoking a policy of rescue (Kyriakides et al., 2018) which

proclaims that Bill 21 ostensibly protects subservient Muslim women forced to wear a head scarf imposed by their religion. Quebec's approach to *laicité* is like France's far-right party leader Marine Le Pen who acquiesces to the need to save Muslim women (Breeden, 2019); however, Muslim women have not asked to be saved. Certainly, this *laicité* law not only complicates the integration of Syrian refugees but is considered contentious, racist, and discriminatory as some Muslims claim it disproportionally targets Muslim women, specifically teachers who choose to wear the hijab as an act of faith at their workplace (Saad, 2019). The fact that many of these refugees are Muslim adds to their exclusion and epitomizes their *otherness* as Islamophobia is on the rise (Bonet, 2018).

Additionally, a recent Human Rights Commission study (CDPDJ) placed Quebec at the top of all provinces in Canada in terms of discrimination and racism (2019). The same study reported that visible minorities are unjustly and randomly targeted by police (CDPDJ, 2019). Amir Attaran, professor at Ottawa University, asserts that systemic racism can no longer be ignored, calling Quebec the *Alabama of the North* (2021). A study by the organization *Femme Justice* found that hate crimes and Islamophobia have increased since 2017, after the wanton killings of innocent worshipers in a mosque in Quebec City by a nationalist *Québécois* youth (Saad, 2019). Clearly, state-based restrictions on religion have a causal impact on social conflict and discrimination (El Karoui, 2016). Within such a socio-political climate, the culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse Syrian refugee youth in Quebec are caught at an intersection (Kundnani, 2017), adding to an already wearisome challenge to resettlement and their aspirations for a better life.

**Refugee Education in Quebec**

In Quebec, education is based along French and English language lines; however, French is the language of business and institutions, legally established in 1975 by the Charter of the

French language, Bill 101. With very few exceptions, education is in French in all public schools in Quebec. The Ministry of Immigration, Language, and Integration promotes and provides for the learning of French, as well as Quebec's culture and values through language classes (*classe d'accueil*/welcome class) in both elementary and secondary schools with the intention to gradually integrate newcomer students into regular classrooms. For those 16 and over, a similar program is offered (*francisation* /Frenchification) free of cost. As of age 16, schooling is no longer mandatory in French; however, to obtain any professional certification a certain level of knowledge of French is required.

Students who arrive in the province above the age of 16 have the option to continue their education through AE institutions, which are not subject to the language law. AE institutions have an important mandate to serve the adult student who returns to obtain academic credits required to complete their high school diploma and education beyond high school into post-secondary studies; however, AE students are not prioritised in terms of admittance into post-secondary studies in Quebec. In the last 30 years, the Quebec government has noted that the demographic profile of the AE student population is getting younger (DEAAC 2009). This could be due to the high rate of high school dropouts in Quebec (CTV, 2018) who return to AE as a *drop in* centre. Unlike in secondary schools, the AE student is encouraged to learn at their own pace, independently, with minimal need for teacher support (Villatte & Marcotte, 2013). Compared to other levels of education, AE is not prioritized in terms of funding and resources (Maraj et al., forthcoming). The participants for this study are young adult refugees who have arrived in Canada too old (over 16) to be admitted to primary or secondary schools, and yet still have not completed high school. AE becomes their only option. Compared to other resettlement contexts such as France, where there is no AE system, or US, where school is highly privatised,

the very existence of AE is positive for refugee students. Yet they have not *dropped out* as AE students are commonly perceived but rather *aged out* and see themselves obliged to learn in a school system they do not know (Potvin et al., 2014).

After experiencing disruption in their education prior to arriving in Canada, our research aims to comprehend how the education system and socio-cultural environment in Quebec influence these young adults' aspirations and life chances.

**Methodology**

Our research was conducted with 29 Syrian refugee young adults (18-24 years of age) in AE centres in Quebec over 2019-2021. We obtained ethics approval from McGill university. There were 14 women and 15 male participants. Our hour-long interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, allowing for natural dialogue from participants. We offered a CAD$25 incentive for their participation. We conducted collaborative narrative analysis through an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding of themes. Funded by a research grant from the Quebec provincial government, our research team consisted of five female immigrants to Canada. We utilise a general framework of migration/aspirations and CRT to focus on education, future hopes for employment to discover the ongoing disruption to refugee young adults' lives and the consequent challenges refugee youth face obtaining their goals.

