

Research Article

Social and Emotional Learning Difficulties of Refugee High School Students in an After-School Tutoring Program

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Abstract: School-aged children constitute a significant portion of the large number of refugees that have resettled in Canada in recent years. Due to the lack of cross-cultural competencies, a social justice focus, and transformative leadership skills, Canadian schools are often challenged to address refugee students' socio-psychological problems effectively. To help with the issue, this study examined 8 refugee high school students through an after-school tutoring program and evaluated their performances in the five domains of social-emotional learning competencies. Findings of the study reveal that refugee students' performance in these skills is not optimal in general. Especially, there is a high demand in improving the refugee students' self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Implications of our findings for school instructors and policy makers are highlighted.

Keywords: refugee students, social-emotional learning, educational barriers, tutoring, high schools, academic success

1. Introduction

With the resettlement of more than 28,000 refugees in 2018, Canada became the top resettlement country in the world (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). More than ever before, Canada has enhanced its role as a recipient of refugees who have left their countries of origin due to war, poverty, and ecological disaster. As refugee resettlement programs typically give priority to the most vulnerable populations (Cho et al., 2019), young children constitute a large portion among the refugees that are resettled. According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2017), between January 2015 and July 2017, there were over 84,000 refugees resettled to Canada, and children under age eighteen comprised 43% of the total. In this context, the education of school-aged refugees has become a significant topic for Canadian educational systems.

The school has long been considered as one of the first sites where host country culture is introduced to newcomer students, and much of their integration into the host society also takes place in the school. As academic success is one of the most important preconditions for professional success in students' later life, determining how well refugee students are performing in educational systems provides insights into how well they will be integrated into the host society in the future as adults (Wilkinson, 2002). However, the diverse and constantly changing demographic composition of Canadian refugees, coupled with the ongoing wars, conflicts, and persecutions occurring on a global scale, make it

difficult for Canadian schools to understand the experience of their refugee students (Rumsey et al., 2018; Guo et al., 2019).

Due to their past experiences, along with academic challenges and cultural differences, refugee youth's adaptation to school is greatly hindered, leading to continuing struggles. High rates of psychological distress of refugee students have been consistently reported by studies, including behavior problems, mental health disorders, and a range of other adjustment difficulties (Betancourt et al., 2012). Betancourt et al. examined the trauma history profiles, psychopathology, and associated behavioral and functional indicators among refugee children presenting for psychological treatment. Results indicated that 30.4% of the participants demonstrated Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), 26.8% generalized anxiety, 26.8% somatization, 21.4% traumatic grief, and 21.4% general behavioral problems.

Education plays a vital role in healing and empowering refugee students. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to refugee students' social and emotional adjustment in school settings (Emerson et al., 2022; Horswood et al., 2019; Sreekala et al., 2025; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been identified as an important framework for understanding students' development and school adjustment, as social-emotional competencies influence both academic engagement and interpersonal relationships. Despite growing attention to refugee education, Canadian schools often face difficulties in responding effectively to the social and emotional needs of refugee students (Ratković et al., 2017).

To enhance its leading role in protecting refugees, Canada will continue its strong humanitarian tradition to settle more refugees in the future (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). With a high influx of refugee students, Canadian educational systems are likely to face ongoing challenges in supporting refugee students' adjustment and success. However, research and educational policies focusing specifically on refugee students remain limited. Ratković et al. (2017) noted that Canadian literature on K-12 migrant students' learning and well-being often focuses on immigrants or English language learners rather than refugee students. Furthermore, many educational policies rely on research conducted outside Canada. As a result, more context-specific research is needed to better understand refugee students' experiences in Canadian schools.

This study examines the SEL difficulties experienced by refugee high school students in the context of Canadian secondary education. By exploring students' experiences within an after-school tutoring program, this study provides a contextualized understanding of the academic and social-emotional challenges refugee students encounter. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of refugee students' school adjustment and to inform educational practices and policies that support refugee students' academic and social development.

