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## The School Counsellor's Role in Promoting Social Justice for Refugee and Immigrant Children Le rôle du conseiller scolaire dans la promotion de la justice sociale pour les enfants réfugiés et immigrants

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### ABSTRACT

Shifting demographics in Canadian classrooms lead to a call for preparation programs to better prepare counsellors to work more effectively with refugee and immigrant students. School counsellors can play an integral role in transforming current education systems to become inclusive and socially just learning communities that are culturally responsive to the unique needs of children from diverse backgrounds. An adapted version of Brown's (2004) theoretical framework, based on the tenets of adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and critical social theory, is proposed as a model to prepare counsellors who are committed to issues of social justice.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'évolution démographique dans les écoles canadiennes crée la demande pour des programmes de préparation pour mieux préparer les conseillers à travailler plus efficacement avec les élèves réfugiés et immigrants. Les conseillers scolaires peuvent jouer un rôle essentiel dans la transformation des systèmes éducatifs actuels visant à devenir des communautés d'apprentissage inclusives et socialement justes qui sont culturellement adaptées aux besoins particuliers des enfants d'origines diverses. Une version adaptée du cadre théorique de Brown (2004), fondé sur les principes de la théorie de l'apprentissage des adultes, la théorie de l'apprentissage transformateur, et la théorie sociale critique, est proposée comme un modèle pour préparer les conseillers qui se sont engagés à répondre aux questions de justice sociale.

Forced migration as a result of conflict and war has contributed to the global movement of people and the need for institutions, such as schools, to respond with programs and services to meet the needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012) reports 257,515 newcomers to Canada in 2012, with approximately 10–12% classified as refugees. By 2031, Statistics Canada (2010) projects that roughly 30% of the population will be a visible minority and approximately 36% will be under the age of 15.

Globally, the increase in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers and the forced movement of people to host countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States have necessitated a closer examination of educational systems and policies that affect resettlement and adjustment (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Much of

the literature related to refugee education has focused on problems and challenges that refugee students encounter and the difficulties the school and community have with helping students be successful in a host country (McBrien, 2009). Schools have a critical role in the process of resettlement of refugee students (Christie & Sidhu, 2002), yet numerous reports indicate that schools feel unequipped and teachers feel ill-prepared to meet the unique and diverse needs of these students (Stewart, 2011).

Refugees are individuals forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence (UNHCR, 2013). Many refugee children and adolescents, who have been exposed to war and armed conflict prior to coming to Canada, have certain needs beyond cultural and social adjustment. Some students have suffered from personal trauma, torture, imprisonment, violence, and loss (Machel, 2001), and others have experienced long-term catastrophic stress and psychological distress as a result of conflict and forced displacement (Zanskas, 2010). Changes to demographics result in increasingly complex social dynamics as well as concerns for inequality and injustice (Goodman, 2001). In addition to noting changing demographics and the movement of people, Kirylo, Thirumurthy, and Ceasar (2011) drew attention to the varied modes of technologies and communication systems that have connected the world and resulted in interrelationships between people from diverse countries, also resulting in the need for increased multicultural and social competencies for counsellors.

Although many children from refugee backgrounds exhibit resilience and resourcefulness, there are some who come to school and experience numerous challenges and obstacles that complicate their social, academic, and emotional development (Matthews, 2008). The literature pertaining to the needs of refugee children reveals numerous systemic and complex issues that complicate the adjustment process for refugee children (Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008). School counsellors can act as stable support persons in the lives of refugee students, and they can play an integral role in making schools into safe and accepting environments for these children. To do this, school counsellors need to learn about the issues related to children from refugee backgrounds so that they are able to critically examine and challenge how to best meet their personal, social, and academic needs. When properly prepared, school counsellors can play an important role in constructing culturally responsive policies, practices, and interventions that influence the entire school community.

More attention needs to be devoted to programming and support for newcomer and refugee children, and educators need more preparation so that they have the skills and knowledge to best support their unique educational and psychosocial needs (Stewart, 2011). Numerous reports suggest that school systems are failing these students (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Hek, Hughes, & Ozman, 2012), and this often leads to exclusion or marginalization and the exacerbation of social difficulties (Stewart, 2011). Without the institutional capacity or individual support for refugee students, there is a risk that they will leave school, either voluntarily or involuntarily (MacKay & Tavares, 2005).

