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# Refugee Youth Challenges and Unique Needs in Worcester Public Schools that are Satisfied by African Community Education

Heidi L. Biron

*International Development Community Environment*, [hbiron@clarku.edu](mailto:hbiron@clarku.edu)

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# Refugee Youth Challenges and Unique Needs in Worcester Public Schools that are Satisfied by African Community Education

Heidi Biron

M.A. International Development and Social Change  
May 2016

A Practitioner Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester,  
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the degree of Master of Arts in the department of International Community  
Development and Environment

And accepted on the recommendation of  
Nigel O.M. Brissett, Ed.D, Chief Instructor

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Refugee Youth Challenges and Unique Needs in Worcester Public School that are Satisfied by African Community Education**

**Heidi Biron**

The influx of refugee youth in United States challenges the structure of the US formal school system, as it struggles to manage the unique needs of refugee youth. This research explores African refugee youth needs in the formal school system in Worcester, MA, and how some of these needs are better supported in a supplementary education institution, African Community Education (ACE). The research draws on individual interviews and focus group discussions with refugee youth and ACE's staff to analyze the complexities and challenges refugee youth are confronted within formal schools and how they are motivated to seek supplementary education. The results suggest that while African refugee youth's academic challenges in school are partly as a result of low English language skills, an even more important struggle is the residual trauma and sense of exclusion that they feel while in formal schooling. ACE provides the support system that helps these students with these challenges. This research paper also provides recommendations specifically tailored to ACE to strengthen their supplemental education provided to African refugee youth attending Worcester Public Schools.

**Nigel O.M. Brissett, Ed.D, First Reader**

**Laurie Ross, Ph.D., Second Reader**

## **ACADEMIC HISTORY**

**Name (in Full):** Heidi Biron

**Date:** May 2016

**Baccalaureate Degree:** B.A. English concentration Creative Writing-Worcester State University, May 2011

**Master Degree:** M.A. International Development Social Change- Clark University, May 2016

**Occupation and Academic Connection since date of baccalaureate degree:**

- 2012-2014 United States Peace Corps Volunteer-China-TEFL Instructor
- 2014-current African Community Education-Worcester,MA-After-School and Express Coordinator and ELL Saturday Teacher

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## **DEDICATION**

To the students attending ACE, never give up on your dreams.

## **Introduction and Background**

Reports released by the American Immigration Council stated from 2009-2014, the United States of America (US) has taken in for each of those years an estimated 70,000-80,000 refugees (2014); that roughly estimates to 480,000 refugees in the span of six years. About 35-40% of those resettled refugees in the US are children under the age of 17 (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS), 2015). The growing number of refugee youth is changing and challenging the demographic needs of students in institutionalized American formal school systems. It has been demonstrated through research and narrative inquiry that refugee children's needs are often different from the average needs of a typical American student and having additional educational support can help address those needs.

Refugee's resettling experience in the US is usually defined by turbulence, uncertainty, and fear for survival in their home country. Troublesome past events and turbulent resettling process have a large impact on refugee youth (McBrien, 2005). Refugees flee their homes and familiarity for safety in place that is foreign and requires adaptation to, the resettlement process is not a simple or easy adjustment, for an adult or child. For a refugee child, the struggle of adapting and acculturating is especially challenging in US formal school systems, as they often feel isolated and alone.

There are many refugee youth who have never attended a day of school in their life or they have had an interrupted education. The absences or interrupted education makes the formal school transition difficult for refugee youth because it makes learning English

much more difficult (Hos, 2012). When a child cannot read or write in their native language, it makes it problematic to teach and enforce another language onto a child. The absence of education and past experiences with trauma, will ultimately impact their learning (International Rescue Committee, 2006 & McBrien, 2005). Refugee youth's unique experiences before arriving to the US along with past education histories can negatively impact their experiences in US formal schools.

To better understand and support their formal educational experiences there needs to be an understanding and awareness of who a refugee student is and how they can benefit from supplemental education. Supplement education institutions can help refugee youth increase their chances for success in their education as they are able to better provide resources and structure that are different from but enhances their formal schooling.

This paper explores the refugee students experience, their challenges in the formal school systems, why it is important to provide them with supplementary educational support, and how formal and supplement education can complement each other. In pursuing these research objectives, I use the non-profit organization the African Community Education (ACE), as a case study to explore how refugee students experience the education system in Worcester, Massachusetts and how supplement educational institutions can support them. Thus my research is guided by the following objectives/questions:

- How do African refugee students experience formal schooling in Worcester, MA, and why do they seek supplement education opportunities at ACE?
- How can supplement educational organizations like ACE help African refugee students increase their formal educational success based on their experiences?



## Section I: Literature Review

### *Putting the Refugee Students into Perspective: Migration: Who are they?*

It is common for people to classify immigrants and refugees as the same (Hos, 2012 & Edwards, 2015), but the two classifications are arguably two very distinctive groups. The groups share the notion of movement of people from one area to another (Edwards, 2015), but their motivation for migration is escalated by dissimilar conditions. Understanding these differences is crucial for understanding how refugees' educational experiences have been heavily impacted by the past lived experience and the reason why supplementary educational support is crucial for this group of people.

A person classified as an immigrant can be seen as having an advantage in their motivation and autonomy for migration vs. a person classified as a refugee. That advantage in migration pattern is the choice and desire to voluntarily leave their home country for another (Hos, 2012 & Edwards, 2015). Having the capacity to make a conscious *decision* creates a big separation and distinction of the two groups of people. An immigrant has made the choice to resettle elsewhere, and it could be for reasons such as they're experiencing hardships within their country. These hardships can be seen as low wages, no employment, little food, the country falling on hard economic times, or a presence of extended family in the country of immigration, among numerous reasons. (Edwards, 2015). A person who is grouped as an immigrant can be viewed as someone whose incentives fuel their move, which is undertaken with some autonomy and planning.

