

Children Affected by War: A Bioecological Investigation  
into their Psychosocial and Educational Needs

By

**Janice L. Stewart**

A thesis submitted to The Faculty of Graduate Studies

of The University of Manitoba

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Manitoba

Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis describes a qualitative research study that examined the experiences of high school refugee students in Manitoba who emigrated from countries affected by armed conflict. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and focus group interviews. A total of 51 participants took part in this study and included: high school students, school staff members, parents, community members, educational policy makers, divisional consultants, members of various social agencies, and experts from the field of refugee education. The study employed a continuous process of analysis that included sorting the data using suitable codes and organizing the material into common themes.

The three phases of migration, delineated by Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Lowen and Frater-Mathieson (2004), was investigated using Bronfenbrenner's (1999) Bioecological Model combined with Portes and Zhou's (1993) Theory of Segmented Assimilation. Components of these three theories formed the overarching conceptual framework for the study.

The findings in this study confirmed that the pre-migration and trans-migration experiences of refugee children are unique, diverse, and not always fully understood by others. The post-migration phase is characterized by four prominent categories of challenges: (1) educational, (2) economic, (3) environmental, and, (4) psychosocial. The study revealed that the educational system played a pivotal role in the lives of the students; however, the students' adjustments were complicated by numerous barriers that impeded their progress. The isolation of the various systems resulted in a weakened ecological system that further complicated the level of support provided to

the students. Racism, discrimination, and ethnically-based conflict were overarching themes that contributed to the overall sense of mistrust and insecurity expressed by the students. The psychosocial needs and challenges for war-affected children living in Canada appear to be difficult to identify, complicated to understand, and even more troubling to address.

A key finding was the presence of a nanosystem – a smaller and more intimate network from the student’s microsystem. The nanosystem connected the student to the various ecological systems and also assisted with his or her adjustment. The fragility of the macrosystem was revealed and the need for a proactive strategy for counteracting negative attitudes in Canada was found to be essential. It is argued that it is the collective responsibility of all citizens to ensure that refugee children are provided a more equitable and appropriate education, in a safe environment.

Purposeful steps should be taken by school leaders to facilitate pedagogical practices that make school more equitable and just. Recommendations for educators and policy makers and suggestions for further research were generated from this study.

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Finally, special thanks are due to my family who supported me throughout the completion of this work. I thank my mother, Alice, who despite her ill health offered countless hours of assistance, support, and reassurance that motivated me to forge ahead. Her personal sacrifices are acknowledged, her strength is admired, and I am forever grateful. My husband, Ross, readily accepted the additional family responsibilities, patiently endured my frustrations, and proudly celebrated my accomplishments. I thank him for his incisive feedback, constructive criticism, and thoughtful gestures that supported my efforts and lifted my spirits. To my children, Jack and Hana, I hope that someday you understand why I needed to work when I should have been playing. You are the source of my energy and I am deeply grateful for your understanding and support. Without your help, I could not have succeeded.

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## Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iv
<b>Contents</b> .....	vi
<b>Tables</b> .....	x
<b>Figures</b> .....	xi
<b>Prologue</b> .....	xii
<b>1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</b> .....	1
Background Information.....	3
Psychosocial Issues.....	8
Refugees in Canada.....	12
The Demographic Shift: Why Canada Needs Immigrants .....	15
Purpose of the Study .....	18
Significance of the Study .....	20
Overview of the Conceptual Framework .....	20
Overview of the Methodology .....	23
Delimitations.....	26
Summary and Conclusion .....	27
<b>2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</b> .....	29
Philosophical Foundation of the Study .....	29
Critical Social Theory .....	29
Theoretical Framework.....	35
Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model.....	35
Segmented Assimilation .....	52
Research Questions.....	61
Definitions of Terms .....	63
Acculturation.....	63
Adjustment.....	63
Assimilation .....	64
Child.....	64
Immigrant.....	64
Psychosocial Effects of War .....	64
Refugee .....	65
War-affected Children .....	66
Summary and Conclusion .....	66
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b> .....	68
The Qualitative Perspective .....	68
Data Collection .....	71
Recruitment of Participants.....	73
Informed Consent.....	75
School Profile.....	76

