

CONGOLESE REFUGEE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EQUITY AND  
OPPORTUNITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore Congolese refugee students' experiences in higher education in the United States. In order to understand the challenges Congolese students face in higher education, this study used narrative inquiry methodology to investigate Congolese students' lived experiences that affected their educational endeavors before and after resettlement to the United States. The study examined personal stories of 10 Congolese students in the Pacific Northwest using semi-structured in-depth interviews, one-on-one follow-up interviews, field notes and two focus group interviews. Using narrative analysis five reoccurring themes were identified and discussed in the findings. The study findings indicate that Congolese students experienced many obstacles and inequitable treatment in higher education after resettlement to the United States. These challenges evolved from a combination of traumatic experiences caused by wars, the lack of opportunities and equitable resources in higher education, unpreparedness of faculty and staff to work with students across cultures, and lack of cultural sensitivity among educators and peers. The study provides recommendations for faculty, staff, and policymakers to provide opportunities and equitable education for all students in higher education in the United States.

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## *Home*

*No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.*

*You only run for the border*

*when you see the whole city running as well...*

*No one would choose to crawl under fences,*

*be beaten until your shadow leaves you,*

*raped, then drowned,*

*forced to the bottom of the boat because you are darker,*

*be sold, starved, shot at the border like a sick animal,*

*be pitied, lose your name, lose your family,*

*make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten,*

*stripped and searched,*

*find prison everywhere and if you survive and*

*you are greeted on the other side with go home blacks,*

*refugees dirty immigrants, asylum seekers sucking our country dry of milk,*

*dark, with their hands out smell strange,*

*savage -look what they've done to their own countries, what will they do to ours?...*

*I want to go home,*

*but home is the mouth of a shark home is the barrel of the gun and*

*no one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore*

*unless home tells you to leave what you could not behind,*

*even if it was human.*

(Drimonis Toula, "Home" by Warsan Shire, 2015)

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The rationale to conduct this study was based on my own experiences as a refugee during and after the Bosnian War. Like millions of other refugees worldwide, I had to leave my home and country. As a homeless and stateless person, I only hoped that somebody would support me to start a new life in a new country. I was lucky enough to get resettled to the U.S. and to have overcome many post-resettlement challenges including accessing and pursuing higher education.

Now, I am glad to be able to support and empower potential and current refugee students who face similar challenges while accessing and navigating higher education. My experiences in higher education have had enormous impact on my life. Education gave me the strength to carry on, to be the active voice for the refugee students and my community, and to be able to advocate for human rights. I have witnessed struggles within the refugee community. I have seen Congolese and other refugee students face many challenges accessing and pursuing higher education in the Northwestern United States. Therefore, my study aimed to examine the challenges refugee students face while accessing and pursuing higher education, focusing primarily on the Northwestern region of the United States.

Although there is very limited literature related to the experiences of refugee students in higher education (McBrien, 2005; Clark, 2007; Roxas, 2008; Sadikovic, 2017), very little or no research exists about the experiences of Congolese refugee students in higher education. Thus, this study aimed to address under-researched issues in

higher education, the main purpose being to understand and illuminate the challenges Congolese refugee students face accessing and pursuing higher education.

In addition, the study explored and examined the opportunities higher education provides for Congolese students, their families and the community as a whole. By using a narrative research approach to collect stories from participants to learn about their educational experiences, I hoped to find satisfactory solutions to ease access and pursuit of higher education for the Congolese refugee community and to empower them to prosper in a new country.

### **Background of the Study**

The immigration rate to the United States is steadily increasing. Each year a large number of refugees from different parts of the world are resettled in the United States. Since 1975, the U.S. has permanently resettled over 3 million refugees (Kallick & Mathema, 2016; Fink, 2016; the U.S. Embassy in Uganda, 2016; Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). The United States, also recognized in the world as a country of immigrants, has opened the door for millions of refugees who fled their war-torn countries to escape near-death experiences and to start new lives (Eby, Iverson, Smyers, & Kekic, 2011).

The United States was a beacon, a light for people in the world who faced persecution and human rights violations. Throughout its history, the United States has welcomed diverse immigrant and refugee groups from across the world (Kunz, 1973; Hein, 1993; Cortés, 2013; Cross, 2017; Fenn, 2017). However, the current refugee situation in the world is very dramatic and requires the world's attention. People are displaced in the highest numbers since the World War II. Currently, there are 65.6 million people displaced from their homes as a result of conflicts and persecution



(Connor and Krogstad, 2016; UNHCR, 2016, UNHCR, 2017d), and over 20 million people who were forced to leave their countries of origin must seek refugee status in second and third countries (Sak, Kaymaz, Kadkoy, & Kenanoglu, 2017).

As the “lower and upper-middle income countries host 65 percent of the world’s refugees,” there is a call on G20—the leaders of the world’s 19 richest countries and the European Union, to develop sustainable solutions for the increased refugee crisis (Sak, Kaymaz, Kadkoy, & Kenanoglu, 2017, p. 1). Though President Obama, in his report to Congress, “re-affirmed our nation’s commitment to helping refugees and our leading role in providing safe haven” and pledged to assist more refugees during the crisis, by increasing the admission cap to 110,000 refugees to be admitted in FY 2017 (U.S. Department of State 2016), the current U.S. administration under President Trump proposed in September 2017 a cap of 45,000 refugees to be resettled to the U.S. in FY 2018 (U.S. Department of State 2017), which is a 50% decrease comparing to the previous refugee resettlement cap. Therefore, this is an enormous disappointment for the poor countries that currently host millions of the world’s refugees. Representations of refugees in the United States are largely at the mercy of negative media portrayals and prevailing anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The world’s refugee crisis and the current political climate in the United States that supports negative media representations of refugees and has caused the decrease of refugee resettlement numbers in the United States is the context in which Congolese refugee students are underrepresented and marginalized in higher education. I decided to do this study to highlight their voices in higher education.

### Importance of Education

The United States permanently resettles refugees from across the world. However, the United States resettlement program does not recognize higher education as a tool to help refugees integrate into a new country and become self-sufficient. Approximately half of all refugees resettled to the United States are children (Sonnert & Holton, 2010). Refugee children, like adults, bring with them traumatic experiences that play a significant role in their integration and acculturation to their new home country (McBrien, 2005), and education plays a vital role in how these experiences are addressed (Fazel & Stein, 2002).

Education is a key for refugees to successfully start social and emotional healing, which is an important factor in helping overcome physical and traumatic suffering caused by prolonged time spent in war-torn countries and subsequent refugee camps (McBrien, 2005; Manitoba Education, 2012). Refugees resettled from war-torn countries “benefit from educational initiatives that are inclusive, that recognize and respond to their educational needs, and that offer a welcoming environment” (Manitoba Education, 2012, p. 3). Such appropriate and supportive school environments for refugee and war-affected learners nurture mental health and well-being, enhancing educational and life satisfaction (Manitoba Education, 2012). However, in many circumstances, physical and mental illnesses, cultural exclusion, and marginalization make integration to the new lifestyle more difficult (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

Refugee students often struggle to gain the adequate educational foundation needed to access higher education (Roxas 2008; Sadikovic, 2017). In April of 2015, the New York Civil Liberties Union and Legal Services on behalf of refugee students filed a

lawsuit accusing the Utica, New York school district for denying refugee students equal educational opportunities. Students explained that since 2007, the school district has made it a policy to bar refugees with low English proficiency from high school enrollment by placing them in inferior schools. These schools often do not offer traditional high school diplomas (Muzaffar & Faye, 2015). This unequal opportunity affects the written and verbal literacy as well as access to higher education and general well-being of refugee students.

Higher education in the U.S. is defined as open access for all students, which statistically enables a growing number of college graduates to earn more money than individuals lacking college degrees. Zimbardo (2005) stated:

Still, there remains an alarming disparity between youth from wealthy families and youth from disadvantaged families in college attendance rates: If the population of high school graduates' families were divided into quartiles, approximately two thirds of high school graduates from the wealthiest quartile would be observed to matriculate at four-year colleges, while only one-fifth of the high school graduates from the lowest socioeconomic quartile would follow the same path. (p. 812)

Refugee students are even more disadvantaged: In addition to low socioeconomic factors, they face additional barriers such as language (McBrien, 2005; Clark, 2007; Wilson & Guskin, 2017), traumatic experiences (McBrien 2005; Patnaik, 2014; Wilson & Guskin, 2017) and cultural gaps (Sadikovic, 2017). Supporting education, which includes higher education for refugee students, enables refugees to successfully integrate and become self-sufficient in their new countries, which at the same time, economically benefits their host communities (Ager & Strang, 2004). However, this is not an easy task for education advocates, as the primary goal of the United States refugee policy is to provide short-term, limited assistance, mostly helping them find low-paying jobs (Schiller, Boggis,

Messenger, & Douglas, 2009). These disadvantages create additional pressure that increases acculturative stress (Barry, 1997) as resettled refugees are still healing from their life experiences.

### Statement of the Problem

The Northwest region of the United States has shown growing diversity within the society and the workforce. However, diversity is not equally represented in the higher education system of the region. Even though the United States resettles many refugees from Africa, particularly from the Congo, and many of these refugees are settled in the Northwest, they are not adequately supported and face problems when trying to enter and navigate higher education. Their participation in higher education needs an investigation to point to factors that hinder Congolese refugees' successful participation in higher education.

A literature gap exists in knowledge about the cultural, social, and other factors that hinder Congolese students' involvement in higher education. This study helped fill the gap in this area of literature.

### Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of this research study is to examine problems Congolese refugee students face with regard to accessing and pursuing higher education. Furthermore, this research contributes to the body of knowledge concerning the factors that may be causing Congolese students to struggle when accessing and pursuing higher education.

### Research Question

This study answers the following research question:

What are the issues that hinder Congolese refugee students from accessing and pursuing higher education?

### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is in its contribution to the fields of education and refugee studies. First, this study provides a rich understanding of the issues that affect refugee students, particularly Congolese students' participation in higher education. This particular study will benefit policy discussions about refugees in education. Second, the study provides assistance for higher education institutions that wish to provide the tools needed to increase refugee students' contributions in higher education. Moreover, this study will investigate socioeconomic, financial, historical, and cultural factors and their influences on Congolese students in higher education.

This study carries vast significance, as there is a lack of literature that examines refugee student needs accessing and pursuing higher education. Finally, this study aims to highlight important issues and suggest recommendations for further studies about refugee students in higher education.

### Limitations of the Study

Although my research was cautiously planned, I am aware that there were some unavoidable limitations. I will discuss each limitation in Chapter 3 and briefly summarize them below.

This study significantly targeted Congolese refugee students in higher education. The findings of the study may not be transferable to other refugee groups in the Northwest region of the United States.

The traumatic experiences that refugee students experienced during the escape stage vary between diverse refugee groups. Some may experience torture, loss of family members, and lengthy time in refugee camps, while other refugees may be luckier during the escape and transit stages. Even Congolese refugees who came from the same country may bring vastly different experiences with them. Thus, refugees experience different traumatic events while passing through stages of migration—escape, transit/refugee camps, and third country resettlement (Kunz, 1973).

This study is grounded in narrative inquiry and depends mostly on interviews, observations, and focus-group interactions with participants to understand and inquire into their experiences. Thus, validity threats are serious issues, and they can interfere with the accuracy and truthfulness of research findings. This research study was conducted by the researcher who came to the United States as a refugee from Bosnia, which could create potential insider bias and present threats to validity. To avoid insider bias, the researcher took necessary steps to guard against researcher bias during the study. To prevent possible undesirable consequences of having an influence on participants' stories, the researcher employed different research methods (method triangulation) such as surveys, interviews and observations to increase credibility of the research findings and conclusions. The researcher employed the procedure to ask participants all questions in the same way. The researcher designed appropriate survey and interview protocol where he avoided leading questions. The researcher also paid attention to participants' feedback and used triangulation while collecting data (surveys/observations/interviews) and in his initial assessment of data, including member checks. Moreover, the researcher ensured

individual privacy and chose a comfortable and safe location of participants' choice. These preventative measures will help reduce validity threats in my study.

### Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, it is important to understand the following list of terms.

**Congo:** The Congo or Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

**Congolese:** A native of the Democratic Republic of Congo or the Congo.

**Critical Race Theory:** “Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001 p. 3; Delgado and Stefancic 2017, p. 3).

**Diversity:** “The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies” (University of Oregon, 2017).

**Ethnic Group:** “A group set apart from others because of its natural origin or distinctive cultural patterns” (Boise State University, 2009).

**Equity in Education:** There is a crucial difference between equity and equality in education. “Should per student funding at every school be exactly the same? That’s a question of equality. But should students who come from less get more in order to ensure that they can catch up? That’s a question of equity.” All students should have the

resources necessary for a high-quality education. But the truth remains that some students need more to get there (Mann, 2014, para. 1).

**Forcibly Displaced People:** People can be internally displaced—within their country of origin or externally displaced—outside of their country of origin. Forcibly displaced people are people who are forced to leave their homes because of conflict, violence, persecution or human rights violations (UNHCR, 2016).

**Immigrant vs. Refugee:** Immigrants leave their country to settle in another country “by choice and due to promise of a better life. The main reasons include better economic conditions, education and family reasons. However, they still have a choice to return to their own country at any time.” Refugees, on the other hand, are forced to leave their country because of “fear of persecution caused by war, violence, political instability, aggression or due to their religion, beliefs, caste, or political opinion. In most cases, it is not possible for them to go back to their country” (Diffen, n.d.).

**Race:** “A social category based primarily on skin color in the United States. Throughout the world this definition becomes more complex” (Boise State University, 2009).

**Microaggressions:** “Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

**Third-Country Refugee Resettlement:** Considered the permanent solution for refugees, which involves the transfer of refugees from the second country in which refugees pursued protection after their initial escape to a new country that has approved their permanent relocation (Miller, 2010; UNHCR, 2017f). “UNHCR is mandated by its



Statute and the UN General Assembly Resolutions to undertake resettlement as one of the three durable solutions” (UNHCR, 2017f).

**Social Capital**: “Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 1986).

### **The Researcher’s Story**

Refik Sadikovic was born in Croatia, one of the six republics of the former Yugoslavia. He was raised in Bosnia. In 1992, war started in Bosnia, and Refik was attending eleventh grade at his high school. Refik recalls being in the classroom when he heard airplanes bombing the city. He and his classmates ran to hide in bomb shelters. Many students were afraid that they would not survive in the school that day.

In the fall of 1993, Refik graduated from his high school, and he was mobilized by the Bosnian army. In 1994, he and “nearly 40,000 other refugees escaped into what he call[s] ‘a no-man’s land’ between the Serbian and Croatian forces [in the Croatian city Karlovac]. [In his attempt to escape the refugee camp and reach Western Europe, he] crossed rivers and countless minefields, was held at gunpoint by Slovenian police and sent [back] to [the] refugee camp [in Karlovac]” (Prentice, 2017).