2. Research context

This paper grew out of the experiences of the first two authors who participated in an after-school tutoring program as volunteer tutors and as well as researchers. The tutoring program, Youth First, is funded by United Way Centraide, a non-profit organization that raises and allocates funds to support local communities. One of United Way's primary goals is "helping kids be all they can be" (United Way Centraide, n.d.). Youth First is a free, voluntary program located in an inner-city high school and is open to all students in the school community. The program provides academic support for students who need assistance with homework and assignments. In addition, Youth First aims to offer social and emotional support to all youth, particularly those who require additional support beyond the regular school day.

Given the influence of COVID-19, the Youth First program has shifted to an online tutoring format. It runs five days per week, with each session lasting two hours from 2:30 pm to 4:30 pm. The online sessions with the students follow a consistent structure. Tutors are invited to access the main room of Google Classroom, where everyone meets first. In this classroom, it is determined which students will need help and what subject they need help with. Each student is matched with a tutor and directed into a breakout room where they go over the student's assignments and homework together to ensure it is completed. With permission, the researchers were able to observe other tutors' sessions for educational purposes at times when they were not engaged with tutoring themselves. There are also students who join the session for the purpose of making social connections with others. In this case, the students remain in the main meeting room where they can just talk or play games with tutors and peers.

During the study period, students who came most often were refugee students. Through the tutoring, the researchers found that refugee students encountered more academic difficulties than their peers. Also, most of them tended to rely

on tutors greatly when completing their homework. These refugee students tend to add attending the meeting sessions to their daily routines, even without the need for homework help. They appeared to particularly value the stay in the main meeting room, socializing with tutors and other students.

3. Theoretical framework

SEL is “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, n.d.). The theoretical framework used in this paper is the five domains of social-emotional learning competencies, which were identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020). This theory puts forward five important SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Cho et al. (2019) and Zins et al. (2007) report that self-awareness includes the ability to identify and recognize one’s emotions; recognize one’s strengths, needs, and values; have accurate self-perception and have well-grounded self-efficacy. Self-management includes emotion and behaviours management, as well as self-motivation and discipline. They explain that social awareness includes the ability to take perspective and accept diversity. Relationship skills refer to the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships. This includes cooperation with others, help seeking and providing, and negotiation of conflict management. They further state that responsible decision making includes the ability to consider ethical issues, evaluate results of various behaviours, identify problems and analyze different situations.

These five SEL competencies are closely related to students’ academic achievement. The impact of SEL competencies on students’ academic performance can be explained by direct effects and indirect effects. In theory, more emotionally competent students may achieve greater academic outcomes because they are better at sustaining and regulating their motivation for their learning goals than those students with poor social-emotional skills (Valiente et al., 2008). Additionally, there is considerable evidence to show that poor social-emotional competence affects young people’s mental health by disrupting interpersonal relationships and class participation which ultimately leads to later academic failure (Jones et al., 2015).

4. Literature review

4.1 *Refugee students and SEL*

Unlike other immigrant groups, by definition, a refugee refers to people who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010, p. 14). The literature has indicated that refugee students have higher risks of having mental health disorders than other students (Betancourt et al., 2012).

According to Ayoub and Zhou (2016), refugee students’ premigration experience was the main cause of their social, emotional, and academic difficulties that emerged when they attended school in Canada. Their research showed that Somali refugee students experienced a lack of necessities of life (shortage of food, no clean water, no financial support, clothes in bad condition, and inadequate shelter), no formal education, violence and abuse, and sad refugee camp memories. From a worldwide perspective, before immigration, experiencing social chaos and witnessing acts of violence are common for refugee children (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Living in such environments may negatively affect children’s social and behavioral development and increase the risk of aggressive behaviours (Scharpf & Hecker, 2026; Song et al., 2024). In addition, during the immigration process, separation from family members is another problem that adolescent refugees face (Joyce et al., 2010). Refugee students face considerable challenges after their immigration: unfamiliar socio-cultural background, language barriers, post-traumatic stress, acculturative stress and inter-generational stress (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Cho et al., 2019; Joyce et al., 2010).