The basic notion is that a person labeled as an immigrant does not need to make an urgent exit from the country due primarily to tremendous fear (Edwards, 2015). The lack of urgency gives an immigrant time to plan to resettle and to cope with the potential challenges that come with resettlement. Having the decision of when, how, and where one will relocate is extremely beneficial for the resettlement process (Cortes, 2004). Having choices allows for one to prepare mentally and physically for the resettlement process. Having a choice allows for the opportunity to learn and form a better mental understanding of a new home country. This concept of ‘choice’ is extremely beneficial for resettlement, as it allows psychological preparation for drastic lifestyle changes.

In contrast, the group of people classified as refugees are motivated by survival, which impacts their unknowing migration. A person of refugee status migrates often under the conditions of no notification, no physical or mental preparation, and the choice to live or die. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention). A person of refugee status is motivated by fear to migrate and will face uncertainties in the process of trying to resettle.

Many persons that are of refugee status have commented that they never wanted to leave their origin country and would have preferred to stay if they did not feel their lives

were in danger (Kibreab, 2003). They flee their homes in urgency without planning a destination, just in the hope of reaching safety. There are many cases of refugees facing long journeys through country to country, having to live in the shadows, detention centers, refugee camps, and/or prisons before even getting a chance to permanently resettle in a country (Kibreab, 2003). With having no time to prep or plan and having nothing in tote, refugees rely on the mercy and grace of their host countries. It is clear that a refugee migration situation is harsher than that of their immigrant counterparts. It is the migration journeys that separates the two groups into two distinct classification in regards to migration.

The difference in migration situations also affects the experiences of assimilating into US formal school systems. While, I acknowledge that immigrant youth also face challenges in assimilating into the formal school setting and have specific needs, their challenges and needs are not of the same of a refugee youth.

### ***Refugee Youth's Challenges in Formal Public Schools***

Significantly, too many refugees are non-native speakers of English or do not speak English at all upon their arrival in the US. This language issue has been deeply problematic historically. The English-language-learner (ELL) student was truly brought into focus in the American public school systems from a ruling in the 1974 case *Lau v.*

Nichols<sup>1</sup>. The *Lau v. Nichols* was a suit that had represented eighteen hundred Chinese-American students that were attending San Francisco public schools that were being denied educational opportunities because they did not speak English (Sugarman & Widess, 1974). The *Lau v. Nichols* case had resulted in the US Supreme Court ruling that all formal public schools were to provide non-native students with extra assistance in English, to erase language barriers in school that would allow ELL students to excel in formal public schools (Baron, 2000 & Vang, 2006), but the court's ruling on formal public schools to provide extra English language assistance was met with a double edge sword. It was a positive direction to for formal public schools to have to provide extra assistances, but because that assistance was being produced and provided by the formal public schools the curriculum does not favor a multicultural, minority, ELL students like the refugee, it was not as effective as hoped.

Unfortunately, it will not be easy for students to quickly pick up a new educational culture and academic successes because all that is contingent on the refugee youth picking up the English language (Browne, 2012). The language barrier can become a huge setback for a refugee student, and until English language is acquired it will be hard for any communication with anyone at school, "... they face a dilemma in meeting the language and literacy expectations within particular curriculum content and in relation to particular pedagogical strategies" (Naidoo, 2009, p. 42). This dilemma will most likely result in a refugee youth entering a formal public school classroom and not having the standard

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<sup>1</sup> 483 F.2d 791 (9th Cir. 1973), cert. granted, 93 S. Ct. 2786 (1973)

English skills that meet the ‘typical’ American student’s curriculum requirements, resulting in refugee youth being segregated from ‘typical’ students and taught a watered down version of the curriculum, along with many being exempt from standardized test taking (Vang, 2010) allow just to avoid lowering the school’s performance.

Formal public school policies have made it so that an English-language-learner (ELL) student is removed from the ‘normal’ structure of schooling and has to participate in a setting that is structured for students with little to no English language skill (Sugarman & Widess, 1974). The ELL curriculum is based on the Western attitude that non-English-speaking students are not capable of the same academic achievements (Vang, 2006). The structure in which public schools are purposely addressing ELL students’ educational needs are essentially setting them up for an underprivileged academic experience and opportunities which is rivaled by their American-English speaking student counterpart.

### ***Refugee Youth Trauma and Identity Challenges in Formal Public Schools***

As mentioned previously, refugee youth are presented with trauma based on their circumstances. Their trauma plays a vast role in how they will respond in a formal school setting. It is important to recognize that not all refugee youth experience the same trauma and hardships in their resettlement journeys, but a majority will struggle with coping with them. To help better understand some of the trauma and hardships refugee youth can be confronted with my draw on examples from research conducted by Blackwell and Melzak’s, who discuss possible experiences that provoked trauma in refugee youth:

“Some have had to stand and watch while their mother or father has been shot or butchered. Some have watched their mothers or sisters being raped. Others have had parents or siblings disappear and have gone through days, weeks or months of anxiety, not knowing if they were dead or alive. Some have been taken to prisons to see their parents being tortured. Others have been in prison and may have been beaten or tortured themselves” (2000, p. 8).

These terrifying scenarios seem to be something out of a horror movie, but these are real scenarios refugee youth encounter. In order to escape their horror film, a refugee must lose their home, friends, family, community, and just their overall way of life. It's a difficult conundrum to be in; it is a lose-lose situation. The decision to flee from the danger is sought on with uncertainty, confusion, and fear with where to go and if one will make it and if one does there becomes uncertainty and confusion on who one is.

### ***Trauma***

The migration journey previously mentioned demonstrate just a small fracture of turbulence wreaking refugees' lives and how it results in instability. A child in a stable environment exposed to daily routines develops a senses of security and trust, but when this routine is exposed to an abrupt and intense disruption, he or she can significantly be affected by a sense of insecurity and displacement security (Sandstorm & Huerta, 2013). The loss of stability of a refugee youth is met with the unknowing, these two events are enough to create impact trauma for a youth. The process of their journeys during migration will inflate their trauma.

