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Navigating the Brick Wall: School Settlement Workers' Responses to Exacerbated Inequities for Newcomer Students in COVID-19

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Abstract

For newcomer students, inequities exacerbated by COVID-19, including racism, unfold within their educational landscapes. School settlement workers perform a critical role in newcomer students' educational trajectories. COVID-19 has intensified the importance of school settlement work, yet school settlement workers remain an under-researched and under-recognized group of professionals. Anchored in an anti-racist, multidisciplinary framework, our article traces how COVID-19 measures in schools have magnified inequities for school settlement workers and newcomer students. Our data, drawn from a community-based project, consist of virtual focus groups held with school settlement workers located in a Canadian prairie province during the height of the pandemic, and the findings emerge through a critical approach to the methodology of appreciative inquiry. We illuminate systemic realities to contradict discourses that the pandemic does not discriminate and demonstrate how COVID-19 protocols are used to justify and obfuscate schooling exclusions along racial lines. We analyze themes of (in)visibility of settlement work, whiteness and racism, and resistance through Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) metaphor of the brick wall to animate the tensions of settlement work in schools during COVID-19. We conclude with school settlement workers' recommendations to increase recognition of their critical role and to support their work during and beyond the pandemic. We call on institutional wall makers to respond to settlement workers' recommendations and actualize institutional commitments to newcomer students and families.

Keywords: racism and schools, school settlement workers, COVID-19, newcomer students, immigrants and refugees

Introduction

Students across Canada and around the world are coping with the ongoing impacts of relentlessly shifting educational landscapes imposed by the COVID-19 global pandemic. At school, as in Canadian society more broadly, the social, economic, and health implications of COVID-19 are most deeply felt within communities already marginalized by state systems, including newcomer students and their families. For newcomer students, existing inequities and racism exacerbated by the pandemic unfold acutely within their schooling worlds. With resources already limited for newcomer students, school-based services provided by settlement agencies are especially critical for newcomer children and youth during this time.

Settlement workers in schools, who are deployed from settlement agencies, supply a host of essential services linked to positive academic and social outcomes for students and their families, including academic support, counselling and mentorship, crisis intervention, school climate–building, advocacy, and resources. They play a vital part in shaping newcomer students' educational trajectories, and the importance of their work has been intensified by COVID-19, yet they remain an under-researched and under-recognized group of professionals. While knowledge is emerging about teachers' pedagogical adaptations and strategies to learning in the pandemic (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2020), the multi-faceted role that school settlement workers have carried out during the pandemic has yet to be highlighted in education, settlement or social work scholarship.

Drawing on data generated from our community-based research project with school settlement workers in a Canadian prairie context during the COVID-19 pandemic, we employ Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) metaphor of the brick wall to explore the repertoire of knowledge, skills, and strategies that settlement workers draw on daily to visibilize and transverse the discursive and material walls that delimit newcomer students and families' inclusion in white settler educational systems. We contend that school-based settlement workers are institutional-wall experts whose presence and labour reveal the tensions and contradictions between the promises of multicultural diversity and inclusion and their (non)actualization (Ahmed, 2012). We posit that the fissures in the wall that school settlement workers make visible reveal where institutional resources and repairs are needed to realize equitable education for newcomer students during the pandemic and beyond.

In what follows, we first provide background information regarding the study and the unique Canadian prairie context and then lay out the methodologies of appreciative inquiry, community-based research, and critical race theory that guide our work. Next, we present our study findings to trace how COVID-19 measures in schools have magnified educational inequities for school settlement workers and newcomer students. We analyze three central themes through Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) metaphor of the brick wall to illustrate experiences of school settlement workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) relating to the wall: (de)valuation of settlement work in schools, (b) seeing the wall: racism and discrimination, and (c) repertoires of expertise and strategies of resistance. We conclude with implications in response to institutional walls in school-based settlement work and steps toward equity revealed by this work, intentionally bridging the intersections of social work, settlement, and education.

Study Context and Background

The context of this study is a Canadian prairie province where there is increasing international immigration. According to the 2016 Canadian census, the number of people under the category of immigrant totalled 112,495 and made up 10.5% of the province's total population. The four top source countries for recent immigrants between 2011 and 2016 were the Philippines (34.7%), India (12.8%), Pakistan (7.2%), and China (7.0%) (Statistics Canada, 2017). Over 60 school settlement workers deliver essential support, resources, and services to over 1,000 students and their families across the province in urban and rural elementary and secondary schools and communities.

Settlement Workers in Schools

School settlement workers are staff from settlement agencies that provide outreach settlement services to schools. They offer these services to newcomer and refugee students and their families, assisting such students and families in navigating Canadian systems and institutions to aid in their settlement and integration in the country. While these are the main descriptions of the job that settlement workers perform in schools, settlement workers hold multi-faceted professional identities and engage in extensive forms of labour to support newcomer students and their families and to ensure students' needs are met at many different points in the school system. For example, their work with students and families involves assisting with school orientation, providing guidance on educational issues, connecting students to community programs and other resources, collaborating with teachers and school staff, serving as advocates for students and families when issues arise, intervening in crisis situations, and operating as cultural brokers between schools and families (Clarke & Wan, 2011; Holt & Laitsch, 2016).

