

Giving Refugee Students a Strong Head Start: The LEAD Program

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As the complexity and cultural diversity in contemporary Canadian schools increases, educators are challenged to respond to the unique cultural, socioemotional, and learning needs of students whose families are fleeing hardship, global conflict, or persecution to seek safe haven in Canada. Like those in most major urban centres in Canada, schools in Calgary have received many newcomer students as families settle into their new lives. Teachers are tasked with providing high-quality education to learners from multiple language bases with limited formal education, little or no English, and histories of loss, grief, and/or trauma. The complexity of this task often requires a multidisciplinary team approach to support the teacher and address unique student needs. This article, written by an ESL teacher and a psychologist, provides an overview of one program that helps set the stage for success in Canadian classrooms. The LEAD program uses a three-pronged approach to foster successful inclusion, an approach comprising English language development, trauma-informed practice, and cultural responsiveness.

L'augmentation de la complexité et de la diversité culturelle dans les écoles canadiennes met au défi les enseignants qui doivent réagir aux besoins uniques culturels, socio-émotionnels et pédagogiques de leurs élèves dont les familles fuient des difficultés, des conflits mondiaux ou la persécution et cherchent refuge au Canada. Les écoles à Calgary, comme celles dans la plupart des grands centres urbains au Canada, ont accueilli plusieurs nouveaux élèves dont les familles s'installent dans leur nouvelle vie. Les enseignants sont chargés d'offrir une éducation de haute qualité aux apprenants ayant des bagages linguistiques divers et une scolarité formelle limitée, connaissant peu ou pas l'anglais et ayant subi des pertes, des chagrins et des traumatismes. La complexité de cette tâche exige souvent une approche collaborative et pluridisciplinaire pour appuyer l'enseignant et répondre aux besoins uniques des élèves. Cet article par une enseignante d'ALS et une psychologue présente un aperçu d'un programme qui prépare le terrain pour la réussite dans les salles de classe au Canada. Le programme LEAD repose sur une approche à trois volets qui favorise l'insertion en visant le développement de la langue anglaise et qui emploient des pratiques qui tiennent compte des traumatismes et qui sont adaptées à la culture.

KEYWORDS: refugee, English language development, trauma-informed practice, cultural responsiveness

Canada has long been a refuge for asylum seekers, including families with children (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2016). Canada's 2016 immigration strategy projected the arrival of approximately 59,400 refugees, including children (Canadian Immigration News, 2016), fleeing hardship, global conflict, or persecution to seek safe haven in Canada. Stewart (2010) says that "the trajectories of [vulnerable] youth hinge on our ability to provide the most appropriate educational program" (p. 8); therefore, "the education system must become more prepared and knowledgeable about the experiences and needs of refugee students to more adequately address their [diverse] learning needs" (p. 7). This article explores the efforts of the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) to address the unique learning, cultural, and socioemotional needs of school-aged refugees, specifically those who arrive with limited formal education, through the Literacy, English, and Academic Development (LEAD) program.

Included is a case study that follows a hypothetical student, Jaol, entering the LEAD program. Notably, LEAD teachers target and expand programming based on the unique academic and socioemotional needs of this diverse group of learners. Jaol's school intake and classroom experiences reflect promising practices in LEAD.

The History of LEAD

During the 1970s and 1980s, Canada received tens of thousands of displaced people from Southeast Asia following the conclusion of the Vietnam War (Stephenson, 1995). Another influx occurred in the mid 1990s when refugees fleeing the conflict in Bosnia and Serbia arrived in large numbers from Eastern Europe (Filice, Vincent, Adams, & Bajramovic, 1992). Many of these war-affected students had experienced disruptions in their education, which presented school systems with a unique problem: "How best should adolescent children at the age of 16, 17, or 18 be schooled when they [had] never been to school before?" (Stewart, 2010, p. 71). Although age-appropriate for high school, many students were illiterate and unprepared to meet the demands of the academic curriculum. In addition, they had to "combat prejudice [and overcome] social exclusion" (Bourgonje, 2010, p.7).

The challenges of providing education for refugee students and stimulating their successful integration and acceptance at school prompted some experienced ESL teachers in the Calgary Board of Education to propose the development of a specialized setting to address the unique needs of the refugee students. The two-year pilot program, "ESL Beginner Literacy" (2000–2002), helped students in one CBE high school develop literacy and numeracy skills to enable successful integration into credited ESL programs and con-

tent-area high school classes. The decision to conduct the pilot program in a secondary setting was intentional, based on evidence that “this is typically ... when students, who are not having success, leave the school system” (Stewart, 2010, p. 10). In 2002, the program was officially adopted in three high schools, including the original site. Over time, these classes expanded across the school district to include Grades 4 through 12, and the program evolved into what is now known as LEAD: Literacy, English, and Academic Development.