Because he was returned by Slovenians to the camp, he had no choice but to go and fight again in Bosnia. In 1995, “the shrapnel from a grenade ripped into his body, wounding his hands, arms, chest and mouth” (Prentice, 2017). Fifteen years later, Refik

discovered that one of the shrapnel had entered his artery by the heart and traveled down to his leg. The shrapnel was removed in St. Luke's Hospital in Boise by Dr. Gilbertson. Even the doctor did not know how to explain how Refik survived with shrapnel entering the artery.



**Figure 1.1:** The author inspects a fragment of shrapnel that over the course of 16 years migrated, through his artery, from his chest to his leg (Allen R. Ansell Photography)



**Figure 1.2: Bosnian Refugees in a Refugee camp in Croatia, 1995. (R. Sadikovic)**

In *Half the World: Refugees Transform the City of Trees*, Refik says, “The shrapnel reminds me of the purpose of life. During the war, I was helping people. I didn’t want to kill [or hurt] anybody. Somehow I was chosen to survive...This is why whenever I talk with refugee students in high schools, I encourage them. I say, Look, I came to America and I didn’t go to an American high school. I was able to finish college and now I’m getting my doctorate. I had to work much harder, because writing was much harder for me than for somebody who attended an American high school...As somebody who is from a different country, I felt like if I didn’t know something, people will judge me and laugh at me. If an American [non-refugee] person doesn’t know how to spell, that’s fine; but if a [refugee] doesn’t know how to spell, it’s embarrassing. I felt that I had to prove my worthiness to others” (Sadikovic with Hodges, 2017). Refik always encourages refugee students to believe in themselves and not to let other people’s judgment discourage them.

In 1995, after Refik was wounded, he was forced to escape a second time to a refugee camp in Croatia. This time, he decided to travel to Austria. He encountered many

barriers on his way to Austria, where he applied for asylum. His asylum case was rejected in 1998, so he had to leave Austria. His only choice was to apply to resettle to the United States, Canada, or Australia. He applied for resettlement to the United States at the American embassy in Zagreb.

In February of 2000, Refik was lucky to be approved for resettlement to the United States in Boise, Idaho after 18 months of waiting process. A month after resettlement, Refik accepted a low-paying job sweeping the streets. He was very excited that his boss let him work overtime, about 80 hours per week. He learned English by listening to NPR in his sweeper truck. In 2004, he went to work for Micron Technology, a microchip-making company in Boise. Seeing his technology and computer skills, Micron asked him to go to college. Refik said, “How am I going to go to college? My English is not so good.” They said, “You already fix equipment here, and everything is in English. You are doing a very good job.” This was a huge encouragement for him. His managers believed that he could do it, and they offered to pay for his tuition and fees.

Refik received his electronics degree. He performed engineering jobs at Micron assembly and fabrication plants (fab). In 2009, after Micron outsourced many jobs, he decided to go back to school. Since then, he has earned his bachelor’s degree and his master’s degree in education at Boise State. He is currently finishing his doctorate in education, curriculum, and instruction at Boise State.

During his time at Boise State, Refik has advocated for diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. His experiences of being a refugee—being forced to leave his home, living in refugee camps, being hungry, surviving wars, and being resettled to a new country where he couldn’t even speak the language—taught him powerful lessons of

life. But, he would never have been able to succeed without support from Micron, community, and family members. Now, in his current position, he feels that he can use his knowledge and experience to help institutions of higher education improve their support for diverse students so that it is more equitable and provides opportunities for all students to succeed. Because he experienced what it is like to be a marginalized refugee student in the university, he works to create inclusive community.

To support refugee students in higher education and encourage diversity on campus, he joined the Boise State Community Refugee Collaboration and the Cultural and Ethnic Diversity board. He co-founded the student organizations Bosnian Student Association and the Boise State Refugee Alliance. He is also actively engaged in the City of Boise as a member of the Neighbors United steering committee. With Neighbors United, he advocates for refugee students to pursue higher education. All of these experiences with the diverse refugee population in Boise encouraged Refik to do his dissertation on Congolese students in higher education.

In addition, Refik has taught various classes for the World Languages Department, University Foundations, and the Literacy, Language and Culture Department at Boise State since 2014. In his classes, he likes to share his experiences to encourage his students to work toward supporting marginalized students, including refugee and immigrant students, and members of our diverse community. Refik believes that only by working together can we make a difference on campus and in our community. He is a strong believer that universities should provide equity and opportunity for all students to succeed in higher education.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Insufficient academic literature exists in the discourse regarding refugees in higher education, particularly Congolese refugee students. This review of the literature examines: (1) The history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), (2) refugee crises and security protection for refugees; (3) issues of resettlement especially issues Congolese students face when they enter college and navigate higher education, (4) and issues in higher education for refugees. Furthermore, this literature review will help me better understand the culture and history of the DRC and the previous educational experiences of Congolese students. This is important when I interview refugee students from Congo.

### **The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Demographics, Education and a Short History**

Geographically, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is as big as Western Europe (Boise State University, 2011; Stearns, 2012; Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016). DRC is a country of 60 million people, and it is located in central Africa (Boise State University, 2011; Stearns, 2012). The official language is French. However, there are four national languages used in different parts of the country: Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili, and Lingala (Boise State University, 2011). The Congo currently has about 70 ethnic groups, and each ethnic group is sectioned into many tribes (O'Ballance, 2015). In addition to many ethnicities, there are different religious groups in Congo: “Approximately 50% are Roman Catholic; 20% Protestant; 10% Islam; 10% traditional

beliefs; and 10% a branch of Christianity, called Kimbanguism” (Boise State University, 2011, p. 5).

### The Kongo Rulers

Congo as a country has a long and turbulent history. The Kingdom of Kongo dates back to the fourteenth century. The people of Kongo, or Bakongo, migrated to central and West Africa over a thousand years ago (Fish, Fish, Leakey, and Sheilds, 2001). Congo, previously called Kongo, was named after the most influential Bakongo Federation, a connection of tribal alliances who shared the same language, “which dominated the coastal area and the lower reaches of the Congo River” (O’Ballance, 2015, p. 5). People of the Kingdom of Kongo used a version of the Bantu language and formed their Kingdom over a hundred years prior to the first Portuguese explorers who came to western Africa in the fifteenth century (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001).

The Kingdom of Kongo was ruled by a King, maniKongo, a man who carried a zebra-tail whip to demonstrate his authority. He married women from influential families to strengthen his influence (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001; Johnson, 2014). He collected taxes, controlled the supply of money, and formed a government that consisted of highly-skilled positions. For example, “one person served as mani vangu vangu, meaning “first judge, in cases of adultery” (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001, p. 45; Johnson, 2014).

During the continuance of the Kongo Kingdom, only King Nzinga Mbemba, also known as Affonso, was able to build strong relations with Europe to improve education for his people as well as to create spiritual connections with Catholicism and Rome (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001; Johnson, 2014). Unfortunately, Affonso’s plans were

never completely realized, as strong relations with Europe were severed during the beginning of the slave trade race and colonialization of America in the sixteenth century (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001; Johnson, 2014). During the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Kongo started to make large profits from the slave trade (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001). By the 1530s, over 5,000 slaves were shipped across the Atlantic yearly, as there was a huge need for slaves to work at Brazil's mines (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001). The increase in slave trade caused the decline in the Kingdom population, and the king's authority weakened as many provincial chiefs became wealthy and powerful (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001). Affonso opposed the slave trade; he "could not believe that fellow countries in Europe who shared the same faith could engage in something so monstrous by not only kidnapping and buying Africans off the coast but even enslaving his own family whose sons were ironically bishops of Rome" (Johnson, 2014, p. 23). After Affonso died in 1542 or 1543, no other ruler was concerned about protection of the Congolese people (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001). By the end of the sixteenth century, "Britain, France, and Holland joined in the slave trade. Roughly one of every four slaves taken to the cotton and tobacco plantations of the British southern colonies came from equatorial Africa" (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001, p. 54). In 1665, the Kongo people in their last effort tried to expel the Portuguese out of the country, but they lost the war and the maniKongo was beheaded, which further weakened the kingdom as slave trade continued (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001).

#### Zaire - The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Congo's early history was politically and financially more stable than any time in the last century. The fifteenth century Kingdom of the Congo was strong and influential,



but since the sixteenth century, Kongo has been the target of political crumbling and slave trade. By the late nineteenth century, Africa became a place for establishment of European colonies (Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016). For example, “the relatively new country of Belgium, which gained independence from the Netherlands in 1830, sought to strengthen its status in Europe with an African colony” (Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016). Consequently, in the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the kingdom became a victim of Belgian colonialism, which dismantled remaining Kongolese kingdoms and appointed hundreds of new chiefs, which allowed them to extract resources (Stearns, 2012). The modern-day Congo experienced “one of the harshest and bloodiest colonial histories in central Africa” (Mullins & Rothe, 2008, p. 88). Belgian King Leopold II annexed Congo in 1908 and took away the people’s chances at self-governance. Through extremely brutal ruling, he turned the country into a mining forced labor economy (Johnson, 2014; Mullins & Rothe, 2008). Furthermore, by not offering educational or vocational training to Congolese leaders, he incapacitated them from engaging in keen economic and political strategies (Johnson, 2014; Mullins & Rothe, 2008).



**Figure 2.1: Belgian Officials at a Gathering of Congo Chiefs, c. 1920. (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001, p. 127).**

Finally, after many Congolese uprisings in 1960, Belgium decided to give the Congo independence (Johnson, 2014; Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016). However, after the newly elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba called on the Soviet government for help to fight insurgents in the Congo, “Lumumba was assassinated in 1961, just after two months in office and leaving decades of dictatorship by the Belgian and U.S. puppet Joseph Mobutu” (Johnson, 2014, p. 5; Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016). Shortly before his assassination, Lumumba emphasized that in order for Africa to feel true liberation it must no longer be an economic colony of Europe. His political agenda conflicted with the interest of Belgian, British, and U.S. companies that “had heavily invested in the Congo because of its natural resources—including copper, cobalt, diamonds, and gold” (Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001, p. 125). Johnson (2014) argues that the result of the exploitation by King Leopold II ethnically, politically and economically destabilized the

Congo into today. Lumumba's successor, Joseph Mobutu, a Congolese Army Colonel ruled a corrupted government for 32 years by stashing millions of dollars in his private accounts. In 1971 he changed the name of the country to Zaire "based on a mispronunciation of the Portuguese word for the area" (Fish, Fish, Leakey and Shields, 2001, p. 126; Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016).

During the civil war and the genocide in neighboring Rwanda in 1994, eight hundred thousand Hutu and Tutsi were killed by the Hutu military who were supported by Mobutu. After the Hutu regime in Rwanda collapsed, over one million Hutu fled into Zaire, while escaping the newly created Tutsi-dominated regime in Rwanda (Stearns, 2012). Mobutu was hosting more than ten foreign military groups in the country and pressure was increasing from his neighbors to stop providing a safe haven to those groups. By 1996, Angola, Uganda, and Rwanda created an alliance and assisted rebel leader Laurent Kabila to topple the Mobutu regime (Mullins & Rothe, 2008; Stearns, 2012; Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016).

#### Ongoing Crises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo).

In 1997, Mobutu fled Congo after the Tutsi forces of Laurent Kabila gained power with the support of Uganda and Rwanda. He quickly changed the country's name back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Fish, Fish, Leakey, & Sheilds, 2001; Whitaker, 2003; Mullins & Rothe, 2008). The Congolese conflict, which started in 1996, included at least twenty paramilitary factions and nine neighboring governments. This conflict caused over five million people to be murdered (Boise State University, 2011; Stearns, 2012; Thomsen, 2012). Stearns (2012) indicates that despite the mass casualties, the Congolese conflict received very little continuous attention from the

influential world powers. According to the International Rescue Committee, over five million people “have died in the DRC since 1998, in a conflict that has been neglected by the media, international governing bodies, and humanitarian organizations alike (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Mamdani 2009; Nordstrom 2004; Wilson and Brown 2008)” (Thomsen, 2012, p. 187).



**Figure 2.2: Routes of the AFDL/Rwandan Army into Kivus in 1996 (Stearns, 2012, p. 10).**

The conflict in Congo can be divided in three phases:

The first Congo war ended with the toppling of Mobutu Sese Seko in May 1997. After a brief lull in the fighting, the new president, Laurent Kabila, fell out with his Rwandan and Ugandan allies, sparking the second Congo war in August 1998, which lasted until a peace deal reunified the country in June 2003. Fighting, however, has continued in the eastern Kivu region until today and can be considered as the third episode of the war. (Stearns, 2012, p. 20)

The Congolese conflict that started over 30 years ago is still going on. The conflict in the Kasai region impose devastation and human misery on a massive scale (UNHCR, 2017b; United Nations Human Rights, 2017). The conflict in the previously peaceful Kasai region started in 2016, spreading from local strains to a war “affecting nine out of the 26 provinces of the DRC, either through fighting or internal displacement” (UNHCR, 2017b, para. 6). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2015) stated that the wars in Congo have been perceived more as regional conflicts, and they are “to some extent, a reincarnation of past conflicts, which is an indication that the fundamental causes of the wars have not been adequately addressed” (p. 9).

Shortly after toppling Mobutu from power, Laurent Kabila faced increased pressure from his former allies Rwanda and Uganda, who were not happy with the way he was dealing with security issues and rebel groups along their country’s borders (Whitaker, 2003; Stearns, 2012). After Kabila attempted to expel Rwandan forces, Rwanda and Uganda decided to fully support a new rebellion in the eastern Congo: “The Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie, led by Wamba dia Wamba” against Kabila triggered the second Congo war (Whitaker, 2003, p. 216; Mullins & Rothe, 2008). Due to the foreign invasion of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, Kabila pleaded for help, and several countries came to defend Kabila’s government, including Namibia, Angola, and Zimbabwe, and very soon seventeen countries were involved in the war (Whitaker, 2003; Mullins & Rothe, 2008). In 2001, Kabila was assassinated and his son, Joseph, became president, a title he still holds (Flahaux & Schoumaker, 2016).

The conflict in the Congo killed roughly 3.3 million people between 1998 and 1999 before the warring parties signed a peace agreement (Whitaker, 2003; Mullins &

Rothe, 2008). In 2010, the horrifying Congolese crisis prompted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to declare that “the mounting problems in this sprawling, crisis-stricken country are virtually beyond the capacity of the world body” to provide adequate aid (Deen, 2010 as cited in Thomsen, 2012, p. 188). The situation in Congo did not improve much after 2003, when Rwanda and Uganda decided to pull out their forces from the areas they controlled in northern and eastern Congo. The power vacuum that was created was very quickly filled with unregulated militia groups that were financially and militarily supported by Uganda and Rwanda (Whitaker, 2003; Mullins & Rothe, 2008; Boise State University 2011).

