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From Displacement to Belonging: Can Higher Education Bridge the Gap? A Phenomenological Study of Refugee Youth's Educational Pathways and Integration in Canada

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Abstract

A phenomenological approach was used to understand the experience of resettlement, integration and university education of refugee youth sponsored under the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) and the Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) programs in Canada. Central to the phenomenon is addressing the meaning of the students' lived experience arriving in Canada under the GAR and PSR, and how their journey to education shaped their integration. How do their life challenges affect their educational pathways? Eight in-depth interviews with four resettled refugee university students were conducted, in addition to individual interviews with four key informants. The study was conducted through the lens of critical theory to explore the power relations and the common sense of the system. Results showcase systematic barriers in refugee youth's access to higher education, with their likelihood of enrollment and educational success further burdened by discrimination, isolation, language proficiency, and a lack of understanding of their needs by service providers. Integration was marked by moments of educational accomplishments, highlighting the importance attributed to education by refugee youth. Nevertheless, the participants also expressed obstacles to integration centered around financial burden, being labeled as others by their surroundings, language proficiency, housing, and overall delays in their academic pathways.

Keywords: refugee; access to higher education; integration; Canada

1. Introduction

The majority of refugees resettled in Canada arrive under the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) and the Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) programs. In 2023, Canada welcomed 51,000 refugees: 23,305 under GAR and 27,640 under PSR ([IRCC, 2024c](#)). The type and source of support vary between the two sponsorship programs. For instance, GAR-sponsored refugees are supported for one year by the government, while PSR-sponsored refugees are supported by committed individuals or community organizations for the same amount of time. Supporting resettled refugees is not limited to financial aid, but also extends to providing tools, resources and guidance to help them resettle, in addition to social and emotional support ([UNHCR, n.d.-a](#)). Between January 2015 and 2024, 39% of refugees who landed in Canada were youth under the age of 17 years old in need of education ([IRCC, 2024b](#)). Approximately 25.5% of refugee children resettling in Canada are expected to complete a university degree ([UNHCR, n.d.-b](#)).

To newly resettled refugee youth, education represents a vehicle for social integration ([Ager & Strang, 2008](#); [Anisef et al., 2010](#); [Arar, 2021](#); [Isaqzai et al., 2026](#)), as schools are often



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where they have their first contact with their new community (Geltman et al., 2005; Isaqzai et al., 2026; McBrien, 2005). Available research tends to discuss access and experience of refugee youth to all levels of education, from elementary to higher levels, and therefore fails to explore in depth refugee youth's challenges to resettlement and integration while enrolled in university education. Data are even more limited when looking at the Canadian context (Ratkovic et al., 2018). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the educational pathway of newly resettled refugee youth under the GAR and PSR programs in Canada, and how their educational experience has shaped their integration into Canadian society. This paper is part of a larger study on refugees' integration and experience of higher education in Canada after resettlement through different sponsorship venues.

1.1. Literature Review

Literature pillars when evaluating refugees' integration and resettlement have consistently been of financial and social integration (Fazel et al., 2012; Hynie, 2018; Valtonen, 2004). Markers of integration quoted in the literature consist of housing, employment, education, health, citizenship rights, language proficiency, environmental mastery and ties to the community (Ager & Strang, 2008; Alqawasma et al., 2025). As for education, research has shown that successful integration in schools results in positive experiences of resettlement (Anisef et al., 2010; Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Morrice et al. (2019) confirmed that a successful educational pathway is a critical component for integration. Likewise, positive school experiences are associated with improved psychological and social outcomes (Geltman et al., 2005; McBrien, 2005; Thibeault et al., 2017).

Resettlement benefits through education also extend to financial integration when considering young adult refugees (Baker & Shda, 2023). While refugees have been associated with lower income in comparison to Canadian-born citizens or immigrants (Prokopenko, 2018), educational enrollment post-migration is linked to improved income and financial opportunities and better socioeconomic status for refugees (Anisef et al., 2010; Prokopenko, 2018). Indeed, completion of higher education in Canada has been linked to lower unemployment rates and improved salary conditions (Bank of Canada, n.d.; Berger & Parkin, 2009).

On the other hand, many challenges to achieving education post-resettlement are identified in the literature. Prokopenko (2018) specified that refugees faced longer delays in enrollment to post-secondary education after landing in Canada, in comparison to other immigrant categories, primarily due to other responsibilities related to resettlement needs. Wilkinson et al. (2012) explained that refugee youth who had to repeat grades following resettlement resulted in a longer time required to achieve high school education, aligned with Rabiah-Mohammed et al.'s (2025) findings. The experience of repeating grades was described as "demeaning" and "depressing" by participants, especially those who had completed higher education in their home country but were placed in lower high-school grades after resettlement. Refugee youth were also more burdened by financial barriers (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020), considering many provinces end their financial support for secondary education by the age of 18 (Wilkinson et al., 2012). On average, refugees require an additional 10 years to achieve the same occupational outcomes as their Canadian-born peers (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Studies have also shown that newly resettled refugee students often suffer from social and educational isolation, in addition to mental health conditions from all that they have suffered and witnessed in their time back in their countries (Anisef et al., 2010; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Hadfield et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2016). Being in school is a crucial aspect that has potential in helping them heal and have higher self-esteem, given educational institutions offer individuals an environment where they can build trusting

and safe relationships with other students (Fazel et al., 2012). Academic institutions also serve in this context as a bridge to connect them to the greater community (Cameron et al., 2016). Available literature highlights the important impact refugees' education has on their integration; thus, there remains an imperative need to better understand the everyday lived challenges to university education faced by refugee youth in Canada during their resettlement.