**Findings**

To understand the aspirations and frustrations students hold it is important to situate their experiences in AE in a continuum with their previous educational experiences in Syria and the countries they were in before arriving in Canada. We present our findings below grouped around their (disrupted) educational experiences in Syria, in countries of asylum and then in Canada.

***(Disrupted) Education in Syria***

Whether students experienced disrupted education in Syria is dependent on where they lived and their exposure to the conflict. Several students indicated that they continued to go to school right up until the moment they left. Abeer told us : "I stayed studying in Syria until the last minute even before I travelled. I finished the year I was in before moving to Lebanon. I finished 8th grade." Ikhlas from Swaida, a predominately Druze (minority group) area in Syria, told us that she did not experience disrupted education in Syria: "…I was going to school, the whole time." Hana was also able to continue her schooling in Aleppo despite the conflict but mentioned that the circumstances of going to school during a war were difficult: "…it was very difficult, all the final exams…trimester exams… without electricity, without internet. It was hard."

Others faced immense difficulty because of the conflict, with their homes and schools destroyed. Caleb, from Daraa in the south of Syria, for example, experienced significant disruption to his education as this town was under intense bombardment for a long time.

> It was very hard to be honest. It was a lot of pressure and a headache. You didn't know how you could live later and if you'll continue your studies. You can expect (the) worse and something else can happen. You'd lose family or not continue your studies. A lot of schools got destroyed in the war.

Caleb mentioned how a school would be destroyed which would inevitably impact the ability to study there, forcing students to travel further to go to another school. With very few schools in the area, accessing them was difficult. He said, consequently, "I slacked with school a lot because of the circumstances of the war" but in fact, Caleb showed much resolve in going to any school he could, one day for humanities and then the next for science. Similarly, Samar and

Jameela mentioned how going to school in Aleppo and Damascus, respectively, depended on the situation in their areas: “One week we went and then the other week you can’t. Sometimes a month passes, and we cannot go to school.” (Jameela). Mariyah, Jameela’s sister, mentioned how her family was internally displaced, moving from place to place, and how this impacted their schooling as well: “… yes, we missed a lot of days because we moved from place to place because of the war… we lost a lot of our friends.” Reem’s house was destroyed by a bomb which ultimately led her family to flee and her to stop school.

Depending on the intensity of the conflict in their respective areas, students faced varying threats to their lives and consequent barriers to continue their education in Syria. This has been widely reported in other research about Syrians' access to education during the war, with schools in rebel-held areas going to ground with over 7,000 schools being destroyed or abandoned (UNICEF 2021; Popplewell, 2018; Armstrong, 2016; Ashawi, 2017).

In contrast to the perception that people immediately flee to other countries for safety, many families moved from their homes to other cities or areas within Syria before finally seeking asylum elsewhere. They stayed for shorter or longer periods of time in Syria depending on their family circumstances, with students not always being able to continue their education there. This is a strong reminder that for many Syrian students, including some of those we spoke with, the disruption of their education started a decade ago.

***(Disrupted) Education in Country of Asylum***

Among our student group, their journeys from Syria to Canada varied although they were all refugees. In fact, there were four types of students. We have a minority of students who lived all their lives in Gulf countries (Mohamad, Tareq, Karim, Farrah, and Fadi). These students had largely not experienced disrupted education having been able to go to school as residents of the

country where they lived. Another minority of our students reported that they only left Syria to come to Canada and, as such, only transited through another country for very brief periods of time (Samar, Emir, Karimah). These students reported to have experienced some disruption to their education in Syria, as noted above. Reflecting the typical journey of Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2021) and refugees in general (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), most of our students spent years in a country of asylum where they stayed temporarily before being sent to Canada by UNHCR (Aaron, Reem, Naima, Mariyah, Hadi, Jameela, Abeer, Ikhlas, Hasan, Laila, Ibrahim, Abdul). Another large minority of students spent 6 months or less in a country of asylum (Lina, Ahmad, Amina, Omar, Yusuf, Roula, Hana, Caleb). Because of the different lengths of time students spent in the countries they found themselves in, the changing education policies there, and the expense associated with schooling, not everyone was able to continue their education.

