ISSUES OF INTEGRATION AND ESL EDUCATION: 
THE SUDANESE YOUTH OF CALGARY

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Abstract

Through explorative research, this project gathers information on many of the cultural, social and institutional factors that may be contributing to a perception of hindrance of the integration and achievement of Sudanese youth in Calgary schools. Using information and statistics from secondary sources, community and aid agencies as well as the two main school systems in Calgary, this research draws attention to the issues at hand, in an attempt to encourage future research.
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Introduction

The city of Calgary has seen its immigrant population grow dramatically over the past two decades. Within the last 10 years especially, Calgary has become home to one of the largest Sudanese populations in Canada. The Sudanese community, community organizations, academics and members of social systems are concerned with the overall wellbeing of this community and integration and education of its youth. There has been concern expressed over how these children are coping with such a dramatic change as well as to what degree they are achieving success in the current school system. Most agree that the current model of education is failing to provide an adequate education for Sudanese youth and that the consequences of this failure are leading to high drop out rates from the education system.

Coming from a country plagued by almost 60 years of ongoing war, displacement and refugee camps, the Sudanese peoples present cultural, linguistic and historical challenges that may go beyond the difficulties faced by many immigrants to obtain language and education. Some studies (see below) on ESL learners have been carried out in Calgary, however very little outlines the failure or success rates for Sudanese youth. It is therefore difficult to prove to what extent Sudanese Children are falling through the cracks.

This research project uses exploratory research, secondary research sources, literature and data provided by community organizations, school boards, and local media to examine the current issues and possible problems keeping Sudanese youth from accessing and obtaining a quality education in Calgary, Alberta. It is an overview of the salient issues
surrounding the Sudanese community as per my experience of it, as a mis en place for future research: How many Sudanese are there in Calgary? How many Sudanese children are there in the Calgary school systems? To what extent are the Sudanese successful within their current school situations? What are the needs and challenges specific to the community? How can their needs be met?

To build a stable springboard for future research, this paper substantiates its background with three reports from 1) Simich et al., 2) Roessingh and Watt, and 3) Van Ngo, that underline challenges faced in relevant situations across Canada. Second, the paper explains the author’s experiences of the Sudanese communities of Calgary. It then gives a background on the socio-economic environment of Calgary as it pertains to the Sudanese peoples. The paper looks at Sudanese youth and families within Calgary’s educational system. It follows with how stakeholders—teachers, individual schools, school boards, government policy and university teacher preparation programs—shape the current model of education. Finally, the paper recommends points that require more attention, and proposes both motivation and framework for future research.
**Major Studies**

**Roessingh and Watt**

One of the most reliable studies to date specific to the ESL population in Calgary is by Watt and Roessingh, *Some you win, most you lose: Tracking ESL student drop out in high school* (1994) with its continuation, *The Dynamics of ESL Drop-out: Plus Ca Change* (2001) in which 232 ESL students academic histories at a Calgary Board of Education high school were monitored between the years 1988-1993. The results of this research suggest that ESL drop out rates were close to 74%, significantly higher than that of the mainstream native English speaking population. (Watt & Roessingh 1994, 2001) Additional study findings indicate systematic and teaching mythology failures alongside recommendations for schools / school boards to provide more time, funding and support for quality ESL education.

Although Watt and Roessingh’s research focuses on all ESL learners and not specifically Sudanese students, it investigates three notions central to both subjects: ‘dropping out’ ‘not graduating’ or being ‘pushed out’. Their research investigates the cultural and social interpretation of the word ‘drop out’, a word that usually refers to students abandoning the school environment and their studies due to frustrations or other socio/economic factors. ‘Not graduating’ seems to be more complex as many students complete the course of high school studies but do not meet the requirements of Alberta Learning for 30 level courses due to language acquisition issues. For instance, in the Calgary Board of Education one can finish high school without graduating. Instead of fully passing or fully failing, once can receive a certificate of completion. This certificate if a way of saying a
student has accumulated 80 credits (IOP or KNE) curriculum requirements during the full 3 year term with 1 year extension of high school studies these students do not complete the government requirements for a diploma. Finally, some students are ‘pushed out’. Being ‘pushed out’ refers to simply a lack of time to complete studies before reaching the maximum age allowed.

These distinctions are key nuances in reliable data collection to determine the rate at which Sudanese students are succeeding or failing in school. Moreover, with these distinctions, Watt and Roessingh help debunk the myth that not completing high school somehow indicates an extreme failure on the part of the student: “Our concern is that a significant number of ESL may have been ‘pushed out’ of ESL educational support and into non academic main stream courses where they are more difficult to identify and track. In short, this is an issue of identifying ESL need.” (Watt and Roessingh, 2001, p.13)

When we factor realities of a refugee population, with gaps in education and/or frequent lack of foundation literacy in first languages, on top of the ESL need, we begin to see the possibility of higher drop out / push out / non-graduating rates in Sudanese learners.

**Hieu Van Ngo**

Calgary, and delineates key issues in the Calgary ESL environment in which the Sudanese are a part.