Counsellors are uniquely positioned in the school to provide leadership, guidance, and direction toward social change. Fundamental counselling skills are closely aligned to the tenets of social justice (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007). Counsellors reflect and value fairness, equity in resources, and the liberation of those who are marginalized. Counsellors who are committed to social justice think critically, question their current practices, and undertake an advocacy role to support marginalized students (Constantine et al., 2007). D'Andrea and Heckman (2008) noted that while multicultural and social justice issues are rooted in the counselling field, they have been largely ignored.

The argument put forth in this article is that current educational systems and learning communities must be transformed to meet the rapidly changing racial, cultural, and ethnic demographics of Canadian classrooms, and school counsellors can assume an essential role in this transformation. To do this, school counsellors need to develop culturally responsive skills and competencies that will better help them respond to the needs of refugee and immigrant students. It is incumbent on counsellor education programs to develop counsellors who are critical and who question policies and practices affecting underserved and underrepresented students and who have the motivation to advocate for change.

Although social justice issues are far-reaching and complex, the purpose of this article is threefold. First, the article provides an overview of the concept of "social justice" and how the concept can be supported and promoted by school counsellors. Second, an adapted version of Brown's (2004) theoretical framework is used to guide the discussion and to orient and prepare counsellors toward a social justice paradigm that includes critical social theory, adult learning theory, and transformative learning theory as well as three pedagogical strategies of critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis. Third, an overview of the issues refugee students encounter in Canadian schools is discussed along with strategies and recommendations for supporting these children and their families. When school counsellors are prepared for social justice critique and activism, they will be able to examine injustices in the system and focus on desired goals.

#### SCHOOL COUNSELLING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Scholarship related to social justice has become a prominent topic in the field of education. Similarly, in the field of counselling, the social justice movement has been rapidly expanding, producing a vast array of literature and professional organizations and groups devoted to issues of equity, access, participation, and harmony (Crethar, Riviera, & Nash, 2008; Dahir, 2009; Lewis, 2011). Distinctly different epistemological and ontological perspectives contribute to the social justice discourse. Terms associated with social justice, such as opportunity, equality, moral leadership, and equity are being utilized by educational researchers and practitioners in a variety of contexts (Constantine et al., 2007; Marshall & Olivia, 2006). Several scholars have provided conceptualizations and principles of justice as a goal for the study of education and counselling, but most of the research lacks

the articulation of theories, frameworks, or methodologies on which to advance these goals (Hunsaker, 2011; Steele, 2008).

For the purpose of this discussion, I define social justice as a process and a desired goal. It is the process of investigating and solving current issues of inequity such as age, ability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and accessibility. This investigation requires ongoing, critical, and multidisciplinary inquiry from diverse perspectives. The goal, or desired end, of social justice is to have full and equal participation of all groups in society. To achieve this goal, issues of inequity, power, and oppression need to be addressed and unjust policies changed. With this expectation, there is an inherent responsibility for systems and counsellor education programs to adequately prepare counsellors to conduct this kind of work and to equip counsellors with skills to confront issues of inequity and injustice.

Brown (2004) suggested that a practical, process-oriented model is needed that is responsive to the challenges of preparing educational leaders who are committed to social justice. I have adapted a version of Brown's framework to discuss the process of orienting counsellors to think about and promote issues related to social justice and then further elaborated to suggest practical suggestions to address challenges and barriers affecting refugee youth.

#### A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Brown's (2004) tripartite theoretical framework includes perspectives of adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and critical social theory. These theories are interwoven with three pedagogical strategies: critical reflection (questioning dominant assumptions in the field), rational discourse (alternative perspectives of leadership), and policy praxis (strategies for eliminating inequities and unjust practices). Brown's figure, titled *A Pedagogy of Transformative Leaders: The Principal Weaves of Principal Preparing*, is depicted as three vertical boxes including the three foundational theories; crossing these three theories are the three constructs: critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis. Ontological/epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs, context and experience, and worldviews are the four perspectives that surround the weave. Instead of an interwoven linear framework, as Brown (2004) illustrated, I propose a cyclical model to better reflect the ongoing nature of change that is required to transform issues related to social justice. The preparation of school counsellors requires a continuing process that evolves as needs and issues occur in the environment. Implicit in this framework is the use of tools or criteria to adjudicate how well this process is working to prepare individuals who are committed to social justice (Grant, 2012). See Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the framework for developing counsellors who are committed to social justice.