There are refugee youth who will endure their journeys alone and unaware of their fate or family members' fate. There are cases of refugee youth's journeys taken by family

members or friends, or linking up later with family or friends, or in some cases arriving alone and being placed in foster care (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). No matter how or who refugee youth travelled with, the lost and abrupt disruption creates a sense of abandonment within them, even the refugee youth who are accompanied by family members have the sense of desertion. This is because the refugee adults too have been drastically changed by the situation and it can result in mental absence parenting (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). Parents or guardians struggle to protect and care for their families as they too are faced with dispositions. Disposition such as navigating around, the adults are unable to write or speak the new language, rendering them feeling useless (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000 & Sandstorm & Huerta, 2013 & Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). Adult refugees that have to become reliable on other people makes them feel inadequate and as though they have no control of their family situation resulting in depression (Sandstorm & Huerta, 2013 & Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). Their sense of lost prevents them from comforting and assuring their own child's well-being. It is the same for refugee youth who are alone, there is no one to help them deal or cope with their trauma to ensure their future well-being.

Youth with past trauma left unaddressed by an adult can lead to not trusting and fear of adults in youth (Shonkoff & Garner, 2011); the absence of trust in an adult becomes problematic in a school setting for refugee youth. The routine in formal schools is for students to attend an eight-hour school day and to listen, respect, and trust the adults within the school. This is not an easy routine for a refugee youth whose past trauma that has been left unaddressed has manifested from rejection and wariness in adults. Refugee youth are

not receptive to the concept of “... ready to learn, ready to emotionally experience the excitement of discovery” (Ziegler, n.d., p. 2) because they are too focused on their environment and people and how to protect themselves from it. It is past trauma that produces a hypervigilance within them, which allows them to heighten their survival skills (Sandstorm & Huerta, 2013 & Shonkoff & Garner, 2011 & Ziegler, n.d.). Their hypervigilance skill that was essential to their livelihoods has continued on in their resettlement. With no one to help refugee youth cope and manage their feelings, their reactions, behavior, and learning capabilities will be impacted in their performance in a formal school setting. The complexity and/or extreme trauma experiences not just results in hypervigilant youth, but hypervigilant youth who do not know how to self-regulate emotional response brought on by their hypervigilance.

Self-regulation is often the most prevalent result of trauma in youth. Without being able to healthy self-regulate, a youth does not pose inner understanding and strengthen to monitor their emotion and behavioral responses around them (Perry, 2003 & Ziegler, n.d.). A person that has not experienced childhood trauma and has had healthy childhood experiences are capable of forming mature brains that allow them to learn the strength of self-regulation; humans are not born with this skill (Perry, 2003). The skill of self-regulation allows one to pause during impulses that are being triggered by emotions of stress, fear, angry, anxiety, sadness, etc... Refugee youth’s traumatic experiences and their mistrust in adults invokes hypervigilance that exuberates their responses which can result



in intense and abnormal emotions and behavior responses that are unaccustomed to the formal schools.

US formal schools confronted with refugee youth with extreme and nonstandard emotional responses misinterpret the real needs and issues conflicting the youth. Many times refugee youth's behavior and learning capabilities are misconstrued as a 'problem' students, and therefore punished and not dealt with (Danieli, Rodley, & Weiseath, 1996 & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2005). Formal schools fail to recognize refugee youth's responses are quite normal for a youth who is dealing with trauma and their response could be interpreted as a cry for help. Unfortunately, most of the time refugee youth is left unaided in coping with powerful emotions, because the US formal school institutions are historically structured to evaluate one's growth in academics, not psychological growth (Browne, 2012 & Danieli, Rodley, & Weiseath, 1996). Refugee youth that is continuously battling their inner trauma alone, will continue to face challenges in formal schools that hinder their chances to educational opportunities.

### ***Acculturative Stress — Identity Struggles***

The last student-conflict factor refugee youth struggle with in formal schools that I will address in this paper is, acculturative stresses. Acculturative stress has been reported as a consequence of acculturation that is brought on from the sense of societal disintegration, which can produce a personal crisis and higher psychological risk,

specifically with youth (Earnest, 2005/2006 & Williams & Berry, 1991). Acculturation is a process that can be described as the adaptation process of diverse individuals to the dominant culture.

As I had previously mentioned, refugee youth have reported that the resettlement process left them feeling detached from their world and from themselves. The loss of confidence in one's identity and belonging, enhances their feelings of abandonment and isolation due to their situation. Bash (2005) argues that the main challenge for a refugee youth is making sense of their own existence as an individual and their relationship to those surrounding them. It is difficult for refugee youth to define their existence as an individual as they are exposed to multifaceted situations. The moving from country to country in the pursuit to find permit residency will detrimentally impact youth, as their developing young minds absorb and attempt to sort out their new life (Strekalove & Hoot, 2008). The forming and understanding of oneself is hard to form, especially when the refugee youth is trying to form an understanding of their new life, like that of the formal school setting. What seems as simple as defining who one is, becomes a source of negative and complex influences. This can result in refugee youth going through multiple identities that are displayed in different settings; such as school, home, and community (Bash, 2005). Having multiple identities can offset psychological, social, and cultural conflicts that "... threatens the child's stability" (Strekalove & Hoot, 2008).

Having to develop and define identity as a youth is extremely challenging, many of us do not think too deeply about our identity, but let it naturally form. When someone so

young has to start to develop and define who they are it creates stress upon them. Academic learning is pushed aside when refugee youth is building and discovering themselves, as this takes precedence. It is important for youth to create a sense of belonging among their peers, the sense of belonging evokes positive social welfares, inspirations, health and happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When refugee youth shapes their identity to fit with their new community it can result in intergenerational stress in their home life's (Earnest, 2005/2006). Refugee youth are more likely to adapt and change to their new environment, which cannot be said for their parents or guardians (Ajdukovic, 1998). For refugee youth's parent, their child's choice to identify with their new life can cause the sense of their child turning their back to who the parents identify their children as; forgetting their cultural. Or it can also result in reverse hierarchy, roles in family units; as parents and guardians become dependent on their child to get by (Earnest, 2005/2006).