Settlement workers act as cultural supporters, interpreters, translators, informal educators, English-language instructors, resource and community connectors and brokers, supportive counsellors, socio-cultural communicators, advocates and allies, community organizers, fundraisers, and more. They draw on a vast repertoire of skills, expertise, and educational backgrounds, and many settlement workers are immigrants themselves, bringing embodied knowledge of settlement processes and lived experiences of navigating Canadian society and institutions. Their lived experiences are an asset, and they inform their relationships with students and their families (Holt & Laitsch, 2016).

The experiences of school settlement workers and their influence on newcomer, refugee and immigrant students' trajectories are largely absent from educational scholarship, which has predominantly focused on teachers (e.g., Ficarra, 2017), and from social work and settlement scholarship, in which studies that examine the experiences of racialized workers instead of clients are exceptional (see Badwall, 2014; Holt & Laitsch, 2016; Kikulwe, 2016). In schools, settlement workers assist newcomer students in traversing pre-existing barriers heightened by the pandemic, including discriminatory attitudes of educators and peers, limited culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, and lack of English-as-an-additional-language programming and supports (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Ratkovic et al., 2017). Compounding impacts of COVID-19 on newcomer students suggest that the role of settlement workers is increasingly critical for mitigating the long-term effects of the pandemic, which could include wider gaps in language-learning opportunities, exacerbated experiences of school and social disconnection and exclusion, and negative mental health impacts (Callahan, 2020; Cerna, 2020; UNHRC, 2020). The study findings expand on limited existing knowledge about settlement workers in schools and analyze how their support and advocacy are accomplished against a backdrop of institutional whiteness and racism both amplified and revealed by COVID-19 restrictions, spotlighting anti-racism as a necessary component of their labour.

Whiteness and Racism in School Integration for Newcomer Students

Similar to schools across the country, educational institutions in the Canadian prairies are undergirded by Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian, white settler normative, middle-class, male

ideals and worldviews that shape policy and practice and delimit change (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014; Khoo et al., 2021). School systems of white dominance give rise to racism, xenophobia, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, and ableism. In schools, these intersecting forms of oppression can manifest in multiple forms of exclusions and violence. While the student population has never been homogenous, the demographic makeup of prairie schools is increasingly diverse, given rising immigration numbers, and is reflective of a multiplicity of cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, and linguistic identities and backgrounds. Teachers and administrators in the province remain predominantly white Euro-Canadian settlers, a point that critical race scholars have long contended is a key factor in safeguarding white dominance in schools and in forestalling its disruption (e.g., Leonardo & Boas, 2013; Matias, 2013; Matias & Mackey, 2016).

Students are racialized along colour lines formed not only through race but also through ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, and legal status. Colour lines are marked points of inclusion for white, exalted Canadian subjects and exclusion for subjects perceived to be outside the national imaginary (Allen, 2020; Lee & Ferrer, 2014; Thobani, 2007). While official institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion are frequently performed in schools (Ahmed, 2012; Liu, 2020; St. Denis, 2011), nondominant students' ways of being and knowing continue to be undervalued, misrecognized, and ignored, and settler whiteness made the standard against which students are constructed (Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2019). Looking through an anti-racist lens, barriers encountered by Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee students are the consequences of systemic whiteness in education. This understanding upends deficit myths that locate educational issues within students and their families. While newcomer and refugee students do not represent a homogenous group, four domains of barriers have been pointed to by scholars studying their integration into Canadian school systems: emotional, linguistic, academic, and social (Guo et al., 2019). Settlement workers in schools are therefore tasked with responding to the latter range of institutional gaps for newcomer students. As detailed in the findings, this can feel like an impossible task given the walls shaped by systems of white dominance and racism that settlement workers in schools come up against in their everyday work.

The Brick Wall

Our article is shaped by feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed's (2012, 2017) compelling conceptualization of the brick wall, which we draw on as a framework in our findings and analysis. Drawing mainly from Ahmed, we continue along the pathways of other scholars who have used the wall metaphor in critical analyses of education, which includes the experiences of migrant students (Bell et al., 2018; Folke, 2018; Khoo et al., 2021). In her study of diversity work in post-secondary institutions, Ahmed (2012) employed this metaphor to elucidate how diversity workers experience the institution as something they come up against in their work, the "repeated encounters with what does not, and seemingly will not, move" (p. 51). Made of brick, the wall represents the historicity and materiality of such encounters and experiences, which solidifies their power and impact. Walls are (re)erected to hinder and block the movements of people deemed "out of place" within institutions. As Ahmed (2017) articulated, "For those who are not white, whiteness can be experienced as a wall; something solid, a body with mass that stops you from getting through" (p. 145). The wall is therefore an institutional defence system and a compounded investment in the status quo of whiteness; as such, it is a mechanism of power that aims to determine who can belong

and who is relegated to the margins. While the margins are meant to exclude, they must be recognized as sites of resistance, power, and unique perspectives of institutions (Smith et al., 2021). In our analysis, we read settlement workers' skillful navigation of the wall as resistance and agency, recognize the taxing labour required to do so, and aim to highlight the rich repertoire of skills, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences they draw upon in their navigation.

