

Dimmer switch on dreams

As more refugee children arrive in Waterloo Region, education cutbacks are hurting their efforts to learn English

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Note

They still have the big eyes and soft, round cheeks of babies. But these children, 12- and 13-year-old students at Sunnyside Senior Public School in Kitchener, have had their innocence wrenched away by war, poverty and homelessness.

Before they came to Canada, they survived in refugee camps in Africa. They've watched soldiers break into their homes in Bosnia and seen relatives shot in Kosovo. They've left their cities and villages with almost nothing, often travelling through several countries before reaching Canada.

Many can speak several languages when they arrive in Waterloo Region's schools -- but not English. And that's what threatens the future of these children, who are among 6,600 students in Waterloo Region struggling to learn the language.

There's nothing unusual about Sunnyside except that, with 37 students in the English as a second language (ESL) program, it has the highest number of recent immigrants of any elementary school in the region. Most are refugees.

They're drawn most of all to the English as a second language room, with its colourful wallhangings, comfortable sofas and big square table laden with tabouli, chocolate chip cookies and crisp, salty snacks someone brought back from a visit to Macedonia.

Siba Ghrear, a soft-spoken 12-year-old girl from Syria, wants to be an astronaut or work in linguistics when she grows up. Cheeky, charming Arif Mohamed, from Somalia, wants to be a cop like his grandfather. Thoughtful Besa Prebreza, from Kosovo, would like to act or sing in her new country.

But statistically, they have far less chance of realizing their dreams than their English-speaking classmates.

Not because they aren't smart, but because of an unfortunate combination of more and more students who need help, a more demanding high school program and rapidly shrinking funds for schools.

Graduating from high school will be an impossible hurdle for many of these students.

Each year, high schools offer fewer classes geared to students learning English. Teachers have less time to offer individual help. Many students eventually drift into regular classes where they just don't understand what's being said.

Fewer than three out of 10 English as a second language students are able to pass the Grade 10 literacy test required for high school graduation. An uncounted number, but one that deeply worries teachers and board officials, simply drop out of school and turn to unskilled jobs, cleaning offices or pumping gas.

"The current situation is definitely restricting opportunities for success in school," says Lyle Pearson, English as a second language consultant for the Waterloo Region District School Board.

"It's going to be far more challenging for them to complete high school."

Debbie Samson, who is Sunnyside's English as a second language teacher and an unofficial caregiver for Siba, Arif, Besa and dozens of others, agrees.

"It's getting worse," she says. "I do not feel I'm able to reach all the students the way I want to."

Samson knows how slim their chances are of realizing their dreams. She knows they may flounder in regular high school classes where there's an emphasis on written, not spoken, English, which is more difficult for them.

They get "frustrated, wandering the hallways," she says. "Most of them drop out."

At the same time, she realizes how much more they know about world affairs than Canadian-born children; how many other languages they can speak, even if English isn't one of them; how they understand, right in their bones, the importance of peace and justice.

"These kids come in with so much potential," she says.

"You see how bright they are. It's astounding what they can offer us as a society."

"I remember the day that I came to my window crying because there were soldiers coming inside, breaking in, and I was only three years old. Well, you think I was too little to remember . . . Well I tell you . . . I remember very well. I remember as if it happened today. I also remember when we went to the city they made me and my mother go down on our knees. They had to throw food down from the airplane so they could feed us. I felt like I had no life. I couldn't go to school because we had no money . . . Now, I am almost 13. I like Canada, but there is no place like home.

"I miss Yugoslavia."

When nowhere else welcomed Aleksandra Klikovac and her family, Waterloo Region did.

When she was four, Aleksandra and her family fled the war in Bosnia. They settled in Germany for a time, but were encouraged to move on and went to Quebec. After two years there, her father still wasn't able to find a job, so the family came to Kitchener.

Her father has a good job in construction now. And even though some kids in her neighbourhood tell Aleksandra to "go back to your own country," she feels that Sunnyside, and especially Samson's English as a second language room, is a home.

It was Aleksandra who baked a big nut-filled cake to share with the others in the class, who wrote down her story and read it to the class. That prompted the class to decide to work on a book that brings together their thoughts about peace and justice.

"I would like everybody in the world to know how I feel," Aleksandra says.

With its long history of helping newcomers, particularly refugees, Waterloo Region is one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Canada. More than one in five local residents grew up speaking a language other than English or French.

And the percentage of newcomers is growing all the time. In 2001, the census enumerated 87,280 people with a mother tongue that's not English or French, an 11.5 per cent increase over the 78,310 counted five years earlier.

This increase was linked to an influx of language groups from Asia and the Middle East, especially people speaking Chinese, Punjabi, Persian and Urdu, as well as the Serbian and Serbo- Croatian groups from the former Yugoslavia.

When Aleksandra arrived here more than two years ago, she was one of a soaring number of Serbian-speaking newcomers. There were 3,500 of them in Waterloo Region in 2001, almost three times as many as the 1,300 in 1996.

Anyone who has lived here can't help but notice the numerous church groups and other organizations that sponsor refugees, and the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support, which helps refugee claimants.

Waterloo Region has more than twice the percentage of young refugees as the Ontario average, according to a study in 2000 by the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

That federally funded survey found that while 14 per cent of Ontario immigrants under 20 are refugees, the figure for Waterloo Region is 33 per cent.

Teachers are very clear that refugee children have extraordinary needs beyond learning English.

Children who have spent most of their lives in a refugee camp are not likely to have had any formal schooling and may not be literate in any language. They may not know what a routine is, how a book works, or how to hold a crayon.