Since 2003, parts of the northern and eastern Congo experienced many war crimes and crimes against humanity (Mullins & Rothe, 2008). The conflict caused “widespread massacres of unarmed civilians, mass rape of a genocidal character, mutilation, forced slavery (be it in mines or brothels) and even cannibalism – much of which continues to this day” (Mullins & Rothe, 2008, p. 81). The current situation in Congo is deteriorating. In the Kasai area close to the town of Kamako, villages are burned down. Extensive, seemingly planned attacks on civilians are dramatically increasing, and people are killed or burned alive and mutilated (UNHCR, 2017b; United Nations Human Rights, 2017). Most of these horrific attacks have been done by Kamuina Nsapu rebellion fighters currently fighting government troops in the area. Similar attacks seem to have occurred in many villages in the Kamonya region, and they are organized and carried out by the Bana Mura militia (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). In attacks to these villages, “armed groups have systematically destroyed or pillaged health

posts, schools and other public buildings. Teachers and nurses have fled or have been killed” (UNHCR, 2017b, para. 4).

Basically, the main drive for the violent military occupation of the north and northeastern areas of Congo was the control of mineral fields, which contain large quantities of diamonds, gold, copper and silver (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, 2004; Mullins & Rothe 2008; Boise State University, 2011). More than 50% of the world’s cobalt, which is the main component in lithium-ion batteries comes from Congo (Amnesty International, 2016). Between 120,000 and 150,000 artisanal miners that exist in the country use “children as young as seven who scavenge for rocks containing cobalt in the discarded by-products of industrial mines, and who wash and sort the ore before it is sold” (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 4). In addition to natural resources that drive the Congolese conflict, the ethnic tensions between two rival ethnic groups, Tutsi and Hutu, made that conflict even more complicated (Boise State University, 2011).

Sadly, the exploitation of the country’s resources was endorsed by numerous international corporations who negotiated with the various rebel groups to buy the minerals, while ignoring the violations of human rights and the crimes against humanity these groups committed. Mullins & Rothe (2008) states:

Because of this foreign push to get these natural resources into European markets, the DRC has devolved into uncontrolled genocidal warfare between ethnically based factions within an unresolved civil war due to the international involvement on behalf of its neighbours (e.g., Uganda and Rwanda), transnational corporations (e.g., AngloGold Ashanti) and those corporations’ Western trading partners (e.g., Metalor Technologies and the nation of Switzerland). (p. 82)

Current problems and rebellious conflicts are much more caused by Congo’s neighbors and international organizations than the Congo itself (Mullins & Rothe, 2008). Millions of people across the world have been forced to leave their homes because of devastating

wars. The current situation is very serious in African countries such as Burundi, Congo, Rwanda and Somalia, “where the right to sufficient food, as well as protection, might be inadequate or nonexistent, and where the basic human rights are likewise not valued” (Obodoruku, 2017). The United Nations Human Rights Council (2010) stated that nothing “can adequately describe the horrors experienced by the civilian population in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where almost every single individual has an experience to narrate of suffering and loss” (p. 11).

Congolese refugees and current crisis. The Congolese refugee population, as of 2014, was the sixth largest in the world, at half a million refugees. They represented 18% of all refugees in Africa, and they were mainly of Banyarwanda (Tutsi) or Banyamulenge (Hutu) background (UNHCR, 2014). The current Congolese conflicts caused the refugee crisis to worsen. Currently, 3.9 million people are expelled from their homes (UN News Centre, 2017). Many of the world’s most influential countries are not taking the Congolese refugee crisis as seriously as they should (Stearns, 2012). The Congo war is not seen as a problem of humanity by many in the world, and in western media the Congolese conflict is usually described as an “object mess” or a mess of rebellious fractions “fighting over minerals in the ruins of a failed state, or as a war of good versus evil, with the role of villain played alternatively by the Rwandan government, international mining companies, the U.S. government, or Congolese warlords” (Stearns, 2012, p. 235). The ongoing Congolese conflict is a prolongation “of what is called ‘Africa’s World War,’ earning this title because militias and armies from eight African countries have contributed to violence perpetrated on Congolese soil (Prunier, 2008; Stearns, 2011; Turner, 2007)” (Thomson, 2012, p. 187). This conflict that was never fully



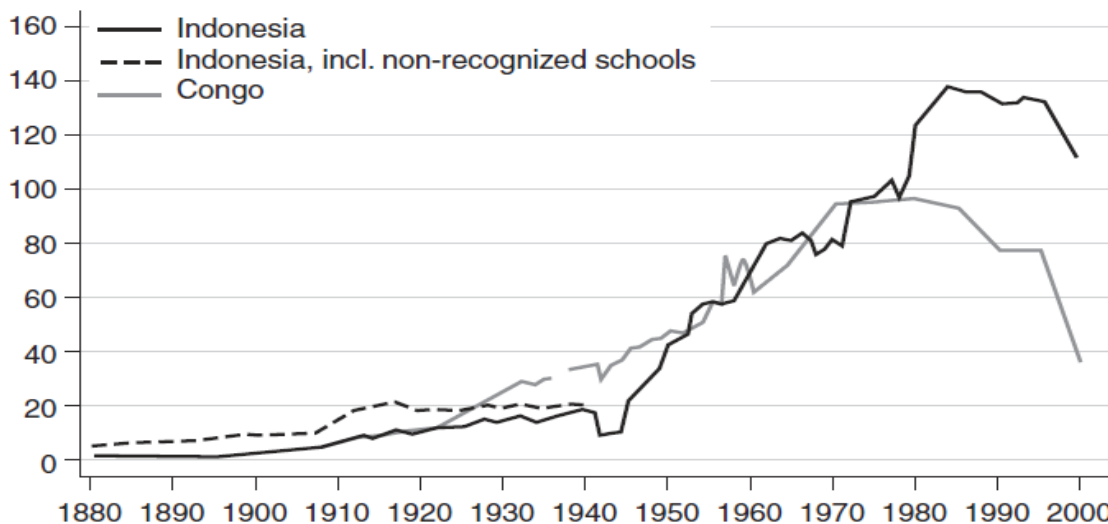
resolved worsened again, and the UN agency and humanitarian partners have declared the situation in DRC to ‘level 3’ –“the highest level of emergency” (UN News Centre, 2017, para. 5). UNHCR (2017e) states that the situation in the Congo is very complex:

With over 600,000 Congolese refugees in the region and 3.8 million IDPs, the situation in the DRC is one of the world’s most complex, protracted and forgotten crises. Refugees continue to flee to Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia in large numbers. The situation has worsened since April 2017 and remains tense, with intercommunal conflict in the Kasai region causing internal displacement at a rate of 8,000 people per day. Tens of thousands of Congolese are now fleeing to Angola and Zambia. The situation prompted UNHCR to issue a supplementary appeal for the humanitarian response in June 2017. (p. 60)

### Colonial and Post-Colonial Education in the Congo

With the purpose to better understand the educational struggles Congolese students may have in higher education, it is vital to learn about the colonial and post-colonial education in the Congo. During the Belgian colonial rule in Congo, after the Second World War, the number of Christian mission schools and schooling rates of children were some of the highest in Africa. However, segregation policies were blocking Congolese access to higher governmental, military, or business management positions (Frankema, 2013). In addition, indigenous populations were not allowed to attend “modern forms of higher education,” as colonizers considered it unnecessary and possibly risky. In 1925, the Belgian colonial government organized a basic education system consisting of three tiers. The goal of the first tier, which lasted for two years, was obtaining labor-oriented skills and labor discipline in rural areas, while in the urban areas, the goal was on acquiring basic literacy skills. The goal of the second, three-year tier placed emphasis on manual skills such as woodworking while offering a wider range of subjects for students. The last two-year tier was created to direct talented students toward

jobs, such as working-class clerks, merchandisers that were vital for the colonial government (Frankema, 2013). However, the accesses continued to be strictly closed to even the brightest Congolese students after completing the maximum of two years of secondary education (Frankema, 2013).



**Figure 2.3: Gross primary school enrollment rates (age 6–11) in the Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies, 1880–2000 (Frankema, 2013, p. 161).**

The Mobutu’s regime didn’t invest enough resources in the system of education, setting education up for failure and future decline. Figure 2.3 shows enrollment rates dropped by more than 40 percent between 1985 and 2000, which occurred after a decade of inactivity in the 1970s. This decline in education “was just one of the many tragic effects of the social, political, and economic deterioration that characterized most of Mobutu’s 30-year rule” (Frankema, 2013, p. 162). It is hard to know if this collapse of the Congo’s education system would have happened if a larger part of “the Congolese elite had gained access to higher education and higher administrative offices” during the Belgian colonial rule (Frankema, 2013, p. 173).

Titeca (2011) specified that after the state mainly retreated from providing public education, religious actors stepped in to fill the gap and continue providing educational services. In 2011, only a small percentage of Congolese students attended higher levels of education and about 41% of their citizens have never attended school (Boise State University, 2011). Many refugees in refugee camps face limited education, which is mostly focused on educating refugees on how to trade goods, while bypassing academic teaching (Boise State University, 2011). However, in older and more organized Congolese refugee camps in Rwanda, young adults are likely to have better access to education at an earlier age (Alloush, Taylor, Gupta, Valdes, & Gonzalez-Estrada, 2017).

In 2017, the educational situation is getting worse because of new violence in the Congo. Hundreds of thousand people escaped from their homes, particularly in the Tanganyika province. Ulrika Blom, the Norwegian Refugee Council's director for the Congo, warns about the humanitarian situation in eastern Congo. She states, "Tanganyika is on the brink of a deadly disaster. It's a catastrophic cocktail about to blow up. The province is a forgotten crisis within a forgotten crisis" (NRC, 2017a, p. 1). The 800 schools—97% of schools were closed because of the worsening security situation in the Tanganyika province. Thousands of children are "studying in extremely poor conditions," many "classrooms are formed under trees to protect children from the sunlight. When it rains the classes must stop. Students must sit down on the ground because of a lack of school chairs" (NRC, 2017b, p. 1).



**Figure 2.4:** Katanika, a transit camp hosting 50,000 displaced people in Tanganyika province (NRC, 2017a).



**Figure 2.5:** Katanyika primary school, (NRC, 2017a).

## **The Plight of Refugees**

In order to better understand the plight of Congolese refugees, it is imperative to understand the root causes of forced displacement of refugees. Refugees are forced to leave their home and country because of fear of persecution and human rights violations. Refugee status is explicitly defined by international law that was established in the 1951 Convention and expanded in the 1967 protocol. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is sometimes referred to as the Geneva Convention, which is the key legal article that protects refugees (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 7).

Defining refugees. People that resettle in a new country can be categorized as immigrants. However, the term refugee depends on if resettled people are categorized as voluntary immigrants or involuntary immigrants (Kunz, 1981; McBrien, 2005; Sadikovic, 2017). This literature review adopts the United Nations' definition in agreement to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 protocol. According to that Geneva definition, refugees are persons

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, are outside the country of their nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNICEF, 2016 p. 14)

Furthermore, it is important to understand the difference between internally displaced people and refugees. For example, people may have moved internally inside the same country because of the similar fear of persecution as described above in the refugee definition, and they are referred to as “internally displaced” and not as refugees, “since the refugee definition refers to people who are outside their countries” (Potocky-Tripodi,

2002, p. 7). Therefore, refugees are often violently expelled out of their homes and their native countries because of war or other violent conflicts, and many of them must take up shelter in improvised refugee camps (Cowart & Cowart, 1993; McBrien, 2005). The conflict caused 1.3 million internally displaced Congolese to flee the horrifying situations in their villages. United Nations Human Rights (2017) condemns the violation of human rights and the lack of international commitment to their struggles.

### Refugee Camps

Currently, Angola has accepted over 30,000 new refugees from Congo and hundreds of refugees are pouring into refugee camps every week. Many seriously wounded refugees have been saved from death by Angolan doctors and nurses who have worked long hours to provide lifesaving assistance (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). The current refugee flights indicate that atrocities in Congo are far from being over (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). Many Congolese refugees live in refugee camps in the territories of Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania. These camps are severely dependent on international help with food and other humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2014). Over 300,000 refugees from Congo and Burundi currently reside in Tanzania's refugee camps (UNHCR, 2017a).





**Figure 2.6: Refugees hanging around under trees, some walking around, some standing and chatting and some sitting on the veranda at the camp leader’s offices/building adjacent to the UNHCR’s Office in Nyarugusu Camp, 2013 (Obodoruku, 2017, p. 27).**

One well-known camp outside of Congo is called Nyarugusu camp. The camp is located in Tanzania and provides refuge to people who fled the First Congo War (1996–1997), the Second Congolese War (1998–2003), and the violence that has continued throughout the region (Thomson, 2012). In 2012, sixteen years after the Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania was opened, more than 63,000 refugees resided in the camp (Thomson, 2012). In December 2016, on top of more than 60,000 refugees from Congo who have resided in Nyarugusu for almost twenty years, the camp received 200,000 new refugees, mostly from Burundi, worsening already unacceptable security and hygiene conditions. (Obodoruku 2017; Koscalova & Lelevrier, 2017). Many refugees in the Nyarugusu and Lugufu camps extensively reported security issues such as rape, tribal and ethnic discrimination, food shortages and many others. Also, “the shortages of food

occasionally led to violence in camps” (Obodoruku, 2014, p. 17). Currently, Nyarugusu camp hosts over 132,000 refugees from Burundi and Congo. There is no guarantee that all refugees will stay in Nyagurusu camp for very long, as the Tanzanian government wants to implement “durable solution,” something that is more permanent for refugees (Thomson, 2012; Koscalova & Lelevrier, 2017; Obodoruku, 2017).

Durable solutions. Under the term durable solution, UNHCR encourages refugees to return to their country of origin, which is also called repatriation. This is commonly the most favored solution to refugee situations. Repatriation is most often implemented in Africa, “whereas integration or resettlement are more prevalent in other areas of the world (McLean, 1983; Pitterman, 1985; Stein, 1987)” (Thomson, 2012, p. 188). However, repatriation is not always the best option as a durable solution. For example, “in the Great Lakes Region, which includes Burundi, the DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, repatriation of large refugee populations has often incited violent conflicts, contributing to an ongoing cycle of war, exile, and repatriation” (Baregu, 2006 as cited in Thomson, 2012).

### **Refugees and Forced Migration**

The refugee and forced migration discipline was born in the 1980s (Chimni, 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, & Sigona, 2014). The research on refugees and forced displacement existed prior to 1980s across different fields of research such as in the social sciences and humanities. Chimni (2009) indicated that the development of refugee studies happened “when the end of the Cold War had undermined the non-humanitarian rationale of the international refugee regime, testing the limits of Western humanitarianism” (p. 1). However, “these early assessments were insufficiently critical



of either the states or intergovernmental agencies, during the 1970s and early 1980s researchers became increasingly frank in their analyses (e.g. Tolstoy 1977; de Zayas, 1979)” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long & Sigona, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, during the 1980s “legal scholars adopted a broader policy-oriented approach examining the domestic and foreign policy influences on Western refugee determination procedures (Martin 1982; Avery, 1984)” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, & Sigona, 2014, p. 2). This broader policy-oriented method provided important understandings into the efficiency of refugee policymaking measures, the role of the UNHCR “and the impact of domestic and foreign policy factors on the implementation of refugee legal instruments” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, & Sigona, 2014, p. 2).

