

# *Refugee Parental Involvement in Children's Education in Winnipeg*

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# Research Questions

- How do refugee parents perceive and feel about their involvement in their children's education?
- What are the barriers to their involvement?
- What can help improve parental involvement?

Sample: Newcomer refugee parents of children in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD)

# Why bother with Parental Involvement?

- To improve child development and success
  - By reducing risk behaviours and isolation
- For stronger relations and capital
- To make schools more inclusive and effective
- To improve refugee re-settlement experiences and empower them
- To inform public-policy

Georgis et al. 2014; Glogowski & Ferreira 2015;

Higgins & Morley 2014; Auerbach 2008; Kanu 2008





# Context: Refugees in Winnipeg

- Overall, increasing refugee migration to MB
  - Most live in Winnipeg's inner city
  - Most are from Africa, Asia, and Middle East
- Fewer resources to newcomer programs
- Unique & intersecting challenges
- Lack of cultural sensitivity
- Lack of research in Winnipeg focusing specifically on refugee parent involvement

Magro & Ghorayshi 2011; Carter & Osborne 2009;

Kanu 2008; Wilkinson 2008; Mackinnon & Stephens 2006

# What is parent involvement in education?

- Need to consider broader factors than just school interactions and academic performance
  - Home and community relations
  - Parent experiences (pre/trans/post/migration)
  - Personal and affective attributes (goals, values, sense of belonging)
  - Structural factors, resources & capital
- Socially constructed, culturally mediated, and psychosocially enacted
  - It is not “pseudo-participation” or “an event”, but a “*committed involvement*” and a “*continuous process*”
  - It is reciprocal, relational, responsive & strength based

Auerbach 2007; Epstein 1995; Appleton et al. 2008;  
Freire 2000; Wong 2015; Georgis et al. 2014

# Methodology

- Community-Based Qualitative Research
  - 23 parent interviews
  - 2 focus groups with 16 educator
  - 1 focus group with 7 youth
    - Most experienced interrupted schooling and struggle speaking English
  - 3 follow-up parent interviews + 7 children
  - Surveys with educators



# Findings: Barriers to Involvement

## Mental Health

- Negative migration experiences like trauma, violence, racism and/or poor social conditions can impact family and school relations
  - Can create “lack of trust” of others, including school staff (Tadessa 2014)
- Feelings of mourning, longing, or guilt related to loved ones can limit emotional capital
  - “I am tired from this situation, and 24 hours I cry... Even my eyes I don’t see from them” (Iraqi Mother)

# Mental Health: Continue

- Some may face “high levels of culture shock”  
(Kanu 2008)
  - “Until 5 or 6 months my mind was not working perfectly” (Bhutanese Father)
- Few expressed feelings of internalized racism
  - A feeling of inferiority toward one’s own group
    - “Maybe it is better if they [uninvolved African refugee parents] died in Africa” (Somali Father)
  - May result in limited interactions at school
  - Families may distance themselves from others, like them, who can be a source of support and empowerment



# Parental Education and Language

- Most parents did not finish high school and struggled with speaking English
- Limits involvement in children's education
  - “They don't know what their children is learning or doing... at and after school” (Somali Father).
- Parents can't help academically, especially older children with homework
  - “My parents go to English school and they come home with home work and I have to help them” (An Iraqi Youth)

# Lack of school supports

- Lack of communication
  - Most school documents sent home without translation
  - Misunderstandings
    - “Some parents were scared to speak to school” (Educator)
  - Parents need to book for translation supports as available
- Lack of support staff
  - Big classes with little support
    - “I have 23 kids who don’t speak English and no support in class. Even when the parent comes to talk to me I can’t talk to that parent...” (Educator)
- Lack of diverse staff & inclusive culture
  - Reduces likelihood of parent participation

# Social Support & Time-poverty

- Social support is crucial for a positive resettlement experience, including parent involvement
- Most refugee parents have limited social networks & a “busy” life with competing demands which can limit involvement
- Some feel that they are “losing” parental authority of at least one of their children
  - Can be a “constant source of emotional stress” (Kanu 2008)
  - “[Children tell us] this is Canada and we can do what we want... This made me very-very angry, I was crazy about that” (Congolese father)
  - “Sometimes if you tell them [the parents] something they will not allow you so I won’t [tell them]” (Youth)



# Housing:

## “The problem with the home is the home” (Youth)

- Housing and neighbourhood conditions impact the re-settlement experiences of refugee families who live in poor inner city areas  
(Carter & Osborne 2009)
  - Finding an affordable and quality home in the city is stressful
- Some lived in poor housing which can impact family dynamics and involvement
  - Some families had to change schools a few times because they changed houses
  - “Our current home is small... I fight sometimes with my husband and my children. I tell them sometimes to throw books away to have more space at home” (Syrian Mother)
- Racist incidents in the community can make parents “over protective” and their children more “conscious”

# Avoid mislabeling parents as “uninvolved”

- Most parents valued involvement, in spite of barriers
  - “To be honest, if it wasn’t for my children’s education I wouldn’t have come here [to Canada] (Syrian mother)
  - Refugee children “attributed their faith and aspirations to the involvement of families on the home front” (Kanu 2008)
- Sometimes barriers acted as a “catalyst”, promoting more involvement (Brewer & McCabe 2014)
  - “[The teacher] was struggling to make them [the students] understand what he was teaching... I invited myself and the teacher was very happy to see me” (Somali Father)
- Parent are involved in different and multiple ways
  - Providers, role models, protectors and sacrificers