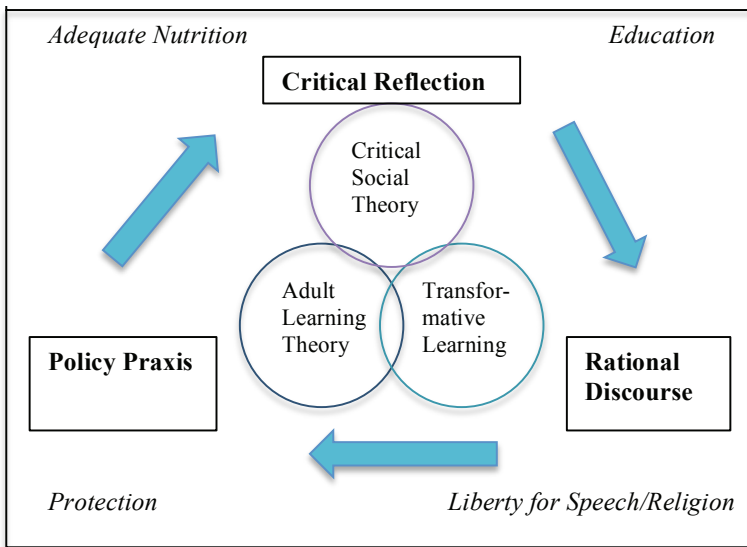
A framework for developing counsellors who are committed to social justice is best situated within broad and overarching basic needs or basic human

entitlements that all human beings strive for. For this reason, I have added to Brown’s (2004) model the four basic human entitlements proposed by Nussbaum (2004)—adequate nutrition, education, protection of bodily integrity, and liberty for speech and religion—to reflect the basic fundamental entitlements (described below in more detail).

Freire (1970) stated, “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 84). The critically oriented, practical focus of this model offers a framework that illustrates the pedagogical orientation of the scholarship and research related to issues of justice. Before promoting social justice, it is necessary to build the capacity of counsellors so that they have the necessary theoretical knowledge and pedagogical strategies to examine injustice and then do something about it. Counsellors may be aware of the inequities with regards to various aspects of their schools, but it is essential that they devise ways to eliminate these inequities. The proposed model serves two purposes: first, to

*Figure 1.*  
*Conceptual Framework for Developing Counsellors Committed to Social Justice*

*Every human being has the right to a life with dignity that includes a set of basic human entitlements, as a minimum of what justice requires for all. We all have the collective obligation to ensure that all people in the world have these basic capabilities.* (Nussbaum, 2004)



Adapted from Brown (2004, p. 79): “A pedagogy of transformative leaders: The principal weaves of principal preparation.”

prepare counsellors to be social justice advocates and, second, to help counsellors engage with students and the community to address social policies and practices that influence the well-being of refugee students. The motivation or impetus for social justice work must originate from within helpers before they reach out to help others. Understanding personal position, power, and influence, and one's perception of the "other" is an essential starting point for social justice work and advocacy.

#### UNPACKING THE MODEL: EDUCATING SCHOOL COUNSELLORS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

This proposed tripartite model provides the foundation for professional dialogue about multicultural and social justice issues and the platform on which to build culturally competent counsellors who look at systems, organizations, and institutions with a critical lens and then use their personal resolve to address inequity and injustice. When counsellor preparation programs have explicit emphasis on critical self-examination, self-directed learning, rational discourse, and social justice issues, the people who are most capable and skilled at transforming systems and organizations will be in the best position to act. Although other theories might also provide an appropriate knowledge base for the study and promotion of social justice, the theories delineated in this model and the strategies associated with these theories (e.g., dialogic interviews, experiential learning) provide the scaffolding for counsellors to "do" social justice work.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2004) suggested that a set of basic human entitlements, similar to human rights, are the minimum of what justice requires for all. She suggested that the goal of every human being should be to cooperate together for the fulfillment of human needs and the realization of fully human lives. If all human beings have entitlements (e.g., adequate nutrition, shelter, education, protection of bodily integrity, liberty for speech, religious self-expression), "then we are all under the collective obligation to provide people of the world what they need" (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 13). Social justice requires that we make a special effort to address the unequal needs of those who began from a position of social disadvantage and have been oppressed by those in positions of power (Freire, 1970). As a reminder of the overarching purpose of global responsibility for social justice, I have stated an overarching purpose for the model to situate the framework within the context of Nussbaum's (2004) theory and my aforementioned conceptualization of social justice.