Within a week that her home was bombed in Syria, Reem and her family moved to Lebanon where she reports never leaving the house nor going to school. She says she tries not to remember most of that destabilizing time, instead seeking solace in English books, which she read vociferously. Having family in the US meant that she was brought up bi-lingually and loved the escape that books provided her. She stayed like this for four years until she came to Canada. Reem's experience is mirrored by Abeer, who having not experienced any disruption to her education in Syria, told us that she was eager to start studying in Lebanon but faced barriers to entry which made her think it would be better to return to Syria to continue with her studies, despite the conflict:

> I expected that I was going to study, I loved studying. Then I tried private schools and they did not accept me at all. I tried to go back to Syria for 9$^{th}$ grade so I can get the certificate, but my dad could not send me back.

Ibrahim, at 14, was led to believe that school in Lebanon was only for children, and not *old* Syrians like him:

> I did not go to school while I was in Lebanon. I was working because Syrians were not allowed to study. At least "old" Syrians, I mean not in elementary school. From grade 7 and up; we were not allowed to study. Only kids. So, I was working with my dad.

Reem, Abeer and Ibrahim's experiences of facing barriers to enter school in a country of asylum like Lebanon are common. In 2014 it was reported that 64.29% of Syrian refugee children 6–14 years old were out of school and 92.26% of children 15–18 years old were out of school in Lebanon, clearly indicating the increased challenge for 'older' students (Watkins & Zyck, 2014), consistent with refugee youth experiences in other contexts (Dryden-Peterson 2016). One of the major factors contributing to the low enrolment of refugee children in countries of first asylum in the early years of the conflict related to government restrictions on who could enrol, when and how (UNICEF 2015). As has been widely reported, another major factor that impacted refugee students' ability to go to school was the need to support family by working (UNICEF 2015; Chopra & Adelman 2017), as Aaron and Hadi explain: "Because living there- look if I was working, my father is working, we will never survive there. We will always put money from our pockets, you know what I mean?" (Aaron). "No, I had to work…education is very hard." (Hadi)

All the five young men (Aaron, Hadi, Abdul, Caleb, Ibrahim) who spent years in a country of first asylum worked, whereas no young women reported to work. Existing data supports the gender division we see in our data with predominantly young men, rather than young women, going out to work to support their families. Many reports refer to the heightened

fears about safety as a reason young girls remain at home (DeJong, et al., 2017; Watkins & Zyck, 2014).

Those students who only stayed a brief time in a country of asylum indicated that they neither worked nor went to school and instead spent their time studying alone and preparing for their arrival to Canada, like Ahmad who mentioned: "I was not in school, but I started by myself to improve my English..." Hana mentioned something similar: "No, we didn't go to school because it was really really expensive … so I didn't go to school, but I studied French…. I studied French myself."

In contrast to most students who were unable to continue their studies in countries of asylum, Roula, Naima, Hasan, Ikhlas and Laila were lucky: they were able to go to school. So, when asked if he experienced disrupted education Hasan responded quickly referring to his age: "I was at school, because...I was a kid in Lebanon, when we left Aleppo, I was like 10 years old." (Hasan).

Naima explained that after arriving in Lebanon her family went back and forth to Syria to collect things, including her school documentation so she could enrol in school in Lebanon where she attended a private Armenian school for four years, at first paid by her parents and then for the following years by scholarships she received. Though she did experience some difficulties having to repeat a full grade to be able to learn in English, Naima spoke a lot about the support she received in the school she attended because of the differences in schooling styles between Syria and Lebanon and because of her need to improve her English when she found out she would be going to Canada. Naima's positive experience of school in a country of asylum differs drastically from the experience of other Syrian students in schools in countries of first asylum (Chopra & Adelman 2017), and refugee education elsewhere (Dryden-Peterson 2016).