The coalition’s report is a detailed map of shortfalls and recommendations for many of the stakeholders involved in providing quality ESL education in Calgary and Alberta. This research investigates funding and ESL program structures, but also draws heavily from interviews and reflections by ESL learners and their families. Most of all, Van Ngo’s study makes the pivotal link between those failing to graduate with literacy skills and English language acquisition: “The consequent lack of high quality, equitable ESL services has contributed to the bleak reality of illiteracy, poor academic achievement, and persistently high drop out rates among ESL learners.” (Van Ngo, 2001, p.7)

Simich, Hamilton and Baya

Whereas the Watt et al. and Ngo both raise key ESL dilemmas in Calgary, Simich, Hamilton and Baya’s 2006 study, *Mental Distress, Economic Hardship and Expectations of Life in Canada among Sudanese Newcomers*, pertains specifically to Sudanese settlement of 220 refugees and consequential health challenges in seven cities in Eastern Canada. The importance of their research lies in proving that many of the integration issues the Sudanese face are, in fact, specific to their communities:

Results indicate that those Sudanese for whom life in Canada was not what they expected and those who experienced economic hardship as measured by worry over having enough money for food or medicine experienced poorer overall health and reported a greater number of symptoms of psychological distress...individuals who were experiencing economic hardship were between 2.6 and 3.9 times as likely to experience loss of sleep, constant strain, unhappiness and depression, and bad memories as individuals who do not experience hardship. Healthcare providers should be aware of how post-migration social disadvantages may
increase the risk of mental distress particularly among refugees. (Simich, Hamilton & Baya, 2006, abstract)

And secondly, that challenges that their youth face relate to language acquisition and communication issues at school.

Although not specific to the Sudanese of Calgary, the study does investigate the difficulties that Sudanese immigrants/refugees face when attempting to integrate into Canadian models of school, employment, housing and culture. This research provides much needed particular background information on Sudanese perceptions of the issues they face and provides evidence that supports many of the assumptions made in this exploratory research project.
**Contexts:**

**Personal experience**

I have worked as an educator in Canada and overseas for over eight years. My passion for working with second language learners came during a two year stay in Beijing China. During this time I had a first hand opportunity to know the frustrations and difficulties that go along with living and learning a second language in a foreign culture.

My experience working with Sudanese youth began four years ago while working as a junior high and elementary teacher in ethnically diverse and economically depressed communities of Calgary. Over the years I witnessed frustrations growing amongst Sudanese children as well as teaching staff that was unable or unwilling to accommodate their many educational, social and psychological needs. Some recurring concepts that will be discussed further in this paper stem from my own observations that:

- **The majority of Sudanese children want to learn, want to have fun, want to attend school and want to be accepted and successful.** Some were very successful learners in their country of origin but are having difficulty transferring those skills to schools in Calgary.

- **The culture is not being understood.** There seem to be numerous situations in which cultural values, skills, timelines and motivations are being misunderstood by teachers and school administration. As a result, Sudanese culture is not being respected and in many cases, students have been disciplined or excluded from the mainstream for misunderstandings. One common example is watching young Sudanese boys roughhousing, what they consider play, schools often consider it as fighting and bullying.

- **Many Sudanese children are struggling to learn solid literacy skills** of reading, writing and comprehension of the English language. By struggling to learn the language, they are unable to participate in the classroom environment to study the same content of their peers leading to confrontations and feelings of being singled out or excluded.
• **Language barriers are often the cause of miscommunication, behavioral issues and frustration** over the inability to explain one self or ones actions. To further exacerbate this situation, school systems seem to be lacking translators thereby making it difficult to communicate with families in their own languages.

• **There appear to be significant psychological and behavioral issues that may have been caused by war**, violence, displacement, the loss of family members, and the trauma of moving to a new country. Many of these issues are not being met with the proper social mental welfare services that they require and incidents of violence amongst youth are not uncommon.

• **Parental input and presence at the school level appears to be quite low** especially for telephone communications and parent teacher meetings.
What makes Calgary Unique?

Calgary has not traditionally been as popular of a destination for new immigrants like other major Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Within the past decade especially, Calgary as a city community has seen exponential growth in employment, property value and mass migration within the past decade primarily due to the boom in the oil and gas resources sector. (Calgary Health Region, 2006) This recent economic boom has attracted many immigrants with the promise of a better quality of life, employment and education opportunities for families and their children.

Calgary currently has a visible minority population of 18% and is predicted to grow to approximately 24% by 2017. (City of Calgary, 2003) It is also now home to the second largest population of Sudanese peoples in Canada after Toronto. (Este, 2006) The face and the culture of the city are changing, and this large and rapid growth in population creates some very real socio-economic factors that many in the community face.

A dramatic shortage of affordable housing and a strain on the cities social infrastructure may be placing considerable stress on newcomers and hampering their ability to be successful in Canadian and Calgarian society. The 2006-2016 Calgary Socioeconomic reports that:

As Calgary grows, the social needs of the city are growing and becoming increasingly complex. This is causing stress on the city’s network of voluntary organizations that provide the range of community services that respond to these needs. Escalating costs and the scarcity of labour is exacerbating this stress as non-profit organizations find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain staff as it is difficult to offer competitive wages in this environment. This is challenging the viability of the city’s array of social service, arts, cultural and sporting organizations. (City of Calgary, 2006, p.117)
With such a large demand on the city infrastructure and funding, how will and have new immigrants, specifically the Sudanese community, been afforded the opportunities to quality language instruction and education, housing, employment and an overall quality of life? In south east Calgary for example, district 10 is home to the largest percentage of immigrants and Sudanese population. (Calgary Regional Health Authority, 2006) The communities themselves face some rather unhealthy statistics that also affect how communities and individuals are able to adjust and integrate into the mainstream culture.