#### *Critical Social Theory*

Habermas (1984) believed that people are able to give a true account of their interests if they have autonomy and freedom. By helping people to see how and why they have been oppressed or how their interests have been distorted, they will confront their oppressions, make changes, and move toward a more rational society. Counsellors need to engage with those who are marginalized or oppressed in an effort to facilitate the movement toward social justice. Critical

dialogue and reflection is what leads to praxis (Freire, 1970) and transformative social action (Mezirow, 1991). “Critical Social Theory calls educators to activism” (Brown, 2004, p. 86). These actions need to be continually assessed, challenged, and reformulated. School counsellors advocate on behalf of those who are marginalized in an attempt to shift power in the social system. As such, this process is cyclical, as individuals are in a constant state of change as they engage in critical reflection and rational discourse that challenges their thinking and actions.

Counsellors are in a position to design and implement programs and services to address inequities and injustices within schools. By way of example, counsellors may facilitate a social justice group within the school community, or can create a safe place for open dialogue among Canadian-born children and newcomer children where experiences are shared and where empathy and sensitivity are cultivated between the two groups. Storytelling, expressive arts, and theatre-based activities are just a few examples of programs that encourage sharing and understanding between children from diverse backgrounds. Counsellors need to encourage dialogue in which students explore their positions in society and within the global context. Examination of the disparities between the Global South and the Global North can facilitate dialogue that explores issues of poverty, displacement, power, and marginalization. Helping students understand their place within the global context and their role in the transformation of society to make it more just is a starting point for addressing issues of social justice.

### *Adult Learning Theory*

Adult learning theory encompasses the basic constructs commonly considered as appropriate teaching methods, including (a) self-directed learning, (b) critical reflection, (c) experiential learning, and (d) learning to learn (Brookfield, 1986). As a theoretical construct, adult learning theory provides the concepts and principles that the counsellor educator can use to facilitate counsellor preparation and training that is oriented toward social justice work (Brookfield, 1995). Adult learners will draw on their own experiences to guide their learning and are intrinsically motivated to solve current problems in their environment (Merriam, 2001).

Strategies, solutions, and responses originating from the school community are best generated by the students and staff who are most influenced by this environment. Self-directed learning stems from the individual’s motivation and interest to pursue knowledge and understanding. Community and school partnerships that are designed to address social justice issues cannot be prescribed; rather, they need to emerge from meaningful dialogue and critical reflection with those who are marginalized and those who are committed to changing the current situation. Experiential learning that strives to foster meaningful engagement and dialogue is what will ultimately lead to transformative change.

Diversity and cultural training exist in most counsellor preparation programs; however, the extent to which open discussion around controversial topics such as institutional racism, “white” privilege, and systemic racism remains limited (Po-



padiuk & Arthur, 2004). Abrams and Moio (2009) are academics from the field of social work, and they discuss the notion of *cultural competence*. This framework, as used in such fields as education and counselling, “understands that all people, including people of color, possess values, beliefs, and assumptions that they bring into the helping relationship” (p. 247). It underscores the need to help counsellors understand and be more aware of their personal values and cultural experiences and how these inform their interactions with students of other cultures. It is essential for counsellors to have the motivation and drive to direct their own learning and to chart their own course for systemic change and transformation. This motivation often arises through the observation of injustices and inequality and the personal desire to advocate for students who might otherwise be overlooked. Counsellors bring their own set of assumptions and life experiences to the counselling relationship. Awareness of one’s own position in society, and knowledge of how culture and ethnicity both contribute to how we perceive and work with others, are essential steps in becoming a culturally responsive counsellor.

Counsellors need to have knowledge about the plight of refugee children and the issues that have influenced their lives both pre- and postmigration (Stewart, 2011). Counsellors are trained to help students cope with loss, stress, family separation, and trauma, but these issues are more complex when they are coupled with forced movement and displacement as a result of conflict (MacNevin, 2013). Knowledge of the political and social contexts surrounding many of the conflicts in the world can help counsellors better understand the complexities of the factors that influence the development of the student. As classrooms in Canada become increasingly more diverse, counsellors must develop knowledge of political and economic factors that influence the lives of refugee children. As global citizens, they must also promote the rights and responsibilities of all members of the international community to ensure that people around the world receive the basic human entitlements they deserve. Critical reflection triggers learning and precipitates change in the individual, in others, and in the world. Counsellors who are trained to recognize injustices as problems that must be solved will draw on their experiences and knowledge to explore solutions and strategies for a more socially just system.