***Disrupted Education in AE***

On arrival students had varying capacities in English and French, from none to advanced. School was of primary importance to students and entry into the schooling system depended on their age. Students who arrived at 16 or younger were contacted by their local school boards to enrol them in language classes in a nearby school (Lina, Ahmad, Tareq, Karim, Farrah, Laila, Hasan, Abeer, Samar, Roula, Hana, Caleb, Emir, Jameela, Fadi). These students spent from one to three years in language courses, depending on their progress, and had varying experiences there. While Hasan found learning French frustrating, Abeer was happy to learn and gained support from her teachers. Once students turn 16, they are eligible to move into AE and some schools encourage their allophone students to do this to be able to go at their own pace and not be dictated by the pace of the curriculum. However, some students were not properly explained the reason for their transition to AE, as Samar explains:

> "I was expecting to go to a regular class…my teacher said that I was more improved than the rest of the class. One day, on my birthday, she said that I would be going to adult school. I had an idea of what it was, that it was about students who failed. I had that idea and was crying on my birthday and my friends were trying to comfort me. My parents thought that I got bad grades and they started reprimanding me about my grades and it was a lot of pressure and very stressful."

Unlike Samar, Tareq and Ahmad already knew they did not want to stay in the French secondary school. They had done their research and discovered that it was possible to do AE in English.

> English is much better for us…we have more vocabularies and ability to study in English than French so… why to wait and waste another year in *accueil*? …learning the French language while studying… like, I do not want to risk my future … so I said, …let's do English. (Tareq)

In contrast to those under 16 who are guided into education on arrival, students over 16 are largely unattended to, left to discover their route back to education themselves (Reem, Naima, Mariyah, Hadi, Karimah, Ikhlas, Yusuf, Omar, Amina, Ibrahim, Mohamad, Abdul). For example, Reem's parents received a letter for her younger brother to enrol in school and nothing for Reem although in their eyes she should be in school at just 16. These students had to be active in finding how to get back to school. Some first went into French adult language classes, because of the importance of the French language in Quebec, and then found their way to AE, oftentimes in English.

*Experiences in AE*

Regardless of their experiences prior to their arrival in Canada, whether they were able to study in Syria, in the country they moved to or had to work, or whether they started in Quebec secondary schools or adult language courses, the students' experiences in AE were very similar and marked by challenges. After Abeer was transferred to a French AE centre because of her age, she faced many challenges. In fact, before we even had a chance to ask her any questions, she spoke non-stop for 15 minutes to tell us everything that she had faced:

> I went through a lot of hardships. I explained to you a story of 4 years in less than 15 minutes, but I suffered a lot. I work fulltime and I finish school and I went to school. I am

> not a girl who just wants to have fun, go out and laugh. No, I am very… serious… I do not play. I want to work, I want to study, I want to graduate, and I am not coming to play in Canada. I am here to study. There is time to laugh and play but the most important thing is studying.

Many of the challenges Abeer faced are shared by other students we spoke with. These challenges impacted students' ability to go at their own pace and crucially progress within a reasonable timeframe which impacted their aspirations and sense of self in relation to their friends and community. Some of the challenges students faced included being placed in low grade levels (Bonet, 2018), the independent learning pedagogical approach in AE which was very new and difficult, and scheduling issues, which we have explored elsewhere (Ghosh et al., forthcoming; Calderon Moya et al, forthcoming; Sherab et al., forthcoming). The challenges students faced through the school led many to shift from school to school, stop and start again and change what they were aspiring for. We will consider each in turn.

*Placed in Low Levels*

Having not experienced any disruption to her education in Syria, and having managed to complete grade 10, Karimah was confident in her academic abilities and yet when she went to speak with the AE advisor about being placed in classes:

> …the advisor told me that "we can't accept you now, we can't do anything for you, you have to take more English" … Like they don't look at your marks. I was in Syria; my marks were very good. But they did not look at it…if they did …they put me in higher level in Math. I didn't deserve to be in level 2.

Hadi had a similar experience. After four years in Lebanon where he was unable to study, he arrived in Canada ready to study and work. He took some English language courses to improve his abilities and then "... in 2018, I started back to (AE) high school. But instead of doing the grade 9 they put in grade 7 …secondary one."

Mariyah, who had spent four years of school in the US, having already entered grade 12, she was advised by family in Canada to apply for *CEGEP*[1], which only requires grade 11 completion. She had a particularly shocking experience when her application was rejected and was directed to AE. Once there she expected that she would only need to complete the remaining courses for year 12 but instead was told to re-do everything: "They put me in level zero of Math. And they put me level two English. And yeah...And everything was hard."