The city infrastructure of community resources, affordable housing and funding does not appear as if it was prepared to meet the demand of such rapid growth. If the Sudanese Youth are having a great degree of difficulty integrating into the school system, additional complications in regards to poverty, housing and accessing social resources may be further exacerbating the issue. If these assumptions are true, one could conclude that current complications in regards to access to resources and supporting immigrant communities might compound if not properly addressed by all stakeholders and funding.
Who are the Sudanese in Calgary?

The ongoing civil wars in Sudan from 1955-1972 and then from 1983-2005 have caused considerable damage to the Sudanese peoples. Large groups began arriving mostly since the mid 1990’s as refugees and government assisted refugees. Since then, individuals have come under a variety of immigration programs including individual and family class sponsorship. (Simich, Hamilton & Baya, 2006) The ongoing civil war has resulted in a mass exodus causing peoples to flee to refuges camps, internally displaced as well as to neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Egypt and abroad. After over 20 years of fighting, many children are now coming to Canada as immigrants or refugees after having lived in a state of displacement or refugee camps. These life altering events have led many to have huge gaps in education, some even arriving in Canada having never attended or very little experience in a formal school environment. (Simich, Hamilton & Baya, 2006)

As mentioned above, Calgary is now home to one of the largest Sudanese populations in Canada. Very little recent statistics on the population size exist, although estimates by Sudanese community members have ranged from 3,000 to 13,000. However, the Catholic Immigrant Womens’ Association suggests that the population lies somewhere between 5000-7000. (CIWA, 2007)

This large discrepancy in population statistics may be due to personal identity and how people choose to classify themselves. While presumptions about Sudanese youth seem to be based on the idea that there exists one single unified community, the Sudanese
communities of Calgary appear fragmented, often times divided by religion, ethnicity, language, class and support for governments in Sudan. This issue is not specific to Calgary alone and has been reported in other studies in Canada and Australia. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) (Silvio, 2006)

Some Sudanese classify themselves as Sudanese, while others who were born in refugee camps or who lived outside of the country may claim to be from Chad, Ethiopia or Egypt. Still, others may label themselves by tribe, linguistic affiliation or religious group and some may simply state black. The City of Calgary 2006 census states that there were 13,665 blacks, 11,395 Arabs or west Asians, 2,250 visible minorities not included in any other group and 3,610 who claimed to be of multiple visible minority groups. (City of Calgary, 2006)(Calgary Health Region, 2006) With such a broad spectrum of classification, it is difficult to even determine the number of people specifically of African descent, let alone specifically of Sudanese descent. The statistical data collected thus far can be interpreted in many ways, therefore our estimate of the Sudanese population seems to be educated guesses at best. Therefore, further research must first begin with collecting accurate data to determine the size of the community in Calgary. One notion that bonds many immigrant communities is that the move to Canada marked an opportunity for their children to obtain an education and have a better quality of life. (Brown, 1997)

All immigrants and refugees cope with the challenges of settlement and adaptation by drawing on available resources for support. A crucial source of psychological support is normally ethnic identity, and the most important social support is usually obtained from family and one’s own ethnic community. In this respect, the Sudanese are no different from many other newcomer groups. One defining feature of the Sudanese population that is critical for settlement services,
however, is the internal complexity of its ethnic composition. (Simich, Hamilton & Baya, 2006, p.5)

In this respect, are the Sudanese an example of a new type of immigrant and refugee population because of their internal complexity? Do they pose new challenges to the current education and support systems that may never have been designed to meet the needs of such a diverse population? My own personal observations as well as those expressed by the Sudanese communities point to the following as significant causes of difficulties with integration:

- **The breakdown of the traditional extended family** structure caused by the split in families and the inability to maintain that structure in Calgary. This includes the loss of elders and traditional or cultural methods of problem solving, or communal welfare.

- **The changing of family and gender roles** has also had significant impact as many women who now work full time and where the unemployment rate of Sudanese men is higher. (Chuol, date unknown) Traditional change in the concept of man as provider has caused significant domestic disturbance.

- **Deaths of loved ones and PTSD** (post-traumatic stress disorder) the stress of moving to a new country, finding employment often outside of ones field of work, finding affordable housing and the stress of trying to succeed financially.

- **Conflicting Sudanese and Canadian value systems** on what is important, what each persons role is in society and especially in terms of what the parents and teachers responsibilities and roles are in regards to schooling.

- **Language barriers and lack of translation** services leading to obtaining needed resources, training and employment.

- **Internal conflict within Sudanese communities** in Calgary between religious, linguistic, ethnic, tribal and political divides
Stakeholders

A number of stakeholders were consulted in an attempt to acquire data and information from multiple perspectives for this exploration of Sudanese educational issues in Calgary:

- Multiple Sudanese community associations including the Calgary Sudanese Family Integration Center and the African Sudanese Association of Calgary.
- Catholic and Community aid organizations such as Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, The Margaret Chisholm House, Calgary Métis Family Services.
- Federally, provincially and locally funded charitable groups and organizations including the Coalition for the Equal Access to Education, Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth.
- Federal agencies such as Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Heritage Canada.
- Local government services such as The city of Calgary, Calgary Police Services, Calgary Health Region, Child and Family Services.
- The justice and social welfare system such as The Calgary Police Service, Calgary Child and Family Services.
- The two major school boards in Calgary; The Calgary Catholic School District (CSSD) and the Calgary Board of Education (CBE).
- Individual schools, administrators and teachers.
- University of Calgary: Faculty of Education.