Based on refugee students' experiences and challenges, current research emphasises exploring the area of refugee students' SEL. According to the study conducted by Cho et al. (2019), although some refugee students have certain advantages in SEL skills, most refugee students need to improve in all areas of SEL skills. Teachers in the study conducted by Cho et al. (2019) reported that many refugee students incorrectly assessed their strengths and limitations; were not able to control or regulate their emotions, attention, and behaviour; lacked the awareness to obey school social norms and rules; treated their classmates impolitely; displayed behaviors that did not meet ethical standards or responsibility expectations. However, this does not mean refugee students are not eager to study well, and make friends, nor do they lose their moral standards. In their study of Syrian refugee students, Ayoub and Zhou (2022) reported that more than 70% of participants were comfortable with asking their teachers for help with their learning; more than 60% of participants expressed that they wanted to make friends with Canadian-born or English-speaking students. In their another study of Somali refugee students, Ayoub and Zhou (2016) reported that some participants regretted their unethical behaviours and promised they would not do it again.

4.2 Refugee students' learning experience

Most refugee children experience education interruption (Ayoub & Zhou, 2022; 2023; Pacione, 2013). Although refugee children can accept formal and consistent education after they come to the host country, they commonly experience great learning difficulties. As highlighted by Weekes et al. (2011), many refugee students have low literacy in their first language since they had limited prior school experiences in their home country, resulting in complex learning needs. Li and Grineva (2017) found that refugee youths at a high school in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, faced many difficulties with their learning due to "limited proficiency in English and interrupted formal education" (p. 59). In the studies reported by Ayoub and Zhou (2022; 2023), more than 60% of participant refugee students thought studying in the regular homeroom class in Canada was difficult. In addition to the reason that they have less or no experience of schooling before they come to Canada, refugee students must deal with a serious English language barrier that creates a huge gap in their learning process. More than 60% of participants thought learning English was difficult, and more than 50% of participants had difficulties in learning math. In addition to suffering from educational disadvantages (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), refugee students also face challenges with "adapting to the expectations and culture of formal education" in their host country (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010, p. 152). Joyce et al. (2010) found that refugee students were forced to "navigate new learning cultures and adapt to new styles of assessment" (p. 89).

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design

Qualitative research enables researchers to develop a rich understanding of the everyday lives and social settings of those they study (Van den Hoonaard, 2015). Instead of staying on the surface of the phenomenon, the qualitative research seeks to find a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon. Since the purpose of this study is to explore refugee high school students' SEL difficulties, a qualitative approach was considered particularly appropriate for capturing the complexity of students' experience.

The first two authors occupied a dual role as both volunteer tutors and researchers within the Youth First program. As enrolled tutors, they functioned as complete participants, which afforded them intimate familiarity with the program context and students' academic and social interactions (Prus, 1996). This positioning enabled immersion in the natural setting of the online tutoring sessions, allowing observations to emerge organically through routine program activities rather than through intrusive or structured data collection. The researchers remained reflexively attentive to the potential influence of their tutoring role on students' behaviours and interactions. To mitigate observer effects, observations were conducted both during tutoring and, with permission, through the observation of other tutors' sessions when the researchers were not directly engaged. Ongoing reflexive dialogue between the researchers was used to critically examine how their positionality, assumptions, and interactions shaped data interpretation, thereby enhancing the credibility and ethical integrity of the study. As noted by Hughes (1960), observing participants in situ while occupying a legitimate social role enables the documentation of social processes in ways that are analytically valuable and not

harmful to those observed.