### The Refugee Migration Path

Based on previous literature, the refugee migration path is commonly divided into three main stages: pre-migration (also known as departure or escape), transit, and resettlement or post-migration stage (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Drachman, 1992; Drachman and Halberstadt 1992; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008; Drachman, 2014; Hall & Olf, 2016). Figure 2.5 shows the key variables that exemplify each of the three stages.

## Stage-of-Migration Framework

Stage of Migration	Critical Variables
Premigration and departure	Social, political, and economic factors Separation from family and friends Decisions regarding who leaves and who is left behind Act of leaving a familiar environment Life-threatening circumstances Experiences of violence Loss of significant others
Transit	Perilous or safe journey of short or long duration Refugee camp or detention center stay of short or long duration Act of awaiting a foreign country's decision regarding final relocation Immediate and final relocation or long wait before final relocation Loss of significant others
Resettlement	Cultural issues Reception from host country Opportunity structure of host country Discrepancy between expectations and reality Degree of cumulative stress throughout migration process

**Figure 2.7: Stage of Migration. (Drachman, 1992, p. 69).**

The pre-migration stage. This stage is also known as the departure or escape stage. It describes the situation prior to escape and the escape process. During this stage, potential refugees are still in their home country anticipating and preparing for the worst to happen (Bhugra & Jones, 2001, Wessels, 2014; Drachman, 2014). Moreover, they face “separation from family, friends, and community; departure from a familiar environment; decisions regarding who leaves and who is left behind; expectation for a better future;

and experiences of persecution, violence, and loss of significant others” (Drachman, 2014, p. 69).

The transit stage. During this middle stage of the relocation process, refugees are forced to leave their home, and they are in transit to a safer country (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Drachman, 2014). During the first phase of the transit stage, they may travel under terrible conditions by a fragile boat, a long walk, or ride a vehicle through dangerous territory. Therefore, the transit stage is very dangerous and sometimes deadly for refugees as they may be escaping on foot through areas of military conflict (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008), facing “starvation, dehydration, hypothermia, or other physical ailments” (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 19). In the second phase, there may be a commercial flight if a refugee is resettled to a third country (Drachman, 2014). In the transit stage, refugees may spend years in a refugee camp under constant pressure and stress while awaiting third country resettlement, possible deportation, or return home (Drachman, 2014).

Many times, during the transit stage, “refugees are repelled at the borders of states, but they are also actively intercepted and repelled en route to liberal democracies” (Larking, 2014, p. 121). In addition, “all Western countries construct complex physical and legal barriers and use force to prevent refugees entering their territory (Carens 1987; Wilsher 2012)” (Larking, 2014, p. 24). These complex barriers constructed by Western democracies resulted “in is death by drowning, starvation or heat exposure for hundreds of thousands of people (Hill 2013; Kumin 2007; Mills 2008; Shenker 2013)” (Larking, 2014, p. 124). Very often refugees are stationed “in refugee camps in neighboring countries before they are sent to a permanent home in a third country such as the United

States” (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002, p. 19). The situation toward refugees may be very hostile during their stay in the second country or transit countries. Furthermore, Larkin (2014) states:

Refugees are denied access to the courts and like Europe’s inter-war refugees, ‘driven underground’ and forced into breaking the law. They are imprisoned – often for years at a time—end brutally treated. For many the search for freedom or a better life has ended in death. Unknown thousands have died in the effort to obtain access to or asylum in a Western democracy. (p. 121)

Therefore, while in this stage, refugees face uncertainty and a constant fear for their future. They are afraid for their lives, as they do not know if they will be sent back home or if they will be killed during their journeys to a safer place (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008).

The resettlement or post-migration stage. This phase, when refugees are resettled to a new country, includes the degree of stress a person may experience because of the loss of social and cultural support after resettlement (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008; Drachman, 2014) The new experiences and treatment that refugees experience in a new country may be significantly different from how they anticipated it to be (Drachman, 2014). In addition, refugees may face cultural differences and experience conflict with their children while experiencing power changes between parent and child. The power change could be a very preeminent issue within refugee families as children go to school, learn the English language, and other social norms and policies faster than their parents (Drachman, 2014).

#### From Displacement to Third Country Resettlement

Civil wars and other armed conflicts force refugees to flee their homes, leading to their displacement, which usually lasts until implementation of a durable resolution that

guarantees safety for refugees (Miller, 2010). The United Nations 1951 Convention and the 1967 protocol that mandate non-refoulement, or protection from forced return, is an essential right that protects refugees escaping the danger of persecution (United Nations, 1951 as cited in Miller, 2010). UNHCR defines non-refoulement:

The principle of non-refoulement is the cornerstone of asylum and of international refugee law. Following from the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution, as set forth in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this principle reflects the commitment of the international community to ensure to all persons the enjoyment of human rights, including the rights to life, to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and to liberty and security of person. These and other rights are threatened when a refugee is returned to persecution or danger. (UNHCR, 2017c, para. 1)

In order to help people fleeing their countries, UNHCR (2003) supported three durable solutions for refugees (as cited in Miller, 2010). They are: (1) voluntary repatriation, or voluntary return to the country of origin (2) local integration, or the settlement in the first country to which they have fled and (3) third country resettlement (UNHCR, 2003 as cited in Miller, 2010).

Voluntary Repatriation. The fundamental belief, and the most desirable solution of the international body, is to provide a safe and voluntary return of all refugees to their home countries (UNHCR, 1999 as cited in Miller, 2010). Miller (2010) argued that refugees should be the primary deciders in planning their voluntary return. However, “in 1996, Rwandan refugees hosted by the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania were forced to return home, and this situation has raised fresh questions about the degree of voluntariness and the role of compulsion in imposed return” (Loesher, 2001 as cited in Miller, 2010). UNHCR (2017) reports that some Congolese refugees are trying to return from Angola to their homes in Kasai, despite dangerous conditions there. After their

return home, they “found their homes destroyed and are forced to live in internal displacement-like conditions” (UNHCR, 2017b, para. 6).

Local Integration. When refugees are afraid to return home, local integration becomes the second durable solution for them, which can only be accomplished with the agreement and adequate involvement of the government of the host country (Miller, 2010). Refugees cannot be pressured to accept the local integration solution, as they need to be integrated into new societies with the opportunity to obtain national citizenship (Miller, 2010).

Third Country Resettlement. The resettlement solution involves the transfer of refugees from the second country in which refugees pursued protection after their initial escape to a new country that has approved their permanent relocation (Miller, 2010). In order “[t]o qualify for third-country resettlement, refugees must convince aid representatives that they have been individually persecuted and continue to fear such persecution” (Thomsen, 2012). Even when refugees qualify for resettlement, however, this qualification often does not guarantee a very desirable pass to freedom (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002; Larking, 2014). Resettlement options to third countries are limited, as less than one percent of refugees worldwide are being resettled. Yet, in spite of these discouraging odds, for some refugees this may be the only chance for survival (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

Many developed countries, including the U.S., participate in the refugee resettlement program (Goers, 2016). The United States of America is a country made of immigrants, and the influence of immigrants made the United States a beacon of diversity, forming coexistence among different ethnic and cultural groups. The United

States admits refugees from many conflict areas in the world. Goers (2016) indicated that the United States resettles about 70,000-90,000 refugees yearly, and during the next five years the United States is planning to resettle about 50,000 Congolese refugees.

Refugee Numbers. The global displacement has been increasing: “the year 2013 marked the first time since World War II that the number of forcibly displaced people in the world exceeded fifty million” (United Nations, 2014 as cited in Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017, p. 1). During the last five years, there were constant rises in the global displacement of refugees. On average, in 2016, violence and war displaced 20 people every minute or one person every three seconds (UNHCR, 2017d). In 2016, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world as a result of conflicts and prosecution, increased from 65.3 to 65.6 million people (Connor & Krogstad, 2016; UNHCR, 2016, UNHCR, 2017d).

Currently, one in every one hundred people globally are expelled from their homes. This is the highest number of people that have been forcibly displaced, since the beginning of the data gathering by UNHCR in 1951 (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). Furthermore, 60% or six in ten Syrians are currently displaced. This is the first time in recent history that 12.5 million people were forced to flee and abandon their homes (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). Many refugees spend some time displaced outside of their country of origin, mostly in refugee camps prior to resettlement to the third country. Generally, third country resettlement offers the best resolution for refugees that are unable to return home (Lischer, 2015).

The United States remains the world’s leading refugee resettlement country (Eby, Iverson, Smyers, & Kekic, 2011). Since 1975, over 3.2 million refugees have been

resettled to the United States (Kallick & Mathema 2016; Fink, 2016; the U.S. Embassy in Uganda, 2016; Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). Demographically, “from fiscal years 2002 to 2016, the U.S. admitted 399,677 Christian refugees and 279,339 Muslim refugees, meaning that 46% of all refugees who have entered the U.S. during this time have been Christian while 32% have been Muslim” (Krogstad & Radford, 2017, p. 2). Krogstad and Radford (2017) argue that currently the majority of Americans do not favor refugee resettlement. However, U.S. public opinion polls from previous decades display that the majority of Americans generally in the past have seldom welcomed people fleeing war and oppression (Fenn, 2017; Krogstad & Radford, 2017).

Currently, we are not in any better place when it comes to welcoming immigrants, which is due partially to the President of the United States, Donald Trump, and his policies against immigrants (Fenn, 2017, para. 8). Even though we are witnessing the highest levels of displacement of refugees on record, now 65 million, the U.S. under President Trump plans to admit below 50,000 refugees annually (Fenn, 2017, para. 12). In September, the U.S. administration proposed a cap of 45,000 refugees to be admitted to the U.S. in FY 2018 (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc., one of the nine national resettlement agencies in the U.S., stated that the record-low cap on refugee admissions, which is the lowest since 1980 when the President began deciding the ceiling on refugee admissions “will cost human lives” (Duncan, 2017, p. 1).

Fenn (2017) states that the words on the Great Seal of the United States from 1776, “E Pluribus Unum,” one out of many, “define America and make us a beacon and example for the world. Or do they? Are we at present—or have we ever been—a



welcoming nation to immigrants?” In addition, Fenn asks, “Does our history embrace the melting pot and rejoice in our diversity? Do we live up to the inscription chiseled on the base of the Statue of Liberty?” (Fenn, 2017, para. 1). We are a country of immigrants and only “[by] reaffirming who we are, what we stand for, and the acceptance – indeed embrace – of immigrants, we will be much stronger as a nation and a true example to the world” and we will be able to resist the “demagogues” and all those people who want to destroy our American values of who we are as a country (Fenn, 2017, para. 14).

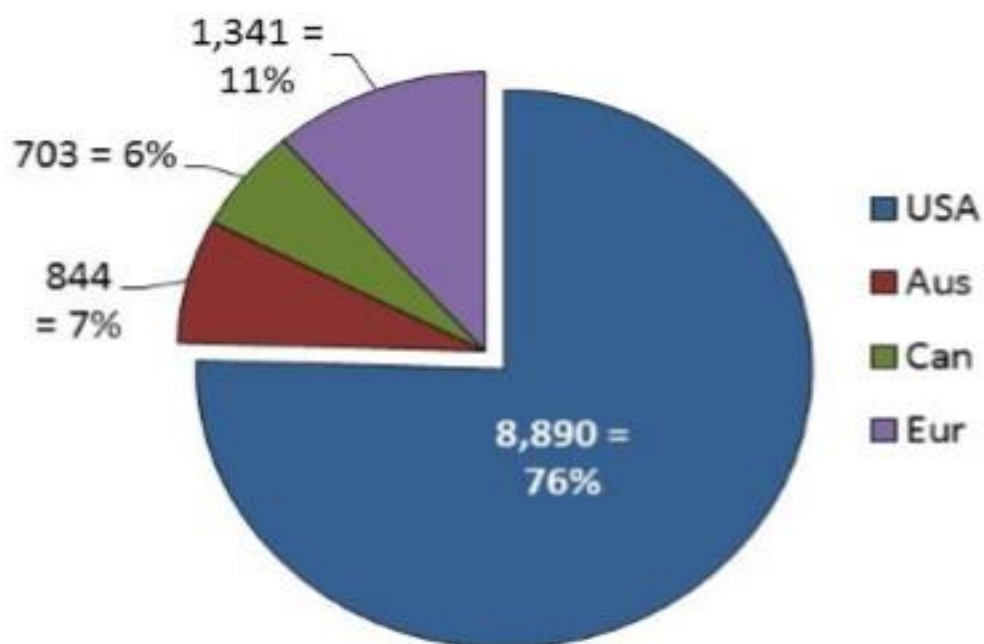
Congolese Refugee Resettlement in the U.S. Since 2011, the resettlement of refugees from the Congo has seen a continuous increase (UNHCR, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2016). Beginning in 2012, many Congolese refugees have fled to “Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, bringing the total number of Congolese refugees to nearly 534,000” (U.S. Department of State, 2016, p. 25). In 2013, the United States resettled 2,613 Congolese refugees, and two years later the United States resettled 7,876 refugees, which is an increase of 5,263 refugees (UNHCR, 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2016). For the total approved resettlement of 14,858 refugees from Africa in 2013, 4,696 or 32% were Congolese refugees, which has increased from 2,640 in 2012 (UNHCR, 2014). For the actual resettlement numbers for the years 2012, 2013 and 2014, see Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Departures of Congolese Refugees for Resettlement**

Country of resettlement	Departures 2012 (persons)	Departures 2013 (persons)	Departures 2014 (persons) as of 31 March*
Australia	271	551	2
Belgium	-	65	-
Canada	247	682	26
Chile	-	3	-
Denmark	2	33	-
Finland	246	50	8
France	6	2	-
United Kingdom	184	199	68
Ireland	20	24	7
The Netherlands	17	83	34
Norway	11	199	2
Portugal	-	-	-
Sweden	17	192	17
USA	1,619	2,613	513
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,640</b>	<b>4,696</b>	<b>677</b>

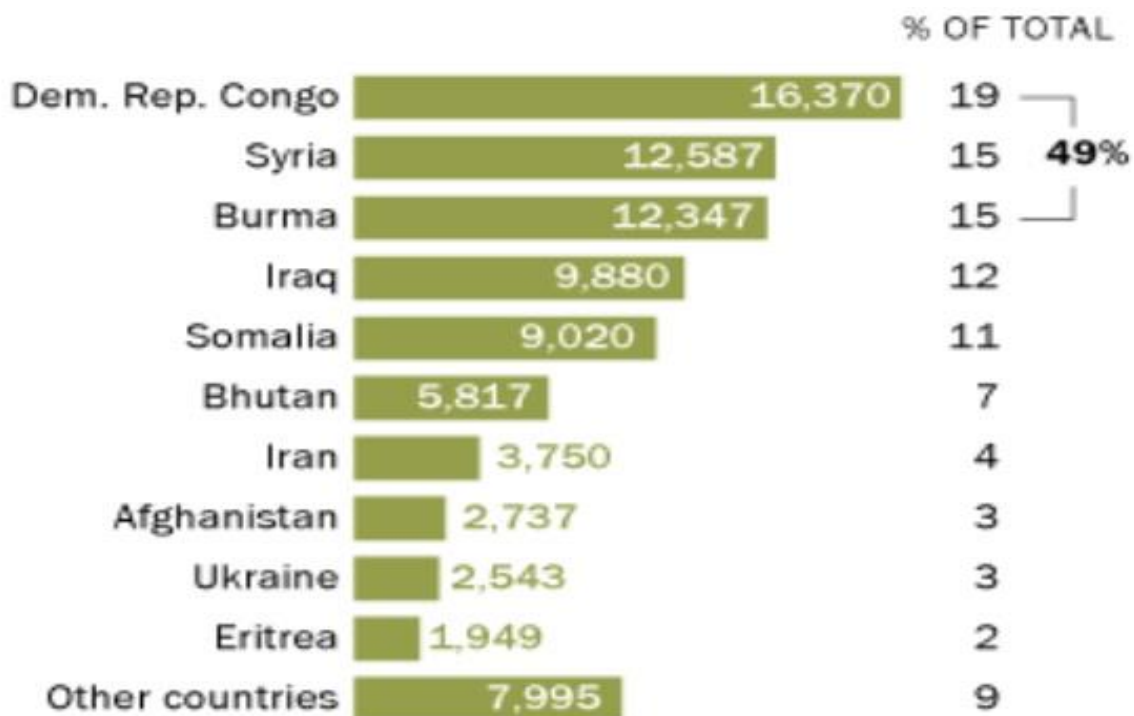
\*Figures are tentative and are subject to change

(UNHCR, 2014, p. 4).