# Avoid mislabeling parents as “uninvolved”: Continue...

- Some involved themselves meaningfully by using their lived & living experience
  - “Look at my condition, I didn’t study or learn. I want them to learn and give them what was not given to me” (Syrian mother)
- Parents value involvement in home and school
  - “As the best thing to solve problems” (Somali Father)



# Recommendations:

## Make schools more accessible and inclusive

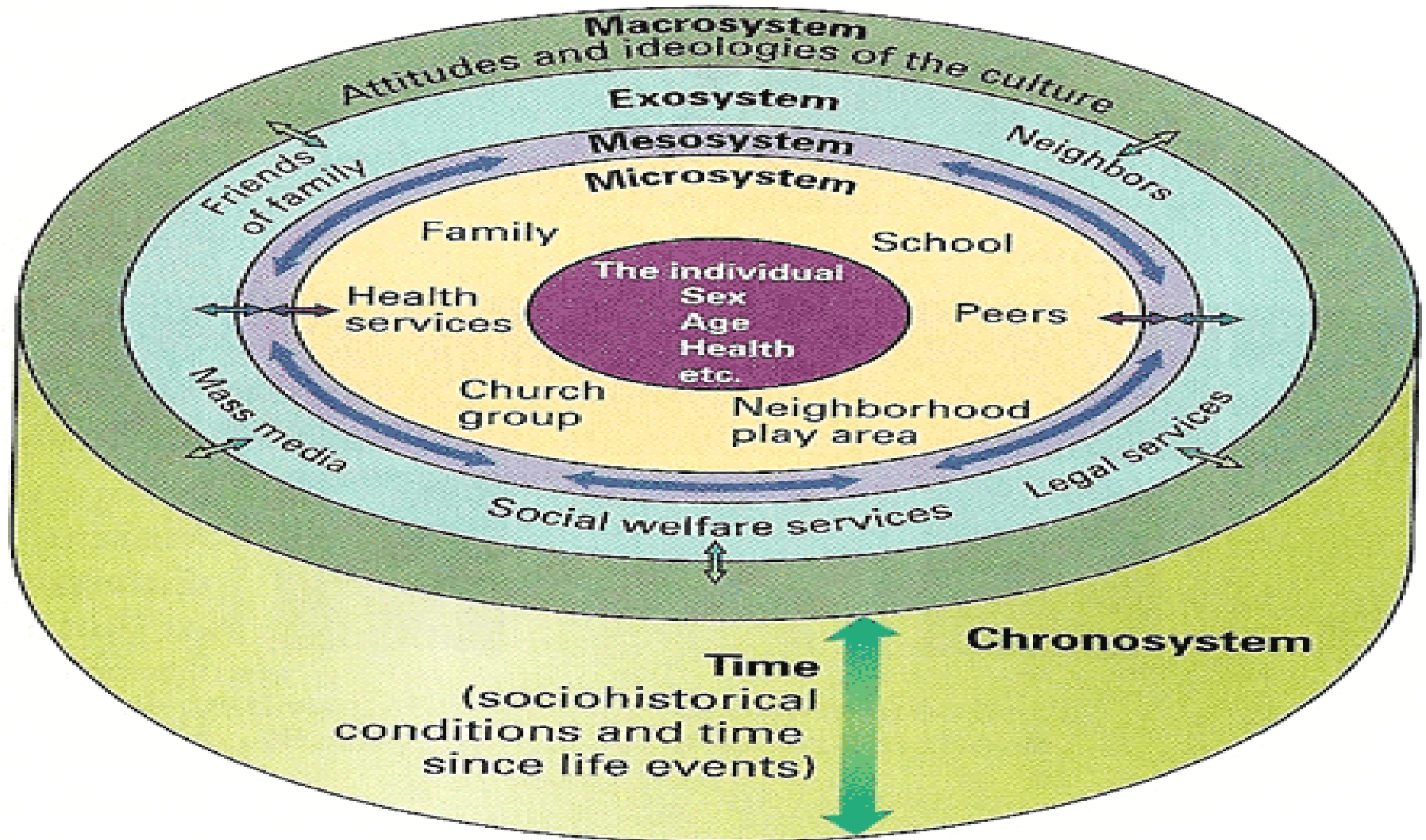
- Provide more timely and appropriate interpretation and translation
- Increasing diversity among staff
- Offering culturally sensitive training and supports
  - Understanding their needs & including their experiences to increase participation
- By helping parents learn the “language of schooling” to allow for more shared expectations
- By being “flexible” with parents
- By developing a “protocol” to guide practices related to refugee involvement within school divisions
- Training and hiring refugee parents in schools (Tadessa 2014)

# Recommendations: Offer more social supports

- Improve access and quality of community programs & after school programs
  - Training and hiring refugee parents in community organizations as support worker and interpreters
- Help parents help themselves
  - Offer intensive supports for parents to learn English and strategies for enhancing their chances for good employment
  - Offer more programs for parents that include child care (Shimoni et al. 2003)
- Address social barriers facing refugees at the municipal and federal levels

# Supports can vary: Social Development Model

## Bronfenbrenner's (2005)





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