Critical Appreciative Inquiry During COVID-19

Our research team is comprised of Amanda Gebhard, a white woman of Eastern European descent, Willow Samara Allen, a white Ashkenazi Jewish settler woman, and Fritz Pino, a first-generation Filipinx. Our social locations, research, and educational backgrounds, and lived experiences shaped how we came to this study and engaged with participants, as well as our own relationships to the brick wall working in post-secondary institutions.

This research took place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating online research methods (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017). Between November 2020 and January 2021, we conducted eight online focus groups with three to five participants each, meeting with a total of 34 school settlement workers employed by agencies and assigned in both urban and rural schools across one Canadian prairie province. Management at the umbrella organization enabled the recruitment of participants by circulating our invitation to participate through email. While we had originally hoped to recruit a larger number of participants, we respectfully understood that our request for participation in a 2-to-3-hour focus group was not possible for many settlement workers who, as we learned, were extremely occupied with heightened responsibilities at work brought upon by the pandemic.

Our decision to use focus groups was informed by our methodology of appreciative inquiry (AI). A central data collection method in AI is the appreciative interview or the appreciative focus group (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI "empowers practitioners to become change agents and to explore innovative practice" (Hung et. al, 2018, p. 2). AI researchers recognize that community organizations "have a host of underrecognized and underappreciated resources that can be built into thriving systems for young people" and focus on building upon practitioners' strengths rather than seeing themselves as experts (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 68). For us, employing the methodology of AI meant foregrounding the vast expertise offered by the participants, including their combination of international work experience and education, fluency in multiple languages, and lived experiences of settlement in Canada. While the core tenets of AI were fitting for our research, we questioned the methodology's emphasis on positivity and lack of critical systemic focus (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Grant & Humphries, 2006; Ridley-Duff & Duncan, 2015). Particularly during a pandemic, it stood out to us that the focus on positivity and the absence of critical systemic analysis might obscure structural realities and relationships of power that should not have to be performed as happy (Ahmed, 2017).

Building from this recognition and informed by the tenets of critical race theory (Gillborn, 2006), we took an intentional critical turn in AI, shifting toward a fluid approach to the AI 4D process of discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Ridley-Duff & Duncan, 2015) throughout, acknowledging the current realities of COVID-19 and recognizing that individual and collective agency and choices are shaped by these realities. This turn allowed us to open

space for a more nuanced analysis of the complexities of settlement workers' positionalities and experiences and of the multiple, sometimes contradictory, forms of agency employed.

Focus group transcriptions were thematically analyzed by grouping responses and identifying major themes that brought to life the metaphor of the brick wall. We used qualitative data software to organize and code the large data set. Responses to questions were initially coded into a large number of categories based on the AI phases and themes, including the roles of settlement workers, daily work before and during COVID-19, and COVID-19 impacts for students and families. Many themes surfaced across the interviews, and for the purpose of this article, we selected those that directly answered our research questions and/or had been discussed in literature on anti-racism. We drew on quotations from participant extracts that illuminate these themes, choosing those that appeared in multiple iterations across transcripts. Debates about concealing participant identities and the ethics involved highlighted the importance of "a contextually-contingent approach to anonymizing data" (Saunders et al., 2015, p. 618). After a nuanced discussion, we made the decision not to include pseudonyms in the presentation of our findings in order to maximize protection of participants' identities, as well as to underline the systemic as opposed to individual readings of the narratives we aimed to accomplish in the analysis that follows.

Relating to the Wall: (De)valuation of Settlement Work in Schools

This theme emerged as participants revealed their experiences of how their work is evaluated and (de)valued as they navigate and transact relationships with the school system. Settlement workers thematically stated that their labour is inconsistently recognized and valued by school staff and administrators, and they overwhelmingly noted the need for increased understanding about the purpose of their positions. Variations of statements like "Schools and administration looking at our settlement workers and valuing our services" and "I'd like to see us kind of work together and for administrators to kind of see us as a service, a quality service that will help in schools" were echoed across transcripts. Regardless of whether settlement workers described their school environment as supportive or not, it became clear that support from the school, defined in terms of how this is denied, is crucial to their work.

School settlement workers' roles and everyday tasks have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifications that create perceptions about the value and necessity of their labour, thereby revealing the power of the wall to support or block the worth of their work. While settlement workers are often highly appreciated, valued, and visible within newcomer communities and by immigrant and refugee families—and even more so during the pandemic—within the institutional space of the school, settlement workers' labour and presence were described as inconsistently recognized and, hence, invisibilized. A participant reflected:

> There's no back-and-forth response anymore, and I don't know if that's because the teachers are really busy or they don't want the programs.… It's really hard because I'm like, "Are you getting my emails? Are you happy with how things are going? Are there kids that are struggling that I should contact?" And we're not really always getting a response back until there's a major issue.… All of a sudden, you know, their grades are bad because they haven't been attending class, and then all of a sudden we'll hear from the teachers.