1.2. Study Objectives

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of resettlement of refugee youth enrolled in or graduated from university programs in Canada. Central to the phenomenon is to explore the meaning of refugee students' experience of university education and how it shapes their integration and resettlement.

Primary research question: How do refugee youth experience resettlement through an educational pathway in Canada?

Sub-questions:

- How do recently arrived refugee youth enrolled in Canadian universities make meaning of their experiences of education and resettlement?
- How does service provision at the institutional level support refugee youth's education during resettlement?
- How do institutional policies and practices shape integration for refugee youth enrolled in Canadian universities?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Critical theory was applied to explore the experiences of refugee students' education and integration, following their resettlement in Canada. Its application allows us to uncover the unequal power structure at the educational institutional level and in society as a whole, which disadvantages visible minorities and vulnerable populations. In the context of this study, critical theory refutes the normality around refugees' difficult living conditions and hardships, which fall under the dominant ideology (Good Gingrich & Enns, 2019). Instead, it invites us to uncover how refugees' challenges and inequalities in university education often stem from institutional exclusion, systemic discrimination and other societal barriers. Habermas' application of critical theory also encourages conversation to better understand refugee students' realities when resettling and enrolling in higher education, a form of "communicative action" (Habermas, 1987).

2.2. Recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed to seek out individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2022). Sampling criteria were limited to refugees sponsored through the GAR and PSR programs who were currently enrolled in a Canadian university or had graduated in the past five years. Recruitment information was first shared with colleagues and faculty members in different Canadian provinces, who then shared it within their academic institutions (e.g., posters, emails). Refugee sponsorship centers were also contacted in the same manner. Word of mouth amongst students across provinces facilitated the process as well. Participants then reached out via email and booked an appointment at their convenience. Signed consent prior to the interviews and verbal consent at the beginning of each interview were sought and received.

Likewise, key informants were recruited by emailing teachers from various academic institutions in different Canadian provinces. Word of mouth by university personnel and colleagues has also facilitated the process.

2.3. Sample

Data were collected from four participants who arrived under the GAR and PSR programs and four key informants who worked closely with refugee students. The participants in this study were two males and two females who arrived in four different Canadian provinces. Three of the participants arrived with their families, while one of them arrived alone through the PSR program but later sponsored his mother and sister, just as he was sponsored himself. Participants arrived in Canada between 2005 and 2017, with ages varying between 13 and 27 years old at arrival. The four participants had escaped their country of origin and lived temporarily in a refugee camp or in a country of exile before landing in Canada. English was the second language for all the participants, although they learned it at different ages. At the time of the study, two of the participants were still enrolled in undergraduate programs, and the other two at the graduate level. See Appendix A for further information on each participant's background and story.

The key informants were recruited for having worked and supported refugee youth's resettlement and education for several years, albeit in different environments. Two practiced in universities, one in a community organization and another in both types of institutions. They were situated in different provinces, in cities that were common to the participants.

2.4. Data Collection

Twelve interviews were conducted with four participants and four key informants in English via Zoom, using unstructured interview guides, between March 2023 and June 2024. An external device was used to audio record the interviews verbatim for transcription purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2022). To maintain confidentiality, all participants chose their preferred pseudonyms that were used throughout the research. Two interviews were conducted with each youth participant, and a small honorarium of \$30 CAD was provided for each interview. There was a pause of 2–4 months between the first and the second interviews. The first interview lasted between 90 and 120 min, while the second interview lasted for 45–90 min. Interview questions included but were not limited to describing their experience of resettlement, integration, and accessing university education. They were also invited to describe the support they received and expand on whether they felt it was sufficient. Descriptions of their moments of connection and their moments of disconnection in their new culture and academic environment were also included.

For the key informants, data were collected between October 2023 and June 2024. Interviews varied between 60 and 120 min and no compensation was given. Some of the questions asked included: How do you describe the support that refugee youth enrolled in university education receive at the institutional level? Based on your experience, how do universities' policies impact the academic success of refugee youth enrolled in university education?

2.5. Member Checking

Member checking was obtained by sending the participants the transcripts of their first interview, the coding and part of the analysis, prior to their second interview. This allowed them to reflect on it and ensure accuracy in the descriptions of the phenomenon (Dodgson, 2023; Jones et al., 2022). Additionally, trustworthiness was built through a prolonged ethical engagement with the participants to ensure proper interpretation of their lived experiences (Jones et al., 2022). Key informants' interviews allowed for triangulation of the results, along with an understanding from their position of what the main challenges or facilitators to educational success are, especially in terms of policies. Finally, an audit

trail was implemented by documenting each step as well as by having the supervisor and PhD committee examine and assess the credibility (Dodgson, 2023).

2.6. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, with a focus on identifying themes that reflect the essence of participants' subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes common to all participants were manually coded and clustered to reveal the essence of participants' experience of integration, along with their access and enrollment to university education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2022). Through a descriptive phenomenological lens, the author read the transcripts multiple times to detect all sentences that were connected to the participants' experiences. Themes emerged based on frequency and highlighted the participants' meaningful experiences of resettlement and integration into their new community through their journey of accessing and enrolling in university education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Suspending past knowledge and experience to understand the meaning of the lived experience at a deeper level, bracketing beliefs, feelings and perceptions were applied with respect to the principal core of descriptive phenomenology (Dodgson, 2023; Gearing, 2004).