The CBE has continued to respond to the changing global political landscape. With the registration of approximately 400 Syrian refugee children at the start of 2016, the LEAD program quickly swelled from 13 classes in 8 schools to 29 classes in 15 locations. For a brief period of about six months, the program expanded downward in order to include students in K-3. It was hoped that short-term intensive English language development and explicit instruction in Canadian culture, with trauma-informed practice, would give these young learners a strong head start toward future school success.

Some quantitative data have been collected and used to reveal student achievement and inform practice; however, no overarching analysis has been conducted. Nonetheless, anecdotal reports from internal and external stakeholders, including students and parents, point to the efficacy of the LEAD program.

LEAD Students

Students entering the CBE as non-Canadian citizens are assessed for English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Numeracy skills are also evaluated. Where preliminary screening indicates that a student may have had an impoverished educational background, assessment teachers explore the possibility that the student may require the support of the LEAD program.

Typical LEAD students are new to Canada and are frequently, although not always, refugees, according to the broad categories defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For a variety of reasons, many of these children have limited formal schooling. They may have encountered disruptions resulting in little or no literacy in either English or their home language. Some have attended schools that focused primarily on religious training, were poorly resourced, or were staffed by underqualified teachers. Some have only experienced school in refugee camps, while others have been denied the opportunity to attend school altogether because they were unable to afford the fees, belonged to a lower status ethnic group, or needed to work to support the family. In certain countries, gender might also have been a factor limiting the opportunity to attend school.

In addition to having sporadic educational experiences, LEAD students may have experienced multiple stressors such as violence, loss, or separa-

tion resulting in trauma. They may have a variety of complex socioemotional needs that must be addressed. School staff must know how to access both internal and external supports to meet the needs of this vulnerable group of learners.

Recent advances in understanding the many stressors faced by refugee students (NCTSN, 2016) highlight the positive directions of the LEAD multi-disciplinary team in addressing key refugee Core Stressors (Figure 1).

Case Study Part 1: Meet Jaol

Jaol (15 years old) has recently arrived in Canada. During her intake meeting at the Calgary Board of Education reception centre, Jaol's family is introduced to a representative from a resettlement program that can offer support. The family is also interviewed by an English language learning (ELL) specialist with the assistance of an interpreter, and Jaol's English language skills are assessed. Jaol meets some of the many criteria that would make her a good fit for an intensive English language-learning experience:

- *Her family lived in a refugee camp for four years;*
- *She has not attended school since she was 10;*
- *She has little English and limited literacy in her home language;*
- *She appears to have no pressing medical or cognitive issues.*

Jaol's parents are offered a placement for Jaol in the Literacy, English, and Academic Development (LEAD) classroom. With the help of an interpreter, the LEAD program is explained to the family. LEAD is a program of choice. Jaol's parents decide that they would like Jaol to take advantage of this unique opportunity. They sign consent forms for Jaol to participate in LEAD, and then work with her assessment teacher to plan next steps.

Jaol's journey in the LEAD classroom has begun. When she leaves LEAD, she will likely be an emerging LP2 English language learner according to the Alberta ESL English Language Proficiency Benchmarks (Alberta Education, n.d.) and will have progressed several grade levels in core content areas.

The LEAD Program

LEAD provides a short-term opportunity (i.e., up to 20 months) for students to accelerate their learning in a trauma-sensitive, congregated environment where they can make the necessary gains to successfully transition to more advanced English language learning (ELL) courses or content area classes. LEAD is offered in only a few locations in Calgary, so parents must be willing for their child to attend school outside of the residential community. This can sometimes mean a lengthy ride on a yellow school bus or a complicated commute by city transit; however, most refugee families perceive education as a priority and one of the best things about being in Canada (Stewart, 2010),