While the above narrative is reflective of the current scenario of the pandemic, this sense of dismissal of settlement workers' presence was already familiar. Prior to the COVID-19

pandemic, some schools had already been reluctant to acknowledge settlement workers. For example, one participant was told by a teacher that their entering classrooms was disruptive, "So we used to stand outside in the lobby. And whenever we see the newcomers coming, we can talk to them." Another settlement worker described having to "push and bug" in order to schedule a "3-minute meeting" with the staff. One participant pointed to their experience with a school principal who seemed apprehensive, if not defensive, framing the labour of a settlement worker in school as unnecessary to immigrant families:

> The first school visit, I just sat in the library the whole morning; no one paid any attention to me. Then the second time when I was there, I told myself, "I cannot just sit there doing nothing." And then I approached the principal [and asked for a list of students and parents]. And I waited in the library for almost one hour, and then the principal handed me a list saying, "Okay, you can go ahead and call these families." But she said, "Frankly speaking, I think you approaching these families will offend these families." And I was shocked. I said, "I will try my best to act in the most professional way. I won't say anything offensive." And then the principal said, "You know, our families, even though they are immigrant families, they are doing great.… They all have very good jobs. They are doing well at school. I think this kind of gesture, thinking they need help from this kind of non-profit organization, will offend these families."

A classist reading of settlement services locates the principal's remark on this attempt of the settlement worker to perform their work of connecting with immigrant families. As the classist gesture exists, the reluctance by school administrators toward settlement workers in school continued even when schools had reopened after pandemic-related closures. While there was variance between school boards, the majority of school settlement workers were restricted and disallowed from entering school premises into the spring of 2021 even though teachers and students were able to enter: "My schools are quite strict with me not entering.… They tell me, 'Do not enter.'" For other workers, conditional access to schools existed as restrictions were eased in the province, and with this their movements and interactions were described as highly regulated: "We are only allowed to visit one of our schools per day." Reluctance and ignorance by the school shape the gestures to invisibilize and eventually restrict settlement workers in schools. Furthermore, this invisibility is maintained through regulatory, spatial declarations from school staff: "Stand over there," "Wait by the door," and "Wait to be called upon." These mechanisms render school settlement workers as "strangers [who] become objects not only of perception but also of governance: bodies to be managed" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 145).

Moments also occur when the presence and labour of settlement workers become hypervisible. Multiple settlement workers described only being called upon by the schools when a major issue with a student arises. In the words of one participant, "If the school believes in our program, we'll know about [the new students]. If they don't, we'll know about them when there is a problem." These statements cohere with the statement in the opening narrative of this section, observing the unresponsiveness of schools and only being called upon when there is deemed to be "something wrong."

In these situations, many settlement workers voiced disappointment as they felt the negative consequences for the student and their families: they cannot provide quality services and genuine support since they have not established rapport and relationship with the student

prior to the emergence of the student's issue. Drawing from McElhinny et al. (2012), this spotlighting of (racialized) bodies only when there is a perceived issue constitutes the ways in which racialized bodies become hypervisible in ways that reaffirm perceptions of racial deficits and crises. Hence, in this experience of settlement workers, their racial embodiments become hypervisible, as their capacities and roles are seen as good and useful only in certain situations, such as in "fixing" immigrant problems, thereby limiting the discursive and spatial terrain of what they can and cannot do. Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the labour of settlement workers, labour that is becoming even more visible and valuable within newcomer immigrant and refugee communities, settlement workers are at once rendered hypervisible in crisis and invisible when it comes to everyday, ongoing relationships with the school system.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, shifts to virtual learning have resulted in heavy reliance on technology, which has visibilized and expanded the roles and relationships of settlement workers in new ways. In particular, settlement workers are highly visible and valued by newcomer families as they are being relied upon for information and technology due to requirements associated with at-home learning. One participant stated, "We've become IT [information technology] support," and another noted,

> There's one task actually that changed for our job. I'm not sure about other SWIS [settlement workers in schools] but, for me, I've been IT support for almost a year. I help people with their online-learning-platform set-up, all kinds of things. I need to learn from scratch, even for myself.

Participants recognized that such amplifications of their work are indicative of the "digital divide," which has magnified and further revealed systemic barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> The main challenge is the digital divide. I would say the lack of digital literacy and communication, technological understanding is very hard.… Even if they have [equipment] or if we provide them with it, they don't know how to use it.
>
> One Syrian family, they don't know any computer at all, and they were always frustrated. So 3 weeks ago, I applied for a tablet, and they didn't know how to use it, so they still missed class for 2 weeks. And then I made kind of a home visit with an interpreter. And after that day, we kind of created an email for them.… I'm so happy that the whole family now can count on a Grade 8 student who speaks very, very little English to have the kind of events on Zoom … so I'm so happy.

As this narrative brings forth, the digital gap that school settlement workers have become central to addressing is reflective of race and class divides in terms of accessing technology for online schooling among newcomer immigrant students. This digital gap exposes how their work serves as one of the very foundations of successful learning for these students and of the success of teachers' pedagogy during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, settlement workers in schools serve as the condition of possibility and visibility through which learning, teaching, and communication between families, settlement workers, and teachers can be virtually achievable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cultural knowledge also plays a very important role in addressing the digital gap, pertaining to differences between how Canadian and non-Canadian cultures place value on technology. One participant explained how live, face-to-face interactions are more highly valued in other cultural contexts.

