

Strands of Support

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Ross Powell works at the ELL Welcome Centre assessing the language proficiency of newcomer students with a first language other than English. Previously, he was a faculty associate at Simon Fraser University and a Helping Teacher in Learner Support in Surrey.

Coralee Curby, a School Psychologist, has worked in the Surrey School District for over 16 years and currently supports the ELL Welcome Centre staff, families and students.

The Surrey Schools English Language Learner Welcome Centre, a school-based model for supporting newcomer families and students

By Caroline Lai, Meredith Verma, Kris Hull, Ross Powell and Coralee Curby

"I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship." - Louisa May Alcott

THE CLASSROOM IS CALM AND QUIET. Students chat with classmates from around the world while working on their projects. Settlement workers, multicultural workers and counselors come in and out of the classroom, addressing a myriad of needs to support the students' transition to a Canadian school. Mayahe Assaf looks at a map and asks in Arabic, "Where is my country, where is Canada?" He turns to his friend behind him and they speak in Arabic and then laugh. The settlement worker explains, "The boys thought Syria was a big country, and then they looked at the size of Canada." The hum of the classroom is filled with wonder, confusion and many questions. For many of the students, this is their first opportunity to find peace in school; some have lived for years in countries under conflict and disruption. A program that focuses on "settling in" is essential for their success.

The Surrey (B.C.) School District English Language Learner Welcome Centre offers programs to support parents' and students' initial settlement into their new community. This centre has been thought of as a model in countries with high immigrant and refugee student numbers, such as the U.S and Sweden. One of the programs at the Welcome Centre is the Bridge Program for newcomer students, including those with refugee experience.¹ Classroom teacher Kris Hull describes it as a "soft landing into Canada." The classroom, he says, "is a place for students to heal, relax, settle, acclimatize and reset their bearings, so they too can experience success in the next step of their educational journey." For students who have experienced gaps in learning due to war, displacement or other factors, the adjustment into Canada begins with a predictable, safe, comfortable, low-pressure environment to allow the mind to start calming, to open up and prepare for learning.²

Mayahe's family began their settlement journey with their acceptance into Canada. This invitation for resettle-



PHOTO: COURTESY CAROLINE LAI

The friendships formed in the Bridge Program are as valuable as the academic learning. These two boys, from Iraq and Syria, connected over their love of soccer.

ment into Canada brought peace and an opportunity to quell the storm they had been living in for the last four years in Syria - but the road ahead for this family is still complex and challenging. Mayahe was 18 years old when he entered Canada just over a year ago. He had some reading and writing in Arabic, no English speaking, reading or writing and had missed the last four years of school. Mayahe has been a witness to death and life experiences not even imagined in Canada. He is one of the many students and families from a refugee background who have found that in time, and with the right supports, their lives can be seamed back together.

The Settlement Workers in Schools program

The Surrey School District is the largest school district in B.C., with approximately 71,000 students. With a growing immigrant and refugee population, it is one of the most diverse public school systems in Canada; about half of the students have a home language other than English.³

Schools are one of the first connection points for newcomers to B.C. The Surrey School District English Learner Welcome Centre opened its doors in 2008 as part of a provincial initiative to enhance

the role of schools and school districts in the settlement of school-age immigrants and their families. School districts were given the opportunity to contract directly with the provincial government for delivery of the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program (funding of the program has since moved to Immigrant, Refugee and Citizenship Canada). This was an opportunity for school districts to access external funding to support newcomer families in their settlement journey, utilizing community-based staff's knowledge of government programs, policies and immigration laws, their expertise in serving immigrants, and their connections to other community services and resources.⁴

Welcome Centre guiding principles

We recognize that all families come with different levels of need, and those needs are personal and unique. This principle guides us in developing strategies for support and case management. Comprehensive and cohesive settlement services must include a universal platform of services for all. Within that platform, the right tools and structures are provided at various levels of intensity and scale, tailored to the unique needs of different families and communities. Realizing a uni-

EN BREF

L'English Language Learner Welcome Centre du Surrey (B.C.) School District offre des programmes pour soutenir l'établissement initial de parents et d'élèves dans leur nouvelle collectivité. Cet article présente l'un d'entre eux, le programme Bridge s'adressant aux nouveaux élèves qui sont des réfugiés. Qualifiée d'« atterrissage en douceur au Canada », la classe Bridge offre un environnement prévisible, sûr, agréable et détendu où les élèves ayant des lacunes d'apprentissage résultant de la guerre, du déplacement ou d'autres facteurs peuvent commencer à s'adapter au Canada.

versal system that is locally responsive requires a partnership between governments and community stakeholders who also believe that:

- Immigrants and refugees are highly resilient at the core.
- Quality settlement promotes quality citizenship.
- It is disrespectful to do for others what they can do themselves.
- We will learn as much about ourselves as we do others.
- Empowerment + interventions = growing independence.