Participant Interviews .....	77
Focus Group Interviews .....	81
Document Analysis and Photography .....	82
Advantages and Disadvantages of Data Collection Strategies .....	84
Assumptions of the Researcher .....	87
Risks to the Participants .....	88
Data Management .....	90
Validating the Accuracy of Findings .....	91
Data Analysis .....	91
Coding .....	92
Summary and Conclusion .....	96
<b>4. PRE-MIGRATION, TRANS-MIGRATION, and POST-MIGRATION</b>	
<b>EXPERIENCES .....</b>	<b>97</b>
School Profile .....	98
Student Profiles .....	101
Pre-migration Experiences .....	115
Personal stories: Hints and Glimpses .....	122
Age Discrepancies .....	124
Documentation .....	127
Trans-migration Experiences .....	128
Refugee Life: Displacement, Distrust and Danger .....	128
Fleeing Persecution .....	135
Loss and Loneliness .....	137
Working towards Relocation .....	141
Relocating to Canada: Hope and Happiness .....	143
Post-Migration Experiences .....	144
First Impressions .....	144
Understanding the Experiences .....	148
Carrying on with Life .....	151
Summary and Conclusion .....	152
<b>5. CHALLENGES CONFRONTING NEWCOMERS .....</b>	<b>158</b>
Racism and Discrimination .....	159
School Culture .....	160
Racism in the Various Ecological Systems .....	163
An Aboriginal Student's Perspective: Toward a Solution .....	170
Gender Discrimination .....	174
Psychosocial Challenges .....	175
Seeking Services .....	175
Psychosocial Issues that Emerged with the Students .....	182
Mental Health Issues with Parents .....	190
Educational Challenges .....	193
Education as the First Priority .....	194
The Pathway out of School .....	196
Disrupted Schooling .....	199



Working and Going to School .....	200
Perceived Attitudes of Teachers .....	204
Academic Literacy, Aspirations and Ability .....	211
Preparation of Teachers .....	213
Parental Assistance .....	217
Educational Organizational and Policy Issues .....	218
Environmental Challenges .....	225
Gang-Related Issues.....	225
Economic Challenges.....	233
Criminal Activity .....	238
No Support in Canada and the Need for an Advocate .....	240
Adjustment to, and Navigation through, the Systems.....	243
Language and Literacy.....	246
Housing.....	251
Summary and Conclusion.....	254
<b>6. SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES, AND PROGRAMS .....</b>	<b>260</b>
Role of the School System in the Lives of Students.....	261
Nanosystem.....	264
Programs and Structures .....	273
Assessment of the Student .....	274
Advice from Students .....	278
Suggestions from the Adults.....	283
Projects in the Province .....	287
Summary and Conclusion.....	289
<b>7. INTERACTION OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS TO INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENT .....</b>	<b>291</b>
Microsystem.....	292
Family .....	293
Community .....	302
Peers.....	308
Mesosystem.....	310
Exosystem.....	313
Macrosystem .....	316
The Impact on the Adults who work with War-Affected Students .....	317
Human Capacity, Hope, and Resilience .....	330
Summary and Conclusion.....	335
<b>8. SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>337</b>
Overview of the Study .....	337
Purpose of the Study .....	338
Data Collection .....	338
Data Analysis .....	339
Summary and Discussion of Findings .....	340
Research Question 1 .....	341

Research Question 2 .....	349
Research Question 3 .....	359
Research Question 4 .....	361
Recommendations for Policy and Practice .....	362
Recommendations for School Leaders .....	363
Recommendations for Federal and Provincial Government Departments .....	369
Recommendations for Local School Divisions.....	371
Recommendations for Community Agencies .....	373
Suggestions for Further Research .....	376
Summary and Conclusion .....	377
<b>References .....</b>	<b>380</b>
<b>Appendix A. Map of Africa.....</b>	<b>397</b>
<b>Appendix B. Form 1 (F1) Interview Questions for Student Participants .....</b>	<b>398</b>
<b>Appendix C. Protocol for Optional Photography Activity.....</b>	<b>400</b>
<b>Appendix D. Form 2 (F2) Interview Questions for Adult Participants .....</b>	<b>401</b>
<b>Appendix E. Questions for Administrators Only.....</b>	<b>403</b>
<b>Appendix F. Form 3 (F3) Interview Questions for the Focus Groups .....</b>	<b>404</b>
<b>Appendix G. Interview Questions for the Expert Group.....</b>	<b>406</b>
<b>Appendix H. Informed Consent Letter of Consent for Student Participants</b>	<b>408</b>
<b>Appendix I. Letter of Consent for Adult Participants (Interviews) .....</b>	<b>411</b>
<b>Appendix J. Letter of Consent for Adult Participants (Focus Group) .....</b>	<b>413</b>
<b>Appendix K. Letter of Consent for Adult Participants (Expert Group) .....</b>	<b>415</b>
<b>Appendix L. Promise of Confidentiality .....</b>	<b>417</b>
<b>Appendix M. Letter of Consent from Parent/Guardian (&lt;18) .....</b>	<b>418</b>
<b>Appendix N. Letter of Consent to be Photographed .....</b>	<b>420</b>
<b>Appendix O. University of Manitoba Ethics Approval Certificate.....</b>	<b>421</b>