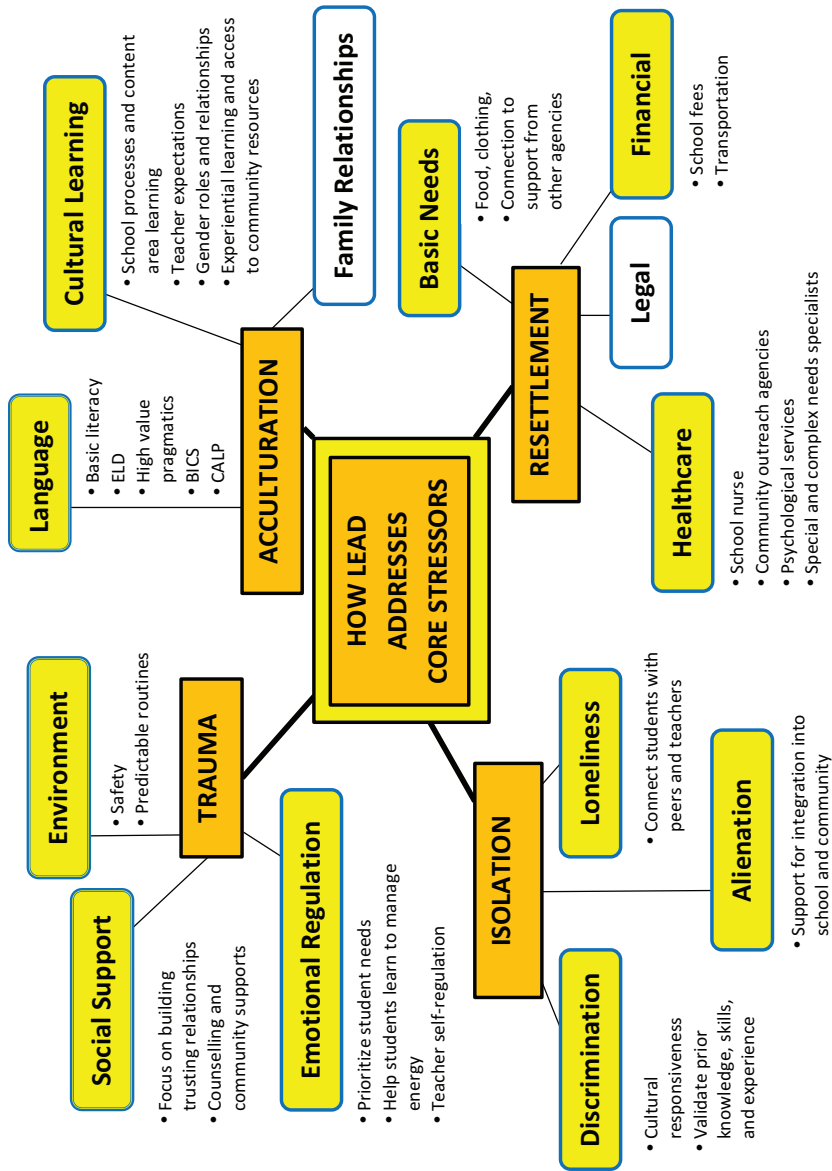


Figure 1. Core Stressors (adapted from NCTSN, 2016).

so are willing to do what is necessary to give their children the opportunity for a better future.

Reeves (2009) tells us that “because identity is relational” (p. 36), limited membership in the school community can relegate newcomers to the periphery and create a sense of isolation and anxiety. LEAD teachers are committed to learning about the lives of their students outside of school (e.g., home language, family structure, life experiences, immigration history, and favourite activities). This information is used to begin the process of helping students to integrate into the community and experience a sense of belonging, thereby reducing the Core Stressors associated with isolation.

LEAD helps those with limited formal education understand both what it means to be a student and how to succeed in a Canadian school context. LEAD teachers personalize instruction and help students gain skills needed for successful inclusion. For some students, this might mean learning how to hold a pencil, follow school and classroom routines, or work cooperatively in mixed gender groupings. The ability to understand and demonstrate expected behaviour (Winner, 2007) increases social and cultural capital and supports students’ efforts to build peer relationships.

LEAD provides trauma-informed practice to support students who have experienced overwhelming stressors. Trauma-informed practice is a growing field as researchers begin to see the impact of adverse childhood events on physical, mental, and social health, and as the field of neuroscience provides insight into the impact of trauma on neurological systems. In LEAD, the task continues to be trauma-responsive rather than trauma-investigative. Classroom staff are trained in trauma-informed practice and encouraged to support students in their coping and calming mechanisms.

LEAD students require intensive explicit English language instruction to build communicative competence across the language strands. This includes development of English phonemic awareness and instruction in alphabetic principle, as well as the teaching of survival phrases, basic vocabulary and syntactical structures, and high-value pragmatics (eye contact, physical distance, and so on). A secondary focus is on building knowledge in the content areas (math, science, and social studies) and computer literacy to attempt to narrow the gap created by disruptions in schooling. The LEAD curriculum is condensed into themes that span curricular areas, with more time spent on fewer topics. Literacy and numeracy are integrated into all areas of learning.

With its tripartite focus on English language development (ELD), trauma-informed practice, and cultural responsiveness, LEAD is one step along the pathway to successful inclusion in Canadian classrooms.

English Language Development

The model for English language instruction adopted by the CBE for all English language learners, including LEAD students, comprises three distinct

understandings. For refugee students, this model addresses the Core Stressor of needing to learn language in order to experience success in the new culture (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2016).