As aforementioned, the cultural and linguistic intricacies of the Sudanese communities sometimes posed a challenge to information sharing, data gathering, and determining. The increased number of stakeholders occasionally produced a sense of competition between agencies and school boards for local, provincial and federal funding alongside conflicting internal policies, ideologies or organizational goals.

Nonetheless, the tie that binds each of the stakeholders together was/is the unanimous recognition that Sudanese youths were and are struggling within the schools. To better get a grasp on how the Sudanese youth are struggling and possibly why, the following groups of stakeholders have been logically delineated into individual sections for further consideration: Sudanese youth; Parents and Parental Inclusion; Teachers, Schools and ESL Students; School boards; and Provincial Government and Leadership.
Sudanese Youth

How has the Sudanese community been impacted by the migration to Canada and how have these factors affected the integration of the youth? Although there has been much speculation, a recent printed *24 hours* interview on Sudanese youth in Calgary with Dak Nyuon, President of the African Sudanese Association of Calgary revealed that, “There are many problems with Sudanese Youth now,” he said, “We know in the background that they’re not in school and not working jobs, so we want to know what they’re doing”(Logan, 2007, p.5) These concerns being are echoed by stakeholders and local media, and are even being linked to possible gang involvement, violence, drugs and prostitution. (Logan, 2007)

Recently, statistics for Sudanese youth drop out rates were quoted as being as high as 80%, (Logan, 2007) although no research study has been conducted to prove this number and very little information on drop out or push out rates by ethnicity is collected by schools and school boards. The 80% drop-out rates does, however, recall Watt and Roessingh’s drop out rates of 74%, for ESL learners (and could be based loosely on the latter number). (Watt & Roessingh 1994, 2001)

The rough estimate of Sudanese drop-out rates originates, in my opinion, from systematic error. For example, in the Catholic School Board System, once students are enrolled in schools through their respective reception centers, very little communication or follow up is conducted. Schools are not always willing, or able to collect information on ethnicity.
By gathering detailed data we run the possibility of stereotyping large groups of diverse people, perhaps even over simplifying the complexity of their situation. However, without the collection of accurate statistics, it is difficult to determine the exact nature of perceived issues, as well as how much resources, funding and community support are required. (Goddard & Hart, 2007) In the case of the Sudanese communities and my own experiences within school settings, there exists significant anecdotal information to suggest that the barriers they face in acquiring meaningful education are significant and alarmingly higher than the mainstream native English speaking population.

Numerous studies in Canada and the USA are proving that ESL learners are more likely to either drop out or be pushed out of school. Furthermore, this research has shown that those ESL learners with significant gaps in their education histories are at even more of a disadvantage. (Silvio, 2006) (Gunderson & Clarke, 1998)

There appears to be some resistance by many Sudanese youth to participate and work within the current school model, especially when it comes to ESL programs. In various ESL based research projects, many Sudanese youth have reported that being placed in ESL classes or being pulled from the regular classroom environment in groups can be a humiliating process. Pull out refers to instruction in which individuals or small groups are removed from mainstream classes for specific language acquisition activities and assistance. Some youth are pulled out for core curriculum support with an ESL teacher
while others are left in the mainstream classroom with little extra help. Pulling students from classes for intensive ESL may assist with literacy, however as Cornell points out, “… separating LEP students from their mainstream classmates could constitute a form of segregation and a denial of equal education”. (Cornell, 1995, p.15)

My own experiences within the school setting and throughout my time working with Sudanese youth ages 6-14 have discovered several significant feeling, barriers and conflicts to be of great importance, many are confirmed in the literature:

- **Students have expressed feelings of frustration due to language barriers** and cultural misunderstandings, emotional or behavioral issues and even the feeling that many ESL programs do not challenge students enough and do not allow them to work on the same topics and content as regular classroom students. (Cornell, 1995)

- **Feelings of isolation and being singled out.** One issue that appears to be consistent among Sudanese youth is how they feel they are perceived and treated due to their skin colour; the way students talk and even the clothing they wear. (Budhu, 2001. p.16)

- **It takes approximately 5-7 years to gain a full understanding of the English language,** according to Collier and Thomas (1989, p.26-38). Often Sudanese students are arriving in their late teens and are not afforded this amount of time.

- **Students have had difficulty coping with and/or understand school structure and school rules.** Both rules and structures have not been explained, or are not understood. Much of the confusion of behavioral problems often involves language barriers. Students who do not understand the direction or rules are seen as being intentionally disobedient.

- **Assumptions / perceptions of Sudanese youth by schools and the teaching community** have also contributed to tensions and miscommunications. Broad and sweeping assumptions that all Sudanese have lived in refugee camps, that they all have limited schooling, that they all have very little foundation in learning lead to misdiagnosis of needs. Mass stereotypes and grouping lead to the assumption that they have no knowledge or skill sets in their first language. Although many students have arrived in Canada under the above circumstances, those who do have knowledge and skills in their native language are often grouped together instead of properly assessing each individual.
Many Sudanese, especially those who came as refugees maintain the idea that their presence in Canada is not permanent. In their paper entitled, Cultural dilemmas of Sudanese Canadian Refugees, authors Doyle Hatt, Deng Akol and Kuot Leng (2004, p.7) explore the idea that many Sudanese view their status in Canada as being temporary and that they are only here as a place to stay, “until some time in the indefinite future when they are able to return home.” This lack of a sense of permanency often leads to emotions of apathy, frustration and acting out against the system.