The acculturation stresses on refugee youth challenges their understanding and defining themselves. Their idea of who are and what they want to be is a nerve-wracking and perplexing concept. In their academic setting, they are expected to acculturate to behave and perform academically like the other students. In their family setting, they are expected to behave and follow their past traditions. Refugee youth trying to comprehend past trauma and deceiver who they are, will struggle to perform in formal school settings, because their concerns are not with academics but how to protect themselves. It is not just

refugee youth who will feel personally challenged in a formal school setting, but the teachers themselves too.

### ***Challenges Teachers Face with Refugee Students***

US teachers are not trained to deal with a non-traditional American students and their needs in a classroom environment. The unique challenges teachers face when confronted with refugee youth are not addressed because once again, the prolonging historical culture in US formal school systems. The US formal schools have trained their teachers based on the historical school culture which handicaps the teachers' ability to understand, deal, and manage with non-linear students (Ogbuagu, B. & Ogbuagu, C., 2013 & Vang, 2010), such as a refugee youth. The majority of US teachers, are not trained to distinguish trauma inflicted students along with how to render special care and learning styles for these sets of students. Strekalove & Hoot who had collected research on the special needs of refugee children to provide guidelines for teachers made the following finding:

“Teachers in the United States are a relatively homogenous group. The great majority are White and monolingual with very modest if any international travel experience. Moreover, they tend to come from secure, middle-class background. Their experience with the horrors of war and trauma are generally limited to watching the evening news or occasional documentaries. Given this background, it is unlikely that such teachers are prepared to respond to that specialized needs of refugee children...” (2008, p.21).

It is true that many US teachers may not be able to comprehend the horrors and challenges refugee youth face, but that does not matter because US teachers are forbidden to inquire about a student’s immigration status (Borkowski & Hartson, 2009). Even if a

teacher was equipped to deal with refugee youth's special needs, they are unaware of the status of any student, unless voluntarily information has been given to them by a parent or student. In the same study by Strekalove & Hoot they gathered that such voluntary information is rarely given to teachers as explained by a refugee parent that was interviewed:

“I don't believe teachers need to know the reasons why we left our country. It is not necessary. What matters is that my child gets the same education as the other, non-refugee children. I want teachers to talk to my child about his experiences only when he brings it up” (2008, p.3).

US formal teachers are trained to implement an education in a precise format, which ultimately narrows their ability to reach out and help refugee youth. The narrow view of student expectations and behavior prevents teachers from being vigilant to refugee youth's real needs to academically achieve in school. Teachers continue to struggle to deal with refugee youth because of the inability of students and teachers to understand one another and it causes tension between the educational ideologies practiced in school and its social structure (Naidoo, 2009).

### ***What is the result of these factors?***

Attending a formal structure school is not a natural, nor simple or easy process for a refugee youth to assimilate instantaneously into. The attending of formal schools is challenging for youth academically, as well a source of anxiety for a refugee youth (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). Formal schools were not structured to accommodate students with dynamic backgrounds like that described of the refugee youth, and therefore a

refugee youth's real needs in order to strive academically go unnoticed, unaware, and/or misconstrued.

There is a sense of disconnect between teachers and refugee youth in formal schools that can result in the misunderstanding of why refugee youth demonstrate explosive anger, problems with authority, disrupts, inability to concentrate, withdrawal, falling behind in school work, and age inappropriate behavior (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000). It is not necessarily the fault of the teachers or refugee youth, but the result of the current structure of the formal school systems, which do not allow for adequate personal care or counseling of students.

With there being numerous personal and educational challenges that refugee youth face, this paper touching on just a few of those challenges, it demonstrates that there is a need for a supplement educational support system for refugee youth. The formal school systems are not structured to meet the unique and perplexing needs of a refugee youth. Fortunately, some communities have established supplement education, support centers to supplement refugee youth's formal schooling, such as the case for African Community Education (ACE) in Worcester, MA.

### ***Who is ACE***

The African Community Education program, better known as ACE is an educational non-profit community based organization. ACE was founded in 2006 by Kaska Yawo and Olga Vladmen, who started off with three tutoring centers around Worcester, MA and eventually started a Saturday program at Chandler Magnet. In 2007,

ACE was officially recognized as 501 (c) (3) organization, concretizing it as a nonprofit organization. Since 2007, ACE has had major growth and expansion in their program and student attendance size. In 2011, ACE had settled into their current residences, a Worcester Public School building known as the Fanning Building. What had once started off as simple tutor sessions had expanded and to date provides eight different educational programs to help foster African refugee youth education. Table 1.0 outlines ACE's programs with a description of program.

ACE's has proven that African refugee students are needing and seeking educational support that is not being fulfilled by their public schools. ACE's has caught the attention of other organizations such as AmeriCorps, Mass Mentoring Partnerships, and United Way who has helped ACE reach as many African refugee youth as possible in the city of Worcester, MA who are wanting and needing supplementary education. ACE's embodies the type of organization that provides educational support beyond the formal school, and is therefore served as an appropriate case study.

The additional education support from ACE, a non-profit educational organization, has helped refugee youth transition and find success in their formal schooling. Drawing on the literature on refugee youth's experiences in the formal schooling, I designed research questions that would help understand the need for supplemental education support for refugee youth. Additionally, the research also aims to generate recommendations to improve the support given by the organization to refugee students. The next section of this paper will examine the proposed research questions through the case study of ACE:

- **How do African refugee students experience formal schooling Worcester, MA, and why do they seek supplement education opportunities at ACE?**
- **How can supplement educational organizations like ACE help African refugee students increase their formal educational success based on their experiences?**