5.2 Participants

Eight refugee students whom we tutored most frequently were selected as the study participants. The students covered every grade of high school, from Grade 9 to Grade 12. They came from several countries of origin, including Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The details of participants' background is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Background information of participant students

Participants	Gender	Country origin	Grades	Years in Canada
1	Female	Iraq	Grade 12	4 years
2	Female	Syria	Grade 11	4 years
3	Female	Syria	Grade 10	4 years
4	Male	Syria	Grade 9	4 years
5	Male	Syria	Grade 11	4 years
6	Male	Syria	Grade 12	4.5 years
7	Male	Lebanon	Grade 10	1.5 years
8	Female	Colombia	Grade 12	1.5 years

5.3 Data collection

In this study, observation is the main approach for data collection. By observing people in their daily situations, researchers can avoid the distortion that may happen in interviews as “people do not always have an accurate view even of their own behavior” (Van den Hoonaard, 2015, p. 75). In particular, our participants who are adolescents have relatively limited ability to identify their behaviour compared with adults. By participating as tutors, the researchers were able to observe students' interactions within the natural flow of program activities while minimizing disruption to the tutoring environment.

Taking field notes is essential to keep detailed records of what was observed. To “record vivid memories and images” (Van den Hoonaard, 2015, p. 96), brief notes were taken using key words, phrases, and short sentences to record the tutoring context, student questions, difficulties they shared or demonstrated, body language and facial impression, and as well as researcher's onsite quick reflections. The more comprehensive notes were finished as soon as possible after the tutoring session finished. All of the observations took place in three contexts: tutoring students in one-on-one meeting room, observing other tutors' meetings with students, and chatting and playing with students in the main meeting room.

5.4 Data analysis

In total, 67 field notes were taken. They were analyzed using a set of common phenomenological processes. First, we immersed ourselves in the details by reading the contents in their entirety several times (Creswell, 2015). After getting a sense of the whole, we then moved on to coding data for the purpose of making sense out of the texts, dividing them into text segments and labelling them with codes (Creswell, 2015). During this process, specific data were selected and data that did not specifically provide evidence for the themes were disregarded. Table 2 provides examples of how field note excerpts were coded and linked to specific SEL competencies during the analytic process.

Table 2. Example of coding and analytical interpretation

Field note excerpt	Initial code	SEL domain	Analytical interpretation
Student asked the tutor to choose a map of Canada from several similar options and insisted that the tutor decide	Reliance on the tutor for decision	Responsible decision making	Suggests limited independent judgment in routine academic decisions
Student interrupted the tutor's explanation and asked directly for the answer	Requesting immediate answer	Self-management	Suggests limited persistence in engaging with learning tasks
Student stated that a lower grade was due to the teacher not liking her	External attribution of performance	Self-awareness	Suggests difficulty evaluating personal academic strengths and weaknesses
Student volunteered to translate for another student during tutoring	Peer support	Relationship skills	Indicates cooperative interaction with peers

6. Findings

Data analysis led us to identify five themes corresponding to the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and social awareness. These themes were derived through coding field notes according to the CASEL SEL framework and examining recurring patterns of observed behaviours. Table 3 provides a summary of the main observed behavioural patterns across the five SEL competencies.

Table 3. Summary of observed SEL competencies

SEL competency	Observed behavioural patterns	Interpretation within tutoring context
Self-awareness	Students often had difficulty identifying the type of help they needed; inaccurate evaluation of strengths and weaknesses; attribution of performance to intelligence or teacher preference	Suggests challenges in recognizing learning needs and evaluating personal academic abilities
Self-management	Emotional reactions when preferred tutors were unavailable; reluctance to work with alternative tutors; requests for immediate answers rather than engaging in explanations	Suggests difficulties regulating emotions and maintaining persistence during academic tasks
Responsible decision making	Frequent reliance on tutors for answers and routine academic choices; limited evaluation of alternative responses; acceptance of tutor feedback without reflection	Suggests limited engagement in independent judgment and academic decision-making
Relationship skills	Generally positive interactions with tutors and peers; cooperative participation in group activities; occasional minor conflicts resolved through re-engagement	Suggests relationship skills were generally adequate within the tutoring environment
Social awareness	Inclusion of new participants in group activities; consideration of others' preferences during group interactions; attentiveness to tutors' workload	Suggests behaviours consistent with social awareness in the tutoring context

6.1 Self-awareness

Findings related to self-awareness primarily concerned students' ability to recognize their learning needs and accurately evaluate their academic strengths and limitations. Among the 8 participants, most of them knew that they had to accomplish their homework, but they were not clear about what kind of assistance they needed from tutors, and how much homework they could complete independently.