To further complicate matters, most children are placed in grades based on their age, called age appropriate placements. However, I have witnessed many situations in which students are arriving in Canada with conflicting documentation on what their age really is. As well, Citizenship and immigration also appears to have policies in assigning ages for Government assisted refugee situations. Often times, the result of older students being placed in lower grades either accidentally or on purpose leads to issues of frustration over appropriate content and feeling different from their classmates who may be less developed both mentally and physically than they are.

Sudanese, like other ESL learners often enter the school system at a disadvantage from native language learners. (Watt & Roessingh, 1994) One issue that may also be of huge importance draws from common linguistic theories on the importance of having a solid foundation in ones native language before learning the foundations of a second or third. The reason why these gaps may play an important role in current difficulties with integration and language acquisition stem from a linguistic theory centered on the importance of creating a solid foundation in ones first language. Significant research findings in the area of second language absorption support the notion that having a solid foundation in ones first language, (speaking, reading and writing) are important factors in learning a second language. (Watt and Roessingh, 1994, 2001)

All of these issues contribute to the very complicated issue of personal identity. In an attempt to teach the Sudanese English and integrate them into a western and Canadian way of life, the system of education may unintentionally be ignoring and contributing to the confusion over exactly who these children are. Some Sudanese grew up in Sudan, while others were raised in camps or communities in neighboring countries or abroad, while others of the next generation will be Canadian born. Since language is so often linked to personal and cultural identity, one question that must be asked is; To what degree will these children be continuing their studies in their native tongue? It is these
issues of native and secondary language acquisition and competency that bring up inherent personal, social and cultural conflicts.
Parents and Parental Inclusion

"Sudanese will never be able to find a solution unless they admit there is a problem," said Yol Piom, elder in Sudanese community in Edmonton. "We (parents) have failed our kids and now our kids are failing us," he added. (Angeth, 2007, p.6)

New immigrant communities often are faced with the barrier of the separation between home and school, where during the day students work within English and the rules of western culture and during the evenings they return to their own linguistic and cultural norms. Although current ESL practice supports speaking ones first language at home, there seems to be confusion over what role parents are to play in their children’s schooling in Canada.

As Simich agrees, parents are primarily concerned with finding and obtaining employment and affordable housing. (Simich et al., 2006) Parents with limited language proficiency or whose qualifications do not transfer to Canada from Sudan or country of origin, tend to get jobs outside of their professions or training. In my experience, the majority of my students’ mothers worked as night cleaners or a night-shift job. By working at nights or shift work, parents are not always available to assist children during the evening, or conversely, are not able to communicate with schools during day time hours. This in turn, causes yet another break down in the chain of already weak communication between school and home.

Schools and teachers have reported relatively low input from Sudanese parents. A variety of potential factors, in my opinion, that could influence this perception, are listed as follows:
• **Many, but not all, parents do not have a strong command of English** and may be limited in their ability to help their children with school work. Furthermore, issues of illiteracy and limited education backgrounds also affect the degree to which parents feel they can help their children.

• **Conflict over working hours** combined with the stress of attempting to communicate with teachers with limited English or a lack of access to translators for school-parent communication also seems to cause communication difficulty and is often interpreted by school systems as parental disinterest in a child’s education.

• **Conflict over expectations of what the roles of parents and teachers are.** (Van Ngo, 2001) (Scollen & Scollen, 2001) This appears particularly important when dealing with discipline issues at school. If a discipline situation arises within a school, parents are often informed, but an explanation over what their role is in this process may not be explained or culturally clear. (Chuol, 2005)

• **Not all parents are informed of the rights in Canada**, their rights to oppose or have their say in how their children are treated and educated.
Teachers, Schools and ESL Students

From my work within the Separate School Board in ESL, the following section is a bird’s eye view of the ESL links and difficulties facing teachers, schools and students.

ESL students are usually admitted through an intake center that assesses language proficiency and needs. After initial assessment, this information is passed onto schools and the center has little to no communication with students after they have departed. Thus, the information on students is passed on to school secretaries, counselors or ESL program teachers for further follow up. There is no blanket school board guideline for how this information is received or passed onto staff in schools; instead the flow of information is unique to each school. Often times, important information on linguistic and social needs is not made available to school staff.

School administrators deal with funding issues and the distribution of funds to academic and athletic programs. As such, their primary objectives are to work within budgetary restraints, maintain and increase enrollment, ensure accountability for funding, health and safety guidelines, implementing new government and school board based programs. Given such large demands on administration for overall school operation, ESL programs and learner needs are often placed behind those of the mainstream academic learners.

Like the mainstream population, ESL students spend a large portion of their day with teachers; often times longer than they see their own parents, so it becomes quite obvious that teachers would play a significant role in helping youth acclimatize and integrate into Canadian culture. Most often, people enter the teaching profession because they love
what they do. They enjoy communicating with youth and love the theories and pedagogies of education. With new pressures to integrate technology, meet government examination criteria, incorporate health curriculum as well as core and extra curricular activities, there seems to be a sense of urgency in schools leading to increased expectations and the stress of meeting demands. Teachers are often overloaded with expectations of meeting course objectives, running extra curricular activities and school based activities on top of the need to teach to governmental exams and achievement tests. As well, the types of programs we teach are generally teacher centered and focus on using spoken language as the main source of information delivery. (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007) With the current level of expectations teachers often do not have the time or resources to adapt each subject to the needs of ESL students, and in schools where there is limited support by a qualified and effective ESL support team, these students often end up reading silently or sitting in class unable to participate.

