

NEWCOMER INTEGRATION AND EDUCATING CANADIANS

BY: MICHELLE LAM

The Canadian government defines integration as a “two-way street,” (2011) which involves change and accommodation from both newcomers and Canadians. But most settlement and integration initiatives work towards educating newcomers about Canada, not the other way around.

Examples of education initiatives aimed at Canadians include the poverty simulation (United Way, 2017) and the forced migration simulation (Canadian Foodgrains Bank, 2017).

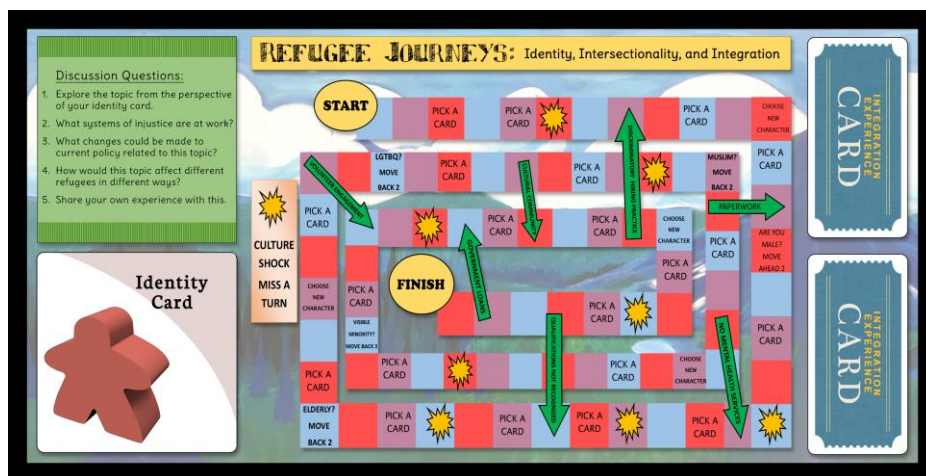
However, these tools do not address the issue of integration, namely the ability to contribute, free of barriers, to every aspect of Canadian life (Shields, Drolet, & Valenzuela, 2016).

This research brief provides an in-depth analysis of the recent board game tool entitled *Refugee Journeys: Identity, Intersectionality, and Integration* (Lam, 2017).

The game (pictured below) was developed with the goal of educating Canadians about newcomer experiences.

KEY POINTS

- Integration is a two-way street, where both newcomers and Canadians change and accommodate
- Tools to educate Canadians about newcomers exist, including the Poverty Simulation (United Way, 2017) and the Forced Migration Simulation (Canadian Foodgrains Bank, 2017)
- A board game, entitled *Refugee Journeys: Identity, Intersectionality, and Integration* is a tool that can educate Canadians more specifically about integration experiences



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BACKGROUND

Refugee Intake is Increasing

Canada’s overall immigration numbers are just under 1% of the country’s population. Most of these newcomers are from the economic class (58% in 2017), followed closely by the family class (28% in 2017).¹ Refugees (all streams) made up just over 13% of all immigration in 2017.

Of these refugees, most have been privately sponsored. Private sponsorship allows groups or individuals to resettle individuals within their own communities.

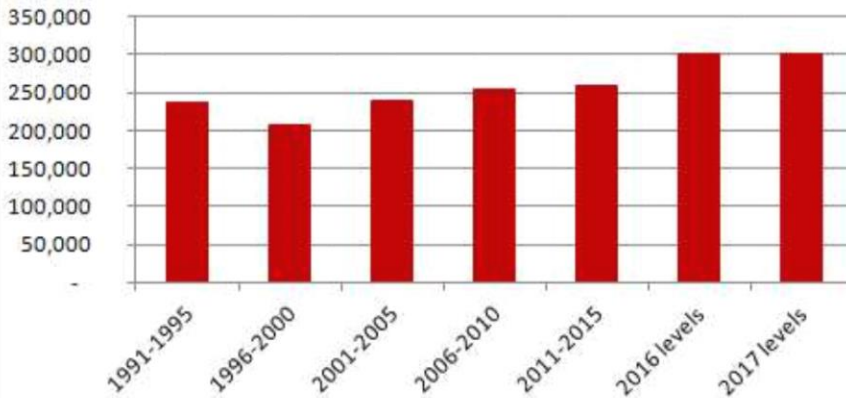
Rural Strengths and Challenges

Rural areas are becoming increasingly diverse. Rural communities are attractive for their lower costs of living and affordable housing. Policy makers in government are choosing to attract labour and investment through immigration to grow regional centres (Burstein, 2010). In addition, rural communities are welcoming newcomers through private refugee sponsorships.

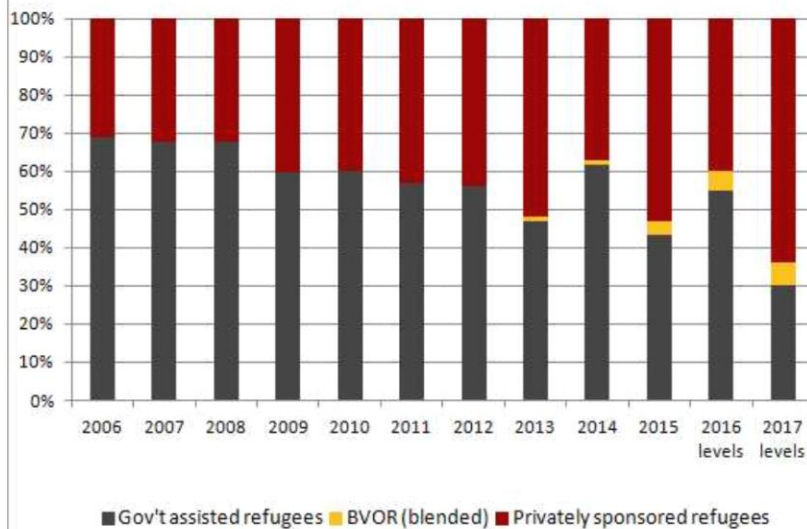
Rural areas have both strengths and challenges when it comes to integrating newcomers. Strengths can include close-knit community and a strong volunteer base. Settlement work can be a natural part of life in a rural area, since neighbours may have more contact with one another (Sawatsky, 2018). Smaller communities may also find it easier to implement necessary changes because of fewer overall numbers (Morishita, 2018).