Student intake and assessment

Often we are asked, “How do newcomer families come to know about the Welcome Centre?” The first point of contact is during school registration. When a new family arrives at a school in Surrey, the Multicultural Worker (MCW) is often called to support the family in their first language for registration and a school welcome. Once this is complete, the child's registration is sent to the Welcome Centre,



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where the families are connected to the Settlement Worker. This becomes the first contact in a supportive relationship between the school system and the families.

The intake with the family allows the staff to assess their needs and to connect them with their schools and the greater community. The students' English Language assessment allows for a detailed and holistic assessment of student needs. Ross Powell, an assessment teacher at the Welcome Centre, believes that, given the wide range of education systems around the world and the even wider range of students' language skills, a perfect language assessment for English Language Learners does not exist. However, good assessments “should provide a strengths-based profile of a student's language proficiency and inform instruction for tomorrow.”

The assessment tools and processes used at the Welcome Centre are intended to assess both students' social language and their academic language. Assessment is not a stand-alone event, but a starting point for planning, instruction and communicating student learning. Powell uses multiple measures to assess a child's language ability. The assessment helps teachers set effective goals for the student's growth, and also provides information as to what kind of curriculum and instructional designs will be most effective. In the interview with the students, Powell tries to view the “whole” child and identify all of the strengths each student brings. Equally important is to understand the possible barriers that might hinder performance on an assessment, such as students' shyness, nervousness, previous experiences in school, or parental expectations. What Powell envisions for the initial assessment is not a “level of skill,” but “a profile of language strengths, and hope - for every child.”

Mayahe's Canadian schooling began with a brief assessment using basic Dolch pre-primer sight words, and a conversation in Arabic about his schooling experience and language ability in Arabic. For Mayahe, attempting a more rigorous assessment would impact his confidence and feelings about being a student, and would not change the level of instruction he would require.

Understanding recovery

Trust, a sense of safety, and relationship are the first priorities when supporting refugee students and families in our schools. For school districts, having staff in schools who can communicate with parents in their first language and demonstrate cultural understanding helps build trust and a connection between home and school.

Mayahe's memories of the war in Iraq are vivid. He remembers when the war reached their village and the family moved to Syria because of death threats. His hometown was no longer idyllic and safe; it became a place where different warring factions threatened the very life of their family. Experiences like this, that threaten the survival of the family's children, are carried into the Canadian landscape and the need to restore safety is paramount. Through school and community programs the family slowly learned to gain trust in the Canadian system and access much-needed supports for their family.

Coralee Curby, our school psychologist, notes that programs like the Bridge Program allow time for newcomer youth to forge strong relationships with caring adults and learn in a predictable and safe environment.⁵ This is especially important for students from refugee backgrounds. Coralee finds that providing a “safe and supportive setting that promotes calming, caring connections and emotional regulation” gives students with complex backgrounds the best chance to recover from trauma.

The Centre for Health reports that although many immigrant

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10 Best Practices for Welcoming Newcomer Students

1. Create a warm and welcoming beginning/introduction to the school – i.e. orientation for parents and students, tour of school facilities, help in understanding Canadian school culture.
2. Buddy newcomer students up with students to help them orient themselves to their new school and join into activities and programs.
3. Help them understand: keep vocabulary and sentences direct and simple, repeat, use visuals, picture dictionaries, Google Translate, etc.
4. Be a safe person for a newcomer. Make it clear they can come to you. Be patient and listen; be sensitive to their past.
5. Take time to learn about their culture, home life, country, town, family. Ask them about who they are as people – what they like to do in their free time, goals, family activities.
6. Acknowledge all cultures and religions in the classroom in a safe and respectful way – make all holidays known as important. Offer to have parents to come in and explain to the class and draw similarities.
7. Include all students in what you're doing, even if they're not fully capable in English. Give students an opportunity to show what they know in their own language.
8. Make connections between their country and Canada and show similarities rather than differences.
9. Speak of their future and help students set goals. Everyone works better when they know what they are working towards.
10. Be very clear throughout the school about rules and expectations – safety and respect being the cornerstone of all conversations.

and refugee children require increased levels of mental health support upon entering Canada, some refugee communities, unfortunately, are *less* likely to receive or access health services in comparison to others in the community. Some of the barriers to access can include: personal views on gender differences of the service provider, cultural misconceptions of mental health issues or personal health issues, language barriers, no access for unique languages, the availability of family or friends to assist and many other factors.