Given large and often stressful teaching loads, many face huge difficulties in differentiating instruction to ESL learners, especially now where full classroom integration of a diverse body of students is popular due to trends in educational theory and as the result of mass budget cuts.

In my experience, ESL programs for the most part are run secondary to core programs and rarely do schools with large secondary language learning populations take a fully integrated approach placing the ESL program at the forefront of their school planning needs, even in schools with ESL numbers as high as 30%. I have been in many schools
where the ratio of ESL teachers to students has exceeded 60:1, a ratio where very little effective teaching can occur without additional support and resources.

It is also interesting to note that in my experience, ESL teachers especially have a high rate of movement from school to school and tend to stay at schools for shorter durations than other academic classroom teachers. Because ESL funding is based on student numbers, more or less ESL instructional support may change from year to year as enrollment of ESL students’ changes. (Van Ngo, 2001) As well, if enrollment figures change during the summer months or beginning of school year, additional funding often becomes available and extra ESL teachers are often hired mid year, and often for half time positions. Very rarely are these positions filled by qualified ESL trained staff as they are inconsistent and lack the employment stability that one could find in other teaching positions or occupations. Therefore, finding and maintaining qualified ESL teachers and programs is difficult within our current school systems.

Another difficulty within ESL teaching and learning is the scope of ESL teacher qualification and the viability of ESL programs for the students. Besides academic training in the field, ESL teachers must create programs based on effective and consistent pedagogy, but also on personal experience. As a teacher in Calgary, it has been extremely rare for me to meet another teacher who has had experience as an immigrant, living and functioning in a foreign culture, or has the command and / or understanding of more than one language.

Within the English speaking mainstream university education programs, teachers are
rarely schooled or educated in second languages and are thus unaware of the stresses and
difficulties involved in entering a full immersion/second language environment. They are
also rarely trained in the areas of psychology and social work and therefore are often
unaware of the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and psychological issues
involved with displacement, the loss of loved ones and culture shock. With the increased
movement of peoples and the changing face of Calgary’s population and multicultural
makeup, the way teachers are have been taught in the past, and are taught today, may not
be meeting the needs of their new clientele. As to be explored upon further investigation
of teacher training practices, many teachers simply lack cultural training and awareness
of cultural differences, the difficulty in obtaining a second language, the ignorance of the
importance of another cultures customs, rights, rituals and traditions and the impact on
the climate of education in this city.

In the discussions I have had with community groups and ESL advocates, proper training
for ESL teachers involves the lack of qualified and/or certified staff has been a recurring
issue. Although universities offer courses in world religions, sociology and anthropology,
very few universities in Canada have integrated a multicultural and multilingual approach
to teaching pedagogy into their training programs. (Duffy, 2003)(Van Ngo, 2001)

Social institutions and universities also share some of the responsibility for how the
above model is created, implemented and perpetuated. Few universities in Canada offer
mandatory courses on multiculturalism to future teachers as part of their training
programs. (Ghosh & Tarrow, 1993) The pedagogy of creating good teachers has also
been mentioned in several studies and publications that question how teachers are being trained for a culture of ESL learners. (Van Ngo, 2001), (Arias & Poynor, 2001)
School Boards

In my eyes, school boards also own a share of the responsibility for the current issues surrounding Sudanese Youth and ESL programs. In Canada, school boards are responsible for ensuring that all students receive an equal access to a valid and effective education. In this salient position, school boards like individual schools and ESL programs therefore tend to draw significant criticism from community associations, Sudanese communities, parents and students. (Rajkumar, 2006)

School boards are government funded agencies, thus often deeply embroiled in their own internal politics for funding and program structure. Often top heavy and political, many initiatives designed to improve students health and access to education often take so long to develop and initiate that their solutions are often out of date by the time they are implemented.

Community groups are highly critical of the lack of political will and funding that ESL programs have received. In “Myths and Delusions: The State of ESL in Large Canadian School Boards” author Mary Meyers states that school boards have projected the notion that the complete classroom integration of ESL learners is the best solution for integration and language acquisition. This premise has allowed them to reduce budgets for ESL programs and redirect funding to other areas. (Meyers, 2003)

While the scope of this research paper does not allow for an intensive investigation of CBE and CSSD policies and inner workings, my own experiences and observations are
paralleled in a report by the Calgary based organization, The Coalition for equal access to education. In their 2001 report, entitled *English as a second language education: Context, current responses, and recommendations for new directions*, author Hieu Van Ngo enumerates the following deficiencies in school board approaches to ESL education:

- lack of an ESL service delivery model that is based on sound educational theory of second language acquisition;
- lack of coordinated services;
- lack of formal curricula for kindergarten to grade 9;
- lack of a rationally sound funding formula for adequate ESL services;
- lack of an accountability framework to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of ESL services;
- lack of centralized services;
- lack of mechanisms for assessing and monitoring academic progress of ESL students;
- lack of qualified ESL personnel. (Ngo, 2001, p.27)

Although the deficiencies that Ngo cites are major concerns, the lack of mandated curricula for grades K through 9 remains a primary concern for me as an ESL teacher. Unlike core subjects, there is no consistency in the types of materials used, course content, relevant materials, content examinations or benchmarks for achievement.