**Figure 2.8 Resettlement submissions of Congolese refugees by resettlement country in 2013 (UNHCR, 2014, p. 5).**

According to Igielnik and Krogstad (2017), “of the 84,995 refugees admitted to the United States in fiscal year 2016, the largest numbers came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar) and Iraq” (p. 1).



**Figure 2.9** Number of Refugees Entering the U.S. in Fiscal 2016, by Origin Country, (Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). Note: Data do not include special immigrant visas and certain humanitarian parole entrants.

The United States, Canada, and Australia are the countries that permanently resettle most refugees in the world (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Therefore, in order for refugees to adapt and integrate successfully to a Western culture and effectively engage in community building, they need an opportunity to learn English language and obtain a suitable education (Evans & Murray, 2009 as cited in Ross, 2013). It is important to understand migration experiences of refugees before and after resettlement in order to understand problems refugees may face while accessing and pursuing higher education. Also, it is crucial to understand the impact that higher education has on refugee

integration into a new country (Zeus, 2011 as cited in Ross, 2013). In fact, “education can provide a path to integration and a source of cultural identification and understanding” (Harris & Marlowe 2011 as cited in Ross 2013).

### **Refugees in Higher Education**

As I begin to understand Congolese students in higher education, it is important to learn about refugees in higher education. This section is narrowed toward research that addresses issues refugee students face while accessing and pursuing higher education. In addition, this literature distinguishes refugee experiences from the experiences of other types of immigrants, as some researchers in their studies tend to lump all immigrants together (McBrien, 2005; Clark, 2007; Roxas, 2008; Sadikovic, 2017): “For instance, in one study, although the researchers did not use the word ‘refugee’ in their research, they likely included refugee students within their sample, as the students in their research came from Bosnia, Vietnam, Laos, Sudan, Somalia, and Russia, as well as Mexico” (Gitlin et al., 2003 as cited in McBrien, 2005, p. 26).

There is limited literature related to the experiences of refugees in higher education (McBrien, 2005; Clark, 2007; Roxas, 2008; Sadikovic; 2017). The existing literature has several limitations, as most of the literature on refugee students in higher education pertains to the situation in Australia, Canada, and England, or a few states within the U.S. (Felix, 2016). The existing literature on refugee students in the United States is focused at psychological factors, the surrounding social environment, and language acquisition (McBrien, 2004 as cited in McBrien, 2005): “Only a dearth of information is available about refugee student’s perspectives; their struggles, needs, and acculturation processes in higher education” (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010).

This is because studies that research refugee students in higher education are relatively rare (Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017). Furthermore, many studies in this field place blame on refugee students themselves, attributing their academic failures to their social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Indeed, they fail to research the problems that relate to the lack of university supports for these students (Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017).

Consequently “studies of programs that aim to create greater intercultural understanding between refugee-background/immigrant students and local students are relatively uncommon” (Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017, p. 1). Research at the higher education level that focuses “on creating greater intercultural understanding within the student body in relation to refugee-background students, or on promoting sustained interaction among student peer groups in order to establish a more supportive social environment for refugees and immigrants” is greatly needed (Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017, p. 2).

Refugee students attending universities face unique struggles; they “have to contend with novel social and educational organisations, behaviours and expectations – as well as dealing with the problems of adjustment common to students in general”; the impact of these novel experiences on refugee students is called ‘culture shock’ (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008). Thus, refugee students are in need of support after resettlement in a new country. After the resettlement, they face mental and physical problems most likely due to their disturbing experiences prior to resettlement (McBrien, 2005; Patnaik, 2014; Wilson & Guskin, 2017), acculturation issues (Sadikovic, 2017), English language barriers (McBrien, 2005; Clark, 2007; Wilson & Guskin, 2017), and

other factors that hinder their overall integration in the United States. These obstacles hinder a successful transition and access to higher education (Patnaik, 2014). A handful of researchers pointed out some distinct problems faced by refugee students in higher education (Felix, 2016). These include “refugee students’ struggle with English language proficiency and academic writing” (Hirano, 2014 as cited in Felix, 2016, p. 56). Based on those challenges, supportive access to higher education for refugee students is questionable (Felix, 2016). Supportive access is crucial for refugee students’ success: “access without support is not opportunity . . . conversations about access ignore the fact that without support many students, especially those who are poor or academically underprepared, are unlikely to succeed” (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008 as cited in Felix, 2016, p. 57).

Furthermore, Barry (1997) describes the importance of adaption to acculturation in the society because in the meeting of different cultures, refugees and the host society must be willing to accommodate each other (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001; McPherson, 2010; Sam and Barry, 2006; Strang & Ager, 2010). There are two things that must happen during the adoption to acculturation in order for acculturation to be successful: “maintenance of group characteristics and contact between groups” (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001, p. 615). Otherwise, if acculturation is unsuccessfully carried out, refugee populations may experience personal crises in their society, which is called “acculturative stress” or culture shock (Williams & Barry, 1991, p. 634). To avoid the above-mentioned crises among refugee and minority groups, there must be a mutual practice in place by both groups in involving their own cultural values while at the same

time respecting and being aware of the cultural values of the other minority groups (Barry, 2001).

### Importance of Higher Education.

Education is a key supporting part for refugee children and adults in adjustment to life in a new country and their successful integration:

For people who have lost all their other assets, education represents a primary survival strategy. Education is the key to adaptation in the new environment of exile. Education is the basis upon which to build a livelihood. For some, education will be the decisive factor for resettlement in a third, normally richer country. Finally, education will ease reintegration on their return home. (Flukiger-Stockton, 1996 as cited in Hannah, 1999, p. 155)

Higher education has a huge influence on both the individual and society as a whole, which is needed to provide significant benefits to the United States population, maintaining the nation's competitive advantage and economic growth (Lotkowski, Robins & Noeth, 2004 as cited in Abokor, 2016). Therefore, a degree in higher education is seen as a path out of poverty (Kuh et al. 2008 as cited in Abokor, 2016). Furthermore, higher education provides opportunities for self-sufficiency and helps create responsible citizens (Kuh et al. 2008 as cited in Abokor, 2016). One of the important barriers to self-sufficiency within refugee populations is insufficient support in learning about importance of continuing education or the inability to understand how to navigate higher education system (Sadikovic, 2017).

Additionally, education can be a stepping stone for newly resettled refugees to increase their social and cultural capital, successfully integrate into society, and to be a source of cultural education for their communities (Harris & Marlowe, 2011 as cited in Ross 2013). Educated citizens with college degrees have a promising influence on the country's economic growth. Also, education opens the door and provides the necessary

support needed for young Americans to escape poverty and underprivileged social settings (Swail, 2003 as cited in Abokor, 2016).

### Refugee Students: Aspirations, Desires, and Pressures Related to Academic Prosper

Many researchers support the notion that young refugees have “high aspirations for education and employment, and that these are shared and influenced by their parents (Baizerman and Hendricks, 1988; Banks and MacDonald, 2003; Peters, 1988; RHRC, 2007)” (Atwell, Gifford and McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009, p. 680). Similarly, Baizerman and Hendricks’ study (as cited in Atwell, Gifford & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009) reveals the sacrifices and hard work of Southeast Asian refugees in a new country to create a better life for their children. For example, many hospital housekeeping jobs that are hard and humiliating are most often filled by ethnic minorities, refugees, and immigrants. These immigrants and refugees sacrifice as they work for low wages, cut back on spending, and work two or three jobs: “Many are also expected to complete a second or even third shift at home, caring for their children, parents, or even the children and parents of the more privileged” (Zuberi, 2013, p. 30). Atwell, Gifford and McDonald-Wilmsen (2009) describe that parents’ previous and present experiences are very influential on their children’s success.

Therefore, in the case of refugee families, their previous traumatic experiences may present some challenges in school, which requires additional academic support (Atwell, Gifford, & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009). In addition, many refugee students bear increased pressures from their communities to succeed academically (McSpadden, 1987 as cited in Harris and Marlowe, 2011). Thus, for many refugee students, “a university degree holds a special place, symbolizing an opportunity to redress the marginalization



and disadvantage that are characteristic of forced migration and resettlement (Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2004; Russell, 2005)” (Harris and Marlowe, 2011, p. 188).

### Refugee Students’ Challenges in Higher Education: Improving Access and Support

There are many impediments that affect refugee students while accessing higher education, such as interrupted schooling, destroyed diplomas, as well as non-acceptable credentials and financial issues (Hannah, 1999; Felix, 2016). In addition, some refugee students in the United States face barriers to higher education during their transition period from refugee to a green card or permanent resident status, and those refugee documents may not be recognized as a proof of immigration status by some universities (Hannah, 1999; Felix, 2016).

Once enrolled in a course “the refugee may suffer from the after-effects of torture or trauma, with physical or psychological symptoms disrupting their ability to concentrate and study” (Hannah, 1999, p. 158). Furthermore, numerous studies of refugee resettlement prove this:

There is ample evidence that exposure to such traumatic events as those experienced by most refugees are often associated with a number of psychological sequelae. These may include depression, feelings of guilt, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, sleep disorders, intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, memory and concentration problems, difficulties in social functioning, marital and family disruption (Arroche 1994; Refugee Resettlement Working Group, 1993; Reid and Strong 1987). (Hannah, 1999, p. 158)

Therefore, current research upholds the notion that many refugees face numerous hardships such as identity loss, language barriers, feeling ostracized, no sense of belonging, loss of self-esteem, and family disruption (Sadikovic, 2017).

In addition to above mentioned challenges, refugee students face unprepared administrative and educational workers, whose unpreparedness causes extra stress on refugee students. Thus, many faculty and staff are unaware that refugee students in the United States are “entitled to many of the same rights as permanent residents for purposes of gaining admission and obtaining financial aid for undergraduate and graduate programs” (Tobenkin, 2006 as cited in Felix, 2016, p. 58). Furthermore, refugees can apply for and become lawful permanent residents one year after they are resettled to the United States (USCIS, 2017). Even if some of them are lucky to enroll in college or university, these refugee students struggle as they are treated like other incoming or international students, while their adjustment is much more complicated because of their previous horrifying experiences (Felix, 2016). It is vital for educators and administrative staff to become informed and learn more about unfortunate pasts and challenges refugee students face while accessing and pursuing higher education (Sadikovic, 2017).

In adding to the language barrier and cultural factors that refugee students face while accessing and pursuing higher education, there are factors that all students face during their educational development. Through his social reproduction theory, Bourdieu (1977) argues that school is a mechanism for the reproduction of existing power with the goal to create structured social inequalities and exclusion in society, which favors the dominant (upper and middle) class and their cultural code. In summary, refugee students, beside the problem of social reproduction, must deal with many other troubling factors such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and linguistic, social, and historical factors that may affect their academic prosperity (Harris and Marlowe, 2011). It is important to add that refugee students who were able to successfully navigate and get into university

still experience linguistic challenges that are faced by fewer native-born students. These challenges can be eased by extra studying, but nonlinguistic barriers require additional university support (Patnaik, 2014).

A plethora of international literature reveals the need for inclusive education “highlighting the diversity of student backgrounds generally and the need for informed and inclusive educational approaches (see Nieto, 2000; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Barceló, 2010; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Tran, 2010; Kennedy, 1995)” as they are crucial to provide fair opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds (Harris and Marlowe, 2011). Some refugee students entering a college or university in their new country of resettlement may have brought proficient academic skills they acquired prior to escaping their country, while some students may come with insufficient education, which may create additional challenges for these students (Harris & Marlowe, 2011). In addition, perceptions and experiences of minority students in higher education are influenced by students’ cultural background (Kuh et al., 2006 as cited in Abokor, 2016).

Congolese students, students of color in higher education, face potential burdens of institutional racism, racial discrimination and stereotyping by their peers and some white university professors. Macpherson (1999) explains that the idea of institutional racism consists of

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. [...] It persists because of the failure of the organisation openly and adequately to recognise and address its existence and causes by policy, example and leadership. (para. 6.34)

Racism is still prevalent in higher education. It is common that white people in education support Black students and staff when it is helping their own interests or when their own interests are non-threatened (Harper et al., 2009 as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

The literature review revealed that Black students in predominately White institutions face discrimination and cultural and racial isolation: those students of color are underrepresented, ignored, treated unequally, discriminated against and often invisible in the institution, and yet this is being ignored by much of the literature (Sol´orzano et al., 2000 as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In addition to students of color, faculty of color are underrepresented in higher education: Stanley’s study revealed that the faculty “participants shared their racialized experiences, describing their experiences of both institutional and individual Racism” (as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

In this study, critical race theory serves as a framework or the tool with the purpose to provide understanding about the impact of race and racism on student of color’s experiences in higher education. It is important to acknowledge that in order “to fully understand how race and racism affect higher education and perpetuate various forms of oppression, students of color’s lived experiences in academia must be viewed as valid, appropriate, and necessary forms of data” (Tara Yosso, Laurence Parker, Daniel Sol´orzano, and Marvin Lynn, 2004 as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Additionally, Ogbu & Simons’s “cultural ecology” describes “the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education,” which explains “the minorities’ perceptions of and responses to education” and “explores the impact of the white treatment of the minorities” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). It helps us understand the

educational issues of “Black and similar minorities” whether we study their school performances, educational success, or the fairness of standardized tests that affect students’ ability to access higher education (Ogbu, 1990, p. 122). Ogbu (1978) states that the differences between minority and dominant-group students were the result of the societal and school treatment of minority groups. Ogbu blames schools for bias in choosing curriculum and not preparing teachers to work with minority students (Labelle & Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu, 1978). Schools prepare minority children for a lower role and status in the society and they prepare the dominant group for a superior role and status. Such treatment toward minorities creates unwelcoming environment in school forcing minority students to develop undesirable feelings and different perceptions toward schools (Ogbu, 1978).