2.7. Ethics

Research Ethics Board approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Board.

3. Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis, revealing the essence of participants' experience of integration while enrolled in Canadian Universities: (1) Access to university education; (2) Challenges to resettlement and integration; and (3) Integration highlights and moments of connection. The first theme describes the participants' journey to higher education: from the moment they landed in Canada to achieving enrollment in higher education. The second theme describes the challenges the participants faced, for instance, how financial and cultural difficulties had negative impacts on their integration and well-being. The third theme describes the participants' integration highlights and what supported them throughout their journey.

3.1. Access to University Education

Viewed through the lens of critical theory, enrolling in university education was full of challenges related to various systematic barriers, especially during participants' pre-university education. A lack of support and of accurate information from their schools' academic advisors and counselors further increased their challenges. These difficulties made their educational pathways longer and more difficult.

While welcome classes are meant to help bridge the gap in their language proficiency and nurture their educational success, they were instead perceived as a source of inequity by the participants whose first language is not English. KK explained that welcome classes delay access to regular academic pathways, limit interactions with mainstream peers, and slow progress toward educational goals.

KK: In Alberta, I feel like there is a systematic barrier to education for newcomers. For example, in high school, there were so many levels of English as a second language course that you have to take before you can get enrolled in the mainstream core courses, so by the time you complete these English as a second language levels, you're out because you could only go to high school until the age of 18

[...] I see so many youths not being able to graduate from high school, forget about post-secondary, because they have to be in ESL classes all day.

The participant's experience suggests that the educational system may implicitly treat proficiency in the dominant language as a prerequisite for full participation, as the policy barriers persist even after the completion of English high school pre-requisites. Somehow, the refugee students are still not perceived as competent enough to pursue their education.

KK: But because they still required English proficiency test, although I did my English studies S1 course and got a good mark, they still require English proficiency test, so as a result I went to college so there was a barrier for immigrants and refugees to go into post-secondary school although they do their high-school in Canada, so that was one of the barriers that I experienced while going from high school directly to university.

Moreover, participants described feeling dismissed and overlooked by academic advisors and other academic personnel. These interactions reinforced existing power relations, where the advisors can withhold information provided to students based on personal misconceptions or biases. As Mohammed recounted:

Let me cite 1 instance. I went to this [Canadian university] in 2015, I explained, like I told them everything. I said, can I enter in a program and the guy said no, you have to go somewhere, get an, I don't know, get this. Like, I don't know, he just made it sound too complicated and for me it was going to cost about like 3000 dollars and then in 2016, I go to the college across the street, both of them are part of the University and I learned that they have a program called [Name of an academic program] that I could join. You know what? Why didn't he tell me about that? Did he not know?

Laila faced a similar experience, where the lack of information provided to her by a counselor resulted not only in delays in her educational goals, but also in significant financial loss. As Laila stated:

Yeah, especially my like counselors who told me to go to college, and they didn't even tell me difference between colleges. So I ended up going to a private college and pay so much for this thing that's not even academics. So it didn't even. . . The courses that I did they didn't even transfer to credits for me in university. They were useless.

The findings highlight the crucial role of academic advisors in supporting refugee and newcomers' educational pathways by properly informing them about the available educational opportunities, without imposing on them their opinions based on their perceptions, personal opinions or stereotypes. Otherwise, their provision of information might constrain rather than expand the refugee students' educational opportunities, as described by the participants. Laila recounted some instances where she experienced microaggressions:

With a few like instances where I feel like there are some microaggressions or like some maybe judgments on just like, similar to what happened when I was younger in high school where they just looked at my grades and we're like, okay, so you probably can't go to university because you don't even have the good grades.

Key informant Jo expressed a lack of clarity in current university policies, explaining that policies at the institutional level are made to fit Canadian students familiar with the dominant educational system, and not those from different backgrounds such as refugees.

Jo: It became clear to me that the policies were written for Canadian students so both navigating the policies but also the language that was used, lack of clarity. Sometimes there is an assumption that a student would know this or that based on having been a high school student in Canada.

These findings highlight how institutional practices can reproduce the marginalization of refugee populations when systems in place repeatedly fail to recognize differences in their experiences and needs. As Jess pointed out, “During the university enrollment, there was no specific support; I feel like no one asked me if I needed something more, since I’m a refugee or like a newcomer.”

Key informant Kevin shared this concern. He emphasized the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach and overlooking students’ history of trauma, displacement, and resettlement:

Students are coming from an environment which was more precarious, an environment which was more traumatic; there is a need of making sure that when they arrive here, they have this kind of support. So at least that outlining the support and who can provide that kind of support.

Key informant Sophie also highlighted inconsistencies in the support provided within academic institutions, further exposing flaws in the system. As Sophie noted:

I think that the issue with the big institution is that everything is very siloed, so even if you talk to someone who can explain a part of the system to their students. I think no one can explain this whole system right, and that makes it very difficult for them to get their information because they would need to meet the right person that can explain that part and then find someone else to explain that part and it makes it very tricky.

To conclude, the four participants’ educational pathways to university enrollment were full of challenges centered around barriers in available policies to achieve pre-university requirements and obtain reliable guidance and information. These difficulties resulted in years of delays in navigating the educational system before being able to access university education, along with additional unnecessary financial expenses. Furthermore, the participants pointed out existing assumptions and prejudices from academic counselors and supervisors towards refugees, which dismissed their academic aspirations and regarded refugee students as not competent enough or less capable than Canadian-born citizens.