Without a relevant and culturally sensitive ESL curriculum for those in the K to 9 levels, it becomes extremely difficult for schools to ensure that ESL learners have equal access to programs which support their needs, such as age appropriate and reading level appropriate literacy skills. It is also difficult to document the effectiveness of ESL programs or success/failure rates of its students without a common bar (in conjunction with differentiated approaches) from which to measure it.
Provincial Government and Leadership

“I think the civil rights question of our nation today is that of access to a quality education,” he said. “The lower class – many of whom are people of color – are disproportionately represented among drop-outs … and other social pathologies. The means by which those populations can have a chance to be successful and address some of their problems is through education. So we are talking about ensuring access to a quality education for all children.” (Gonzalez, 2001, p.1)

The underlying notions of multicultural education as outlined above are the democratic values of equal access and opportunity. Alberta’s policy on multicultural education, while linked to this country’s charters, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; The Multiculturalism Act of Canada, and The Alberta Cultural Heritage Act., reflects this belief. Specifically, the Alberta Multiculturalism Act of 1990 states: “… the main objectives were to encourage respect for and promote an awareness of the multicultural heritage of Alberta and to foster an environment in which all Albertans could participate and contribute to the cultural, social, economic and political life of their province.”(Dewing & Leman, 2006, p.14)

However, over the past decade especially, goals of education have changed to focus on the market value of education, rather than individual values, emotions and goals. During the 1990’s the government and school boards in Calgary made significant cuts to its funding for ESL programs. (Duffy, 2001)(Van Ngo, 2001) Instead of creating collaborative and community based education, there has been a large shift to make education competitive and economically viable.

Injecting funds, structure, guidance and support at into the present education system is an investment in the future, as Van Ngo explains below:
Learners who are denied the opportunity to develop literacy and realize their full educational potential do not simply fade away. They may rely heavily on our social assistance programs and community services. Their issues may also be manifested in other forms of social costs, including crime and violence, unemployment, suicide, alcoholism, and so on. Community agencies have become increasingly alarmed by the high visibility in their services of youth from an ESL background. (Van Ngo, 2007, p. 10)

Importantly, provincial and government leadership must include all stakeholders in their plans and not strictly adopt a lead from the top mentality, as Dr. Thomas Ricento, English as an Additional Chair, University of Calgary outlines in his five principles for Immigration and language policy:

1. With regard to the education of English Language Learners (ELLs), there is not one correct approach or policy that can be uniformly applied.

2. Policies concerned with language and social integration need to be sensitive to local needs and culture.

3. The kinds of support that governments and other agencies provide should be negotiated in partnership with local community organizations, schools, and other stakeholders, including universities.

4. Policy frameworks must be evaluated on an on-going basis; this includes periodic assessment of how the original goals are being met (or are not being met).

5. All stakeholders must feel a sense of investment in the process, evaluation, and reassessment of public policy related to the learning and use of language(s). (Ricento, 2007, p.1)

Thus, the Alberta Government, and Alberta Learning play a key role in shifting the political and social will of the province and the city by their policy making (and breaking). In order for there to be changes for how the Sudanese and other ESL learners are received and educated at the school level, there needs to be a will by the provincial government to create positive change.
Recommendations

Many of the following recommendations are not new to those who have campaigned against the various current levels of education in Calgary, Canada and North America as a whole. Although the Sudanese Youth and the diversity of their learning needs may be unique, it appears that the current system of assisting newcomers is not being met for most ESL learners. If the education system as highlighted by so many writers, advocates and community organizations is failing the majority of ESL learners, one must come to the conclusion that the Sudanese Youth whose education background and immigrant experiences are more extreme, may be even worse off.

Recommendations for Parents:

- Seek, receive, and review specific information on how and why schools function the way they do (in the appropriate language(s) when available through translation)
- Be informed and ask how to assist the education process at home and school
- Learn and be aware of legal responsibilities that schools, students, and parents have.
- Take advantage of opportunities to work or volunteer in schools with programs, festivals and school-wide community events.

Recommendations for Community Agencies:

- Increase communication with school boards and access to individual schools.
- Assist the Sudanese community by helping educate parents on their roles and expectations.
- Continue strong pursuit of school boards to increase funding and resources for ESL programs.
Recommendations for School Boards:

- Develop and implement a district wide ESL mandate that will meet the reception, educational, information, and assessment requirements for Sudanese and all ESL students.
- Ensure that ESL funding is properly directed to ESL programs.
- Create clear and open channels of communication between intake centers and schools.
- Review standardized tests and diagnostic tools, recommend suitable materials for determining English language proficiency that reflects current research and district's Assessment for Learning model.
- Create programs for easing students into a stable school structure.
- Place more emphasis on hiring qualified and experienced ESL staff.
- Create long term ESL programs with more emphasis on retaining ESL teachers for consistent programming.
- Develop and review comprehensive short and long term plans.

Recommendations for Alberta Learning:

- Create province wide curricula for grades K to 9 ESL programming.
- Create universal benchmarks for English language proficiency and testing.
- Identify consistent critical learning outcomes and objectives.
- Provide additional funding to schools and school boards ESL programs and a multicultural model for education.
- Assist in the creation of program materials and ESL school resources.

Recommendations for Schools:

- Ensure that ESL funding is directed to ESL programs
- Collaborate with school boards to collect data on success and drop out rates of ESL students at all levels.
- Increase the opportunities for Sudanese parents to actively participate in their children’s education.
• Draw from the vast resources offered by community organizations.