1. An effective ELL program is built on a foundation of cultural responsiveness that recognizes, values, and builds on the language, culture, and experiences of each student;
2. Learning must be personalized such that students (a) see themselves reflected in the curriculum and (b) are provided with just-right levels of support that target their specific learning needs;
3. ELL students require intentional daily instruction in English. Within this, students require explicit instruction in the *functions* (the purposes for which the language is used) and *forms* (the *vocabulary* [emphasis added] and grammatical features of the language to accomplish those purposes) of English, with ample opportunities to develop *fluency* in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Dutro & Moran, 2003).

The LEAD classroom supports ELD in a way that is both culturally responsive and personalized to students' individual needs (see Case Study, parts 1–4). Teachers strive to understand and value the background and experiences of each learner. They are skilled at “[creating] community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds” (Gay, 2013, p. 49) and helping students to see their cultural and life experiences as assets that can empower them as learners. They are able to show students that “skills embedded in [their own] cultural practices are similar and transferable to academic tasks” (Gay, 2013, p. 64).

Stewart (2010) shares that “a major obstacle for non-English speaking refugees is to learn the language so that they can function in society” (p. 80). In LEAD, students develop Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS): the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation required to carry on day-to-day personal communication (Cummins, Baker, & Hornberger, 2001). They also develop the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) required in content area classes (Cummins et al., 2001) to “narrow the gap” and eventually integrate into mainstream classrooms. LEAD teachers in the CBE are well versed in ELL pedagogy and are provided with ELD training using models informed by Dutro and Moran (2003) to support the development of BICS and CALP.

Communicative Competencies and Indicators

LEAD teachers know the criteria of the communicative competencies at the different language proficiency levels according to the Alberta ESL Benchmarks (http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/eslapb/printable_benchmarks.html) and use this knowledge to guide instruction. Ten additional learning indicators have been developed to identify what must be explicitly taught in order to address the unique learning needs of LEAD students:

1. Survival skills and school culture: basic skills to assist students in navigating the school environment;
2. Learning to read: foundational skills including phonemic awareness, as necessary, and print awareness;
3. Learning numeracy: mathematical language and reasoning;
4. Vocabulary: general and academic vocabulary necessary for everyday life and school life;
5. Language forms: syntactical structures needed to communicate for different purposes;
6. Language functions: language needed for different communicative tasks (e.g., compare-contrast, explain, describe);
7. Oral fluency: regular opportunities for structured interactions to practice everyday conversation and content-based language;
8. Learning to write: English sentence structure; understanding of how ideas are organized and connected;
9. Self-regulation and problem-solving: the ability to regulate behaviour and demonstrate interpersonal skills to signal classroom readiness;
10. Experiential learning and community resources: resources in the community to broaden cultural experiences (adapted from LEAD General Learning Indicators, <http://teachingrefugees.com/instructional-programming/learning-indicators/form/>).

Some effective language-scaffolding strategies include ensuring that input is comprehensible and supported by key visuals and hands-on materials, using a gradual release approach (*"I do, we do, you do"*) to model and practice desired skills, providing frequent opportunities for oral practice and interaction, integrating multiple language strands into each lesson, and continually reviewing and recycling vocabulary and concepts.

A variety of instructional units are available to teachers on the CBE website and to the general population on the website www.teachingrefugees.com. These thematic resources encompass the foundational elements of English language development and focus on the fundamental skills that LEAD students require (<http://teachingrefugees.com/instructional-programming/sample-units/>).

Assessment and Reporting

LEAD teachers use baseline assessment data to set individual student and class goals in some or all of the learning indicators, and then scaffold instruction toward the attainment of those goals. Students are supported in becoming independent learners. They are encouraged, over time, to reflect on their progress and set realistic and achievable goals to guide their own personal and academic development.

Information about each student's progress is recorded in a Student Growth Plan (SGP). This document, created in 2009, helps in the transition process as students move from LEAD to more advanced ELL or content area classes. Teachers receiving a LEAD or post-LEAD student access the SGP to get valuable information about the student's educational background, English language skills, and socioemotional readiness. They can see the results of recent assessments in literacy, oracy, and numeracy and learn about the various strategies used to effectively support learning. Twice a year, progress on each of the 10 indicators is recorded and reported to parents in clear, comprehensible English.

Case Study Part 2: Jaol's first few months in LEAD

Soon after her intake meeting, Jaol joined the LEAD class, one of 15 students between 14 and 18 years of age. There are eight languages and six countries represented in her LEAD classroom. Jaol was introduced to another student and took a tour of the school.