Students were often observed to evaluate their academic abilities inaccurately. Some students attributed their poor academic performance to external factors such as teacher bias. During the breaking time of a session, Participant 8

talked about her grade in the history subject, she said: “Last time the teacher gave me the grade of 70, but this time I got the lower grade, I think the teacher does not like me”. In contrast, academic success was sometimes attributed to general intelligence. When the tutor asked Participant 4 why he made great progress in his homework, the student answered: “I have told you, Ms, I am smart!”.

These refugee students commonly had negative attitudes towards their homework. On the one hand, they refused to do better. For example, when the tutor suggested participant 2 use another way of expression in her English composition because she was repeating the same sentence pattern, the student rejected the suggestion and said: “It is fine, Ms, it is not a big deal”. On the other hand, participants frequently came to tutoring sessions without attempting their homework, even when they appeared capable of completing the tasks independently. For instance, Participant 4, who seldom needed the tutor’s instructions during tutoring, demonstrated this tendency. Even when he asked questions, most of the time he answered himself. Apparently, he was able to finish his homework on his own, but he said: “I need someone to accompany me when I am doing homework”.

Overall, these patterns suggest that several participants experienced difficulty recognizing their learning needs and accurately evaluating their academic abilities within the tutoring context.

6.2 Self-management

Findings related to self-management primarily involved students’ regulation of emotions and persistence during tutoring activities. Several participants demonstrated difficulty managing emotional responses and maintaining task engagement when tutoring conditions did not match their expectations.

Some students showed strong emotional reactions when they could not work with preferred tutors. For example, Participant 1 directly asked to be matched with a specific tutor every time she attended the session. If she could not get the tutor, she would get upset easily. Students’ lack of confidence in their English proficiency also contributed to their unsuccessful self-management. Similarly, Participant 7 would only accept tutors who could speak his mother tongue of Arabic, even though he could communicate with others in English with little difficulties. Once, when tutors that Participant 7 preferred were unavailable, the program coordinator suggested matching Participant 7 with another tutor together with a student who could speak Arabic. In this way, the student could translate for them when they had language difficulties. However, Participant 7 rejected the suggestion, waiting until the Arabic-speaking tutor was available.

Participating students also demonstrated limited persistence during tutoring sessions. Most participants focused primarily on completing assignments as soon as possible, and they did not expect to learn from tutoring sessions. For instance, when Participant 6 had difficulty with the present continuous tense in his English assignment, the tutor tried to explain how this tense worked. However, the student interrupted the tutor and asked: “Ms, what is the answer?”.

Overall, these observations suggest that some participants experienced challenges in regulating emotional responses and sustaining engagement during academic tasks within the tutoring context.

6.3 Responsible decision making

Findings related to responsible decision making focused on students’ ability to make independent academic choices and evaluate alternative responses. Several participants demonstrated a tendency to rely on tutors’ judgments rather than actively evaluating their own answers.

Except for Participants 4 and 8, the rest of the participants have the habit of not considering the answers in their homework in a critical way. When tutors pointed out the mistakes they made in their homework, they usually did not express their thoughts or ask questions. Instead, they listened to tutors and changed the answers without questioning. When they were asked whether they agreed with the tutors, their responses were always “yes”. However, when we asked them for further explanations, they always said: “I do not know” or “I just think you are right”.

Participants also frequently sought guidance for routine academic decisions that allowed multiple acceptable options. For instance, when completing a geography presentation, Participant 2 searched for a map of Canada online, many similar pictures showed up. She asked the tutor which one she should choose. The tutor told her that as all the pictures were Canada maps, she could choose one that she preferred, but she said: “I don’t know. Ms, you pick one for me, please”.

Overall, these patterns suggest that several participants demonstrated limited independence in evaluating alternatives and making academic decisions within the tutoring context.