• Draw from the experiences, skills, and traditions of the Sudanese and other immigrant communities.

• Provide additional information to Sudanese families on the inner workings of the school system.

• Create stronger internal communication structures to introduce incoming Sudanese students histories/files to staff members.

• Provide consistent and reliable translation services.

• Create support networks that assist immigrant and refugee families with obtaining community and social welfare resources.

Recommendations for Teachers:

• Request and pursue more training and expertise on multiculturalism and the impact of cross cultural education.

• Request and receive specialized training, certification or diploma, as an ESL teacher.

• Request access to additional ongoing professional development opportunities that deal with language acquisition and literacy.

• Become more aware of how cultural values affect education especially in the area of integration issues.

• Maintain ongoing contact with Sudanese families through the use of interpreters.

• Adapt pedagogy for how they teach and how their teaching must adapt to understand the needs of a changing clientele.

Recommendations for the Community and Youth:

• Seek out opportunities to identify with your own culture, and ways strengthen your foundation in your native language

• Work within the system that is presented.

• Strive to achieve an education, even if your presence is only temporary.
A Springboard for future Research

Purpose

While the three reports highlighted in this proposal, in conjunction with the author’s experience teaching his Sudanese students, have focused on integration and education difficulties in ESL and Sudanese populations in a Canadian context, specific research in regards to the Sudanese youth of Calgary has yet to be conducted. The need for additional studies is not strictly limited to the education practice and theory, but stretches across the fields of multiculturalism, human rights policy, university teacher preparation pedagogy and linguistics.

However, for practical purposes, it is necessary to find a point of debarkation. Although research is not fully a numbers game, and every learning case is unique, the need to draw attention to the emergent and present issues in the Calgary school system is urgent. To this aim, documentation is paramount. In other words, to “prove” there is an area of need, a primary study needs to be set up and presented in such a way that data is repeatedly tractable, and quantifiable. Whereas this project relies heavily on observation, experience and educational theory, the next important step for researchers is to collect reliable data on the numbers of Sudanese within the two main school boards in Calgary. Only after this information is collected can further long term studies be designed to determine graduation/drop out rates and to monitor the extent and rate of change over time.
The next step for researchers is to answer the following questions:

- How many Sudanese youth are in our school systems?
- What is the break down by age, gender, ethnicity and linguistic group?

**Methodology**

The least labour intensive method for data collection would be draw from the records already being collected by school boards in Calgary. Both the CBE and the CSSD keep detailed records of all government funded ESL students who are receiving ESL supplementary grant funding in addition to the basic instructional grant given to all mainstream students.

Researchers would require access to those lists and the opportunity to obtain and categorize students by:

1) name: to be assigned a number for anonymity
2) age
3) grade
4) gender
5) native languages

The Calgary Board of Education and the Calgary Separate School District each have their own policies regarding access to and release of private information. Therefore,
information would need to be collected through ethical procedures that ensured the anonymity of research subjects and the security of collected data.

**Funding and Support**

Such a study may be eligible for funding from a number of local, provincial and federal agencies and or stakeholders. (Please refer to Stakeholders section of the paper.)

With permission to consult school board data lists, man-power support would entail a project leader and data collection assistants. To accommodate the Sudanese communities of Calgary, it may be necessary to acquire the assistance of support staff from each linguistic, ethnic or religious group, which could be made available through stakeholder agencies.

**Motivation**

Motivation for further research stems from a community development approach as well as from education (ESL) theory. Firstly, there is a need to address the concerns for the general health and welfare of the Sudanese community, but this cannot be done without support and funding which would come from baseline statistics. Secondly, there is a need to investigate to what extant the current models of education are serving or failing the Sudanese community, and again, this can be only done if the extent of failure is known.

Furthermore, the civil unrest in Sudan has not ended. Current tensions and instability in the south and now even more so in the Darfur region may force more people into a state of forced migration within their own country and abroad. Therefore a primary motivation
for follow up research is not only to look back at how the systems were unable to serve the community, but to anticipate and eventually (with further) create support structures for the next wave of people.

Lastly, although the data collected is specific to the Sudanese population, the model for data collection and formulation of need assessment could be used in the future for other large populations that immigrate or are forced to relocate. Given that no plan exists to deal with large diverse and needy population movements to either of the school boards in Calgary, the next step of research could seek to provide ways of creating flexible models capable of assessing and meeting the needs of new populations regardless of religious, ethnic or cultural makeup.
Conclusion

It would be easy to single out only schools for the difficulties that Sudanese children appear to be facing; however, blame cannot be placed on a single organization or educational structure. If there is a failure, it is possible that all stakeholders within this system have contributed to it.

Although it may be difficult to prove to what degree Sudanese children are struggling within our school system, research into ESL success rates and comparisons with other new immigrant communities clearly demonstrates that there exist significant social, cultural and linguistic barriers. As a city community, all stakeholders within Calgary must begin to focus on trans-cultural skills, trans-cultural communication, and the creation of trans-cultural networks.

No one person or system can possibly be at fault, in fact it appears that all stakeholders share some blame and are accountable for whatever failures may be occurring within the system. As the city of Calgary and Canadian culture as a whole begins to move towards larger numbers of immigrant populations and a more diverse society the need for change is vital. Change is slow, and there must first be a political will and a social want to move towards a broader understanding of multiculturalism and integration. Further research is required in specific areas in an attempt to reveal the truths behind each issue. Such research requires the cooperation and collaboration of all stake holders involved.
References Cited