At first, Jaol's entire day will be spent with the LEAD staff and students in a congregated setting. Each period focuses on a different subject: English Language, Math, Social Sciences, and a LEAD option, such as Art or Computer Technology. She will need a lot of time and practice in a low-risk environment to learn the grammar, vocabulary, and key concepts associated with these courses. The teacher will scaffold the work in a way that makes it comprehensible and encourages the students to find connections between what they are learning and their prior knowledge and experiences.

One bulletin board in the LEAD classroom is dedicated to visuals and basic vocabulary to help students communicate different wants, needs, feelings, and physical states. These words will support the development of early literacy skills. The emphasis on speaking and listening in the classroom will help build phonemic awareness that will bridge to letter-sound correspondence. The teacher will provide ample opportunities for Jaol to rehearse her new language through an "I do, we do, you do" approach. Using this strategy, the teacher will first model the desired skill, then provide students with opportunities for supported practice, and finally check to see that students can independently demonstrate the skill.

Jaol now has a LEAD "buddy" who sits with her for lunch and helps her ease into the social dynamics in the classroom. The buddy has shown Jaol the map of the world, where students' pictures are connected to their countries of origin. Jaol and her buddy have posted Jaol's picture in the same fashion.

The predictable routine of the day is posted as a series of labelled pictures visible at eye level. The LEAD staff ensure that the routine is up to date. The teacher and EA refer to the pictures throughout the day to help students know what to expect.

Recently, when students were asked to bring in pictures of important people in their lives, Jaol was clearly excited about bringing in a recent family photo taken by a volunteer in a community program. Jaol keeps this photo on her desk and seems more engaged throughout the day.

Trauma-Informed Practice

The aftermath of trauma may be a Core Stressor for refugee students (NCTSN, 2016). Trauma can be understood as an experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, and can include acute (discrete) or chronic (over and over again) events. Refugee students may have experienced one or both types of trauma.

While some children “bounce back” after adversity, traumatic experiences can result in a significant disruption of child or adolescent development and have profound long-term consequences. Repeated exposure to traumatic events can affect the child's brain and nervous system and increase the risk of low academic performance, engagement in high-risk behaviors, and difficulties in peer and family relationships. Traumatic stress can cause increased use of health and mental health services and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. (NCTSN, 2016)

Trauma-informed practice incorporates an awareness that trauma may have a deep and wide-ranging impact on students.

LEAD staff are offered frequent professional development in supporting students who have experienced trauma. They are well aware that trauma-informed practice is categorically different than trauma treatment, the latter of which involves consultation, referral, and intervention by specialized services (e.g., psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists). In the LEAD program, emphasis is placed on assisting each student to be resilient to the demands of the present, as well as reducing elements in the classroom and school environment that may be traumatizing to the student.

Our ever-evolving trauma-informed practice currently incorporates

- Prioritizing student needs
- Using a trauma-responsive framework
- Intervening from the “bottom-up”
- Accessing multidisciplinary supports and external services.

Prioritizing Student Needs

LEAD teachers and support staff (educational and English language learning assistants) respond to student need. Basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), social-emotional needs (e.g., self-regulation, social support), and referral to mental health services are at least as important as, and sometimes take precedence over, communicative language learning, academic language learning, and core subject curriculum. Accessing external stakeholders to support students and families in basic, financial, healthcare, and legal needs becomes key in reducing the Core Stressors associated with resettlement.

Using a Trauma-Responsive Framework

The CBE's incorporation of a Trauma Sensitive Schools Initiative (TSSI) has provided a system-supported framework that values the unique needs of LEAD students who have experienced difficult events, have no/little English, may never be seen in a clinical counselling setting, and have parents with little familiarity with Canadian culture and counselling models.

Caregiver affect management is a key principle in the Attachment–Regulation–Competency (ARC) framework (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010) adopted by the TSSI. This principle focuses on school staff managing their own emotional states. Teachers' personal self-regulation sets the emotional tone of the classroom. LEAD students often cue into teacher nonverbal cues of stress (e.g., frowning, voice change, posture); therefore, LEAD teachers must be diligent in getting calm, staying calm, and recovering calm.

LEAD teachers were interviewed on five dimensions of trauma-informed practice highlighted in the ARC framework:

1. Building connections
2. Emotional skill development
3. Safety and routines
4. Referring to mental health services
5. Teacher self-care

Teacher insights were gathered and posted on www.teachingrefugees.com (Tips for Teachers). New LEAD staff and LEAD schools are invited to build upon the collected insights of experienced LEAD teachers.

Intervening from the “Bottom Up”

The social, emotional, sensory, cognitive, and academic demands of school can be a dysregulating experience for any student. This is particularly true for students new to Canada who are adjusting to their new environment and its demands. Intervening from the bottom up focuses on first helping students regulate in the school environment. Regulation in this context involves helping students to manage their levels of energy and their emotional states.