In conclusion, given that refugee students’ traumatic experiences and social, historical and linguistic factors affect their access to higher education and academic success, it is crucial to better understand Congolese students’ previous traumatic, cultural, and educational experiences. This will help the researcher to successfully conduct the study that relates to their lived experiences in higher education. Through this literature review, I used different academic resources and perspectives to become familiar with the issues the Congolese people experienced prior and after resettlement to the United States. This acquired knowledge will assist me to continue working on the important story about Congolese refugees while incorporating new research and new perspectives into the story.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Through the review of the literature, Chapter 2 examined the following: 1) The history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); 2) refugee crises and security protection for refugees; 3) issues of resettlement and acculturation; and 4) issues Congolese students face when entering and navigating higher education. The purpose of this study is to understand and illuminate the challenges Congolese refugee students face accessing and pursuing higher education, as well as the opportunities higher education provides for them, their families, and the community as a whole. This chapter explains the methodologies utilized in this research study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks help researchers better understand central parts of the research being studied, and they provide the crucial description and direction of the study. In addition, theoretical frameworks provide support in formulating appropriate research questions (Anfara & Mertz, 2014; Creswell, 2013). In this research study, the theoretical framework helps the researcher explore factors affecting refugee students in higher education. This framework offers different viewpoints in analyzing resilience and strength of Congolese students in addition to the frameworks of minorities in higher education. Thus, the theoretical viewpoints used in this study offer important framework components needed for better understanding of the needs and the experiences of refugee students and to highlight challenges those students face while navigating higher education settings in the United States.

The study's theoretical framework builds on Kunz's (1981) refugee theory, Ogbu & Simons's (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority students' school performance, Barry's (1997) theory of acculturation, and McCoy and Rodricks's (2015) critical race theory in higher education. This study builds within Kunz's (1981) theoretical framework that explains the factors affecting refugee students before and after resettlement.

Kunz's Refugee Theory of Resettlement (1973, 1981). It is common to believe that all immigrants are pulled to a new country of opportunities. However, Kunz's kinetic model (1973) indicates that the refugee is pushed out and not pulled to. Many of them had a decent life in their countries and they ended up escaping because of fear and persecution (Kunz, 1973). Kunz (1973) explained that the difference between immigrants and refugees lies in the reason for the escape. Similarly, Stein (1981) explains that immigrants choose to relocate, while refugees are forced by certain events in the country to relocate. Also, while the immigrant can choose the immigration location, the refugee accepts any resettlement location.

Kunz (1981) explains that most refugees leave their country by "an anticipatory flight, or is carried into exile in an acute refugee situation" (p. 42). In his work Kunz defines anticipatory refugees as persons who feel that danger is coming and therefore have some time to arrange their escape, mostly together with their family. On the other hand, acute refugees are forced to leave their country, often unexpectedly, because of war or violence (Kunz, 1981).

Based on Kunz's definition, Congolese refugees belong to the acute refugee group as they are forced to leave their country and are violently displaced. Furthermore, based

on refugee attitudes toward their departure, Kunz separates refugees into three distinct categories: a) majority identified, b) event-related, and c) self-alienated refugees.

Those refugees who disagree with their government or a political structure of their country but agree with other nationals are called **majority identified refugees**. Refugees who are discriminated against, persecuted or alienated in their own countries by their own countrymen because of belonging to a different religious and national minority group retain minimal connections with their former country—these refugees are called **events related refugees**. The third group, **the self-alienated refugees** leave their country often because of different personal ideology that causes disconnection and alienation within their homebased society (Kunz, 1981).

Many newly resettled refugees who escaped their homes and countries because of violence will be living under the influences of their memories, traumatic experiences, and homesickness, feeling basically as prisoners of their past. Thus, after refugee resettle to a new country, their first encounters and experiences with the host society will be of crucial importance for their well-being. The well-being of the newly arrived refugees is mainly influenced by the cultural compatibility factor present between the two cultures. If refugees are unable to overcome the gap created by the presence of unfamiliar values, they will be forced into seclusion. On the other hand, if refugees find cultural understanding among different groups within the host society, a welcoming environment, and a certain number of people who share the same cultural values and speak the same language, their integration and identification with the host country will be faster (Kunz, 1981).



A Cultural-Ecological Theory. Ogbu & Simons's (1998) framework divides minorities into "voluntary (immigrant) and involuntary nonimmigrants" (9.155). They describe voluntary immigrants who resettled to the United States by their own wish and involuntary minorities who were mostly brought to the U.S. as slaves. Therefore, they place refugees into a semi-voluntary minority group as they fall between these two groups. At the same time, Ogbu and Simons state that refugees resettle to the United States because of war and violence, and they did not choose to be resettled in order to improve their socioeconomic status. Based on this reality, Kunz (1981), McBrien (2005), Sadikovic (2017) categorize resettled people as voluntary and involuntary immigrants, placing the refugee population into an involuntary immigrant group.

Regardless of how Ogbu and Simons divided minority groups, the important purpose of the Ogbu & Simons's theory is to describe "the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education," which explains "the minorities' perceptions of and responses to education" and "explores the impact of the white treatment of the minorities" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). This theoretical framework allows us to explore relationship between the school and social forces. Ogbu (1990) describes cultural ecology as "the study of socially transmitted and institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment" (p. 122). Cultural ecology helps us understand the educational issues of "Black and similar minorities" whether we study their school performances, educational success, or the fairness of standardized tests that affect students' ability to access higher education (Ogbu, 1990, p. 122).

The visible differences between minority and dominant-group students were the result of the societal and school treatment of minority groups. Therefore, such treatment

toward minorities forces them to feel unwelcomed and develop negative perceptions toward schools. Schools are to be blamed for their bias in choosing curriculum and not preparing teachers to work with minority students (Ogbu, 1978). Many immigrants believe that hard work and education are very important in order to succeed in the U.S. However, the immigrants that face prolonged “employment and wage discrimination as well as other barriers to making it in a white-controlled” structure start to believe that their hard work and education is not enough to overcome racism and discrimination at work and school (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 172). This theoretical framework is useful for this research study as it highlights presence of various discriminatory practices that challenge refugees and immigrants after resettlement to the United States.

Barry’s Theory of Acculturation. Acculturation theory provides support to the study on refugees in higher education. Barry (1997) describes the importance of adaption to acculturation: In the meeting of cultures, both refugees and the host society need to accommodate each other (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001; McPherson, 2010; Sam and Barry, 2006; Strang & Ager, 2010). Acculturation theory focuses on “two fundamental issues that face immigrants and the society of settlement: maintenance of group characteristics and contact between groups” (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001, p. 615). Thus, this theory supports researchers in understanding how refugees and immigrants adjust to a life in a new country.

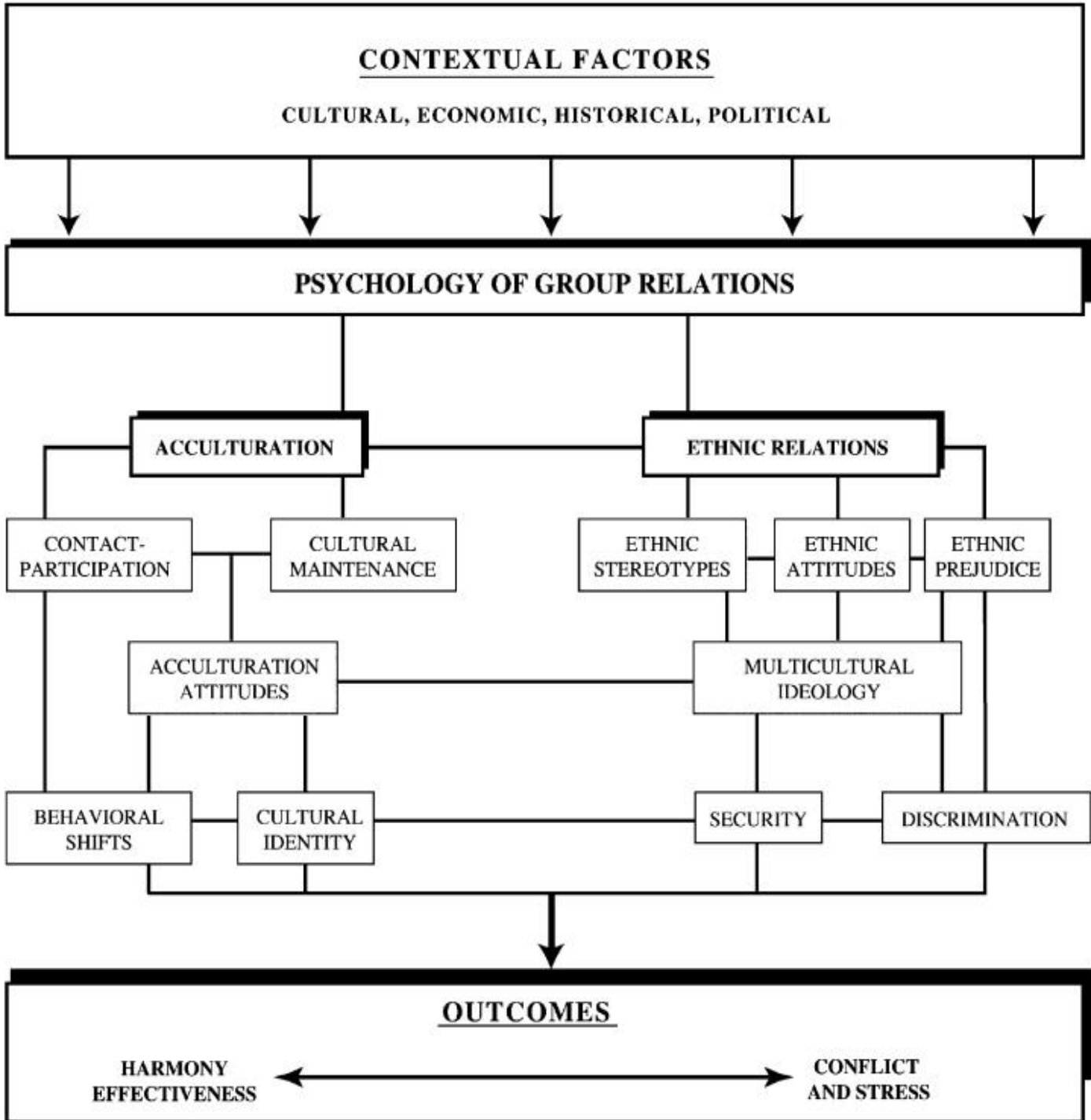
If acculturation was not carried out appropriately, as the consequences and a product of social disintegration, refugee populations may experience personal crises in their society, which is called “acculturative stress” (Williams & Barry, 1991, p. 634). Many social and psychological factors affect the process of acculturation such as the host

society, including their multicultural perspectives, prejudice, and discrimination toward immigrants; the ethnicity, race and religion of the acculturating group; the personal characteristics of an individual person, and the mental health of individuals during the process of acculturation. It is important to note that those marginalized are the most stressed, and those joyfully and welcomingly integrated in society are minimally stressed (Williams & Barry, 1991).

Barry (2005) states, “acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups” (p. 699). Figure 3.1 describes the process of acculturation that requires interaction and cultural adaptation between two different cultural groups (Barry, 2001). Also, this figure describes how sociologists and anthropologists explain the two basic characteristics of intercultural encounter during the process of acculturation. These aspects are “(1) the degree of actual contact and the resultant participation of each group with the other, and (2) the degree of cultural maintenance manifested by each group” (Barry, 2001, p. 618).

Immigrants and refugees must find suitable ways to deal with the two earlier mentioned aspects, and the dominant group (host society) must find appropriate ways to interact with immigrants and refugees. In the case that the essential mutual contact inescapably produces the lack of cultural maintenance by a particular immigrant group, then the only expected result is the blending of the cultures, which leads to the disappearance of that particular diverse ethnic group (Barry, 2001). Therefore, there must be a mutual practice in place by both groups involving their own cultural values while at

the same time respecting and being aware of the cultural values of the other minority groups (Barry, 2001).



**Figure 3.1: A framework for understanding psychology of immigration, linking acculturation and intergroup relations research to background context variables and outcomes (Barry, 2001, p. 617; Barry 2005, p. 699).**

Furthermore, Figure 3.2 explains how the four acculturation approaches arose from the two issues: “(1) a relative preference for maintaining one’s heritage culture and identity, and (2) a relative preference for having contact with and participating” in the host society (Barry 2005, p. 705).