## Tables

Table 1.1 Main Countries of Resettlement for Refugees in 2004 .....	14
Table 1.2 Manitoba Government Assisted Refugees .....	16
Table 1.3 Manitoba Privately Sponsored Refugees .....	16
Table 3.1 Research Design .....	72
Table 3.2 Participant List from Microsystem .....	78
Table 3.3 Participant List from Exosystem .....	79
Table 3.4 Participant List from Expert Group .....	80
Table 4.1 Student Case Attributes .....	101
Table 4.2 Summary of Themes .....	109
Table 4.3 Top Five Themes from the Student Transcripts .....	112
Table 4.4 Summary of Themes from the Student Interviews .....	112
Table 4.5 Top Five Themes for Members of the Microsystem .....	114
Table 4.6 Comparison of Most Common Themes .....	114
Table 6.1 Evidence of a Nanosystem .....	271
Table 6.2 Initiatives to Address Educational and Environmental Challenges ...	284
Table 6.3 Initiatives to Address Economic and Psychosocial Challenges .....	285

## Figures

Figure 2.1	Bioecological Model .....	45
Figure 2.2	Segmented Assimilation Model .....	58
Figure 2.3	Conceptual Framework .....	60
Figure 5.1	Adjustment Challenges for Refugee Children in Canada .....	256
Figure 6.1	The Microsystem, Mesosystem and Nanosystems .....	269
Figure 7.1	A Well-Functioning Mesosystem .....	315
Figure 8.1	Reconstituted Conceptual Framework .....	348

## PROLOGUE

### Sokut's Story

*The following story was written by Sokut, who was a participant in this study.  
Edited by J. Stewart.*

They told us to run. If you hear the horses, run as fast as you can. You never know when the Junjaweeds will attack, and when they do, they will kill or capture everyone they find.

I was five. I was visiting my uncle. My family was in my home village which is a day's walk away. The soldiers came. I was holding my uncle's hand when the bullet hit him. He fell to the ground, I knew he was dead. I didn't know where to run. I hid in the bush. Women were attacked and raped in front of me. I saw my own sister. It is very hard to talk about. I try not to remember.

I ran with the other boys, they were running in all directions. For about 100 days we walked through the bush. No shoes, no clothes, no water or food. We ate dead animals. I had to drink my own urine. We had no choice, we would die. Sometimes there was fruit or bark from the trees that we ate. Some of the berries were poisonous and children would die. We knew to be careful, but it was hard to resist; we were so hungry. Someone said that there was food in Dimma, Ethiopia. We walked for two months. There were 20,000 boys and no parents. Most of the girls were captured, but some walked with us. Many of us were taken by insects or by sickness. We had to bury them. I worried that I would go too. I knew that I would never see my family again. Some of the children were too tired to walk—they sat down. They would die of starvation or the wild animals would get them. It was hard to keep going.

I was in Dimma camp for three years. We had to cook by ourselves and sleep by ourselves. We drank water from the river, but it was not clean. It made our stomachs hurt. The UN gave us maize, beans, and sometimes sugar, oil, and salt. We soaked the rice overnight before we cooked it. Kakuma was hot and dirty, but we had food.