<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Description of program</b>
<i>After-school Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates Monday thru Thursday from 3:00-6:00</li> <li>• Students have the opportunity to bring in homework and receive help from tutors</li> <li>• Daily leadership activity to help students be better community members</li> <li>• Students that demonstrate need for extra language support attend a structured class lead by a certified ESL instructor</li> </ul>
<i>Saturday Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates every Saturday from 8:30-2:30</li> <li>• Morning classes consist of STEM and ELL classes</li> <li>• Afternoon classes consist of Express Yourself and Physical Activity (soccer or dance)</li> </ul>
<i>Express Yourself Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates during After-School and Saturday program</li> <li>• Designed in small groups 'classes' build essential knowledge and skill in conflict resolution, healthy relationships, and positive values</li> <li>• Explores identity, cultural, and traditions</li> </ul>
<i>Leadership Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates during the After-School program</li> <li>• Engages students to develop positive leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
<i>Workforce Development Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates during After-School program</li> <li>• designed for high-school students to help gain finical literacy skills and pre-employment skills</li> <li>• Opportunity for students to work in the ACE office part-time</li> </ul>
<i>Summer Reading Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates in the summer; Monday thru Thursday 2:00-6:00</li> <li>• Keeps students academically engaged during summer months; 4-week program</li> </ul>
<i>Family Education Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates during Saturday program</li> <li>• Adult ESOL &amp; U.S. Citizenship classes, early literacy playgroup, and parent-child literacy activities</li> </ul>
<i>Mentoring for Empowerment &amp; Exchange Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operates all year; meet on mentor and mentee schedule</li> <li>• Students build self-esteem</li> <li>• Establish and work toward goals</li> <li>• Learn about community resources</li> <li>• Explore potential college and career path</li> </ul>



## **Section II: Supplement Education Organization Case Study African Community Education**

### ***Methodology***<sup>2</sup>

To further understand the challenges refugee youth experience in public schools and why they seek optional supplement education opportunities I conduct personal further investigation with the help of staff and students from ACE. I gathered qualitative research through collecting narrative research.

My narrative research was collected at ACE and were sets of interviews with staff and one focus group with students. I had completed four direct semi-structured interviews with different staff members, along with one direct semi structure, focus group, where I acted as the facilitator.

### ***Researcher's Role in Collecting Data***

It is important to note my connections and experience with the organization ACE. I had purposely selected this organization as a case study because of my familiarity with the organization. In 2010-2012, I was a Saturday Teacher Assistant volunteer for the organization and in 2014 from currently, I am an active staff member of ACE. I spend about thirty hours a week at the organization where I play the roles of Saturday & After-

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<sup>2</sup> All interviews were approved by Clark University's Committee on Rights of Human Participants in Research and Training Programs and were acknowledged and agreed to by the acting participants.

School ELL teacher and Express Yourself Coordinator. Because of my very active presence within ACE, I have developed close personal relationships with the students. The students involved in this research project are students I have worked with in the past and have maintained relationships of mutual trust, respect, and understanding. With permission and support of ACE and the students, I spent the summer of 2015 conducting interviews with staff and students to characterize the organization from the people involved with the organization.

### ***Research Design***

Through the course of the summer and fall of 2015, I conducted interviews with different groups of people that were active participants' members of ACE. I had conducted four and half-hour interviews with different ACE staff members; see appendix for Table 1.1 for staff profiles. The interview questions were constructed through the results of my examination of the literature research on refugee students' experiences as refugee students, as well as the roles of staff within the program.

Along with staff interviews, I facilitated a one-hour focus group with four students, see appendix for Table 1.2 for student profiles. Using a focus group setting with students, helped me collect the narrative inquires as a compare and contrast of their experiences in formal schools and their motives for seeking out supplement education. I had given the students prompts throughout the one-hour focus group, these prompts were based off of literature research and responses given by staff members.

### ***Handling of Research Data***

Interviews from both groups (individual and focus) were recorded as well, notes were taken during the time of the interviews. The recordings were later transcribed. After, the focus group and individual interviews were typed out it provided a full script that was then strategically coded to enable information that was aggregated and analyzed via descriptive measurements. These descriptive measurements were labelled as such 'no English', 'identity issues', 'extra support' etc. The placing of descriptivist on responses allowed for the identification of issues, success, and needs by the recurring descriptive in the statements by the different participants. These measurements are used to strengthen the understanding and need for refugee youth needing educational support.

### ***Limitations***

There were three limitations when it came to gathering qualitative data to support my research. The first limitation was there were no interviews collected from teachers or administration who operate in the formal Worcester Public Schools (WPS). No interviews were collected from WPS because of resource and time constraints, for those reasons I had decided to focus solely on the experiences of refugee youth in formal schools and their need for supplemental education. The second and third limitation were the age and sample size of the students who participated in my focus group. The students who were selected for the focus group were all seventeen or older. I did this intentionally due to the nature of the research and the potential chance it had to harness negative memories or feelings; for

this reason I opted for an older and mature student research participant. There were seven older students who had agreed to partake in the research focus group, but on the day of the scheduled focus group only four of the seven students attended.

## **Research Questions Explored**

### **I. African Refugee Students Experiences in WPS**

#### **i. Elevated Anxiety Due to Lack of English**

The students at ACE expressed elevated levels of anxiety throughout their assimilation into the WPS. Their anxiety levels would be evaluated from multiple situations, and for the students that participated in the focus group these situations primarily arose because of the language barrier.

For many refugee youth that have resettled in Worcester, MA attend a school known as NCC; James A. Caradonio New Citizen Center. NCC is known in the Worcester community as a public school that is geared toward newly arrived immigrants (Ncc.Worcesterschools.org, 2015)<sup>3</sup>. Even with a formal school aimed for newly arrived students, the ACE students still expressed intense anxiousness in the setting. The students would blame their unfamiliarity with English for causing stress and anxiousness.

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<sup>3</sup> NCC's school focus statement: "The staff at the Dr. James A. Caradonio New Citizens Center is committed to providing direct instruction to increase students' skills in reading comprehension, writing, academic and social discourse, and vocabulary development in all content areas"(School Accountability Plan Worcester Public Schools 2014-2015;15).

Students in the focus group stated that they struggled with English immensely and how this would intensify their already uneasiness.

Student#5: "...even sometimes if I know the word I can't say it, I don't feel comfortable because like I might not say that word right, and they might laugh at you. I wouldn't say right way so made me feel uncomfortable....Say like in the schools, teachers get angry sometimes because you can't ask all these questions and stuff like that."