Some LEAD students have experienced early life chronic stressors and are, therefore, more vulnerable to dysregulation. The Neurodevelopmental Sequential Model (Perry, 2006; Perry & Hambrick, 2008) highlights the impact of early life stressors on neurological development. Perry's model holds that intervening at the level of the earliest traumatic stressor offers the possibility of galvanizing change through higher brain systems. For LEAD students who have experienced chronic trauma (e.g., distressing environments in early childhood and ongoing difficult life experiences), additional supports and more intensive interventions both within and outside of school are often required.

Ablon's (2014) filing cabinet metaphor (Figure 2) focuses on regulating first, relating second, and reasoning third. Learning how to regulate at school becomes part of the path to success in Canada (Bailey-McKenna, 2016). The following are key strategies, resources, and approaches:

- a. **Regulate** (get ready to learn by managing levels of energy and finding the right emotional state): Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011), SPARKS (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008), progressive muscle relaxation, culturally familiar regulating techniques from tai chi, yoga, tabata, etc.
- b. **Relate** (build connections within the classroom and within the school): deepening attachment (Neufeld & Mate, 2013); "Tribes" collaborative models (Gibbs, 2006); Tips for Teachers (www.teachingrefugees.com)
- c. **Reason** (access students' cognitive and metacognitive strengths): supporting lagging skills (Greene, 2011); CBE ELD social emotional units; LEAD learning indicators; metacognitive strategies; CELLS (www.teachingrefugees.com).

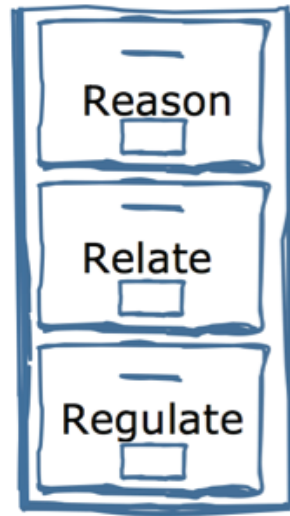


Figure 2. Filing cabinet metaphor (adapted from Ablon, 2014).

Purposeful, targeted, and timely use of each of these "filing cabinet drawers" facilitates LEAD student success.

Although learning English is crucial in LEAD, placing mental health needs first is important. In LEAD, it is particularly apparent that staff cannot successfully teach English Language Development or academic constructs to a child who is dysregulated. When a student cannot regulate in the classroom, despite a variety of the targeted supports, referral to specialized services within and outside of CBE takes priority.

Accessing Multidisciplinary Supports and External Services

Any student who has experienced trauma may evidence challenges with school performance, learning, physical and emotional distress (NCTSN, 2008), and LEAD students even more so. According to Leong and Collins (2007), refugee learners respond positively when they are offered social support (e.g., counselling or assistance with basic needs) as well as academic support. How do we determine the need for specialized services when language and acculturation stressors mask deeper challenges? How do we determine the need for specialized services when students have unusual complexity?

Teachers use a quick-call list with contact numbers for targeted community supports, including available cultural supports, to assist students and

families. Teachers consult with ELL specialists and LEAD psychologists to help identify appropriate referral for mental health services. The Complex English Language Learners (CELLS) Toolkit (CBE, 2014) is a much-used pre-referral resource. CELLS helps teachers respond to a broad range of cultural and language-learning factors that may be impacting a student's progress, targets and tracks interventions in a Response-to-Intervention and Continuum-of-Supports model, and sets the groundwork for a Student Learning Team (SLT). If an SLT forms, parents are key members. Parents learn many strategies to support their children's education in this new culture (Sutherland, 2007). Many services and professionals support families and students (e.g., Diversity and Learning Support Advisors [DLSAs] and interpreters). Parent consent for CBE and non-CBE specialized services often requires a slow and steady approach of relationship-building and orientation to Canadian models and services. Parents may prefer, and choose, other models of intervention. LEAD program staff build connections with external mental health services to provide trauma-informed treatments in culturally sensitive ways.

Case Study Part 3: Jaol's self-regulation and supports

Jaol participates in the LEAD classroom's morning calming exercises. She practices deep breathing but has some difficulty getting her breath down from her lungs into her diaphragm. The LEAD staff understand that this is more typical of anxious students and support Jaol with additional calming strategies (i.e., a collection of calming phrases in English [I am OK! Mistakes are OK! I am safe!]). Jaol's younger brother was recently diagnosed with a serious medical condition, and she has been worried about his medical treatments. The LEAD teacher has been able to connect the family to some support services.