In 1997, the Ethiopian government was overthrown and the rebels chased us with guns. They gave us one week to leave. We didn't move fast enough. They shot at us. Many children were killed; we were just young children. Coming to Ethiopia was hard, but going back to Sudan was worse. We had to cross the River Gilo. Many more died. I couldn't swim. I held onto the dead bodies in the water to cross. The crocodiles ate some children.

The Sudanese government didn't want us; they thought we would fight them. By the time we got to Sudan, 4,000 boys had died. The Red Cross said we must go to the Kenyan and Sudanese border. It took one month to get there. There was no grass, rivers, or trees—it was a desert. We had to walk at night. We started at 4:00pm. If we walked in the day, we were shot and killed. The UN dropped food, but sometimes the animals ate it.

I was in a camp at the Kenya-Sudanese border. We had to go to another camp when the Sudanese captured Keapore, which was two hours away. They would come and get us, so they moved us to Kakuma in 1998. I was about nine.

In Kakuma we were put into groups. There were 16,000 of us and we had to live in groups of five. A school was opened. For grades 1 to 4, we studied under the tree. When I reached grade 5, I studied in the school building. In August 2000, I was moved to Ifo Camp in Dadaab. People in my settlement were moved so that there would be more security.

Ifo Refugee Camp was a hard life for me. The UN told me to go back to Kakuma, but I refused. They told me that I would not get any more food rations if I stayed. I walked to Dadaab town and I cleaned clothes for money and I cut trees in the bush to sell. I was captured by child rebels, but I was not hurt. They didn't want me to take the trees. They said they would kill me if they caught me cutting more trees. I had to keep cutting trees or I would die. In 2001, I went back to Kakuma because the UN adjusted the rule to give everyone food rations.

I was rejected by the Canadian Embassy in 2001 because I was under 18. I spent over two more years in a refugee camp in Kenya. I was really 15, but I increased my age to 21. It was not my choice to come to Canada, it was the UN's choice to send me. I lived in Winnipeg with three other boys from Sudan. Two boys were 16 and one was 17. We lived like adults. I have never really been a child...I have had no childhood.

I have been in Canada since 2003. I enjoy being in high school; it is the best part about being in Canada. I came here to have a peaceful life, but my life is not peaceful. It is still hard and I hope that it will change someday. When I came here I thought life would be like heaven. That is what I thought life was like in North America. But it is not. I am still a refugee. It is not safe for me here. I have been threatened and beat up. Other kids attack us because we are African and they think we are gang members. I don't have money for food. There are the same problems for me in Canada that I had in Africa.

Some kids find the street life. They don't have food and they want what Canadian kids have, but they don't have any money. We need more support because sometimes we have to leave school to make money. School work is hard for us. It takes us longer to do the work and there is no one to help us. I want to educate myself and change my life so that it is better than before. I want to finish my high school. Unless I die, nothing will get in my way.

*A total of 40 million people have fled their homes because of armed conflict or human rights violations. It is estimated that 20 million of these displaced people are children (Machel, 2001).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This thesis describes a research study that examined the experiences of high school refugee students who emigrated from countries affected by armed conflict. This qualitative case study attempted to reveal the personal, social, and academic needs of refugee students in Manitoba as well as to articulate effective ways to assist with their adjustment to school. Many children from war-affected countries have been denied basic human entitlements, and their immigration to Canada represents hope for their futures. Evidence suggests that these students are further marginalized by an educational system that does not recognize their unique psychosocial needs and does not provide culturally sensitive support.

In September, 2005, Winnipeg hosted a conference on War-Affected Children that included representatives from the United Nations, World Vision, War-Child, Canadian Foreign Affairs as well as national and international scholars. The key recommendation from this conference was the need to educate teachers and school leaders on the issues of war-affected children and youth and to develop practical strategies for helping these students. Considering the increasing number of refugee children coming to Canada, it is timely to review existing literature, explore approaches for helping war-affected children, and suggest future directions for research, practice, and policy.

Children from countries affected by conflict represent a new segment of the population of students in Canadian schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the needs of these students are not being met, and this has exacerbated other societal

issues. Some disenfranchised youth in Winnipeg have joined culturally based gangs that rival other gangs within the city. Some youth have become involved in the justice system as a result of their criminal activity.