> Even before COVID-19, a big issue that all families encounter when they come to Canada, is the value that … Canadian culture places on technology versus the value [of] that in other countries.… [In] less developed countries we place more value in face-to-face interactions versus the value assigned to technology. So … there's a lack of empathy from the Canadian culture regarding [this].

Digital literacy is one of many examples that demonstrate how settlement workers are hypervisibilized during times of crisis, while different ways of knowing and sustained digital inaccessibility and resources are invisibilized, along with the role settlement workers are playing to address these issues during and beyond the pandemic. Settlement workers' narratives make visible how differing levels of engagement with digital literacy can frequently be perceived through a deficit lens, in schools and more broadly, without consideration of the normative assumptions that inform such perceptions.

Seeing the Wall: Racism and Discrimination

This theme highlights participants' narratives of racism and discrimination that they had both experienced and witnessed. We consider these narratives as "seeing the wall" because of how participants recognize the ways in which the wall deploys white dominance to maintain and secure power, domination, and control over racialized immigrant groups. When we asked participants about experiences of racism and discrimination in their work, and if and how they believe schooling exclusions have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed multiple manifestations of systemic racism and barriers running through the focus-group discussions. The response of one participant after we posed this question was, "Should I give examples? I have a lot."

In speaking about her own experience of trying to protect students from racism and discrimination, the same participant explained the difficulty of taking on this task when she herself is subjected to discriminatory treatment, underlining that "being an immigrant helping immigrants is really, really hard." While there was notable variance among participants' naming of racism as an issue in their school contexts, a shared concern emerged that immigrant and refugee students receive unequal treatment from teachers, other students, and the wider school community.

Of urgent and grave concern are the suspicions and assumptions that several participants encountered from school staff and community members making false links between newcomers, particularly newcomers from Asia, and the spread of COVID-19. One participant said,

> We do hear the comments … "Oh, it's the newcomer that's got the COVID-19 virus; it's not a white person, it's a Filipino that's got it." So they're making that connection that it's going to be spread by the newcomers.… We've heard that, and our community was tagged with racial symbols over the summer.

These assertions demonstrate how anti-Asian racism and xenophobia are being given licence and harmful articulation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been witnessed and reported widely in other fora (CBC News, 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2021; Project 1907, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2020; Wu, Wilkes, Qian, & Kennedy, 2020).

Settlement workers described how newcomer parents' decisions to send their children to school or choose home learning were complicated by their awareness that white students, emboldened by racist discourses around COVID-19, would bully their children:

> One of the Chinese kids was sitting in his classroom. One classmate was pointing at him like, "You're the virus." But he was yelling, like, "I'm no virus. I didn't get the virus. I'm healthy." And yes, the teacher provided the proper education like telling that kid, "The virus is the virus; it's not because you're coming from—" Parents are still afraid like, "Do I still send my kid to school? Is that safe?"

Other settlement workers said that shared Chinese ancestry with their students meant they related to the experiences of confronting racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> Chinese people, yes. I need to say that. I'm not saying other students haven't been faced with situations, that it is just only me. I go to Walmart, where I wear a mask and just go to Tim Hortons to buy the cup of coffee. But we know that this virus was initially coming from Wuhan in China. So people will look at us like we are bringing the virus here.… It is just a virus; it's not because of my race, right? It doesn't mean like, as an Asian, I will bring the virus.

Participant descriptions informed our interpretation that COVID-19 restrictions provide a license and justification for discrimination. Thematic in this regard was the articulation of exclusionary and boundary-(re)making practices that appeared to be fortified by discourses and regulations in response to the pandemic. Several participants shared narratives about families being told to leave a classroom or exit the school immediately by administrative staff, and that these decisions varied from school to school—as did treatment of settlement workers and newcomer families. The participants emphasized this variability but thematically noted the powerful role administrative staff can play as the first and often ongoing point of contact in the school. One participant stated, "The administrative assistants have a lot of power … so I've witnessed a lot of discrimination and racist comments from the administrative assistants at school." The same participant shared an illustrative encounter:

> I have this admin assistant that, she would just say, "Those folks, will they ever learn to speak English?" And she tells it to me, in a playful way. But she really means it. Like, "These folks, when are they going to learn to speak English?" But she doesn't see the way she says it comes out very—it's discriminatory.… So it's those little things.

Many participants also held an understanding of racism in education as individual acts of discrimination enacted by a select few, without also naming how these experiences connect to racism being systemic and very much entrenched within school structures and policies. While as researchers we recognize our own questions shaped the responses, many examples of racism provided were largely about individual acts and described as isolated incidents by school settlement workers. It was common for responses to be premised with "Just one time" or "The only time I've witnessed racism was…"

As expressed in the next excerpt, there was great variability among settlement workers with respect to their willingness and levels of comfort naming racism, as well as competing discourses regarding how racism should be addressed:

> In our own community of SWIS workers, I have this feeling that even within ourselves, we don't realize, like, I see the racism, but I could see some of my colleagues not seeing it. I could see some of my colleagues saying, like, "Oh, no, she didn't mean it that way." And me thinking, "Well, she didn't mean it *that* way. But she actually *did* mean it that way," you know, so it's a tough position.… It puts us in a hard position …