Placement in low levels was a major source of frustration and sadness for many students like Mariyah, Hadi and Karimah and experienced by students in both the French and English AE sectors. Some students accepted their placement in grades lower than their abilities because they recognised the need to improve their language skills, like Ikhlas who arrived with no knowledge of English or French, or precisely because they had been outside of school for so long, like Reem. She disagreed with her English placement, but, like other students, did not know that she could complain, or how to do so, and feeling socially isolated had no one to ask:

> I didn't question it because…I didn't know like if I could complain or not. So, I just went with it… And add to it…I didn't have friends for many years. I was okay with it but still,

[1] CÉGEP: acronym from the French term *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel* which means a publicly funded college.

> seeing that people are interacting and me…just standing alone next to the room…waiting for the class to start. It was also…discouraging at first because…I didn't know… they obviously knew what they can and can't complain about, I didn't. But I also didn't have anyone to ask.

Naima, who had been to the Armenian private school in Lebanon, had a similar experience. Although she had already studied two years in a Vancouver high school in English, the AE school she went to did not accept her transcripts and asked her to sit a placement test. She was initially excited as she expected that she might be able to skip a level, so confident in her abilities. Instead, the opposite occurred, and she was placed in beginner level for all subjects. Consequently, she told us that:

> …the first semester, the first three semesters I didn't study. I remember I came back home "I know everything, I don't need to study" – because I have repeated those almost three times.

She did query her placement with the school and was informed that the placement test she did was not good. Like Reem, Naima did not think this was accurate, but unsure what to do she stayed put. After three semesters a teacher finally noticed that Naima was well above her peers and queried why she was in such a low grade. The teacher told Naima that she should have asked to retake the exam, "(a)nd that's when I was like "I'm giving up" you know?!...now no one is going to help me, because the time that I had to take action, I didn't because I didn't know what to do."

For students in the French AE sector, the challenge was getting the French skills they previously learnt through welcome class recognised in AE to allow them to transition to higher academic levels. Abeer, Samar, Maher, Roula, and Caleb were all still in French secondary 3 when we spoke with them, despite all having spent at least one and half years in the welcome class, passing through the last grade of the adult language course (francisation) and spending a year or more in secondary 3. This was a source of great frustration as students were desperate to move ahead and saddened that they were not able to do so.

*Shift in Education Styles*

Another major challenge for students which disrupted their progress through AE was the distinct pedagogical approach of AE which required them to work independently and largely without instruction from teachers. As Caleb said, "It's very hard to advance alone... There's no teacher following up and are just waiting for you to finish the book and send you to the text." Farrah highlighted how this independent pedagogical approach bred an independent culture, which left students vulnerable to failure and largely slipping through the cracks: "If you stayed 20 years doing nothing (in AE) no one will tell you anything… Whatever you do, you do it." This was a challenge for even the most advanced students with limited disruption to their education and high levels of English or French, like Ahmad and Tareq. After having a very positive learning experience in the US, Mariyah was not prepared for the independent learning approach she found in AE: "my teacher just gives us a book, and some questions and you have to answer them. Ah when you finish, come show me I will tell you if it's right or it's not. But how I'm gonna do it? You didn't explain for us. You know?" Students even expressed hesitation to ask for help when they needed it because teachers may be with other students, as Caleb mentioned: "... with studying problems you'd hesitate to see the teacher because they might be busy or working with another

student. It wasn't easy or helpful to approach. I wasn't facing problems, but I wasn't advancing quickly."

Having only completed primary school prior to arriving in Quebec, being left largely alone to study was a major challenge for students like Abdul, who found the pace of class rapid and the support of teachers minimal:

> [The teacher] always… give us activity and subject and said finish it fast-fast-fast… I need time to understand it I cannot finish it without understanding. I told him that, he said he cannot because the school board gave me specific time and program I have to finish.

The independent learning approach was something that students simply needed to adapt to and as Ikhlas said "You have to be[come] your own teacher" to be successful. For some students learning to adapt meant first failing subjects, wasting time, and only after speaking and learning from friends figuring out the best solution for them.