Although some students adjust quite well into Canadian schools, others do not. Little empirical evidence is available to examine the factors that contribute to the successful adjustment of these students into Canadian schools, and information on the effects of different types of interventions remains sparse. The context of the school environment is crucial to the pro-social development and the acculturation of the war-affected child (McBrien, 2004; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; Hek, 2005; Rutter, 2006; Rutter, 2003; Rutter & Jones, 1998). Having said this, little information is available on the most suitable educational context and the most appropriate support mechanisms for the student.

The trajectories of these youth hinge on our ability to provide the most appropriate educational program that meets their diverse learning needs. This generation of youth will be the parents and workers in the next decade and it is imperative that the present school system respond to their immediate needs. The school is arguably one of the most influential social systems – it has the ability to significantly affect our lives, both in how we think and how we conduct ourselves as individuals and as a collective society. As such, most would agree that theory and practice should support the type of system that liberates rather than marginalizes; few offer pragmatic ways to make this occur.

Canadians have a responsibility to protect these children, to support their families, and to provide an appropriate education that meets their unique learning



needs. All children are entitled to an education in Canada, and this study will examine the needs of these children and the educational interventions that will offer the best practices for providing this education. This study examined the following questions: (a) What are the experiences of war-affected children who immigrate to Manitoba? (b) What are the challenges that confront war-affected children who attend high school in Manitoba? (c) What systems, structures, or programs assist with the process of adjustment for the war-affected child? (d) To what extent do the various ecological systems interact with each other to influence the student's development? These questions will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

### Background Information

Throughout history, children have been affected by war; however, the nature of war has changed dramatically. In today's conflicts, children assume the roles of casualties of war, soldiers of war and survivors of war. The size and scope of the refugee movement has been a defining feature of the last hundred years, yet the field of education has paid little attention to the issues of refugee children (Myers, 2001). Access to education is a human right, and educational leaders have the legal obligation and the moral responsibility to ensure that youth who have been victims of violence receive an appropriate education. The first step involves a greater understanding of today's conflict, how it affects children and their families and how these children are being served by our educational system upon immigrating to Canada.

In August 1996, the Secretary-General of the United Nations released a report entitled *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* written by Graca Machel.

In this ground-breaking report it was revealed that in any given year, over 300,000 children are exploited in armed conflicts as child soldiers and sex slaves. In the past 10 years, as a result of armed conflicts, about 2 million children have been killed, more than 6 million have been disabled, 1 million have been left orphaned, and about 12 million left homeless. It is estimated that there are presently 20 million children who have been uprooted from their homes. Many of these children are internally displaced within their country or they are refugees seeking asylum in another country (Machel, 2001). More than ten million children have been psychologically scarred by the trauma of abduction, detention, sexual assault and the brutal murder of family members (Canadian International Development Agency, 2005). Today's warfare often entails horrific levels of violence and brutality aimed specifically at children (Knudson, 2004). The United Nations claims that 10% of the casualties of the First World War were civilians and this percentage grew to 45 % in World War II. It is now estimated that in today's warfare, 90% of the casualties are civilians (UNICEF, 2004).

“War undermines the very foundation of children's lives, destroying their homes, splintering their communities and shattering their trust in adults” (Machel, 2001, p. 80). Neil Boothby and Christine Knudsen (2000) from the Children in Crisis department of Save the Children in Washington, DC, report that in many countries war is a way of life and entire generations of children have grown up surrounded by war. “Refugee children often have experienced the tragedy and trauma of war, including persecution, dangerous escapes, and prolonged stays in refugee camps. Some have witnessed killings, torture, and rape – including atrocities

against family members. Some have lost many members of their families and many have lost everything that was familiar to them” (Fantino & Colak, 2001, p. 590).

Attempting to comprehend the extent of the psychological and emotional trauma that these children have endured is a complex task. Machel (2001) states, “War affects every aspect of a child’s development - physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual” (p.80).

Children and adolescents, who have been exposed to war and are now attending schools in Canada, represent a particularly vulnerable group of students. Their experiences have been diverse and many have suffered from severe personal trauma, violence and loss. It is argued that the current system is not meeting the unique social and psychological needs of these students and they are not provided with an appropriate education. When students’ needs are not being met by the system, they often leave it, either reluctantly, or voluntarily. This often results in the exacerbation of social issues and the further marginalization of the individual.