3.2. Challenges to Resettlement and Integration

Participants described facing various resettlement difficulties in relation to finances, academic exclusion, access to housing, and mental health, all of which negatively impacted their integration and educational journey. These challenges were further burdened by microaggressions, racism and discrimination encountered during their interactions with their peers and other individuals from their surroundings. Consequently, they mentioned feeling disconnected from their academic and social environments, stressed, and anxious, to the extent of considering dropping out of school.

3.2.1. Financial Strain

The participants’ financial struggle was marked as an important stressor, not only to the students’ educational aspirations, but to their overall wellbeing and integration. Mohammed expressed feeling severely disconnected from his social circle (friends and family) every time he struggled with finances “So yeah, that’s when I feel disconnected most; whenever finances come up, I just feel like I don’t want to be part in this race at all.”

Similarly, key informants noted that financial difficulties limit the students' social and academic engagements. As Jo explained:

I think that added a level of anxiety and pressure to...to his search for a job that is not helpful. You know, like it's hard for any university student who can't find a job that there's, there's already anxiety about that.

Key informant Mike considers universities to have a responsibility in alleviating the existing financial inequities, rather than considering them as solely individual concerns. This not only entitles support programs, but also proper dissemination of important information.

Mike: So, the orientation should give them clear path that this is the way that you get in; these are the requirements, this is the financial structure of your education, you will be getting this much assistance, and you may get more if you do this and that like the bursaries, etc. If you are a good student, you get more bursary, etcetera.

3.2.2. Exclusion in the Classroom

Participants expressed how language proficiency caused them to feel vulnerable. Being perceived as linguistically different exposed them to prejudice and marginalization in their academic environments.

Jess: let's say if you can see like people... well, when they listen to you, they're going to look at you differently, they're going to know that you're not from here, they're going to know that English is not your first language, let's say or French is not your first language.

Self-awareness on how their accents and pronunciation do not abide by the dominant norms reduced the participants' self-confidence and engagement in class. Laila explained: "So in college I didn't struggle with language. I didn't struggle with writing or speaking. I was shy to speak in class because I didn't want to mispronounce anything."

Beyond language, the students also expressed feeling alienated due to their past lived experiences, which seemed unrelatable to the reality of Canadian-born students. Addressing these differences became an important source of anxiety to KK, to the extent where he considered quitting.

KK: There were also times that I felt disconnected. For example, in my class, I was the only one whose English-speaking skills were distinct from peers, whose experience was completely different than my peers and this difference was very much visible. [...] I still remember that I would experience anxiety, that my heartbeat would raise as my turn comes to share something like. [...] So that kind of like provoked anxiety in me and during the times like this that I felt really disconnected and you know where I felt like, maybe I should quit.

In other words, experiences of exclusion were linked to English pronunciation, accents, appearance, names, and lived experiences not conforming to the dominant cultural norms. When asked about moments of disconnection, Laila expressed feeling oppressed when students from her classes kept asking her where she came from.

Laila: being asked where you from consistently when I was an undergraduate, people wouldn't ask international students who were white, for example where are you from? But everybody would ask me where are you from? And I've been in Canada for many years and they keep asking me where you from, where you from? Your name is not white, so you must not be from here and it irritated me a bit because I kept saying like I'm from here. Like, I went to school here, blah

blah and they like oh, but you weren't born here, right? I said yeah, I wasn't born here, I was born in Iran and then they would be happy then.

Laila's academic experience of marginalization negatively influenced her feelings of acceptance and sense of belonging in the broader community.

Laila: So, that really bothered me, and I felt like maybe I would never be accepted as a Canadian. [...] This happens all the time, even people, like there's a huge flow of immigrants from Ukraine because if they were and people don't question Ukrainians, where they're from because they're white. But they literally came from Ukraine yesterday, you know what I mean? Those things definitely irritate me in Canada, always, like even to this date.

Moreover, Key informant Sophie explained how refugees do not feel welcomed due to many individuals' misplaced anger towards them, often blaming them for existing societal issues. Consequently, refugees face further isolation and lack important community support for their integration.

Sophie: Like people are not wanting them here. People are complaining, like, "you're coming here to steal our jobs and our money" and talking with them, to me, was like oh. Like they had been trying to find a place where to live. They had started in the US, they moved here, they struggled, they never felt welcome. They had no one giving them information.

3.2.3. Housing

The findings highlight how access to higher education is mediated by broader socio-economic structures. In fact, housing-related constraints of affordability and accessibility have limited the participants' university choices. This was especially crucial to KK, who lacked financial orientation and support.

KK: Yeah, exactly. I didn't really know how to navigate the student loan process and I would calculate the amount of money that I make and the amount that I would need to live by myself, pay all the bills, eat, and pay student tuition fees like it was not feasible for me to move out from parents' house or go anywhere else to study.

The concern for housing was also raised by the key informants. A critical interpretation of these findings suggests that policy frameworks often assume a level of bureaucratic literacy and familiarity that many refugees have not yet developed. As Sophie explained:

Yes, I do remember a student who had to move to a new place in two days and had not started searching. Because they have not realized that here the rules are at least three months ahead of time, and it's hard to rent, they figured it out and they found a place, but they had not realized how tricky this could be and how many rules. So, do they need more support for housing?