6.4 Relationship skills

Findings related to relationship skills focused on students' ability to interact cooperatively with peers and tutors during tutoring activities. Overall, most participants demonstrated generally positive interactions and were able to work comfortably with others. In other words, their relationship skills were generally adequate within the tutoring context.

Only a small number of interpersonal difficulties were observed. For example, during a session of learning in playing games, Participant 1 used inappropriate language to describe another student. When Participant 2 pointed out that her behaviour was inappropriate, Participant 1 got angry and left the session. However, she came back to the meeting room about half an hour later and reconciled with Participant 2.

Some uneven participation in cooperative activities was also observed. During team-based games, Participant 1 always asked her group members to answer questions, but she refused to answer any question and never negotiated with group members about the answers.

Aside from these isolated instances, participants generally interacted positively with tutors and peers and sometimes helped one another. For example, Participant 3's spoken English was not good and she was expecting a tutor who was able to speak her mother tongue which was Arabic. However, tutors who knew Arabic were not available that day. Participant 7 who could speak Arabic volunteered to serve as an interpreter to facilitate communication between Participant 3 and the English-speaking tutor.

6.5 Social awareness

Findings related to social awareness concerned students' ability to respond appropriately to others and participate in shared social activities within the tutoring environment. Overall, participants demonstrated behaviours that reflected awareness of others and engagement in group interactions. In other words, they had adequate social awareness within the tutoring context.

At the first time the researchers joined the session as tutors, students initiated conversations and asked about their backgrounds and experiences in Canada. Similarly, when a shy Chinese student newly joined the session, all the participants presented great warmth and kindness. They greeted him friendly through initiating pleasant conversation, introducing the tutoring program, and even playing Chinese songs, helping the Chinese student get used to the new environment.

Participants also demonstrated their respect to others. When we chatted or played in the main meeting room, participants tended to ask other people's opinions on which topic they wanted to discuss or what kind of game they wanted to play together. Participant 1 prepared and hosted Kahoot games every time.

In addition, some students often showed care for others. For example, Participants 3 and 8 always took tutors' feelings into consideration. Sometimes, if they had more assignments that needed help with, they would ask the tutor: "Ms, is it too much for you?", or "Are you tired? I can come to you tomorrow".

7. Discussion

Based on our research, we found that refugee students have difficulties in different SEL skills, and they showed the skills that they were not good at in the same or different ways. Our findings coincide with previous studies reporting the negative evaluations on refugee students' social-emotional behaviors (Bitew & Ferguson, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Thabet et al., 2004).

Furthermore, several participants demonstrated greater needs in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, or responsible decision-making, while relationship skills and social awareness appeared less problematic within the tutoring context.

In addition to confirming patterns reported in previous studies, this study provides context-specific insights into refugee students' social-emotional learning within an online after-school tutoring environment. Unlike regular classroom

settings, the online tutoring format provided individualized support and flexible participation, allowing students to seek both academic assistance and social interaction. The findings suggest that the tutoring environment functioned not only as an academic support setting but also as a space where refugee students could establish routines and develop supportive relationships with tutors and peers. The following sections interpret our findings in relation to the five SEL competencies identified in the CASEL framework: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

7.1 Self-awareness

Within the context of academic performance, self-awareness refers to students' ability to accurately recognize their strengths, limitations, and learning (Denham & Brown, 2010). Several participants in current study showed that they had difficulties in evaluating their academic abilities and learning processes. Rather than reflecting on their learning strategies or efforts, some students appeared to rely on simplified explanations for academic outcomes, such as attributing performance primarily to intelligence or external factors. Since students' self-perceived academic competence was positively correlated with later performance in the areas of both reading and mathematics (Liew et al., 2008), participants' lack of sense of their academic abilities likely hinders continued gains in achievement.