### *Transformative Learning Theory*

Literature related to transformative or emancipatory learning was greatly influenced by critical theory. Transformational learning theorists such as Freire (1970), Mezirow (1990), and O’Sullivan (2002) focus on how the learner changes when learning occurs. Transformative learning leads to action that can significantly affect our interpersonal relationships, the organizations in which we work and socialize, and the socioeconomic system (Mezirow, 1990). Transformative learning changes the values and beliefs of the individual; people change the way they see the world, and ultimately how they act within their world (O’Sullivan, 2002). Reflection, critical thinking, and rational discourse are necessary for meaningful change or personal transformation (Mezirow, 1991).



Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) stated, “Central to the category of transformative intellectuals is the task of making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical” (p. 46). Transformative individuals create the conditions for students to share their opinions, and to write and be critical of their histories and their experiences. Transformative learning is a process that involves engaged learning through the process of thinking critically about events, people, or changes in context. Values, beliefs, and assumptions are questioned and either accepted, revised, or rejected. The process of transformation is best supported when the learner has skills, optimism, and confidence to work toward change.

### *Practical Strategies*

Critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis are what bridge the three intersecting theories to the practical application of strategies and initiatives aimed at social justice work. Critical reflection is a combination of critical inquiry and self-reflection (Brown, 2004). As such, it is an examination of one’s personal and professional belief system with deliberate consideration of the implications for practice. Counsellors must first be aware of their own self and how culture has influenced both their position and view of the world. Listening to the life stories of other persons and reflecting on their position and interests is an integral part of understanding the worldview of others. Working with these stories to examine injustice, discrimination, and inequality is essential to combating racism. Encouraging counsellors to be more critically aware of their own selves and how they function within their culture must occur before working with others.

Rational discourse is a means for testing the validity of one’s construction of meaning (Mezirow, 1991). Participation in rational discourse is best facilitated in an environment where learners have accurate and complete information and are able to be critically reflective, objective, and open to other perspectives. Learners should have equal opportunity to participate and be able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity (Mezirow, 1991). Brown (2004) suggests three pedagogical discourse procedures to help ensure openness, respect, and equal participation: cross-cultural interviews, educational plunge (encouraging educators to travel outside of their milieu), and diversity panels (individuals give voice to how decisions and actions affect them).

Policy praxis is the process of moving back and forth in a critical way between acting and reflecting on the world (Brown, 2004). Transformative learning leads to some form of action. Mezirow (1991) states, “Reflexive discourse and its resulting insight alone do not make for transformative learning. Acting upon these emancipatory insights, a praxis, is also necessary” (p. 355). Brown (2004) suggested implementing an “activist action plan” to accept responsibility, make decisions, and to take action toward issues of social justice.

Generating practical strategies to address social justice concerns requires the epistemological and ontological perspectives of critical theory, adult learning theory, and transformative learning theory. The basic tenets put forth by scholars from these three theoretical orientations provide the scaffolding that is needed to

prepare counsellors to be the kind of facilitators and leaders who are capable and willing to address issues related to social justice. When they are prepared to “do social justice work,” counsellors will be more apt to feel confident and knowledgeable to transfer these skills and to use this ideology to help others advocate for social justice.

#### FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS: RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT REFUGEE CHILDREN

School counsellors may be in a position to observe issues of inequity, misuse of power, and oppression. Lee (2007) asserted that counsellors have a moral and ethical obligation as helpers to actively participate in social justice initiatives and to promote the development of a more equitable society that is accessible to all people. Educating school counsellors through counsellor preparation programs, professional development seminars, annual meetings, online webinars, electronic bulletins, conference proceedings, workshops, and journal articles are all means to develop school counsellors who recognize and address injustice. When counsellors are committed to eradicating inequality and injustice, they will be able to recognize how the school system continues to marginalize and oppress certain groups of children. Moreover, they will be more apt to make changes to transform the system to better meet the needs of all students.

Canada is providing a home to children and adults from war-affected regions throughout the world. These individuals arrive with unique and often distressing past experiences. Despite varying degrees of challenges and successes, the trajectories for many refugees are riddled with barriers and obstacles that hinder adjustment. Stewart (2011, 2012) noted that challenges can be categorized into four overarching themes: environmental, psychosocial, educational, and economic. Although a more focused discussion of the challenges for refugee children is beyond the scope of this article, recommendations for counsellors will be discussed within these four themes and examined within the aforementioned conceptual framework for preparing counsellors who are committed to social justice.