3.2.4. Mental Health

Participants' experiences demonstrated how resettlement following life in war zones does not mark the end of conflict. Instead, resettlement introduces a new set of struggles, which continued to produce psychological distress long after leaving the conflict zones. Mohammed even described surviving resettlement as more difficult than surviving war itself:

So, a bit of survivor guilt, a bit of financial problems, a bit of family problems, a bit of, you know, adjusting to life, like I said, resettlement is... I have lived through four years of the war, and I honestly, I think resettlement is more difficult

because during the war I mean the next day you wake up and you're like, I'm thankful to be alive. You know, if there was like a bombing or something, but resettlement is like, like I've been here for eight years and this is, I think, this year is the first year that I am okay.

Pursuing education becomes a more distant concern, as their mental health becomes a priority. In Mohammed's case:

I think my mental health was like my main concern because it was, I was in really bad shape. Like I couldn't... sometimes, I couldn't leave the bed and sometimes I would have panic attacks all day long. I would have panic attacks nonstop.

Limited access to health resources at the university also negatively affected students' performance and reproduced existing social inequalities. They often had to wait for unacceptable delays.

Jess: But there are definitely some challenges, but it's not education itself, it's more of a lack of resources for a day if you want to see a doctor at the [university] and you have to wait and wait. Or, you can't get an appointment, and sometimes, when the person has a health issue that's gonna definitely affect their school performance, educational performance.

Overall, the participants faced multiple challenges in their integration to different Canadian cities. These challenges were present throughout different stages of their lives and interconnected in the process of integration. For instance, financial strain was an important limiting factor, given it also influenced their housing opportunities. Limited interactions with academic advisors, stained by prejudice and bias, have reinforced marginalization of the refugee students. This not only limited their accessibility to available resources, such as student loans, but also unnecessarily prolonged their academic pathways. Additionally, linguistic capabilities made them feel even more self-conscious and vulnerable, given they felt it exposed their background and nurtured exclusion from the group. The cumulative effect of the combined challenges caused a toll, not only on the students' mental health, but also on their academic performance. Even after being resettled for many years, they still felt disconnected, excluded as if they did not belong.

3.3. Integration Highlights and Moments of Connections

Friendships were at the center of the discussion for all participants, regarding what helped them integrate and develop a sense of connection to their new environments. Three even specified valuing connections with people from the same background, language, and culture. Another identified marker of integration was academic success and achievements, either by completing a step in their education or by receiving support in their educational pathway. Development of in-class academic integration helped them increase their self-confidence and develop feelings of connectedness to the surroundings.

Mohammed explained that friendships are what make him feel connected to a place, and that they represent an important decision marker on whether he would want to stay or leave, "But I think that its people like that you...friendship, friendships really is the only thing that makes me feel like oh yeah. I have a...I have a place here. I could stay here."

In fact, Mohammed mentioned how much it meant to him to have monthly meetings with one of his sponsors, even after the sponsorship period had ended. As Mohammed described:

I think I would say that I had a moment where I connected with one of my...like...the sponsor, one of like after our sponsorship period ended, I started meeting up with this person. His name is Jasper and he talks a lot and I like him, but he's wise. He's an intelligent, wise man.

Similarly, participants highlighted social interactions where they felt supported in their academic journeys. As Laila noted:

I have this mentor which I'm so grateful for, by the way. She helped me a lot in writing my mission statement or whatever it's called [...] She helped me like understand how to... how to apply, like she was very helpful in that process.

A moment of connection for KK was having a safe space to share and feel heard about his inner challenges during resettlement with his teachers and colleagues in the context of a class in his university. This allowed him to gain confidence and navigate his inner strength to cope with the burden of not feeling accepted. His classes felt like therapy, where he was able to connect with himself and his environment:

KK: Well, it was challenging for me, but it kind of pushed me to find myself, find my inner strength, find the self that I was in Nepal, which I was losing because I was not able to be accepted at the university or college and the academic journey was difficult for me. But in the labs of the courses that I was taking, we had to do individual group and family counseling. So, in these labs where I was hearing my experience, it was very difficult and challenging for me to share my experiences, but I had moments of catharsis, where I was really sharing my experiences, sharing my feelings, sharing my emotion. And the instructors and professors were able to navigate my feelings and then kind of help me see myself, and I was able to gain confidence, and my self-esteem improved because of those counseling courses. That's another example of where I felt more connected; to not only the environment, but myself.

Educational achievements were also described as meaningful moments of connection. As Jess shared:

Inclusion. I feel like the first one that I think about it would be my graduation from CEGEP. I feel like when I graduated from this French CEGEP, I was proud of myself. I was proud that I did it and I finished with good grades, and I did feel connected. I did feel that now I can move on to the next step.

Laila's integration highlights were driven by the economic and social aspects of her life, as she developed meaningful connections with her female colleagues.

Laila: Like my coworkers were women older than me, and they were a diverse group of people. [...] So we're all different women from different countries and we kind of had a little community. We would feel comfortable to talk about any things in our lives and I felt very connected at that environment because we became close, and we would invite each other into our homes.

Moreover, Laila was grateful for her connections with friends who shared her cultural background, as they helped her feel more grounded and less estranged. This was especially important to her after experiencing a cultural shock and an identity crisis following her arrival in Canada.

Laila: When we first came, we all kind of experienced culture shock and identity crisis and all that, so we have this youth group where we would do cultural things. We would even do things for health, like we would go hiking, we would just. We have a small group of friends. And that also made me feel very connected and included.