If they've seen people being raped and killed, they may have nightmares every night that prevent them from sleeping properly. Then they're so tired they might fall asleep in class.

We've always been a community that reaches out to refugees and immigrants, whatever their needs, says Pearson, the school board consultant.

When school taxes were decided by locally elected representatives prior to 1998, there was no problem collecting enough money for an adequate English as a second language program.

But now the province decides how much school boards get, and it isn't as much. Even if they wanted to, local school boards can't spend much more.

So Aleksandra and others like her have less time with teachers, less time to be assessed, less time to be advocated for and less time to be advised on how to get help with homework. And when students are taken out of class for work in small groups, those groups are larger than they used to be.

The amount each Ontario school board receives for English as a second language is determined by a formula that combines an amount for each student who has lived less than three years in Canada, plus a much smaller amount for students who were here, but started school not knowing English because it wasn't spoken at home.

Everyone in education -- including outgoing University of Guelph president Mordechai Rozanski, whose task force report on fair education funding was released last month -- agrees the allocation isn't enough.

Rozanski said the province should be more generous, allowing students five years instead of just three to learn English. But there has been no action on that recommendation to date.

Meanwhile, there's mounting evidence that students new to Canada are slipping on provincewide tests, while those adept in English are improving their results.

Five years ago, the Waterloo Region public board spent \$6 million a year on programs to help students learn English. Today it's \$4.2 million. Five years ago, there were 88 English as a second language teachers in public schools. Now there are 62.

Meanwhile, the number of students who need help has soared by 30 per cent in that time, to 4,300.

At the Waterloo Region Catholic School Board, spending has also dropped, though less drastically. Just over \$1 million was spent in 1995; \$936,000 this year.

The Catholic board, which has fewer students in total, has 2,300 students for whom learning English is a concern. About 230 of those have very high needs and the board's 15 English as a second language teachers spend most of their time with them.

"They (the teachers) are stretched," said Cathy Moloney, who assesses new students for the Catholic board.

Immigrant students are evenly spread throughout Cambridge, but in Kitchener they focus on the "inner suburbs," with the highest numbers at Sunnyside, A.R. Kaufman, Monsignor Gleason, St. Aloysius and Westmount.

In Waterloo, there are high concentrations at Cedarbrae, Lester B. Pearson and Winston Churchill.

But wherever they are, they can't help but be hurt by spending cuts in education. In focus groups organized by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, immigrant teens told researchers that English as a second language teachers were their biggest ally in a difficult new world.

It's not just English lessons that they get from teachers during the small group meetings, said senior researcher Rich Janzen, but many other things as well.

"It's having people help interpret the school environment."

The English as a second language room also allows the children to talk about negotiating their two separate worlds -- their parents' traditional world and the North American world.

The teacher explains about Halloween and gym uniforms -- and understands why you might cry every night when you look at photos of the cousins and grandparents left behind.

"They spoke very highly of the ESL teacher," Janzen said.

Teachers say the little Sudanese boy was "wild" before he met Cecilia Imunu.

The Grade 2 child had never held a pencil before coming to Canada. He had lived in horrible conditions in a refugee camp. He was overwhelmed by everything in his Kitchener school -- the other kids, the overhead lights, the routines -- and deeply frustrated by his inability to communicate.

But he was thrilled to meet Imunu, also a refugee from Sudan, who was working at the Waterloo Catholic District School Board as an education assistant, and who spoke his language, Dinka.

"Will I ever learn this English?" the boy demanded of Imunu.

That encounter brought together Imunu, who holds two master's degrees, and two English as a second language teachers, Dianne Workman and Cathy Moloney. Together they realized the need for Sudanese children to get after-school help with their homework.

"Some of the parents have enough on their plate looking for work, and surviving," Workman said, even though, like immigrants anywhere, she added, they want their children to get a good education and the chance of a better life.

In the absence of adequate funding to help these children, their best hope is the generosity of people for whom a personal connection sparks a willingness to help.

So, twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday evenings, Imunu, Moloney and Workman volunteer to run a homework club in the library at St. Joseph School in Kitchener.

The children "practically eat the books," Moloney said.

On one bitterly cold evening recently, about 12 children from kindergarten to high school age have come to the club. Imunu moves quietly among them, helping one at a time.

She puts her hand over one child's hand, guiding her pencil. She looks over another child's sentences. And "Sonya," she gently chides, "if you are talking, I will have to put you in another chair."

On the floor, a boy from Africa is learning to write words about strange concepts: Reindeer. Snowmen. Santa Claus.

"I feel it is a moral duty" to help these children, says Imunu, who ran a school in Cuba after she left Sudan, then later moved to Canada.

"You are reading Harry Potter? Good boy," she says to one child.

Then she turns to Jane Mayani, 8, who has been in Canada less than a year. Her head is bent so low over her book, she almost whispers the words into her fingertips. "Big bear," she reads. "Small bowl."

Imunu knows that after the poverty and emptiness of a refugee camp, many of the children feel overwhelmed when they are put into school for the first time. The other

children, the huge number of books, the colourful walls, the noise -- it all feels like too much.

And so it really helps the students to come after school to a special place where there aren't so many people, and where they can get individual help. Some students walk a kilometre or more to get here.

"If I don't know something," says John Moi, "the teachers will tell me."

When homework is over, some of the children play. One small boy picks up a truck made of Lego, turning it over and over in his hands, figuring out how it's put together. His concentration seems limitless.

When it's time to leave, a group of children walk together across the schoolyard, the cold air piercing their skin like a knife.

They've been shy to talk inside the library. But now, no one's watching them, and they sing together, their voices filling the black night sky as they head for home.

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