For racialized immigrant settlement workers, apprehension to talk about racism appeared to be weighted by the consequences and possible repercussions of naming it as such, and some participants minimized its impact by commenting that they "don't take it personally" or by stressing that examples were isolated. This speaks to Ahmed's (2017) articulation that "those who don't come up against walls experience those who talk about walls as wall makers" (p. 141). Settlement workers, in this context, are pushed to minimize racism for fear of deviating from the wall's expectation of them as professionals who do not complain and who behave politely and respectfully as immigrants, consistent with the model minority discourse (Pon, 2000). This was also reflected by one participant who, after realizing that she had identified people with whom she had a racist encounter as "white," deliberately apologized for identifying them as such. Here we can consider how fear structures the affective apology—in racist encounters with the wall, and in proximity to wall makers, the racialized worker is expected to be "good," obedient, and grateful. The apology is produced as an effect meant to resolve their perceived transgressions toward the wall.

Furthermore, in the words of Ahmed (2012), "Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude, of failing to be grateful for the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival" (p. 43). The failure to uphold expectations of gratitude could result in social penalties and even job loss for immigrant settlement workers. Pointing to this dominant discourse during the focus groups created a moment of counter-discursive production in which we could name the harm that debts of gratitude cause when they become a condition of tentative inclusion, as this participant and others appeared to be confronting (Khoo et al., 2021).

The following example of anti-Muslim racism, which is particularly egregious, further showcases the power of this demand for gratitude willed by a white settler, school staff member positioning immigrant students as demanding "special treatment." In this condition, entitlements and dominance of white settler Christian normativity, myths of white settler benevolence ("we are giving you shelter here") and assumed jurisdiction ("you have no right") are being reproduced and made clear. Several participants spoke of witnessing similar forms of racism in schools, and we noted that such experiences of racism were not isolated and remain necessary and urgent to confront (Ahmed, 2020; Amjad, 2018; Elkassem et al., 2018).

> I have seen the [English language] teacher, she was so strict, and she was so firm in having these senior Muslim students to have non-halal. They were having a barbecue, and some of the students said, "No, we can't have it because this is not halal." And she started screaming at them: "See, you are the ones who came here as a refugee. We are giving you shelter here.… When we come to your countries, we don't do all this drama of having whatever is there available in your country. We eat. We don't ask for any special things. So you have no right, you are refugees here." I just didn't want to make it a big issue. But I said, "Okay, even if it is halal or not, if they're not willing to eat, we cannot force them. We can't ask them to eat." So she said, "Go to hell," then she just left from there. But when she saw me there she left; otherwise she was forcing [them to] eat this.

Indeed, walls and the kinds of discourses and behaviours they can give licence to—like those above—are most visible, recognizable, and familiar to individuals and groups perceived as the "wrong bodies" within the white settler Canadian nation-state. However, these practices of racism and xenophobia are out of sight for those who share investments in whiteness and whose bodies and ways of being are in line with the institution. For white, heteronormative,

and able-bodied students, teachers, and staff, schools are clear pathways that support their freedom of movement and are settings "lived and experienced as open, committed, and diverse" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 174; Smith et al., 2021). This institutional alignment shaped the apprehension we noted of white Euro-Canadian settlement workers to name racism or in some instances their silence in response to questions about racism. These (non)responses demonstrated how the racist workings of the wall can be denied, or render those bodies not aligned with the wall as problematic, because of the failure to maintain "kindness" and "respect", which were the words predominantly used by white participants. This obfuscation of race and racism, along with using code words or not naming racism, are iterations of colour-blind discourses that signal what it means to be a "good" Canadian—an embodiment of kindness and respect. Such denials seemed to be rooted in investments to not witness the wall: even though white settlement workers' colleagues and newcomer students come up against walls, white settlement workers do not, as "those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 175).

For other participants, there was a recognition of racism and a concern of whether they were doing enough to protect newcomer students from its impacts. The weight of perceiving this protection from racism as their responsibility was encapsulated by one worker who said, "I feel a little embarrassed, because I've seen a lot of racism and discrimination, but I haven't really done a lot." The protective role that settlement workers undertake is one of many forms of resistance they perform.

Repertoires of Expertise and Strategies of Resistance

Building on sections 1 and 2, the themes of *repertoires of expertise* and *strategies of resistance* emerge. Such repertoires and strategies demonstrate settlement workers' multiple forms of resistance to whiteness and racism in their everyday work. Their intimacy with the operations of the wall informs their knowledge and resistance. Forms of resistance have in common a refusal to accept the constraints and limitations imposed by dominant discourses and power relationships (Swan, 2008). The subsequent narratives illustrate multiple acts of resistance by the participants, ranging from having a sense of heightened identity consciousness to linguistic renaming and refusal, and to living as persistent advocates for their clients to traverse walls so as to bring them down.