Another related issue concerns students' academic self-efficacy. Several participants appeared uncertain about their ability to complete academic tasks independently and therefore relied heavily on tutors for assistance. Bandura (1997) emphasises that belief in one's ability influences their choice of activities and effort, and engagement in the practical efforts to attain goals, academic interest and motivation, as well as the growth of cognitive competencies and accomplished achievement. In the present study, the refugee students' low self-efficacy is likely to prevent them from taking more risks in the classroom, in both participating and attempting challenging academic difficulties.

7.2 Self-management

Participants with low self-management skills usually did not know how to regulate their emotions. Xu (2013) explains how to control emotions when doing homework:

As homework typically elicits unpleasant emotional responses (Verma et al., 2002), controlling homework emotion often involves down-regulating unpleasant emotions (e.g., "Tell myself not to be bothered with previous mistakes") and up-regulating positive emotions (e.g., "Cheer myself up by telling myself that I can do it") (p. 102).

For refugee students, emotional regulation may be further complicated by the challenges associated with adapting to a new cultural and educational environment. The pressure of understanding English and the Western schooling system, undermines the likelihood of a successful transition to their current academic learning (Joyce et al., 2010). This coincides with literature which has emphasized the risk of coexistence among emotional, psychological, and academic dimensions in which a student with difficulties in one area is more likely to simultaneously have difficulties in other areas, such as academic performance (Valdez et al., 2011).

With respect to the current study, some participants appeared to experience frustration when preferred tutors were unavailable or when academic tasks became challenging. These patterns may indicate difficulties in regulating emotional responses during learning activities. When emotional regulation is limited, students may have greater difficulty maintaining attention and engagement in academic tasks (Denham & Brown, 2010).

7.3 Responsible decision making

The findings of this study suggest that many participants demonstrated limited independence in making academic decisions. They came to the tutoring session with the expectation to get their homework finished as soon as possible, instead of gaining new knowledge. Therefore, they expected tutors to solve every problem for them, and they accepted whatever tutors suggested without evaluation and reflection. Such patterns may reflect limited confidence in their own academic judgment.

In fact, this kind of overreliance on the instructor as a source of support is usually seen among young children (Roorda et al., 2021). Regarding the high school participants in the present study, difficulties in language acquisition and

adaptation to a new educational system are the most likely cause of their over dependence on tutors. As newcomers to Canada, these refugee students were still tentative in their exploration of the school environment. Feelings of isolation, as well as negative feelings about and attitudes towards school may increase their reliance on instructors.

According to Verschueren and Koomen (2012), although the instructor can be used as a secure base when students feel stressed, excessive dependence on instructors may hinder their integration process with the community. To be specific, students' overreliance on instructors is likely to inhibit them from exploring school and social environment. With respect to the present study, participants' overreliance on tutors may become an obstacle for meeting the students' basic need for autonomy (Roorda et al., 2021), such as making their own judgements and completing homework independently from tutors. According to self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991), this need for autonomy plays a vital role in students' engagement in academic work and the whole school environment.

7.4 Relationship skills

Throughout the whole current research, it was evident that most participants possessed satisfying relationship skills. Few conflicts were seen during the tutoring sessions. In addition, the students showed a great willingness to help other students. In turn, the good relationships they built with others helped them get comfortable with seeking help from teachers and peers, which enabled them to get more academic and non-academic benefits.

A large body of literature has proved the importance of relationship skills to students. Wentzel conducted a study (1993) examining the causal effects of 423 students and found that good relationship skills served much more than facilitating interactions with others. Relationship skills also affected students' academic achievement in two ways. On the one hand, relationship skills had direct impact on the academic achievement. On the other hand, they impacted a variety of academic preparatory behaviours such as listening to instructions and asking questions.

Some relevant literatures have explained why relationship skills have a big impact on students' ability to succeed in an academic setting. For example, previous studies (Mertens et al., 2021; Lawler et al., 2020) found that positive interactions with peers promoted positive behaviours through peer modeling. Also, cooperative students tend to share intellectual resources by interpreting teachers' directions, and sharing academic resources such as notes and books (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, p. 62). As their academic exchanges have been promoted, whether they are resources providers or recipients, they can all benefit academically.