Likewise, KK experienced a meaningful moment of connection when he was reunited in Canada with old friends from the refugee camp. Meeting with individuals who shared

the same background allowed him to feel understood, connected, and to develop a sense of belonging to his new environment. According to KK:

I felt more connected was in 2009, only few families had arrived in [Canadian city] from Nepal and eventually more people from refugee camps came to [Canadian city]. [...] So, as more people came, I felt more sense of community, a sense of belonging, a sense of connection in my new environment because my friends from Nepal were here. I was able to share the culture, share the language and so I felt more connected that way.

To conclude, the participants' highlights of integration were greatly related to personal accomplishments, in both the educational and workplace settings. These accomplishments increased their self-esteem as well as encouraged them to believe in their own capabilities of accomplishing successful resettlement. These same environments nurtured friendships and social connections with individuals that helped improve their morale and feel like they belong. Indeed, friendships were described as being of the utmost importance, whether at work, school, or in their community. Relationships with old friends or new connections helped decrease previously mentioned feelings of alienation, standing out, and not belonging.

4. Discussion

The findings showed that the experience of refugee youth resettled under the GAR and the PSR programs in Canada was grounded in their access to university education, their challenges to resettlement and integration, alongside their integration highlights and moments of connections. Data collected from key informants confirmed the youth's discourse, showing a similar perception of the lived struggles.

4.1. Navigating the Educational System

Access to higher education was a long and difficult process for participants, due to systematic barriers for refugees sponsored through the GAR and PSR programs in comparison to other Canadian youth (Anderson, 2020; Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023). As per Canadian education policies for immigrants, refugee youth must register in specific programs in high school to develop their English or French proficiency, depending on the welcoming province, for an average duration of 2 years. Only then can they enroll in mainstream high school courses. If they turned 18 during this process, they would be moved to adult schools (Wilkinson et al., 2012). Additionally, universities require non-Canadian born students to have at least 3 years of high school education in English with satisfactory grades to apply to university, otherwise they must pass an additional English proficiency test. Quebec requirements are similar, demanding applicants of French universities to have completed their last 2 years of high school in French to be exempt from submitting a proficiency test (Université de Montréal, n.d.). For those whose English scores were weak in both high school and the proficiency exam, they would need to study for an additional year in college to reach university requirements for English language proficiency and subsequently get admitted to university education (Illuminate Academy, 2025). Indeed, participants expressed their dismay in having to take language courses before being eligible for the mainstream courses in high school, given that it delayed their entry to university. Some turned eighteen during the process and were consequently forced to switch to adult schools, which felt like a step-back as they lost their friends and sources of support, in addition to having to start over, adjusting to another new educational environment. As a result, their academic pathways were longer, more complex, at an older age, and consequently more financially burdensome. Combined, these factors make it less likely for them to reach post-secondary levels as they aged and gained new financial

or familial responsibilities, where they might need to prioritize short-term income over long-term career investments (Ives et al., 2022).

Moreover, limited knowledge on available resources, such as student loans and bursaries, further increases the entry gap to university education for refugees (Bajwa et al., 2017). Both participants and key informants agreed that more attention should be given to young refugees, as they are not lacking competencies but rather they are struggling with the educational system. Even when seeking help, three of the participants from different Canadian cities were given misleading information about admissions and university entry (Bajwa et al., 2017). Thus, not only did they need to be wary of misinterpreting directives, but the reception of misinformation created a sense of mistrust within them towards their schools, further convincing them that the system was not built for them and further delaying their enrollment. Key informants addressed this issue as a gap in the educational system and its policies, which are built under assumptions of knowledge that Canadian-born citizens would have, but that refugees are likely to miss. The results highlight the importance of academic individuals' influence on students' educational pathways and the need for support adjusted to refugees' unique needs and realities. Newcomers are resilient and have competencies, so special consideration should be given not only by advisors but also the administrative teams of educational institutions. In fact, when discussing facilitators and barriers to academic success for refugees, Bartlett et al. (2017) and Roxas (2019) concluded that it was not the placement of refugees in integrated or separate classes that made a difference but the understanding of the educators, their connections to their students, and the type of support they provided. Indeed, research has shown that the less social support the students are offered, the less educational success is achievable (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023; McBrien, 2005).

Language skills also represented a vulnerability point for the participants by exposing them to prejudice and misconceptions from their environment. They voiced that their educational desire should not be judged by people in charge, based on status, background, skin color, and previous assumption and stereotypes, subsequently influencing the help they are provided by teachers, counselors or administrators. Likewise, Korntheuer et al. (2018) and Ramsay and Baker (2019) explain that intersectionality such as gender, ethnicity, language, and past experience can influence refugees' educational goals and challenges.

Overall, systematic barriers in English proficiency requirements and accessibility to information have discouraged students to pursue postsecondary education, making it seem almost unattainable. These barriers were echoed by key informants. In this context, the attitude and efforts from academic individuals around them were shown to be of utmost importance, as it both hindered and facilitated their educational pathways.

4.2. Barriers to Resettlement and Integration

While many studies describe the impact of refugees' pre-migration factors on resettlement and integration (D'Abreu et al., 2019; Fraine & Mcdade, 2009), this study's results were centered around participants' post-migration challenges. These hardships, having started after their arrival to Canada, caused them to feel disconnected, excluded and not belonging, even after many years of resettlement.

First, participants expressed important financial challenges rooted in a constant difficulty securing a stable job and lacking knowledge of the available resources. Previous research has shown an association between limited job opportunities for refugees due to racial discrimination, which was also vocalized by a key informant (Cheung et al., 2022; IRCC, 2021). Key informants stressed that the cycle of job rejection and economic insecurity negatively impacted the youth's integration, mental health, and wellbeing, as confirmed by Bridekirk et al. (2021), Hynie (2017) and Korntheuer et al. (2018), in addition to hindering

their educational pathways as described by [Naidoo \(2021\)](#). For instance, Mohammed “felt disconnected every time finances came up”, emphasizing how financial difficulties lead to feelings of disconnection from their environment ([Torlinska et al., 2020](#)) and, ultimately, decrease their likelihood of academic success ([Naidoo, 2021](#)).