#### *Environmental Challenges*

The school is a primary stabilizing feature in the lives of refugee students (Matthews, 2008) and an integral environment for social development and adjustment (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Rutter & Jones, 1998). That said, there is a paucity of information on how best to provide support to refugee students and what programs and services are most beneficial to foster refugee student integration or adjustment to a host country (Hamilton & Moore, 2004). To examine and reflect on the reality for refugee and immigrant children, it is essential for counsellors to engage in continuing dialogue with students to look for and expose the inequities that they find. In doing this, counsellors will also identify best practices and effective strategies that assist with adjustment, which will also inform policy and the continuation of successful initiatives.

Settlement workers frequently mention a need to strengthen the relationships between immigrant youth and Canadian-born youth (Hebert, Wilkinson, Ali, & Oriola, 2012). Considering their expertise in mediation, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, counsellors can play an integral role in bridging and connecting students from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Opportunities such as clubs, sports groups, or community outreach activities allow students to interact outside of the classroom, and this informal environment can foster meaningful relationships between students who might otherwise never interact with one another. Ethnically diverse schools do not necessarily mean that there are relationships between ethnically diverse students. Counsellors can help foster understanding between groups, and they can encourage activities that help celebrate diversity while at the same time acknowledging similarities and common characteristics.

Facilitating groups who work on common tasks (e.g., designing community gardens, creating a sustainable classroom, organizing a music festival) can help foster relationships between culturally diverse students. Although differences will arise and conflict can result, the counsellor who is trained to use this situation as a catalyst for reflection and critical discourse will ultimately be better prepared to use this experience as a transformational learning exercise. While not easy, social justice work is often messy and disordered before meaningful and lasting change takes place.

Helping refugee children navigate through the various systems in the environment is a difficult task, but counsellors have the skills and experience to facilitate this process more effectively. Typically, there are existing social services for refugee and immigrant populations, but it is not always clear how to connect to or access these programs and services. Counsellors can help students to access refugee and settlement services, and counsellors can ensure that refugee children and their families receive adequate services and the quality of care they deserve. In cases where there is a paucity of services or programs, counsellors can use their skills in advocacy, leadership, and persuasion to ensure that the appropriate people have the knowledge and data to make informed decisions about future development and planning.

Assistance with accessing services for newcomers (e.g., health care, language support, employment counselling) are just a few of the areas where counsellors can provide invaluable help with refugee children and their families. Services and programs are not always equitable and, when people are not aware of inconsistencies or disparities, can be unjustly served.

Counsellors can also play a vital role in bridging from one environment to another. With knowledge of the premigration and transmigration experiences of children, counsellors can facilitate a more supportive postmigration experience for refugee children. Counsellors can help refugee students learn about the roles and responsibilities of Canadian citizens. They can also teach strategies for avoiding negative social factors such as gang life and drug and alcohol use. Through their efforts, counsellors can help ameliorate many of the challenges that complicate

the adjustment process. Proactive programs and services for refugee children can go a long way toward preventing complications and challenges associated with adjusting to a new environment.

### *Psychosocial Challenges*

A number of controversial issues have emerged from the growing literature related to research and practice with war-affected populations (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Trauma-focused versus psychosocial approaches have different assumptions and strategies for addressing mental health needs of individuals. Presenting arguments to support both sides, Miller and Rasmussen (2010) maintained the need to include daily stressors in any model that attempts to explain patterns of distress for refugee students. Daily stressors such as isolation, family separation, loss, and poverty also contribute to the compounding stress that refugee students experience (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Although they do not deny that war exposure exerts a direct and adverse effect on mental health, the data are not consistent with understanding the effects solely in terms of a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Studies reveal that children and adult refugees suffer from a variety of mental health problems and psychiatric disorders as a result of their experiences (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000). Trauma has been associated with PTSD and reported by various studies concerning refugee children (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Heptinstall, Sethna, & Taylor, 2004). However, little is known about the schooling and settlement issues associated with trauma and the impact racism and discrimination has on the well-being and mental health of the refugee student (Matthews, 2008). Dialogue with refugee children, their families, and the systems they interact with could provide valuable insight into ways to help build resilience and foster protective factors that support adjustment and provide psychosocial support. Knowledge about the lived experiences of refugee students in Canada will contribute to a better understanding of the significance of the daily stressors they experience and the cumulative effect these have on their long-term mental health and adjustment.