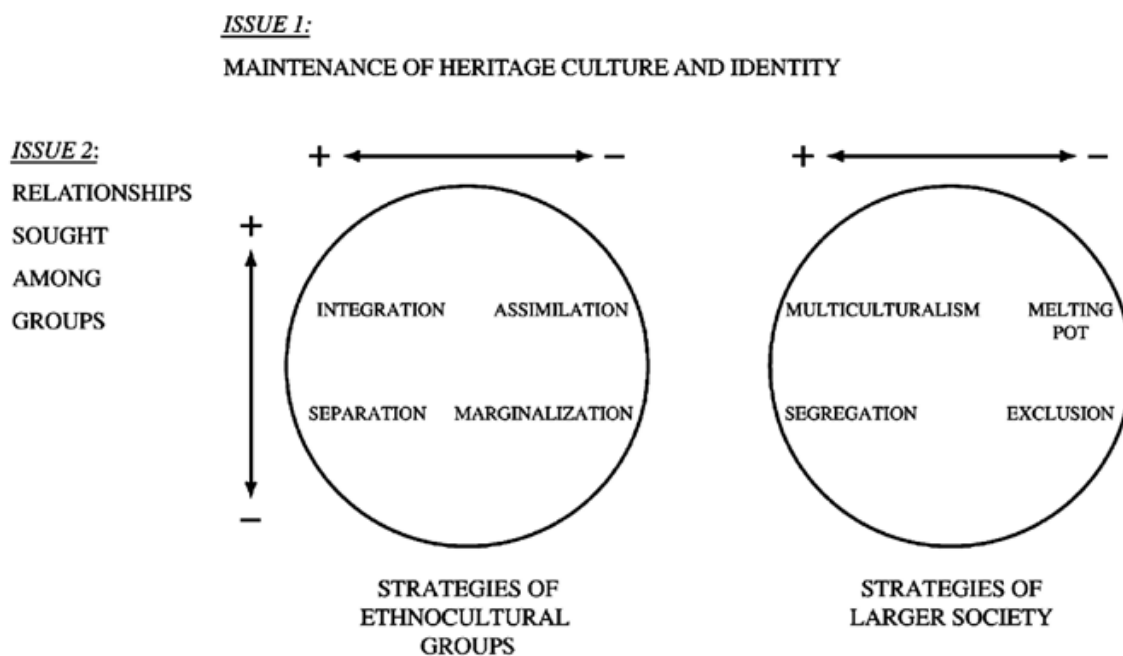
From the non-dominant group’s perspective when “their individual members have the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate” (the left circle of Fig. 3.2), there are four different acculturation approaches: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Barry, 2005). When cultural identity is not maintained, the assimilation approach is defined. In this approach, individuals choose to drop their own culture for the sake of being immersed into the leading culture. On the other hand, when people decide to avoid interaction with the people from the host society and choose to keep their distinct culture, then the separation approach is defined. When individuals show “an interest in both maintaining one’s heritage culture while in daily interactions with other groups, integration is the option”; on the other hand, the marginalization approach is defined “when there is little possibility or interest in heritage cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination)” (Barry 2005, p. 705).

However, “when the dominant group enforces certain forms of acculturation, or constrains the choices of non-dominant groups or individuals” then (in the right circle of Fig. 3.2), there are four different acculturation terms used: multiculturalism, melting pot,

segregation and exclusion (Barry 2005, p. 705). Barry (2005) defines the following acculturation approaches:

Assimilation, when sought by the dominant acculturating group, is termed the ‘melting pot.’ When separation is forced by the dominant group it is called ‘segregation’. Marginalization, when imposed by the dominant group, is called ‘exclusion’. Finally, integration, when diversity is an accepted feature of the society as a whole, including all the various ethnocultural groups, is called ‘multiculturalism.’ (p. 706)

Therefore, it is important to note that “the ideologies and policies of the dominant group” are “an important element of ethnic relations research,” and “the preferences of nondominant peoples are a core feature of ethnic relations in acculturation research” (Barry 2005, p. 706).



**Figure 3.2:** Four acculturation strategies based upon two issues, in ethnocultural groups, and the larger society (Barry, 2001, p. 618; Barry 2005, p. 705).

Avoidance of cultural conflicts between immigrant groups and the host society should help with the acculturation process. This way, the host society would avoid causing the phenomenon of acculturative stress. The term acculturative stress is also called culture

shock. However, Barry (2005) avoids using the term “culture shock” as the “notion of shock carries only negative connotations” (p. 708). Barry states that when the larger cultural conflicts are seen as problematic but manageable, then the acculturative stress has been addressed, as the individuals recognize that they are confronting difficulties arising from intercultural contact.

In addition, Barry (2005) explains “the notion of stress commonly connotes a negative experience, in the field of health psychology stress can vary from positive (eustress) to negative (dis-stress) in valence” (p. 708). Therefore, in this case, the term stress “better matches the range of affect experienced during acculturation, because acculturation has both positive (e.g., new opportunities) and negative (e.g., discrimination) aspects”; moreover, the term shock “has no cultural or psychological theory or research context associated with it, whereas stress (as noted above) has a place in a well-developed theoretical matrix (i.e., stress-coping-adaptation)” (Barry 2005, p. 708). The idea of acculturative stress is applicable to my study as many refugees experience acculturative stress as a result of different cultural norms in the country of resettlement. Higher education should be a striving place that provides support for minority students, promoting multiculturalism, helping in managing acculturative stress, as well as, the institutions of higher education should be the guiding force in promoting successful integration and mutual cooperation between the host society and refugee and immigrant groups.

Critical Race Theory in Higher Education. Critical race theory emerged “from critical legal studies,” and it was established “by a group of legal scholars” who recognized “that civil rights advancements had stalled”; thus, “these scholars pursued a

theoretical approach that emphasized race and racism’s role in the United States’ political, economic, and social landscapes” McCoy and Rodricks, 2015, p. vii).

Throughout the past twenty years, this theory “has emerged as a powerful theoretical framework and research methodology to explore and examine People of Color’s lived experiences in higher education (p. vii).

The very important purpose of McCoy and Rodricks’s (2015) critical race theory is to provide “a theoretical framework and analytical tool for interrupting and dismantling inequality and inequity in U.S. higher education” (p. vii). In addition, McCoy and Rodricks’s critical race framework places emphases on the following seven doctrines of critical race theory:

- Permanence of Racism—the concept that racism is not random and isolated but is an endemic and permanent aspect of People of Color’s experiences in the United States.
- Interest Convergence—the theory that historically oppressed people (People of Color) advance socially and politically when their interests converge with the interests of those in power (typically White, heterosexual, Christian males).
- Experiential Knowledge—the knowledge that People of Color possess based on their lived experiences; considered valued, legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in education.
- Intersectionality—the theoretical concept that race intersects with other subordinated identities (such as gender, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and forms of oppression (sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc.) to influence People of Color’s lived experiences.
- Whiteness as Property—the premise that the assumptions, privileges, and benefits of identifying as White are valuable assets that White people seek to protect; includes the rights of possession, use, transfer, disposition, and exclusion. In higher education, those individuals (such as White people) who have historically accessed higher education through admissions policies is an example of Whiteness as property.
- Critique of Liberalism—the challenge of concepts of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, objectivity, equal opportunity, and incremental change.



- Commitment to Social Justice—the ideology that all people should be safe and secure in society and education with equal participation and access to equitable resources. (McCoy and Rodricks, p. viii)

McCoy and Rodricks (2015) states that very often we have heard a question about why change is coming very slowly in higher education, but “that question, often posed rhetorically, is almost never interrogated further” (p. 32). Therefore, “critical race theory offers much utility for determining “why” to the question of change” (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015, p. 32). In conclusion, the critical race approach deeply illuminates the complex power discrepancies “that exist within higher education institutions and critiques notions of color blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality” and shows how this power “is systemically framed by law and supported by institutional programs and policies that demonstrate an interest convergence” (p. 33). This theory will help me analyze the stories shared by racial minority participants.

### **Problem Statement Restated**

The Pacific Northwest region of the United States has shown growing diversity within the society and the workforce. However, diversity is not equally represented in the higher education system of the region. Even though the United States resettles many refugees from Africa, particularly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), these refugees are not adequately supported: they face problems when trying to enter and navigate higher education. Their participation in higher education needs an investigation to identify factors that hinder Congolese refugees from successfully participating in higher education.

### **Research Question Restated**

The primary purpose of this study is to analyze and describe the actual issues/barriers Congolese refugee students face while in higher education or attempting to enroll into higher education. This study is guided by and intends to answer the following research question: What are the issues that Congolese refugee students experience accessing and pursuing higher education?

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study is as an inquiry into the experiences of Congolese refugee students in higher education. I used the narrative approach to lead my qualitative research methods in this study. In addition, narrative inquiry benefited this study, as it has “a long tradition in the humanities because of its power to elicit voice” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 118). Also, narrative inquiry “has been particularly useful in developing feminist and critical theory (Eisner, 1988; Grumet, 1988; Riessman, 1993)” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 118).

The researcher should make sure to explain the research methodology: research techniques and data collection and data analysis strategies (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Maxwell, 2013). The strengths of qualitative research are in the inductive method of the content analysis that focuses on particular persons or situations and words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 2013). Creswell (2009) states that qualitative research focuses on individual meaning and the importance of interpreting the complexity of a setting.

Creswell (2009) explains that

[qualitative research] is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to

general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible writing structure. (p. 232)

According to Creswell (2009), the research design for the research study should be chosen after analyzing and deciding from wide-ranging assumptions and then narrowing down “to detailed methods of data collection and analysis” (p. 3). This way the researcher has full autonomy to choose the most suitable research design for the study. In this study a narrative research approach seems most suitable to explore and understand the lived experiences of Congolese refugee students in higher education. The aim of the narrative approach is to utilize narrative inquiry as a research tool to collect stories from participants in order to understand and learn about their experiences.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a universal practice:

Human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another’s assistance in building lives and communities. (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007 as cited in Peterson, Baker and McGaw, 2010, p. 436)

Narrative as one of the five approaches of inquiry “incorporates many forms, such as autobiography, life stories, and personal stories, as well as biographies” (Creswell, 2007, p. 4). It allows people’s experiences to be described and envisioned through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Creswell (2008) defines narrative research as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives”; these stories are often “retold or restored by the researcher into a narrative chronology” (p. 13). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to “situate individual stories within participants' personal experiences (their

jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 56; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Polkinghorne (1995) explains that the purpose of narrative cognition is to

[configure] the diverse elements of a particular action into a unified whole in which each element is connected to the central purpose of the action. [...] Narrative reasoning does not reduce itself to rules and generalities across stories but maintains itself at the level of the specific episode. [...] The cumulative effect of narrative reasoning is a collection of individual cases in which thought moves from case to case instead of from case to generalization. (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11)

Polkinghorne (1995) identified two distinct types of narrative inquiry: “paradigmatic-type” and “narrative-type” (p. 5). They are based on Bruner’s (1986) two kinds of reasoning or knowing (p. 12). “Paradigmatic, which operates by recognizing elements as members of a category; and narrative, which operates by combining elements into an emplotted story” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). The paradigmatic type or analysis of narratives “results in descriptions of themes that hold across the stories or in taxonomies of types of stories, characters, or settings”; therefore, it seemed to be most applicable for my study (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). The paradigmatic narrative approach allowed me to use participants’ stories to understand a concept or abstraction “to produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5).

In this study, the participants’ stories delivered data, and my examination of narratives began in each story. The paradigmatic structure allowed me to identify common or shared themes and present my findings (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Polkinghorne (1995) states:

Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world. Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse

events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes. (p. 5)

Thus, narrative study is the study of experience, culture, and historical context, which we understand through narration.

The researcher employs narrative inquiry, and using participants' stories through descriptive analysis, explore unfamiliar topics. Then, the researcher role is to "re-story" them into a context that makes sense and "provide a causal link among ideas" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). In narrative inquiry, "re-storying" is important because "when individuals tell their stories, they do not present them in a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). Narrative inquiry is an important method in qualitative research as "it seeks to understand sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals' lived experiences" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006 p. 117).

In addition, Silverman (2016) states that through their stories, interview subjects "construct social world"; and "those of us who aim to understand others' understandings choose qualitative interviewing" (p. 44). Silverman (2016) continues to defend his and other authors' stance in his book by stating "we acknowledge, for instance, that interviewees sometimes respond to interviewers through the use of familiar narrative constructs, rather than providing meaningful insights into their subjective view" (p. 44). However, the experiences and issues of how interviewees respond to a researcher is grounded on "who we are – in their lives, as well as the social categories to which we belong, such as age, gender, class and race" (p.44). For example, if a researcher studies a group outside of his or her shared membership, the participants may not trust researchers or even not understand the questions in the way they were written or maybe purposely mislead researchers during the interview processes. Therefore, based on my shared

membership as a refugee, I am confident that the participants were completely comfortable with my questions and myself.

Furthermore, Peterson, Baker and McGaw (2010) describe the features of narrative inquiry as unique in qualitative research. The authors distinguish narrative inquiry from other qualitative methods:

Through attending to the commonplaces, narrative inquirers are able to study the complexity of the relational composition of people's lived experiences both inside and outside of an inquiry and, as well, imagine the future possibilities of these lives. (p. 436)

The research procedure of narrative inquiry starts in the field with a recursive process of telling/retelling or living/reliving stories to field text/notes, to “drafting and sharing interim research texts, and composing research texts” (Peterson, Baker, & McGaw, 2010, p. 439). Similarly, Creswell (2007) highlights the following characteristics often used in narrative reports:

### Major Characteristics of Narrative Research

- **Experiences of an individual**—social and personal interactions
- **Chronology of experiences**—past, present, and future experiences
- **Life stories**—first-person, oral accounts of actions obtained through field texts (data)
- **Restorying** (or retelling or developing a metastory) from the field texts
- **Coding the field texts for themes or categories**
- **Incorporating the context or place** into the story or themes
- **Collaboration** between the researcher and the participants in the study, such as negotiating field texts

**Figure 3.3: Major Characteristics of Narrative Research (Creswell, 2013, p. 507).**

## **Participants**

The number of participants in this study is a small sample from one area in the Northwestern United States—a total of ten participants. The data in this study was collected by interviewing participants who came to the United States from the Congo (DRC). The participants were five female and five male students who came to the United States as refugees. They are currently pursuing higher education or have already graduated from an institution of higher education in the United States. Two participants recently graduated from a master's degree program, and eight participants are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree.

All participants are racially Black. Six participants identified as Black or African Black, two identified as African, and one identified as non-Hispanic. Also, seven participants nationally identified as Congolese, two identified as American-Congolese, and one as Tanzanian-Congolese. All participants gained refugee status due to the conflicts in the Congo (DRC). One participant was resettled to the United States in 1992, and the other nine participants came to the United States after the year 2008.

**Table 3.1 Participants' Description**

Name	FEMALE PARTICIPANTS					MALE PARTICIPANTS				
	Gia	Ngege	Denise	Sarah	Evelyn	Kia	AM10	Eddy	Blue	Pirens
Age	18	25	20	20	19	43	21	28	43	49
Country of Birth	Tanzania Asylum	DRC	DRC	DRC	Tanzania-Kasulu, Refugee Camp	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC
Exile before Resettlement	Nyarugusu Camp/Tanzania 9 Years	1998 - Rwanda 2004 - Burundi 3 Years	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 4 Years	Kenya 3 Years	Refugee Camps in Tanzania and Botswana 12 Years	Zambia Tanzania, and Botswana 13 Years	Nakivale Camp Uganda 9 Years	Lugufu Camp Tanzania 5 Years	Cameroon 4 Years	Burundi, Tanzania, and Kenya
Year of Arrival to the U.S	2008	2007	2014	2012	2012	2008	2014	2010	2008	1992
Years in the U.S.	9	10	3	5	5	9	4	7	9	25
Major or Academic Discipline	Bachelor of Biology/Dental Hygiene	Bachelor of Biology Healthcare	Bachelor of Social Work	Pre-Nursing	Bachelor in Elementary Education TESOL/ENL	Master in Bilingual Education	Engineering	Bachelor in Social Science	Master in Education/ESL	Bachelor in Marketing Management
Current Student Status	Senior in High School: Taking college classes	Undergraduate 2nd year	Undergraduate 3rd year	Undergraduate 3rd year	Undergraduate 2nd year	Alumnus	Undergraduate 2nd year	Undergraduate 4th year	Alumnus	Undergraduate 2nd year
Nationality	Tanzanian, Congolese	Congolese	Congolese	American, Congolese	Congolese	Congolese	Congolese	Congolese, American	Congolese	Congolese
Race or Ethnicity	Black	Black African	African	Black	Black African	Not Hispanic	Black	African	Black	Black African

(Source: Sadikovic, 2018)



All participants range from age 18 to 49. Upon resettlement to the United States, participants were between 11 to 32 years old. Eight Congolese participants were born in the DRC, and two participants were born in refugee exile in Tanzania. All individuals spent many years outside of the Congo prior to resettling in the United States. Each participant speaks at least two languages.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The purpose of narrative research is to gather data through the collection of stories and to use the participants' stories to describe their lived experiences. For this study, I collected stories by interviewing participants who accept to participate in the study. Creswell (2007) explains that all five qualitative approaches—narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study— “employ similar data collection processes, including, in varying degrees, interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials” to facilitate the data collection process (Creswell, 2007, p. 76). Thus, in this study I used interviews to facilitate the collection of data.