Second, participants expressed difficulties integrating due to language proficiency, although in different ways and to different extents. In the academic setting, key informants explained that the language used by universities in applications and web-searching does not accommodate non-Canadians, making the admissions and education pathways more challenging; there were often educational and digital literacy nuances that they missed. Additionally, language impacted participants’ engagement and connections, confirmed by [Ives et al. \(2022\)](#), notably out of fear of being exposed as outsiders due to mispronunciation or from having an accent ([Ayoub & Zhou, 2021](#); [Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018](#)). As classmates or other individuals from their social environment can identify that it is not their first language, their cultural background is exposed and they are seen as less than they are ([Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018](#)). In other words, their linguistic skills exposed a third challenge; marginalization, microaggressions, and racism ([Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018](#); [Walker & Zuberi, 2019](#)). The participants described feeling isolated and disconnected from their educational environment, a finding shared by other studies ([Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015](#); [Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018](#); [Walker & Zuberi, 2019](#)). For this reason, they limited their participation in class and engagement with those of different backgrounds to avoid being judged or excluded ([Ayoub & Zhou, 2021](#)). Concern for discrimination was also voiced by key informants, with great concern on its impact on mental health ([Ratkovic et al., 2018](#); [Walker & Zuberi, 2019](#)).

Third, housing was an important challenge for participants, having negatively affected their integration as previously shown by [Hynie \(2017\)](#) and limited their academic opportunities. A national housing crisis in Canada ([IRCC, 2024a](#)) does not excuse the Canadian government from leaving newly arrived refugees without proper housing, or at the least, adequate guidance. Key informants named financial struggle and a lack of understanding of Canadian policies as the primary obstacles to proper housing. In accordance with [Hynie et al.’s \(2019\)](#) definition of integration, refugee youth’s integration in their new country does not exclusively depend on refugees’ own efforts and motivations, but also on the welcome society’s services.

Fourth, harsh post-resettlement conditions highly impacted refugees’ wellbeing ([Bajwa et al., 2017](#); [Fazel et al., 2012](#); [Wong et al., 2018](#)). Participants considered the circumstances and challenges faced in their educational and integration journey to have negative consequences on their mental health, as confirmed by the key informants. One of the participants even described resettlement to be harder than war. This aligns with results from [Chen et al. \(2017\)](#), suggesting post-resettlement challenges have a bigger toll on psychological wellbeing than pre-migration trauma. Indeed, challenges to integration impacted their mental health, which in return limited their social connections and their school performance, as confirmed by earlier studies ([Rousseau et al., 1996](#); [Wong et al., 2018](#)). Additionally, difficulties in accessing mental health care, including long delays in wait-time and unaffordable out-of-school clinics, further decreased their overall wellbeing. Unfortunately, study results showcased that academic institutions lack adapted services that would be necessary to adequately support refugees suffering from psychological or mental health issues ([Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023](#); [Ratkovic et al., 2018](#)).

Overall, as participants experienced hardships in the financial, social, and educational aspects of their lives, they lacked support and understanding from their communities.

4.3. Integration and Sense of Belonging

Participants mentioned remarkable integration highlights and moments of connections through their social connections and educational pathways. Three out of four valued friendships with people from the same background, who spoke their language and shared their culture. Indeed, the familiarity helped ground them and navigate the alienation they felt within and outside the classroom. Study results support previous data in the literature underlining the importance of connections with friends and others with the same background who speak the same language (Ali et al., 2021; Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Plasterer, 2011; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). Nevertheless, all participants had valued connections with individuals from different backgrounds as well. According to Durlak et al. (2011), inclusion and social support can help youth refugees develop their internal resources and increase their abilities to cope in their new environment. Furthermore, it facilitated their academic enrollment and success in addition to providing them with a sense of belonging where they felt like a member of their communities. Indeed, friendships and social connections are considered important aspects of resettlement and integration for newcomer refugees in their new environment (Ali et al., 2021; Song et al., 2024).

Throughout the long and challenging journey to access university education, participants persistently valued their education. Every form of support they received in their educational pathway that helped them get a step closer to achieving their academic goals was described as a moment of connection and an integration highlight. These results were confirmed by other studies that indicated enrollment in education as a marker of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Arar, 2021; Matthews, 2008). Finally, all participants agreed that university enrollment helps refugees develop their skills and language proficiency, increase their social connections, and, overall, have better integration outcomes in their new communities.

4.4. Limitations

A limitation of this study resides in the coding of the data being executed by a single researcher, consequently introducing the risk of researcher bias as intercoder reliability could not be assessed. To address this, an audit trail was implemented and later examined by the PhD supervisor and committee. Another limitation stems from the selection criteria for participants in this study, which includes being enrolled in university. This can result in a positive bias of the results, as it did not include refugee students who dropped out of their universities or were forced to abandon their academic development due to resettlement challenges. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was not to generalize the results, but rather to explore the experiences of university education during resettlement. Results can only provide further insight on the extent to which refugee youth from the GAR and PSR programs must persevere to achieve university education. Of note, although the study sample was limited to four refugee students and four key informants, sample size in phenomenological research is not based on the number of participants, but rather on the prolonged relation and engagement with the researcher (Dodgson, 2023).