In the excerpt below, one racialized school settlement worker acknowledged how both race and gender are at play in her interactions with white, male school principals, disrupting mechanisms of power through which settlement workers are made into raced and gendered subjects:

> I also think that there is discrimination between not only the whites and the people of colour but also between men and women as well. Especially like us, like women working in settlement and like working with high-school principals, it is more difficult. But we are very determined women, so don't worry. I worked with one or two schools where the principal and the vice-principal are men. Sometimes, it's very difficult to approach them, even with emails or with personal meetings, but I also have a strategy. I will kind of grab them in the hallway, and I will pin them down and kind of ask, "So I sent you several emails.… Did you have a chance to read it?"

Participants also spoke to the linguistic response strategies they employ to resist dominant discourses of deserving and undeserving newcomers introduced in the previous section. In the

next excerpt, one participant deploys the term "new Canadian" to describe a Syrian student, which positions the student as automatically entitled to resources that are often denied or provided begrudgingly to new immigrants and refugees:

> It's sad, but now I just come up and present the student [instead of asking them to introduce themselves]; I hate doing that. I feel like it's a way of protecting them a little. So I would just come to the office and say, "Hi, I'm here with [name]. She's a new Canadian that arrived from Syria." So I give like a little bit of background so they understand: "And I'm trying to help her get a bus card. Could you tell me how much it is?"

The above strategy is learned from prior experiences of coming up against the wall and coming to understand how to move through it. The settlement worker's rhetorical manoeuvre may be considered an example of employing "the happier languages of diversity," which does not "necessarily mean an identification with the institution but can be understood as a form of practice knowledge of the difficulty of getting through" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 175).

In some cases, settlement workers felt that not contesting their personal mistreatment was necessary in order to access and provide support to students. At the same time, they recognized teachers' behaviours as subordinating and refused to take up an unequal subject position, thereby asserting agency in how they repositioned themselves and therefore their roles in relation to students and families:

> Sometimes I feel like I'm a servant to her, not like a partner agency working with her. And so there is no respect.… "Okay, you have said your thing; now you can leave," in front of the students. Because we are partners, we are not servants. I said, "Okay," but because I just don't want to have any conflict with the students and all that.
>
> Sometimes, instead of being partners, sometimes we're—we work—I get that's our job. Like we advocate for families. And sometimes the teachers don't understand that we don't work for them. It's written on our mandate: "We work for the families, not for the teacher, not for the principal, not for the admin assistant. We work for the family; we're advocates for them."

The same participant further explained that while they learned to use language that keeps benevolent subjectivities intact, they do at times call out racism, albeit in indirect ways. While the excerpt below demonstrates how power works through them, power simultaneously works to constrain them, for being candid would mean a transgression of the expectation of gratitude bestowed upon racialized school settlement workers and would risk the subjectivity of a "wall maker … the one who makes things harder than they need to be … as if we bring the walls into existence by talking about them" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 142).

> So some of us are scared of engaging in some conversations, but for me, personally, I've had to step up in a way that doesn't hurt the relationship, but you do have to call it out sometimes. I'll just say some of those like little educational little hints. Yeah, because I don't want to maybe jeopardize their relationship.
>
> I don't know if my kind of voice can go anywhere. But I have been kind of calling out in any meetings that I've been that, that has to be changed.

Similar to what they do with students, settlement workers must also persistently defend newcomer families whose cultural differences or circumstances are often perceived by the

school as deficits. This demanding and taxing labour again brings to mind Ahmed's (2012) metaphor of repeatedly banging one's head against the wall:

> I think for my work, those microaggressions, I feel like sometimes we are like—we have to defend the families and continuously explain why their behaviours happen or why does Mom not check her email or all those things. So we do have to act like a little bit of an excuser or a shield.
>
> The issues that we encounter are bigger than ourselves and … we cannot control other people's actions, but we can control our own. I cannot teach a teacher how to be more open and an ally. But I can be an ally myself; I can protect the family; I can give them some strategies on how to navigate things; I can empower them by teaching them something, even if it's in the little things.

As demonstrated above, many school settlement workers have seen themselves as protective forces for newcomer students, both pre-COVID-19 and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and, whether or not they named it as such, their protection has mitigated the impacts of race and racism on students. Multiple participants told stories about their interventions in critical moments of life at school when they recognized how mechanisms of the wall, such as discipline, bullying, and streaming into special education programs, were disproportionately directed at newcomer students.

The following example is an excerpt shared in the context of a larger story about intervening in the (wrongful) placement of one student into a special education program. The settlement worker spoke to the serious repercussions of being streamed out of the mainstream program, including limited options for post-secondary education. They also refused to accept the placement as legitimate, advocating for the student until they were moved back into the mainstream program:

> The parents approached me; then I went to the teacher; then I went to the psychologist; then I went to the school board. Nobody helped me. They said … "CBI professionals, we know what we have done. And she's a psychologist, she has tested and all that." I said that the story behind this is this, not exactly this.

In the next example, a settlement worker described how she acted as an advocate for a mother whose son had been repeatedly bullied and believed transferring schools was the only option:

> In a follow-up phone call, I also got a lot of background about her son. He was bullied. He actually has transferred five schools already in [city name], and he was bullied in the other three schools as well. But—they never told teachers or schools because Mom feels that she wasn't good at English, and no one could really understand her or understand their thinking and what they experienced. Thought transferring school as a solution for their experience. And they did transfer to my school recently, and they encountered this discrimination again. So I comforted the mom, and then I scheduled a meeting with the school principal and the teacher regarding to Mom's concern, specifically about the discrimination and how Mom relate[d] the school-transferring to the discrimination part and the physical-insulting part.