Upon arrival into Canada, students we have supported in the Bridge Program often show signs of trauma, displacement, and disconnection from their new country, which can significantly impair learning. Some of the features of trauma or post-migratory stress that we have witnessed in the Bridge Program include:

- diminished concentration (tiredness, overstimulation, feeling overwhelmed)
- affected memory and learning (brain is synthesizing other relevant data for survival)

- impaired executive functioning (quick to anger or slow to calm)
- impaired language abilities (silent period/whispering)
- affected feelings of safety (questions routines, authority, legitimacy of rules, fairness)
- impaired readiness for school (poor attendance, tiredness, depression, fear).

While each person's story, experience and needs are unique, the research shows that the most important facets of any trauma recovery include:

- Restoring and rebuilding a sense of safety and security
- Development of attachments and social groups, trust and connection
- Support in developing plans and goals for the future
- Maintaining a sense of cultural identity
- Developing a safe welcoming place in all areas of their new community.



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The Welcome Centre was able to take 175 newcomer families to a Canadian football game, courtesy of the B.C. Lions.

One family's story

Mayahe also remembers times of peace and fun in his home in Syria. He and his younger brother, Mohamed, used to help their father in his grocery store after school. Before the war, Syrian schools had an excellent reputation and Mayahe attended school with students from Yemen, China, Afghanistan, Russia, Syria and Iraq. Mayahe smiles quietly at these good memories.

"When did this memory change?" Mayahe's face draws down and he says slowly, "Tuesday, July 17, 2012. Everything changed - ISIS

burned my dad's supermarket." He goes on to say that his family was targeted for their beliefs. He tells us he saw dead people, burning, shooting, and killing. In 2013, mortar and rockets began firing against Damascus and conditions in the city declined. The children could no longer attend school. When the conflict became more intense, Mayahe started to combat against ISIS. He says, "For two years and eight months, I was fighting with the Syrian Army." He pulls out his phone and shows a photo of himself in army greens, holding a heavy artillery weapon. He is just 15 years old.

In early 2015, the Assaf family received notification that their application to Canada was accepted, and they arrived in Vancouver on July 25th. Mayahe remembers walking in downtown Vancouver and feeling that "I didn't know what to do. I had no English and I had no friends here in Canada." When asked if adjusting to Canada was difficult for him, Mayahe says, "When I first arrived in Canada, I thought learning English was going to be hard, but it was not that hard for me. But I was worried they might send me back to Iraq."

That September, "Someone helped us enroll in school and I started in the Bridge Program." What were his early days of school like? "I didn't understand anything; I thought I wouldn't ever understand anything. I felt totally overwhelmed. I felt very challenged and frustrated. I was miserable and wanted to go back to Iraq." But, he says, his teachers, Mr. Hull and Ms. Tang, were incredibly patient and good to him.

Mayahe says the Bridge Program "helped me learn to cope and do school in Canada. My school helped me so much. I know how to use words properly, make sentences and how to function in Canadian society - to speak to people and do what I can for myself." Mayahe also attributes his success to his Canadian friends who helped him understand how to work and live here. He says, "I have kept going because I want a future, so I can take care of myself." When asked what advice he give to a new student coming into Canada like he did, Mayahe laughs a little. "First when I came, I was angry, I got into fights outside of school, and this was my only way to express myself. But I learned if I want to live in Canada I have to change... Stay away from angry feelings, and focus on school and stay away from friends who lead you the wrong way."

Like any 19-year-old, Mayahe is unsure about his future. But his ship is stable. The storm has passed. He has hope. **EC**

NOTES

- 1 Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics* blog, Department of Government and International Affairs, Virginia Tech (2013). <https://toal.org/page/7>
- 2 Bruce D. Perry, *Helping Traumatized Children: A brief overview for caregivers* (Child Trauma Academy, 2016). https://childtrauma.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Helping_Traumatized_Children_Caregivers_Perry1.pdf
- 3 *City of Surrey Immigration Fact Sheet*, 2011. www.surrey.ca/files/Immigration_Demographic_Profile.pdf
- 4 Ference Weicker & Company, *Delivery Model for School-Based Settlement Services* (Vancouver, B.C.: Ministry of Education, 2007).
- 5 CMAS, *Caring for Syrian Refugee Children: A program guide for welcoming young children and their families* (2015). <http://cmascanada.ca/2015/12/12/caring-for-syrian-refugee-children-a-program-guide-for-welcoming-young-children-and-their-families/>

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