5. Conclusions

By drawing on rich narrative and critical reflections from the participants, the research highlights structural barriers and moments of resilience in their academic trajectories. Study results demonstrate the importance of education in refugee youth's integration in Canada. Not only does educational success promise better socioeconomic status (Arar, 2021; Wilkinson, 2008), but it also brought participants closer to feeling integrated, as all educational accomplishments were celebrated as a moment of connection to their new home (Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). Although multiple important barriers to education

were identified, through proper understanding and evaluation, we can raise awareness of the unmet needs of refugee youth enrolled in higher education to provide refugee experience-based solutions. This research underscores the necessity of engaging students and universities' administrative bodies in critical dialogues to discuss refugees' needs and provide improvements. Policymakers and service providers in the educational system must work in collaboration and base their decisions on the experiences of the refugee youth receiving their services (Ratkovic et al., 2018). Canadian universities must promote equity by adapting their policies to adapt to refugee students' unique differences and avoid a "one size fits all" approach (Naidoo, 2021).

6. Practice Recommendations

Universities must adapt their policies to show flexibility in refugee students' admission process, particularly in regard to language proficiency criteria, in the optic of offering more inclusive education. Additionally, learning institutions are urged to ensure that individuals with whom the students have direct contact (teachers, counselors, advisors, etc.) hold a thorough understanding of refugee students' challenges, needs, and conditions. Study results also call for a reassessment of government financial and housing support, given that it is a significant challenge faced by participants, applicable to both the GAR and PSR programs. PSR sponsors should also demonstrate an accurate understanding of refugees' needs and be capable of orienting them to the proper services when applicable. The use of critical theory's "down-up" system centers the research on the students' voices, challenging existing assumptions about integration and success and provides a foundation for future studies on policy, equity, and access to higher education for displaced populations.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

GAR	Government-assisted refugee program
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
PSR	Private sponsorship refugee program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Appendix A

Appendix A.1. Participants' Backgrounds

The four participants were still enrolled in university education at the time of their participation in the study.

Appendix A.1.1. Mohammed

Mohammed arrived in Ontario, Canada, through private sponsorship, after leaving Lebanon in 2016 at the age of 27. He was a stateless Syrian Palestinian. He had previously accomplished a bachelor's degree in English and had worked as an English teacher in Syria before being displaced to Lebanon during the war. He thought that once in Canada, he would feel happy and that everyone is happy there, but it was not the case. Despite describing feeling different, the settlement challenges made him feel as if he does not belong anywhere. The struggle caused him mental illnesses; two months after his resettlement, he was clinically diagnosed with depression and had suicidal thoughts. He kept waiting for his big moment of happiness that never came. Small tasks, such as receiving government cards which provided access to services (e.g., the health insurance card), felt like an accomplishment. As per Mohammed, people expect everything to fall into place upon arrival, but they quickly realize it is only the start. Instead, they get bombarded with tasks that Immigration and Refugee Services Canada (IRCC) did not disclose in the orientation session before traveling. Mohammed explained that the government should be more transparent with people and let them know that it could take up to 10 years to integrate.

Appendix A.1.2. Laila

Laila arrived via private sponsorship to British Columbia from Iran by the Canadian Government in 2005 at the age of 15, with her single mother and five siblings. Laila joined the labor market young to help support her single mother and her siblings. She always had to navigate between school and work. Before coming to Canada, Laila missed 2 to 3 years of education, which increased her challenges during her educational transition in Canada. Laila did not get enough support for her education in Canada to address this, which affected her settlement and negatively impacted her integration. Her educational pathways were long and full of challenges. She nevertheless completed the welcoming class and high school, eventually entering university at the age of 26. Despite accomplishing major steps in her education, she always felt behind when she compared herself to Canadian-born students. At the same time, she preferred her situation to that of other individuals in her community who gave up on pursuing a degree. She saw herself as more open-minded and knowledgeable than they were.

Appendix A.1.3. KK

KK was sponsored by the Government in 2009, while in secondary school at the age of 13. With his family, they moved from a refugee camp in Nepal to the province of Alberta. Despite having his family's support, knowing how much they value education affected him negatively when he was unable to enroll in university. KK saw policies regarding education as the main barriers for refugees and newcomers. He added that pre-migration orientation by IRCC should include information about how people could pursue their education post-resettlement. It should not be limited to food, weather and culture. KK had to work to support his education. His university program helped him overcome his psychological needs when learning about counseling and therapy sessions. Despite being in Canada for 14 years, he still felt that what support he received was not enough to fully integrate and be able to navigate available resources like a Canadian-born person would. He felt behind on many things.

Appendix A.1.4. Jess

Jess arrived in Quebec in 2017 at the age of 15 under the private sponsorship program, through a community organization with her parents and sister from Lebanon. Jess felt

lonely following her separation from extended family, and adapting to a new environment was difficult. She arrived at secondary school with no prior knowledge of the language. Working during secondary education was not easy, but it helped her improve her language proficiency and improve her confidence in her communication skills. She described language barriers as the number one obstacle to resettlement. Jess added that despite working, she would not have been able to enroll in university education without the support of her family, due to the associated fees and expenses. For Jess, her educational success was her source of happiness, and seeing herself accomplish her degree was what would make her grateful. Jess' primary concern was how digital illiteracy of newcomers and refugees could prevent them from accessing resources or completing important steps towards their resettlement. The government must support people with regard to that, considering that they are coming from different environments.

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