*Focus on Future/Shift in Aspirations*

Despite the challenges they faced in moving through AE, students were future oriented. As Hana mentioned: "at AE … I tried to focus on my future… needed lots of energy… I wanted to choose a career for my future." Other students referred to their age to indicate that this was the time for them to be focused on studying, they did not want to be doing anything else, so they worked tremendously hard to achieve the best results possible (Tareq and Ahmad). Students were particularly impacted by the fact that their friends in Syria and elsewhere were advancing ahead of them, whether having already finished high school, started college or university. This was a major point of sadness and motivation for students. As Lina said:

> Yes, I am very upset, and I do not want to talk about this subject because it gets on my nerves. I cried a lot because it is not fair that all of my friends in Toronto, they are already going to university.

Naima mentioned something similar:

> I was doing fine until I started seeing a lot of people graduate and actually go to college and see myself not being done and that's when I started getting disappointed and frustrated. I never thought of giving up as an option … I always thought "I'm just gonna study, that's the only thing I'm gonna do in life" because it's the best thing to do …now I have friends in Syria and Lebanon, and they're married and have family. And I was like "That's not gonna be me, I'm gonna finish, I'm gonna work". "Yeah, I'm gonna do something with science". I was like maybe doctor or something when I was in Syria.

After all the years she spent trying to complete her high school and seeing the long road ahead of her, Naima decided to pursue interior design and told us that "If the school affected me in a way, it was to change my mind in doing what I like. What I love actually."

This explicit story of the institutional environment of AE impacting how students moved on to the next stages of their lives was mirrored with Aaron, who told us that he had always wanted to be a doctor: "I was studying so, so hard to make it. But at the end, I see that it's a long journey…" Continuous negative interactions with a teacher in AE made him reconsider his dream:

> After the second time, the third time I said "uh sir, still like I don't understand" he says "You know what? I don't have time for this, let's move on" … And I was so- when he

> told me this- like another student in an Adult Centre would tell him "What is your job as a teacher?" would tell him "Why are you getting paid? For what? For just like doing your hour and then you go home? Your job is to make us understand!" You know? … So, I don't know …it's so crazy. I don't wanna …remember that…I just told him "Thank you sir".

Like Naima, Aaron decided to switch his aspiration of becoming a doctor to focus on construction. Unambiguous examples like Aaron and Naima sit alongside less obvious examples of students shifting their aspirations as they become exhausted by the demands of AE and their expectations, and their families, of where they should be in their lives. Speaking directly to these personal and intergenerational pressures, Aaron said, "… what do you want me to do? You want me to go to the moon and study as well?"

**Discussion**

Our paper is supported by our theoretical framework: CRT allowed us to analyse structural challenges that young adult students face in AE which impede positive learning progress and negatively affect their high motivations to achieve their academic objectives. The Capabilities approach allowed us to uncover the students' aspirations which fuelled their desire to stay in school despite adjustments and obstacles to their goals. In tandem, both theories revealed the exclusion refugee young adults encounter in the educational structures in the Quebec system. This framework reveals that refugee's previous experiences, transitions/journeys, as well as the institutional environment in which they resettle are essential in understanding refugee aspirations.

We note the importance of aspirations in better understanding the experience of the student and refugee integration. Refugees hold on to their aspirations for life-long plans despite the

enormity of the interruption in their life trajectories (Borselli &Van Meijl, 2020). The possibility of coming to a resettlement context, such as Canada, after so much disruption gives refugees hope that they will be able to continue their lives as planned and aspire for more than what was offered in a country of asylum. Young adult refugees hold education as a major avenue for improving their lives and that of their families. Through education they aspire for stable lives to realise their aspiration of a better life, a good life, a comfortable life. Our study shows that a preference for education is reflected amongst all participants, regardless of the extent of previous disruption to their education and their challenges on their journey to resettlement (Carling & Collins, 2018)

Our findings indicate that movement through AE in a resettlement context disrupts the dream of a smooth pathway. Although the system is purported to be designed around an independent adult learner, students face structural barriers that constrict their choices, simple things such as sitting for an exam when they believe they are ready or scheduling their own time, to being placed in lower levels than their abilities. While some students can navigate the complexities of independent learning, new languages, and eliciting appropriate academic and career support when they need it, others are not able to effectively mobilise themselves to confront the challenges they encounter (Stermac, et al., 2013; Taylor, & Sidhu, 2012), which impacts their aspirations. Students eventually learnt to resist the limitation of their choices by demanding resolutions to problems from school authorities, changing schools or going to multiple schools simultaneously while others repeat or fail classes, drop out or change their life plans.