7.5 Social awareness

Current study findings showed that participants demonstrated positive social awareness in various aspects, such as recognizing community (e.g., cared the well-being of the tutoring program as well as its members), appreciating diversity (e.g., showed great curiosity and kindness to people from different backgrounds), respect for others (e.g., asked others' opinion on chat topic and games), and perspective taking (e.g., concerned whether tutors were overworked).

Researchers are increasingly confirming that students' social awareness plays an important role in their concurrent and later academic success (Garner & Waajid, 2008; Izard et al., 2001). It is important to note, however, that students' performances related to social awareness could change when they were in classroom, as the setting of the tutoring program was quite different from that of school. As mentioned before, adjusting to school is one of the most difficult experiences for young refugees (Ayoub & Zhou, 2023; Hyman et al., 2000; Humpage, 2009). Difficulties such as marginalization due to lack of English fluency, feeling different from peers, and struggling with a new school system are often far beyond what their social skills can handle. However, the tutoring program could be a haven for the refugee students where they were together with other students of similar backgrounds. Also, a tutoring session was smaller than a regular classroom, and students typically received one-on-one tutoring, which enabled them the refugee get more attention and develop a closer relationship with their peers and tutors. Therefore, refugee students' social awareness, especially the situation in the classroom, still needs further research.

8. Recommendations

The school is often the first and primary place where refugee students learn the host culture, and it is also the place

where much of their socialization occurs (Wilkinson, 2002). Therefore, schools have an obligation to help refugee students deal with socio-psychological challenges. To meet this end, professional development opportunities for teachers and other education stake holders are desperately needed to significantly build their cross-cultural competences, instill a social justice focus, and develop transformative leadership skills (Ratković et al., 2017).

In addition to professional development, school-based interventions are critically needed, as these programs are conducive to the students' personal development, social interactions, as well as ethical behavior (Taylor et al., 2017). However, a systematic review shows that there is a serious shortage in school-based prevention programs, underscoring the need for the development of these programs to better support refugee students (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Joint efforts between school, home, and community should be enhanced. Schools are encouraged to collaborate with refugee students' parents, families, school settlement workers and community allies to promote intercultural dialogue (School Mental Health-Assist, 2016).

In addition, targeted strategies may help support the development of specific SEL competencies identified as areas of need in this study, particularly self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making. Self-awareness may be strengthened through guided reflection on learning progress and structured discussions that help students identify their strengths and learning needs. Self-management skills may be supported through scaffolding strategies that encourage persistence and gradual independence during academic tasks. Responsible decision-making may be fostered by encouraging students to evaluate alternatives and make independent academic choices during tutoring or classroom activities. These targeted approaches may help refugee students gradually develop greater confidence and autonomy in their learning.

9. Concluding remark

Through observations in an after-school tutoring program, this study examined refugee high school students' SEL skills around self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Our finding shows that refugee students' performances on these skills are not optimal in general. By determining how well these refugee adolescents are doing with their schoolwork, we have answered partly the question of how well they adapt to Canadian society (Wilkinson, 2002). This paper helps fill the gap in Canadian refugee education literature given the dearth of research focused specifically on Canadian refugee students (Ratković et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, caution should be made in generalizing from this study results. One limitation of this study is the time duration. Given the time span of our internship, observations only lasted for eight weeks, which is a bit short for ethnographic research. Another important limitation related to the online nature of the tutoring environment. Because tutoring sessions were conducted virtually, opportunities to observe students' nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language, were limited. In many sessions, students chose not to turn on their cameras, and interpretations therefore relied primarily on verbal interaction and observable online behaviours. This constraint may have reduced the researchers' ability to fully interpret students' emotional responses and social interactions. In addition, although the participants stayed in the same virtual meeting room with other people, physically each participant was in a separate space. As people often act differently in groups than they do alone, some of what we observed may not be accurate for the contexts of in-person meetings. Future research needs to take this circumstance into consideration when conducting relevant studies.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the conduct of this study and the publication of this paper.

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