A new project has begun in class. Students have begun their individual "calming tools" folders, which follow some of the Zones of Regulation visual strategies. Jaol has discovered that drawing and singing are two ways that help her to calm. She will review the wide variety of calming strategies with the class several times a week. When she uncovers another strategy, she adds the image to her folder.

The teacher plans another initiative for her often sleep-deprived teenage students. Soon they will chart their hours of sleep to help connect their levels of rest and their abilities to stay calm and return to calm, and to focus.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is a broad interactive concept involving agency and investment by students and teachers alike. The key concepts of acculturation, integration, and identity are inextricably woven in the experience of student belonging.

“For refugee children ... schools are experienced as the most important place of contact with members of local host communities, playing an important role in establishing relationships supportive of integration” (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 172); however, immigrant students struggle with identity because they are “often constructed as strangers at school” (Guo & Hebert, 2014). They are oriented toward achieving membership in educational and social spaces in their new society (Duff, 2012), but lack sufficient knowledge of English to gain membership among their peers. This can lead to isolation, exclusion, bullying, and racism (Ager & Strang, 2008). LEAD staff are adept at validating students’ cultural identities while helping to build social and cultural capital in the host society. Teachers and educational assistants broker the way to successful integration for immigrant youth through carefully planned, staged inclusion into both social and academic settings. They provide students with access to socially, academically, and intellectually engaging learning experiences in the school and the broader community to foster a sense of belonging and provide an authentic context within which to develop English language communicative competence. These experiences empower students by helping them to acquire “a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 2013, p. 3). The integration opportunities that LEAD staff provide vary according to the age of the students and their individual linguistic and socioemotional readiness to engage in meaningful participation (See Case Study, Part 4).

LEAD teachers also recognize that English language learners have deep connections to their home cultures and communities; thus, the development of linguistic competence in a new culture represents a transformation, rather than a replacement, of identity (Ricento, 2005). These skilled educators employ culturally responsive teaching “that infuses the [home] culture of ... students into the school curriculum and makes meaningful connections with community cultures” (Vavrus, 2008, p. 49). They strive to become familiar with ways in which Western cultural practices differ from the cultural backgrounds of the students, attending to the “underlying values, beliefs, and norms that influence behaviours, expectations, and thinking” (DeCapua, 2016, p. 228). Teachers work to ensure that their instruction “takes into account different ways of learning” (DeCapua, 2016, p. 229). They commit to the premise that students benefit from being able to see their own life experiences, cultural identities, and goals reflected in the curriculum (Banks, 1996; DeCapua, 2016; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), intentionally “making associations to activate prior knowledge” and “leveraging home language skills to promote the acquisition of [English]” (DeCapua, 2016, p. 231). LEAD staff help students to develop their sense of self and play an instrumental role in helping to shape students’ view of their place in the school and in the broader community.

Case Study Part 4: Jaol's ongoing integration

After several months in Canada, Jaol has now started her second semester at high school. Jaol is now integrated into a Grade 10 physical education class comprising almost all of the LEAD students along with some other Grade 10 students in the school. This is her first high school class outside of LEAD. Jaol looks forward to the opportunity to meet new friends and practice English with native English speakers. Jaol is sometimes a little hesitant to speak because she isn't sure that the PE teacher or the other students will understand her accent, and she does not understand everything that the teacher says. The ELL assistant from the LEAD class accompanies the students and is available to help with communication. Next year, when Jaol's English is even better, she will be able to choose her own options from a list of courses that are appropriate for someone with her English language proficiency level. She is looking forward to that!

Jaol has many other opportunities to integrate into the school and community outside of formal class time. She has learned to independently ride city transit to school, she eats her lunch in the cafeteria with students from another class who speak her home language, and she has joined a student club at lunch once a week. Since Jaol enjoys running, her LEAD teacher has encouraged her to join the school track team. Her teacher will make sure that the coach knows that Jaol speaks only a little English and provide practical supports (e.g., help getting appropriate clothing and understanding the practice schedule).

Jaol's teacher has arranged for the LEAD class to go on several excursions to explore their new community. Many of these opportunities involve contact assignments, where Jaol can use her English in an authentic communicative context. At a recent community event, for example, Jaol's LEAD teacher arranged for the class to volunteer in the children's craft area to help youngsters make toys from recyclable materials. That was fun, and not too difficult. Jaol even showed children how to make a toy that youngsters like to play with in her home country. These outings have helped her to feel more independent and more confident about communicating with native English speakers. Through school field trips, Jaol has already become familiar with the local library, the fire hall, the city museum, and a nearby bowling alley. Later this year, Jaol's class will also attend a concert, a cultural dance performance, and a play. They are even planning to go ice-skating for the first time at the Olympic Oval!