The extent of disruption that students face in AE has no apparent relationship with the extent of previous disruption that students faced to their education. This is important because so much literature about refugee education notes the importance of acknowledging these previous experiences. Naima faced the same problems as Aaron in AE although she was able to continue

school in a country of first asylum, while he was not. After facing continual challenges in AE, they ended with the same conclusion: better to lower their expectations of what they can achieve through the system and aspire to less academic vocations. This conclusion is mirrored in other contexts where young adult refugee students are forced to make difficult decisions about their life chances, which appears clearly related to a lack of institutional and systemic support to enable them to continue their chosen education path (Bonet, 2018; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Morrice et al., 2020). This is deeply concerning considering that refugee youth are already the most marginalised population in terms of access to education in countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson 2016; Watkins & Zyck, 2014). Our findings confirm what Morrice et al. found in the UK: 'despite the promise of educational opportunity and transformed life chances enshrined in the notion of refugee resettlement, many of the experiences and barriers to education [that refugees face in resettlement contexts] are not dissimilar in kind to those facing refugee youth in countries of first asylum.' (Morrice et al., 2020).

Our findings underscore the fact that arriving in a war-free country is not a panacea for refugee young adults above the mandatory age of schooling who are interested in finishing their high school diploma. We have found that the inflexible education policies applied to youth refugees aged-out of secondary schools contrasts with those applied to children, thus maintaining a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability of ever completing their high school education. This is not to dismiss the opportunity that resettlement offers to refugees but to highlight the need for greater attention to the institutions to which they will be welcomed to ensure that their educational exclusion is not perpetuated, and their aspirations can be realised.

Liberal approaches to integration in Quebec, reflected within AE policies, fail to evaluate, and subsequently adapt to the heterogeneity of their growing student body. Such failure, together

with diverse intelligences, varying levels of knowledge of national language/s, limited exposure to independent learning approaches, previous experiences of disruption to their education, potential trauma, family pressures, and a need to study full time, indicates how inequitably the AE sector measures these students against false meritocratic standards. This disproportionately affects young adult refugee students' abilities to continue studying and achieve educational and social integration.

Ministries of Education in resettlement contexts such as Canada must consider that their AE policies neglect the needs of refugee students, and similar at-risk students. Therefore, critically acknowledging the ongoing young adult refugee experience once resettled is essential to integrally guarantee their access to education, from pre-school to post-secondary, and prevents them from being assimilated by a low wage economy (Bonet, 2018;Morrice et al., 2020).

**Conclusion**

One particularly pernicious effect of AE on students appears to be the lowering of their expectations and aspirations due to the lack of acknowledgement of their diverse background, their different learning style as well as their emotional well-being. Dreams of being a doctor are quashed into seeking vocational training such as in construction. This points to the impact of the continual disregard of the needs and desires of allophone non-white immigrant students and what would support them to thrive to realise their aspirations. Other students resolve to never allow the AE system to prevent them from reaching their goals. Even as they face many years attempting to get their high school diploma, these refugee young adults are aware of the obstacles ahead.

For refugees, countries like Canada seem like the cure-all; a place where all their problems will be resolved. Indeed, refugee children are ensured an uninterrupted education. However, refugee young adults, who find themselves in an exclusionary environment in Quebec, face

barriers obtaining a high school diploma. The paradox is that this is a marginalized population trying to fit into an education system (AE) that is itself marginalized. AE provides an important avenue through which marginalised adults can be integrated 'back into' society; a 'second chance' school. And yet our findings show that the second chance offered to students with refugee backgrounds is filled with struggle and frustration and impacts students' choices and tempers their aspirations. We argue that rather than resettlement offering an opportunity to realise their aspirations, they experience ongoing disruption simply because of their age and the fact they are immigrants. We suggest that our findings are generalizable for all young adult allophone non-white newcomers attending AE in Quebec and elsewhere.

**Significance**

This chapter fills an important gap in knowledge about the experiences of refugee young adult students who do not fit within the mandatory school age bracket and thus are 'aged out' of schooling despite not having completed their high school diploma. Our chapter argues that without further attention to this subgroup of resettled refugees, resettlement education 'second choice' options prolong the disruption to their lives rather than provide a resolution to their crisis. Without attention, they, and others like them, will continue to be the *Lost Generation*.

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