Student#6: "The kids were born in America or knew English, I couldn't feel comfortable, they might laugh so I said nothing."

Student#7: Massachusetts the teacher will say some stuff and we didn't know how to like how like if you wanted to use the bathroom you didn't know how to say 'let me use the bathroom.' So you just walked out."

Student#8: "Our schools had tutors, but I could never figure out what the tutor was saying, I ask to repeat, but I still did not get it. I did not want to upset them by keep asking them to explain."

During the course of focus group the four students reported that not knowing English left them confused, scared, nervous, and angry because they felt lost and alone in formal schools. Not knowing English became a trigger of past trauma. While none of the students acknowledge past trauma and how it could be affecting them currently, it is contributing to heightened emotions.

Staff#1: "I think they [WPS] look at it as being a one fastened issue, they look it at only being an English issue. You know the problem is these kids don't have enough of English, but it is much more than that. You know there is a trauma issue for all of them. You know it is a traumatic experience to be in a camp of some sort, to be a refugee of any kind is a trauma issue and I think that is glossed over in favor of 'oh it is just a language issue' no. Then the other issue is you know, most of these kids have had their education interrupted and it is very difficult to figure out you know to what extent that education has been interrupted and what kind of toll that takes on that kid. I don't think teachers and I don't think the educational establishment recognizes that and really gives, you know, really assesses that properly."

## **ii. Limited to No Parental Support in Regards to Schoolwork**

When children do experience on uncertainty and/or uneasiness they would talk to their guardian for help and support. ACE students explained how they could not ask for help to resolve their discomfort.

Student#8: “Well, for me the reason why I came to ACE is like, my parents don’t speak English and they don’t and my older brother couldn’t speak English too. None of us spoke English.”

Parents play an important role in their child’s education, but refugee youth cannot rely on their parents to be actively engaged in their education. The parents are at the same level of understanding or less as their child.

Staff#1: “Most of us Americans have the benefit of our parents who have gone through the public schools and have some understanding of what is like to get through the public schools, these kids don’t. So their parents and them are left at a lost.”

Students are expected to come prepared and ready for school, but what if you or your parent does not know what that means? They are left to fail, such as in the case of something as basic of homework. Many students will ask their parents for help with difficult homework assignments, but refugee youth’s parents may not even know what the homework is, and if they do they themselves do not understand the assignment.

Staff#3: “The schools do not teach you how to do your homework.”

Student#5: “Like how in school they issue homework and stuff and say imagine like the teacher did not explain very well and then they give you homework and you don’t even know what like the homework is about and that is the problem.”

## **iii. Uneasiness with WPS Teachers**

ACE students and staff spoke about how the environment of WPS makes it a challenging learning environment for a refugee youth. The students also had made mentioned that the teachers in their environment did not make their situation any better.

Student#5: “The people in the WPS know nothing about you. They think you are from America, you know everything. Like they don’t know your whole background, you know what I mean? They kinda put you in the same place like other kids, like, you know what I mean?”

Student#7: Cause some teachers think like cause you like you from Africa or refugee they think that you don’t know anything.

ACE’s students’ comments support Strekalove & Hoot (2008) findings that US formal teachers are disconnected in understanding or knowing refugee youth. Formal school teachers have a very narrow view of their students, and this prevents them from making connections to refugee youth, which leads to unsuccessful teacher and student relationship.

#### **iv. Overall Experience**

Negative experiences and feelings African refugee youth were experiencing at WPS prevented them from their opportunity to education and wanting a chance to education sought help from ACE. As the literature pointed out, these negative feelings are brought up from a combination of past trauma experiences (Blackwell & Melzak, 2000 & Sandstorm & Huerta, 2013 & Shonkoff & Garner, 2011 & Ziegler, n.d.) and the unfamiliar school cultural in formal schools (Ogbuagu, 2013). Supplementary education can help support refugee youth with

US formal school classroom setting is rooted by the Western cultural expectations that have become the norm for American teachers and students in formal schools (Konieczka, 2013). This is not the case for refugee youth, their assimilation into a formal school setting is unknown resulting in feelings of discomfort, danger, isolation, etc., which naturally they react to.

## **II. African Students' Reason for Attending ACE and How ACE Addresses their Students' Challenges**

### **i. Quality of Teachers**

It was the cultural and the structure of the formal school environment was related to why refugee youth were looking for supplemental education.

Student#7: "They say African Education Community? I think like that basic says why the program is about like carters to kids who are from other countries I kinda think they opened this program to help other kids. And I felt like, felt like the teachers who were trained here would be more patient with you, say like in the schools. Like the teachers get angry sometimes. But, you can't ask all these questions and stuff like that and ya here I thought they would be more patient. "

It was having the opportunity to attend ACE that student5 and 7 were able to make genuine connections with teachers and felt a sense of comfort

Student#5:"ACE the teachers are different, patient, care about you, like, it's just a better feeling."

Student#7: "Cause like, I didn't feel comfortable with Worcester teachers....Cause I didn't learnt English that was needed over there so I decide to see, come here to learn more...and I did."

American formal schools were not structured to address the underlying issues that may be contributing to the student's behavior, but rather structured to punish that behavior by doling out detention for too many missed homework, suspension for leaving a classroom without proper authorization, etc. Supplement educational organizations, such as ACE, are not constructed in formal schooling guidelines, allowing for a structure that fits the needs of the students they are serving.



## ii. ACE's Structure of Providing Education

ACE was not structured as a behavioral program, but an education program, but recognize that the students they are serving need their behavioral needs met in the academic setting.

Staff4: "So a lot of perceptions of ACE from educators is that we are serving this purpose [behavior]. They will like contact us and being like 'can you deal with this challenge?' and it is like well that is not what our role is, that is not why we are here. We even say we are not a behavioral program, we are an academic program. **It is just because the behavior piece is so crucial for our students, it can get in the way for many of the students in regards to their academics. So you have to deal with behavioral before you can deal with the academics.** If they aren't happy or you know or something is making them feel uncomfortable they are not going to do their homework, they are going to be trying to figure out how do I get comfortable so my personal feeling is the educational system is not structure in that way right now so that is why the teachers are saying that can't support them."