Considering the multi-ethnic backgrounds and cultural diversity of students who make up classrooms in Canada, acquiring knowledge of various cultural traditions and backgrounds is a significant task. This involves not only knowing about the unique circumstances affecting children, but also gaining new knowledge of non-Western ways of supporting children and their families. There may be strategies that prove to be more effective than one-to-one counselling or more traditional counselling therapies. Expressive arts such as music, dance, drama, and storytelling have all proven to be effective means of helping children heal from the effects of war (Stewart, Kuly, Ezati, & McBrien, in press). When exposure to horrific levels of violence or trauma have influenced the development of the child, it is essential that helpers are open to additional therapies or techniques to support children, even if they are not directly aligned with Western models.

Recognizing the individual strengths and the skills of resilience of refugee children are essential to the overall counselling plan (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

Knowledge of the experiences refugee children have had prior to migration will illustrate numerous personal, social, and political strengths that the counsellor can acknowledge and help build upon in a counselling relationship (Stewart, 2011). Moreover, the schools have a critical role to play in the settlement of refugee students and in facilitating a sense of belonging and citizenship in a host country (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Numerous challenges, obstacles, and barriers punctuate the trajectories for many refugee children and their families. Without counsellors who are prepared to look for and expose these challenges, many of these issues will go unnoticed and will further contribute to the marginalization of the individuals (Stewart, 2011).

### *Educational Challenges: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment*

In a Vancouver-based immigrant and refugee youth advisory group, students reported that they felt stigmatized, devalued, and discriminated against by the education system and the policies and practices that influenced their experiences (Vancouver Foundation and Representation for Children and Youth, 2013). Counsellors who are committed to social justice issues need to seek out and identify issues of personal and structural discrimination that compromise the well-being of students. Banks (2009) argued that even when students are highly culturally assimilated, they may still experience high levels of cultural exclusion. Counsellors need to provide the opportunity for safe and open discussion with refugee students so they know more about the challenges these students encounter. Counsellors also need to create opportunities for students of culturally diverse backgrounds to talk with and learn from each other.

Ladson-Billings (1998) referred to the “race-neutral or colorblind perspective” (p. 18) in the way that the curriculum presents people of colour. This perspective teaches students that “we are all immigrants” and posits that students should rise, just like every other group of immigrants has in the past (p. 18). Ladson-Billings further related to the “distortions, omissions, and stereotypes” (p. 18) that are evident in curriculum. She also discussed the disparity in rigour and the lack of enriched curriculum available to minority children. Although some stellar programs to address the needs of refugee children do exist, there remains sparse evidence that schools are providing culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum to the majority of refugee children.

The focus on extensive instruction in English language, literacy, and numeracy skills has contributed to instances of segregated programs and the reinforcement of inequality (Stewart, 2011). Jones, Buzick, and Turkan (2013) argued that in situations where English learners spend the majority of their time in the general education classroom, there has been virtually no attention given to whether teachers are meeting the needs of these children. Considering that English-language learners are disproportionately referred to special needs classes (Burnette, 2000; Kavale & Forness, 1998), it seems appropriate to examine how and when children are assessed and with what instrument. Assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse students requires the appropriate assessment tools and clinicians who are

appropriately trained; at present, both are inadequate (Burnette, 2000; Gunderson & Siegel, 2001; Schon, Shaftel, & Markham, 2008). These challenges increase when teachers or clinicians have limited information on a student's personal, social, and educational background.

School systems continue to grapple with how to get parents more involved in the schools and how best to acquire and convey information about the child in a way that is culturally and linguistically appropriate. Counsellors must take an active role in the management of cases concerning the educational assessment and referral of refugee children. Moreover, they must be aware of the challenges students encounter, and they should provide developmentally appropriate skill-building strategies to address these needs. When necessary, school counsellors may need to use their knowledge of the students' needs to advocate for the provision of appropriate education. Counsellors might also reach out to the refugee and immigrant community to seek parents or community members who are willing to be involved in parent councils and school advisory groups so that they are better represented within the decision-making structure of the school. Counsellors could also encourage refugee students to be members of student councils so their perspectives are heard and understood by other students. With experience in group dynamics and facilitation skills, the counsellor's role can be integral to linking community groups together and bridging the school with the community for a sustainable partnership to support refugee children.