Settlement workers' familiarity with the realities of race and racism within and beyond the wall's rhetorical veneers are crucial forms of practical knowledge. In this way settlement

workers inhabit a position that is deemed to cross a limit of knowing, in that they are witnesses to the contradictions and fissures where racism and discrimination take place. Settlement workers "create trouble" by naming that which other school staff may not seem or, rather, may not wish to see. Relying on such practical knowledge about the wall, they make visible the intangibility of symbolic commitments (Ahmed, 2012, p. 130). Settlement workers' multiple forms of resistance (re)position students as rightfully belonging in the space of the school.

Conclusion: Implications (of the Wall) and Recommendations

In this study, we examined the experiences of settlement workers in schools as they perform their roles supporting newcomer immigrant and refugee students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. As our study revealed, the multiple roles that the workers play every day have been amplified during the pandemic. At the same time, the entrenched whiteness and racism of the school system became amplified as well. Sara Ahmed's metaphor of the brick wall helps unpack power and domination within educational institutions that our study participants experienced and related. Settlement workers revealed narratives of the ways in which their labour has been rendered invisible and hypervisible (Coloma et al., 2012), how racism and discrimination appear, and how strategies of resistance gained through repertoires of knowledge about the wall can be enacted to intervene on students' behalf. In other words, as settlement workers negotiate power relations within the institution, they also are seeing and experiencing the wall as a metaphor for the solidification of history and power, institutional will and resistance, and a defence system meant to regulate and block the "wrong" people from passing through (Ahmed, 2012, 2017). Settlement workers thus have become highly skilled, expert wall navigators who "acquire a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 174).

The participant narratives put into sharp relief how COVID-19 measures and protocols have been used to justify and obfuscate schooling exclusions along colour lines (Lee & Ferrer, 2014), thereby challenging the prevalent discourse that the pandemic does not discriminate. Instead, pandemic conditions further demarcate, through both implicit and explicit communications, who belongs as exalted subjects in the making of a nation-state and who is excluded or is extended only conditional belonging (Thobani, 2007). Schools are spaces of both tensions and possibilities; schooling barriers and exclusions persist despite official commitments to multiculturalism, benevolence, tolerance, and inclusion articulated in policy and curriculum (e.g., Gebhard, 2018; Lund, 2006; St. Denis, 2011).

There is much to learn from settlement workers in schools about how the school system presents itself as a wall to racialized settlement workers and newcomer students and how educational actors differentially regulate entry, access and belonging. Drawing from the perspectives of settlement workers and building on Ahmed (2012, 2017), we ask, *What happens when the world is written from the orientations of people who come up against the wall and not those who fix it in place and move through it at leisure?* As per Ahmed, "we need to rewrite the world [in this context of the school system] from the experience of not being able to pass into the world" (p. 176). To support this rewrite, encounters with the wall must be more than named; they must be heard and acted upon by the governing white settler school leadership and body that keeps them solid. Animating the wall from the perspectives of racialized groups who are not meant to cross it is an invitation and an entry point to dominant white settler groups to dismantle them alongside settlement workers. The wall must be

dismantled for settlement workers to be able to fulsomely support newcomer students and families.

When we asked participants to share how they imagine schools could be, they essentially spoke of breaking down the walls they navigate. Their articulations have been translated into recommendations that are being disseminated to the participants' organization, the provincial ministry of education, and the federal ministry responsible for immigration and settlement. The study recommendations emphasize intersectoral communication, collaboration and accountability, and are intended to inform policy and practice. The recommendations include:

- awareness raising and official recognition of settlement workers and their position in the school,
- enhanced communications and interprofessional collaboration between school settlement workers, school teachers, and staff,
- mandatory training for all school staff on critical multiculturalism and anti-racism,
- permanent, equitable funding for school-settlement-worker positions, programs, and professional development, and
- consistent access to necessary supports and resources (e.g., translation services, English-as-an-additional language instruction and supports, IT equipment and technical support).

That the labour of change cannot be on those who come up against walls, that it must be on those who uphold them, was materialized through participants' clear recommendations as to how schools could be most supportive to them and newcomer students. Their articulations and experiences of the wall direct us all in imagining schools otherwise. As researchers, we put the settlement workers' recommendations forward and call on the *makers* of the wall to respond, while recognizing the recommendations will be received in the context of neo-liberal, white settler institutions made of walls of inertia, resistance, and gatekeeping/defence (Ahmed, 2012; Khoo et al., 2021). In order for the recommendations to be truly heard *through* the walls, we as researchers need to grapple with how to strategically contribute to breaking down the walls, while being accountable and advocating for the changes proposed by the research participants. It is not lost on us that there is a "contradictory logic of aligning with existing organizational cultures while advocating for institutional changes with a social justice agenda" (Khoo et al., 2021, p. 5). Our findings are therefore an invitation to wall (re)makers to actualize the commitments of educational systems to newcomer students and their families, in part, by responding to the recommendations emerging from the experiences of settlement workers narrated herein.

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