ACE's dynamic educational practices create a place for a refugee youth not to just get academic support, but readjustment support; which has been demonstrated to be a crucial element for refugee youth outcome in formal schools.

Staff#4:..... we [ACE] know more about having that one on one attention is important. Where in the school system they do not have the ability to create a structure like that..... ACE prioritize who works with them [ACE students]. So, we think about the staff we hire, we want them to be; African or have some sort of background in their understanding, knowing the education system, but also if they are a refugee themselves.....We have a space [ACE] where we can talk about things, and we also know with trauma you do not want to open that door unless you know you can help them go through a path or you can grasp one piece of it without making them feel like their whole world is going to fall apart. We know not to start something without like, we, but we do like value what means to be in trauma and think about it and really trying to support our students, where I don't think the educators have created a space to do that in the public schools.

Formal schools structures, attitudes, and constrains (teacher class size) do not permit refugee youth their fair chance to this opportunity. The literature has commented that formal schools' attitudes are non-English-speaking students are not capable of the same academic achievements of a native English speaker (Vang, 2006).

Staff#3: "...we are an education center and I have the expectation that every student graduate from high school and beyond—many alumni have said that they did not have other people to ask questions to ask them or support them—parents could not help them because they are in same situation. We have a lot of opportunities for our students. We can help open doors for students by linking them with alumni and can see how former students like them are graduating and attending school and students get to see them being academically successful and that is phenomenal thing but it is powerful...it is big.

### **iii. Opportunities**

ACE has been successful with helping African refugee youth reach academic achievements, because they are providing unconventional educational methods that are not practiced in the formal education institutions. It was clear during the focus group that the students had felt ACE indeed has been helping them in their academic achievements, student# 6 shared his personal believe in the role ACE had played in his education:

Student#6: "I think ACE played a big role in my education. By like helping with homework and stuff like that. I would like say if I didn't come to ACE or there wasn't ACE place like this I think like, I dunno bad. I have to do my homework but I like can't, I can't give up on it, like how can I do it? I can't give up. At school I got zero but when you come to ACE you have people who will help you. College stuff. ACE taught me about college and stuff like that, that I can go to college."

Refugee youth recognize that they have a chance for an education that might not have been available to them in their home countries

Studen#5: "Let me be serious on this question, for me, I think it is really important, say like I was still in the camp I thought, [pauses],like I wasn't sure, like I thought I wasn't really sure I was going to get the same education and same life that I have right now in here."

Student#8: "I agree with Student#6 because this the only education we have, our parents did whatever they can to bring us here to get an education. I mean they didn't have what we have right now."

Student#5: "Yep, so that is opportunity"

Student#8: "So yea this OUR opportunity"

#### **iv. Overall**

Refugee youth struggle assimilating into the formal school systems because their responses to the environment. The students stated that not knowing English, or homework assignments, or having to ask for help created heightened responses that was misunderstood by teachers and as Danieli, Rodely, & Weiseath (1996) had stated above, this is because formal schools are not structure therefore not equipped to deal with such responses from students. Supplemental education, like ACE, had helped refugee youth because they were proposedly structured to fit the needs of the demographic population they are serving.

### **III. Unintended Findings: WPS and ACE Relationship**

#### **i. ACE's Students Want WPS and ACE to Coincide**

The students at ACE have demonstrated how African refugee youth in Worcester, MA want the chance to strive in their formal education. They have demonstrated this through their voluntary commitment to ACE, a majority of ACE students attend the After-School program Monday through Thursday 2:30-6:00 pm and Saturday program 8:30-2:30 which is all academic focus. The students appreciated having ACE there for academic support, but felt they could be better supported if ACE was more connected to what they were doing academically in their WPS.

Student#8: I want to learn what we do in school at ACE. Maybe it be better if we had a history class, it is like the hard classes for me. I don't even know my own cultural history, I don't even understand what's going on over there, how would I understand it over here and it's not even mine?

Student#5: They {ACE} should do more what we are learning in the WPS. It like would make sense. Like teach the way they teacher over there too it kinda like help kids so it get easier for them when they go like school and stuff

The students recognize that ACE is not completely aligned with their full academic needs, but felt that this could be fixed if ACE would reflect their WPS learnings.

## **ii. WPS Reaching out to ACE for Support**

The WPS have also acknowledged in an indirect way that they too would like a more strengthen relationship between the two institutions. This has been demonstrated through WPS's high call to ACE, which had become unmanageable for ACE that in 2013 they had to secure grant funding and hired a part-time WPS liaison.

Staff3[Liaison]: "I have weekly communications with schools [WPS], about 8 different schools [WPS] it depends on what schools our students are going to and what kind of relationships is needed and how often I am needed upon request of the school or student. And I will do this as responses need, so it can be more on behavioral and academic need."

While this helped alleviate some of the misconceptions for students and the WPS school teachers, it barely touched the surface. The relationship between ACE and WPS is very loose, not agree set protocol, and limited in time to efficiently address every ACE student need at their school.

Staff 4: We {ACE} seen a teacher {WPS} come and talk to liaison about a behavior issue and say 'can you deal with this at ACE?' and my responses to that is like 'how is that even possible that you wouldn't even deal with that in the school?' There's no way I think, that you can see a behavioral issue happen and then 2 hours later try to address it to a student with someone who wasn't even involved and then be like 'a this sort happened at school, what were you doing?' I don't know it just seems really remote and removed, and why is a teacher getting to the point they cannot even deal with the problem? They are not getting the right support from their administration. BUT that is an observation I am not saying this is for definite what is happening.

## **iii. A Recommendation to Explore for ACE and WPS**

If the WPS and ACE could strengthen their relationship, it would allow for support of all three parties. Dealing with behavior issues is core to academic success, but the WPS

teachers are not equipped and become quickly overwhelmed and not receiving the support they look to ACE to fix it. But with the current informal relationship of ACE and WPS, it leads to the issues being bandaged and not fixed.