### *Economic Challenges*

Impeding the process of adjustment for refugee children and their families are financial difficulties, secure and affordable housing, and accessing adequate social services (Stewart, 2011). For refugees, the repayment of a government loan is a major obstacle after arriving in Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2014). With the expectation to pay for airfare for transportation to Canada, families and individuals face this economic challenge within the first few months of arriving, and the cost of the loan can exceed \$10,000 per family (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2014). This stressor is coupled with the reality that refugees have often come from violent and unsafe environments, and they may be coping with issues related to mental health issues, physical health concerns, and other postmigration challenges that may complicate their ability to work in Canada (Khanlou & Jackson, 2010). It is not uncommon for newcomers to work in more than one job in an effort to support their family in Canada and also support family members back home (Stewart, 2011). Foreign-trained professionals are not always recognized by professional organizations, leading to both underemployment and difficulty accessing work (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2014).

Knowledge of labour laws and workplace health and safety would be beneficial information for the counsellor to have, to ensure that students who are working are not being marginalized or treated unfairly by employers. It is common for secondary students to work long hours after school, which interferes with the amount of time they can devote to schoolwork (Stewart, 2011). Counsellors may



need to work collaboratively with teachers to create a realistic educational plan that balances the realities of the student's work, homework, and long-term career goals. Citizens who are aware of the rights of workers and who know of labour laws need to report instances of exploitation or marginalization in the workplace.

Complicating the existing economic stress is the pull to gang involvement, criminal activity, drug use, and trafficking (Stewart, 2011). The counsellor must play a pivotal role in keeping students connected to the school community. The counsellor can help to eliminate obstacles within the school by educating other staff on the issues of immigrant and refugee children, by combating racism and discrimination, and through the provision of culturally sensitive counselling and psychosocial support. Counsellors are school leaders and, although they may not be part of the "school administration," they can assume a critical role in influencing how teachers perceive students and how they respond to refugee children. In some instances, obstacles imposed by the teacher may seem benign until pieces of a story unravel and more information is known about a student. When more information is known or when an obstacle is revealed, most teachers will work collaboratively with counsellors to help students find success. Counsellors can forge the vital link between the teacher and student and, in some cases, the school and the home environment, particularly when this is fractured by factors related to cultural issues, language difficulties, or a lack of parental figures.

Although resilient and resourceful, refugee children are often faced with obstacles and barriers that contribute to long-term challenges with adjusting to life in Canada (Stewart, 2011). The counsellor can serve to mitigate some of these challenges by working with children and their families to address issues related to marginalization and lack of opportunity. Counsellors can be a part of a multi-agency network of organizations that assist newcomers with postmigration and adjustment issues.

The host community also has a role in supporting newcomers, and the counsellor can facilitate capacity development within organizations to better prepare communities for receiving and supporting refugees. Human rights issues, economic marginalization, and employment challenges may require the counsellor to take a stand against an issue, build partnerships with the community to solve problems, or challenge public policy that undermines the rights of refugees. Controversy surrounding refugee and immigrant populations has led to public debate, irrational fears, and unfair assumptions. The counsellor who has knowledge of current politics and personal circumstances of refugee and immigrant populations may be the best person to dispel these myths and challenge this thinking before it leads to intolerance and discrimination.

#### CONCLUSION

Supporting war-affected children in Canadian schools requires the dedication of school counsellors who have the knowledge, awareness, skills, and commitment to addressing issues of social justice. The discussion in this article addressed theories,



perspectives, and strategies that are useful for developing the kind of counsellors who are needed to transform the school system into places that are fair, equitable, and just. It is imperative that counsellors are aware of the experiences that refugee children have endured so they are able to determine how best they can support their education, development, and transition to life in Canada. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the current school system with a critical lens to find more appropriate ways to address the inequities that are revealed.

Social justice work includes meaningful dialogue with students to identify issues of inequality and injustice, and counsellors who are oriented toward social justice will be in the best position to facilitate this dialogue. Orienting counsellor educator programs toward a framework for social justice can provide an overarching model to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies to address injustice. With the implementation of some of the recommendations to address the challenges that refugee students encounter, it is hoped that counsellors will contribute to creating a more socially just environment for refugee students. As the demographics in Canadian schools become more diverse, the need for counsellors and educators to develop more culturally responsive strategies will become increasingly more evident.

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