Jaol has already seen some students begin the transition out of LEAD. Visits to the new setting and pictures of "key contacts" are just two of the ways to support transition. A key contact from the new location is coming to visit the LEAD class as indicated by the "visitor" card that Jaol's teacher has added to the day's visual schedule. The card has a drawing of a person with the word "VISITOR" underneath. Jaol knows that one day, when the time is right, it will be her turn to leave LEAD.

Reflections: Where do we grow from here?

The changing sociopolitical and economic forces on the world stage impact the dynamics of our LEAD classrooms. Change is inevitable; growth is a choice. As new challenges arise, the LEAD program must evolve. The following questions reflect current challenges, considerations, and our best efforts toward fostering growth.

How do we maintain high expectations of English language learning in classrooms where the majority of students may speak the same home language? Students may lack investment in learning English when they do not know why it is worthwhile. Teachers must help students become invested in learning English. Teachers must prioritize authentic, real-life opportunities that are “personally relevant and deeply connected to the world in which [LEAD students] live” (Friesen, 2009, p. 5). They must also expand those opportunities for language learning into the greater Canadian context, where English is the primary language for communication. We grow investment in English language learning.

How do we avoid duplication of services? Case management models require building connections, finding a case manager, getting all key stakeholders at meetings, and sharing key information. We must prioritize interventions, work with family and student strengths, and be brave enough to assess the effectiveness of the plan. We steward our resources and grow communication.

How do we make transportation manageable for LEAD students? Schooling already separates refugee children from their families for several hours a day. Efforts are made to locate LEAD programs in areas of the city where large numbers of refugee families reside; nevertheless, many refugee students must travel outside of their school communities to attend LEAD classes. This may result in longer and more complex bus rides on either yellow school buses or public transit. Some refugee students have great difficulty with the physical, social, financial, and emotional demands of this reality. We need to review the impact of the current transportation model, including the time and emotional cost on students and families, and modify our practices accordingly. We grow awareness and responsiveness.

How can we better identify complex learning needs in LEAD students? The problem of the Gordian knot, where culture, neurological atypicality, and language learning are tied together, is exacerbated by current diagnostic models and parental lack of familiarity with Canadian models of neurological diversity (e.g., reading disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, cognitive delay). More formal analysis of typical rates of learning in LEAD classes will help with early identification of students who require more specialized assessment and intervention. We grow understanding.

How can we find staff who are a good fit for LEAD? This requires clear communication regarding what LEAD staff actually do in the classroom. Like

many unique program settings, the skills of teachers and educational assistants in LEAD are quite broad. Staff must be skilled in working within the three-pronged model of English language development, trauma-informed practice, and cultural responsiveness. Ongoing professional learning for new and seasoned staff in LEAD, and staff in schools where LEAD classes reside, becomes a necessity. With the recent expansion of LEAD, this has become a logistical challenge. We grow capacity.

How do we foster successful integration? Congregated settings already separate students from the mainstream student population. Integration for students in a congregated setting is fluid and complex. LEAD has been uniquely situated to help refugee learners expand their cultural identities and build social and cultural capital. We understand that racism and discrimination are ongoing struggles that immigrant learners face even long after their arrival in Canada (Nangia, 2013). LEAD staff act as the intermediary between LEAD students and the mainstream population. We look for opportunities to successfully integrate individuals, groups, and classes. We grow belonging.

How do we structure educational transitions for success? There are many transitions within and beyond school (class, program, division, workforce, postsecondary). Students often lose supports during transition times. We have worked diligently to build processes to enable seamless transitions for LEAD students; however, unanticipated changes (e.g., student transience, staff changes) often disrupt these well-thought-out plans. We must build mechanisms to track LEAD students, expand ELL program offerings at all levels, and provide support during transitions. We grow bridges.

How do we assess the efficacy of the LEAD program? We have begun to develop local norms that reflect student learning in LEAD. We gather constant qualitative and quantitative feedback from the field to reflect on what does and does not work. Our next steps are to review the current data, look for trends, refine our research questions, and then conduct further research in order to improve the educational outcomes for refugee students with limited formal schooling. We grow responsiveness.

It has been written that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Our steps are many, and there are more to go. We do grow on.

Conclusion

LEAD continues to be shaped by Canada's response to asylum seekers and those refugees that are welcomed under the humanitarian umbrella. The LEAD program is supported by a school board that has decided to place intensive interventions at the forefront of a refugee newcomer's education. CBE LEAD students, families, school staff, and our communities reap the benefits. Students make great gains in English language proficiency, gain core concepts in math, science, and social studies, have a stronger sense of how to

navigate Canadian culture and Canadian schools, and begin to experience “I can do this!” in the new life in Canada.

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