It is expected that the number of students coming to Canada from war-affected countries will increase significantly over the next decade and this will likely compound many of the current issues we already see in schools and in the community. School leaders and educators must learn about the issues related to war-affected children so that they are able to examine critically and challenge how they might best meet the needs of these students. This process requires working with these students, their families, and the communities in which they live to acquire cultural understandings, shared values, and pragmatic solutions for a more socially just school system. Educators must critically examine and reflect on current practice,

and then use this knowledge to transform future practice. The Canadian school system is in a unique position to provide educational interventions and psychosocial support to refugee children. Moreover, the educational system must become more prepared and knowledgeable about the experiences and needs of refugee students to more adequately address their learning needs.

Jill Rutter and Crispin Jones have done extensive work supporting refugee children in educational systems in the United Kingdom. A concentrated amount of research has been conducted with refugee students, particularly in the city of London, where many of the refugees have settled. Rutter and Jones (1998) found that refugee students were a “particularly vulnerable group of school students” (p.6). Refugee students often attended schools which were under-subscribed and usually had a greater proportion of other children who also made heavy demands on the teachers’ time and skills. Whiteman (2005) conducted a qualitative analysis of teachers’ views regarding the integration of refugee pupils into schools in Newcastle upon Tyne. This study uncovered an overwhelming need to improve access to interpreting services and revealed that more reliable information was needed regarding the backgrounds of their pupils. Involvement of support agencies seemed inconsistent, and training needs were identified by a number of schools.

MacKay and Tavares (2005) from Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth reviewed services and programs provided to newcomers of war-affected backgrounds who attended schools in Manitoba. To gather information and to promote informed dialogue, a survey of Manitoba teachers and school principals

from Grades 7 to Grade 12 was conducted, as well as a review of practices in other jurisdictions. Summarizing their findings MacKay and Tavares state:

There is evidence from the survey, the literature, and experiences in other jurisdictions that a lack of appropriate and specialized programming for adolescent and young adult learners with EAL/ESL needs and from war-affected and interrupted schooling backgrounds exacerbates the socio-emotional and learning challenges that such learners experience in our school system. This lack of programming often leads to 'falling out' of our school system and limits the long term educational and life opportunities of these learners. The stress and frustration that such learners experience because of inappropriate programming tends to accentuate the challenges they face in integrating into a new society and educational system, thereby contributing to the development of a sense of hopelessness.

School personnel indicate that they had a negative perception of how well they met the needs of refugee learners; 80.7 % of the school personnel indicated that significant improvements should be made to meet the needs of these learners. Out of the school personnel that were surveyed, 53.8 % rated their current programming supports as "weak" or "somewhat weak." MacKay and Tavares (2005) also found that there were significant attrition rates at the Grade 11 and Grade 12 levels and they suggested that many learners fall out, drop out or are pushed out of the school system.

Although this report yields interesting information and suggests future direction for research, it lacks the input from the children and their families who are

marginalized by the system. Instead of imposing our narratives on these children and contributing further to their marginalization, we need to engage in dialogue with the children to learn more about their experiences and how we can help. Input from school personnel is essential, but so is the engagement of the children and the families that we are attempting to support. Work in social justice and education requires working with, not for the students. Children should be viewed as survivors, not victims. Instead of being overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues, researchers should engage in meaningful dialogue in an attempt to find solutions to the problems they encounter. This study was designed to investigate the experiences of war-affected children, and to closely examine the challenges and successes of these children as they adjust to school in Manitoba. The various ecological systems that interact and influence the war-affected child were also explored.

### *Psychosocial Issues*

Studies reveal that children and adult refugees suffer from a variety of mental health problems and psychiatric disorders as a result of their experiences. War trauma has been associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as reported in numerous studies (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1998; Barenbaum, Rushkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Fazel, Wheeler & Danesh, 2005; Fazel & Stein, 2006; Heptinstall, Sethna & Taylor, 2004; Hyman, Vu & Beiser, 2000; McCloskey & Southwick, 1996; Papageorgiou, Frangou-Garunovic, Iordanidou, Yule, Smith & Vostanis, 2000; Sourander, 1998; Sundelin-Wahlsten, Ahmad & von Knorring, 2001), although the prevalence rate ranges anywhere from 3% to 86%. Variations in prevalence rates are likely attributed to the differences in the participants studied as