

Johanne Paradis (University of Alberta): Bilingual development in first generation Syrian refugee children: What factors contribute to successes and challenges?

The number of refugees worldwide is the highest ever recorded and over half are children (UNHCR, 2017). Children from refugee families can have experiences that set them apart from other migrant children, e.g., interrupted schooling, witnessing and being the victims of violence, loss of and separation from family members, displacement and frequent transitions, residing in refugee camps or detention centres (Graham et al. 2016; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin 2015; Kaplan et al. 2016). Post-migration, refugee families can also face economic and social integration difficulties and many child refugees struggle with socioemotional wellbeing and mental health post-migration (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Stewart et al., 2019). Such adverse experiences could well impact these children's development of both their first language (L1) and their second language (L2). For example, interrupted schooling could result in lower than age-expected abilities in the L1. In addition, since mental distress interferes with cognitive functioning and learning (Yasik et al., 2007), it could, in turn, interfere specifically with language learning.

To date, little research has focused on the bilingual development in refugee children separate from other populations of bilingual children. Furthermore, while much recent research has focused on sources of individual differences in bilingual development such as, age, cognitive and input factors (Chondrogianni, 2018; Paradis, 2016; Unsworth, 2016), very little research has examined the influence of wellbeing and adversity factors in particular. In this talk, I will present research from a longitudinal study on the bilingual development of Syrian refugee children recently arrived in Canada. The focus will be on sources of individual differences in their Arabic-L1 and English-L2 development, including age of arrival, quality and quantity of input-output, parental education, family size, as well as pre-migration adversity factors and concurrent socioemotional wellbeing. The influence of these factors on children's lexical, morphosyntactic and narrative abilities in both languages across time will be discussed. The overall goal of the talk is to reveal what poses challenges to these children's dual language development as well as what underlies their successes. The educational and clinical implications of this research will be discussed.