Staff 2: “We [ACE] are so busy taking on duties to run our program that we don’t necessarily have time to develop training for the WPS. But it’s something that we are pretty much talk about every single year with the WPS. I know it is something they want to do, they defiantly want to collaborate.”

Staff 3: Well, we have After-School teachers working on curriculum and enrichment kids, but they really have no attachment to NCC or any of the schools. I think it should be stronger, but right now it is not there.

For ACE and other supplement education organizations to be the most effective they need to define and develop a well communicated relationship with the formal schools. This would have to be in both parties' efforts to accomplish this effectively.

### **Section III: Discussion and Conclusion**

#### **Discussion**

The student and staff experience at ACE in regards to formal education, support the literature that refugees have needs that are not provided by formal schools. The students at ACE credited limited English for their bad experiences, but when their comments were unpacked it was clear that their bad experiences were more complex than simple language acquisition difficulties. The ACE staff were more cognizant that these bad experiences were partly due to issues of past trauma. The students never stated trauma, but commented on the feelings that were triggered from not knowing English in a formal school setting and were heightened and intensified by stress, anxiety, and fear. As stated in the literature

these are normal responses for a refugee youth because of their turbulent resettlement process (Kibreab, 2003).

The result of discomfort, uncertainty, and misunderstanding African refugee experience in WPS is the driver for them to seek supplement education options. For refugees seeking supplementary education, they are looking for an environment that will meet their educational needs, for they do desire the opportunity to an education. The opportunity for education in formal schools for refugee youth will be challenging and sometimes undoable. The students in the focus group had stated over and over again in some fashion how before coming to ACE, school seemed impossible. These feelings arrive from the deep rooted school culture that is unknown to them, but which they are expected to follow (Konieczka, 2013).

The literature findings and analysis of student and staff interviews support my argument of the need and usefulness of supplementary education to enhance refugee youth formal educational experiences. The students from ACE demonstrate refugee youth's aspiration to an education through their dedication and commitment to ACE. The WPS have also demonstrated a need for supplemental education for their refugee students, as they contact ACE frequently for help in dealing with student behavior or academic challenges. This supports the literature that the state teachers fail to meet needs of their refugee students because they do not understand or can relate to the student (Strekalove & Hoot, 2008).

Supplementary education has demonstrated through the students attending ACE, to be effective in aiding African refugees into assimilating into formal school cultural. Supplementary education could be improved and produce higher success rates by forming strong and cooperative relationships with the formal schools. In the case of ACE, it has been proven that WPS and ACE have an undefined relationship and it results in gaps of services, ACE can provide to their students because they are unaware of what is going on in their formal schools. The WPS turn to ACE when things have escalated out of control for them, but ACE cannot give them the support they desire because they have been far removed from the situation(s) to provide any effective support. The building and strengthening the relationship between ACE, WPS, and the students would open up communication, understanding, and improve the effectiveness of supplementary education.

## **Conclusion**

The American educational institution is a deeply rooted cultural system with binding structures that have made it very difficult for a refugee youth to strive in Western education. But with the intake of refugees in the US scheduled to grow (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; Proposed Refugee Admission Fiscal Year 2015, 2014) it will continue to cause challenges for the formal schools.

It was fleeing troublesome past events that have resulted in refugee youths in the US school systems, and resulting in needs far greater than the formal schools can manage or comprehend. Refugee youth are left to figure and cope with their past experiences while

forcibly thrown into the realm of unknown formal school, where they become isolated, lost and misunderstood.

Refugees youth assimilation into formal public schools can be relieved and met with success with the use of supplementary education. Providing a supplementary education to refugee youth does not just provide academic support, but personal guidance. Supplementary education teaches refugee youth what is expected of them in formal schools, provides language learning at their real level, and instill a sense of support and care from adults. US formal schools are strained in time and locked to a curriculum that often prevents refugee youth learning essential skills for school, but can still support refugee youth in building these skills by encouraging supplementary education institutions.

ACE is a supplementary educational institution that has proven to be powerful for the students it has served and has inspired goals that were once unimaginable. WPS may not be able to directly meet African refugee youth needs, but by teaming up with ACE they can indirectly provide those students' needs. Supplementary education is not meant to replace formal education, but enhance it. In order to improve that effectiveness formal and supplementary education need to work, support, and learn from one another.



## Appendix A

**Individual Staff**

Staff	Age	Position	Years working at ACE	Years with teaching experience	Years working with refugee population	Brief Qualifications
1 (Male)	65	Head Saturday ELL Teacher	5	45	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- M.A in Edu</li> <li>- Teacher in formal schools 40 years</li> <li>- RPCV in Africa</li> </ul>
2 (Female)	29	Saturday Program Coordinator	6.5	n/a	6.5	- Work experience
3 (Male)	29	Worcester Public School Liaison AND Volunteer Coordinator	4	1	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- B.A. African Studies, History</li> <li>- PhD African History</li> </ul>
4 (Female)	27	Former After-School Coordinator AND Current Mentoring Program Coordinator	6	5	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- AmeriCorps training in Mentoring Best Practice</li> <li>- Volunteer experience at ACE</li> </ul>

**Table 1.1**

## Appendix B

### Focus Group

Student #	Age of time of interview	Grade attended during interview	Home Country	Years in American	Years attended ACE	Attended school in home country	Prior knowledge to English
5 (Male)	18	11th	Born in refugee camp in Kenya—Somalia	3.5	2	No	No
6 (Male)	19	11 <sup>th</sup>	Somalia	3	2	Yes	Yes
7 (Male)	19	12 <sup>th</sup>	Congo	8	6	No	No
8 (Female)	20	Freshmen at local community college	Congo	7	6.5	Yes	No

Table 1.2<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Table 1.1 demonstrates a common trend among the students that attend ACE. A majority of the students have had no prior understanding of the English language and only about half of the students had some type of schooling before it was interrupted.

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