However, sponsors who live in rural communities may not have access to interpreters, settlement facilitators, language teachers or other settlement professionals. For refugees in rural areas, challenges include a lack of public transportation, limited access to language training classes, and few culturally appropriate mental health resources (Ashton, 2016).

Overall immigration numbers: historical averages of landings and 2016-17 levels



2006-2015 resettled refugees with 2016-2017 levels



¹ Charts Source: Canadian Council for Refugees data, downloaded July 16, 2018 from <http://ccrweb.ca/en/2017-immigration-levels-comments>

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Diversity Education is Needed

Refugees are routinely covered in the media in ways that are dehumanizing (Esses, 2008). A 2017 analysis of a large segment of the Canadian media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis over a period of nine months showed that Canadian media represents Canadians as positive and generous, while Syrian refugees were represented as “lacking agency, vulnerable, and needy amidst challenges” (Tyyskä et al., 2017, p.4). We currently see a resurgence of the same type of dehumanizing language used to describe irregular border crossers or asylum seekers when they are represented as “illegals” or “aliens” (Paspalanova, 2007).

Personal contact with diversity has been shown to decrease prejudice (Enviro-nics, 2006). But this can be a concern in rural areas since they may have had limited exposure to diversity. It becomes necessary, particularly in places lacking contact with diverse populations, to have educational tools designed to counteract the negative messages portrayed in the media. Diversity education is necessary to work effectively with diverse individuals and groups (Avery and Thomas, 2004). In rural areas, having access to diversity education may increase awareness and knowledge of how culture and other aspects of identity influence others (King, et. al, 2010).

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Eliciting Respect and Building Empathy

One of the goals of *Refugee Journeys* is to build empathy by highlighting different experiences of integration.

“Campaigns that elicit admiration and respect for group members, perhaps by demonstrating the hardships that they have successfully overcome, may prevent negative attitudes and behavior toward refugees in general. As attitudes become more favourable, it will be easier to promote more just behavior on our own part and fulfill our commitment to the protection of refugees.” (Esses, 2008, p. 24)

Engaging Public Policy

A second goal of *Refugee Journeys* is to educate Canadians about how different policies affect newcomers at various stages of integration.

“The framework that politically and educationally progressive educators have employed to understand this is grounded in what in cultural theory is called the act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power.” (Apple, 2008, p. 224)

Spark Conversations

A final goal of *Refugee Journeys* is to create a space where people can share their own experiences and discuss ideas. The board game includes a discussion component, where after an “integration experience card” is played the players choose a question from the board and discuss it together. The game then becomes a tool that can include the experiences and opinions of the players.



Discussion Questions from Refugee Journeys: (Used after an “Experience Card” is played)

1. Explore the topic from the perspective of your identity card.
2. What systems of injustice are at work?
3. What changes could be made to current policy related to this topic?
4. How would this topic affect different refugees in different ways?
5. Share your own experience with this.

Creation Process

How do you create a game that will provide space for discussion, bring in real-life examples, be grounded in research, and still be something that people will want to play?

It started with a home printer and an old copy of Snakes-and-Ladders. Experiences of integration gleaned from research, from conversations with newcomers, and from media were collected and turned into “Experience Cards” – difficulties with language learning, celebrating a child’s first friend, needing transportation in a rural area, trying to find food from home.

A refugee student drew artwork for the gameboard, and a game designer, Rob Gosselin of Birdlight Games, gave

professional insights to transform it into a product that could be ordered online. The end result is a game that is complex and engaging. It puts players into the shoes of a newcomer, moving forward or backward along the pathway of integration.

Every player’s path is unique. Players receive an identity card detailing background and other aspects of identity. The journey of integration will be different depending on the cards drawn.

Feedback from trial runs of the game added more complexity – places to

change identity were added, and more places to jump into the cyclical path were developed.

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The game highlights:

- *How different aspects of identity can intersect and overlap*
- *How integration is not always a linear path*

- *How the “start” and “finish” of integration is unclear*
- *How culture shock can immobilize*
- *Integration experiences can be both positive and negative*

Author's Biography



An experienced teacher and researcher, Michelle Lam is currently pursuing a PhD in the Education at the University of Manitoba. Her doctoral research explores refugee language learning in rural areas in Manitoba.

Michelle has been an English as an Additional Language teacher for over ten years and was the Director of Teacher Training and Development for Lucas Detech Institute in Vietnam. She is currently involved in a research-in-residence project examining newcomer integration in Brandon, Manitoba.

Michelle's passion for equitable integration stems from hearing stories of discrimination and racism directed towards her family and students in her classrooms. Her strong sense of social justice has led her to advocate on behalf of newcomers, believing firmly that all people are equal. She has a strong record of volunteer service and has received numerous awards, fellowships, and distinctions including a Young Humanitarian Award, a Citizenship Award, as well as awards for high scholarship.

Michelle earned a Bachelor of Ministry (highest honours) from Ambrose University College in 2006 and an MA in TESOL (honours) in 2009 from Providence Seminary. She has been published in two books for teacher professional development and is a sought-after public speaker and educator.

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