In order to participate in this study, participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- All participants were at least 18 years old
- All participants were Congolese nationals
- All participants were born outside of the United States and were approved for resettlement to the United States under refugee status
- All participants are currently in higher education, attempting to enroll into higher education, or they are alumni

As a committee member of the Neighbors United collaborative group of the city of Boise, during our meetings at the city hall, I have spoken with representatives of the refugee organizations to help me get in contact with Congolese students in higher education. Also, at the meeting, I met a few Congolese people who were happy to share some email addresses and phone numbers of the Congolese students. I emailed potential participants. The message stated that potential candidates could contact me (the Principal Investigator) if they were willing to participate in the study about Congolese students in higher education. Individual interviews were scheduled at a place and time that were most convenient for the study participants.

At the interview meetings, potential participants were presented with a consent form and were asked to carefully read the informed consent. Before the interview started, the individuals were asked to sign the form only if they were still interested in taking part in this study.

#### Semi-Structured Interviews.

In order to gather data for the study, the researcher needs to collect stories about the lives of individuals (Creswell, 2008). In qualitative studies and narrative research, interviews are advantageous (Creswell, 2008); they are recognized as “one of the dominant methods” for the data collection process (Flick, 2008, p. 78). Thus, I used semi-structured interviews to gather data to help me address the research question. Semi-structured interviews allowed me some autonomy to adjust questions if needed during the interview process in order to allow natural conversations to take place (Creswell, 2013). The interview with semi-structured questions and a focus group questions were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). These interviews were utilized to collect

narrative data from ten participants through ten individual interviews. The first portion of the interview included demographic questions asking participants about their resettlement to the United States, and this part was important to get to know my participants better. The second part of the interview asked participants to share their stories about their experiences in higher education after resettlement to the United States. For example, participants were asked the following questions:

- Can you tell me about your experiences with education in the Congo?
- Can you tell me about your experiences with school in the U.S.?

These introductory questions about participants' education gave me a better idea about students' educational experiences prior and after resettlement to the United States.

During the interview process, I maintained consistency across all interviews: I asked all participants the same questions in the same order.

Even though the participants had an option to decline to answer any uncomfortable questions, all questions were answered by every participant. The participants felt comfortable to share their experiences with me, as they were aware that I as well came to the United States as a refugee. I could feel their stories, as they reminded me of my own experiences after resettlement to the United States. We established trust with each other, and I am very pleased that I had this great opportunity to spend time with Congolese students.

All interviews with the participants were audio-taped—this way, I was assured that exact words would be used in the analyzing process in order to have factual data and to provide the accurate final report. Reliability of the study was enhanced by employing a high-quality device for the interview recording and accurately transcribing it by including

the small but often important pauses and overlays (Creswell, 2013). During the interview process, I took observational notes to have a better description of the stories. Then, interviews were transcribed in order to be ready for analyzing procedures—to discover similarities and differences or to look for patterns within data.

#### Focus Groups—Conversational Meetings

I had two focus group meetings with my participants: a female focus group and a male focus group. A focus group is meant to provide additional insight with the deeper understanding of some details that arose after semi-structured interviews were completed. The use of focus groups is beneficial “when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (Creswell, 2007, p. 133). In this study, I used a focus group as a validation strategy to make sure that the participants in the study got a chance to offer their perspectives about my preliminary analyses, description or themes, as well as what was missing in the preliminary analyses (Creswell, 2007). Since I interviewed participants who were resettled to the United States as refugees from the DRC, they were cooperative with each other, which improved my data analysis process and the study findings.

The purpose of the focus group in this study was to gain additional insight and participants’ views in order to better understand the issues Congolese students face in higher education. I asked the participants in my one-on-one interviews whether they wanted to participate in the focus group to make sure they understand that by participating, their identities would be revealed among the other group participants.

The two focus groups consisted of four people—two female and two male participants, in each group, as they showed interest in participating in a focus group conversation. During the focus group meetings, participants were reminded that they may decline to answer any question about which they feel uncomfortable. Although the focus group is often referred by some people to as “group interviews...the moderator does not ask questions of each focus group participant in turn, but rather facilitates group discussion, actively encouraging group members to interact with each other” (Morgan, 1988 as cited in Silverman, 2016, p. 71). Focus group conversational meetings helped me close potential gaps in the data, validate themes that arose from the data analysis, and offer participants’ viewpoints on initial themes and analyses.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher utilized semi-structured individual interviews and the focus group—conversational meeting—which allowed me to collect information about the contexts of the individuals’ stories “within participants’ personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 56). These semi-structured interviews and the focus group interview were basically divided into 3 groups of questions: 1) demographic information about the participants (characteristics of participants such as ethnicity, race, gender, age, education level, academic major, nationality, etc.); 2) background information of participants to gather information about participants’ life before and after resettlement to the United States and to collect information about their initial experiences in the country; and 3) information about the educational experiences of study participants to gather stories about their experiences in higher education.

During the collecting of data, the subjects “themselves are not engaged in the production of knowledge”; and if a researcher during the interview process act behaves “nondirective[ly] and unbiased, respondents will validly and reliably speak the unadulterated facts of their subjects’ experience” (Silverman, 2016, p. 62). Thus, in this study, I acted nondirectively and unbiased to preserve the quality of data and the final results because the results of data analysis are directly dependent on the data collection procedures.

The collection of data from the interviews and observations were analyzed to identify the overarching themes, sub-themes and patterns. I analyzed data by following “a chronology of unfolding events and turning points” and using “the three-dimensional space approach of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that involved analyzing the data for three elements: interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation (physical places or the storyteller’s places)” (Creswell 2007, p. 158). Coding categories were created to organize the data, to identify findings, and to help provide detailed descriptions. For this study by conducting data analysis, I was able to identify issues, which includes barriers Congolese students face in higher education. According to Creswell, “the process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different data base being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184).

During the process of identifying themes and patterns, the researcher looks for stories, participants’ experiences—as in narrative research—and the context of those experiences to build detailed descriptions. Here researchers “build detailed descriptions,

develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation. Detailed description means that authors describe what they see” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184).

Per Barbour (2001), to increase reliability, the researcher had another research team member to re-code the data, look for themes, and verify the researcher’s themes. He also met with each participant to member-check the data. In qualitative research, multiple coding concerns are similar to the quantitative inter-rater reliability; this is “a response to the charge of subjectivity sometimes levelled at the process of qualitative data analysis” (Barbour, 2001, p. 1116). By including member-checking data in the study, I ensured reliability and validity, which provided credibility to the study’s findings. In addition, I utilized Atlas TI (analysis tool) for transcribing and coding interviews, organizing and storing of the data and other analyzing tasks. This tool provided a reliable platform that enhanced my research process by providing a user-friendly analytical tool for text analysis.

Data Coding. Similarly, as with all qualitative inquiry, narrative researchers identify “a small number of themes, such as five to seven” and incorporate them “into the passages about the individual’s story” Creswell (2013, p. 510). These themes represent a vital part of the qualitative research and provide the meaning to the collected data. Creswell (2013) states that the themes must be extracted from the data in order for the researcher to identify research findings.

Atlas. TI assisted me with coding, inspection of the data, searching documents for recurrent instances—the Code Manager helped me with managing the code relevancy and the editor to search for associations between codes, quotes, and notes.

Based on my research question and the theoretical framework, I coded my transcriptions and assigned codes in Atlas TI. I used one of the basic coding functions called “open coding” to create new codes and label the codes with short phrases directly from the interview transcriptions. Throughout “the constant comparative procedure of open coding,” I increased validity of the study by triangulating data “between the information and the emerging categories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 442). In addition, I organized codes in chronological order from specific to general in order to be able to see themes that relate with one another.

Atlas TI allowed me to look closely at the data, line by line, and think about the meaning of each sentence. This way, I was able to find relevant ideas, repeated words, their relationships to one another, and words closely related to my research question or the theoretical framework.

In my report of the study findings, I included data based on their importance to my theoretical framework and their significance to my research question: “What are the issues that Congolese refugee students experience accessing and pursuing higher education?” After the data analysis stage and in order to establish reliability and validity, member checks were used to verify participants’ voice. This process is called triangulation of data and is an essential phase to improve validity and reliability of the study.

### **Research Quality Measures**

The quality of the research is an important part of the research process, which requires the researcher to pay attention to it during the research study. In my qualitative study, I use the terms validity and reliability, which are also used in quantitative studies.



Golafshani (2003) explains that “triangulation as used in quantitative research to test the reliability and validity can also illuminate some ways to test or maximize the validity and reliability of a qualitative study” (p. 597).

Thus, it is important to find the ways to evaluate the quality of qualitative research and to take into consideration different perspectives on validation and reliability of qualitative research. Figure 3.4 illustrates several different perspectives on validation. They are “viewing qualitative validation in terms of quantitative equivalents, using qualitative terms that are distinct from quantitative terms, employing postmodern and interpretive perspectives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 201). Creswell states, “there are many types of qualitative validation and authors need to choose the types and terms in which they are comfortable” (p. 207). Creswell (2007) explains his validation framework in qualitative research by stating “validation strategies” are accepted strategies “that researchers employ in their studies “to document the ‘accuracy’ of their studies” (p. 207). I understand the importance of validation strategies in qualitative research, and I made an enormous effort to implement these strategies in my study.

Perspectives and Terms Used in Qualitative Validation

<i>Study</i>	<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Terms</i>
LeCompte & Goetz (1982)	Use of parallel, qualitative equivalents to their quantitative counterparts in experimental and survey research	Internal validity External validity Reliability Objectivity
Lincoln & Guba (1985)	Use of alternative terms that apply more to naturalistic axioms	Credibility Transferability Dependability Confirmability
Eisner (1991)	Use of alternative terms that provide reasonable standards for judging the credibility of qualitative research	Structural corroboration Consensual validation Referential adequacy Ironic validity
Lather (1993)	Use of reconceptualized validity in four types	Paralogic validity Rhizomatic validity Situated/embedded voluptuous validity
Wolcott (1994b)	Use of terms other than "validity," because it neither guides nor informs qualitative research	Understanding better than validity
Angen (2000)	Use of validation within the context of interpretive inquiry	Two types: ethical and substantive
Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle (2001)	Use of synthesized perspectives of validity, organized into primary criteria and secondary criteria	Primary criteria: credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity  Secondary criteria: Explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity
Richardson & St. Pierre (2005)	Use of a metaphorical, reconceptualized form of validity as a crystal	Crystals: Grow, change, alter, reflect externalities, refract within themselves

Figure 3.4: Perspectives and Terms Used in Qualitative Validation (Creswell, 2007, p. 203).

Figure 3.4 describes the commonly used validation strategies in qualitative research that the researcher should consider in their studies (as cited in Creswell, 2007).

Because this qualitative study is built on understandings from my theoretical framework that helped me when studying the lived experience of Congolese individuals, which could include multiple meanings of shared experiences and understandings of the real world, I incorporated the following validation strategies to ensure validity and reliability of the study.

Building Trust with participants. Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to keep close interactions with participants and to be familiar with the participants' cultures. It is important that researchers understand participants' cultures to fully engage with participants and to recognize and keep constantly checking for potential misinformation during the study process. Prolonged engagement and participant observation include "building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). I did not have difficulty building trust with the study participants because of my role within the refugee community. However, on the other hand, this could be perceived as a potential threat to validity, including researcher-insider bias, which I will address in a section that follows.

Implementation of Triangulation in Qualitative Studies. In Triangulation, researchers need to utilize "multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1980, 1990)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). According to Golafshani (2003),

the triangulation strategy is used for “improving the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings” (p. 603). Triangulation has become “an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology” (Mathison, 1988 as cited in Golafshani, 2003, p. 603).

Therefore, use of different methods, data sources, and theories in this study enhanced the validity of the findings.

Peer Review or Debriefing. Researchers need to implement an external check or peer review or “debriefing” to check their “research process (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). The peer debriefer is also known as a “devil’s advocate,” a person who by asking many questions about “methods, meanings, and interpretations” keeps the researcher accountable for the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 208). In order to improve the study validity, I had an independent coder to validate my transcriptions and already developed themes.

Importance of Clarifying Potential Biases. Qualitative researchers must recognize their positions or assumptions that may corrupt the study’s findings. The researcher explains past experiences or anything that may influence his or her interpretation of the data or the study approaches (Merriam 1988 as cited in Creswell, 2007). Narrative research requires the researcher to be closely connected with participants during the course of the study, and this could lower the credibility of the study. Thus, I approached the study with the clear goal to maintain the credibility of the study. I am aware of my insider role within the community, and I carefully monitored my personal beliefs by

separating them from the study. In Chapter 1, I described limitations by explaining the potential threats to validity and how to avoid them.

Member Checking. This is a most important strategy used in most qualitative studies that gives additional credibility to the study—it requires “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 208). I validated the study analysis by checking the final interpretation with participants to get feedback and to validate the trustworthiness of my preliminary analysis of their interviews. Also, to improve validity, I utilized a focus group conversation that helped me close potential gaps in the data and confirm the themes that arose from the data analysis. I was able to use their perspectives in my final analysis.

Rich, Thick, and Detailed Descriptions. In order to validate my study, I used rich, thick and detailed description as a validation strategy, providing detailed description while describing the study themes (Creswell, 2007, 2013). By using detailed description in my study, I allow “readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred ‘because of shared characteristics’” (Erlandson et al., 1993 as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 209). This validation strategy I consider as very important, relevant and applicable to my research study. In chapter 4, I provide thick and detailed descriptions of the themes that arose.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to highlight problems Congolese refugee students face after resettlement—primarily while accessing and pursuing higher education in the United States. The study is guided by a single research question: “What are the issues Congolese refugee students experience accessing and pursuing higher education?”—and using narrative study methodology the study attempted to explore, analyze, and describe the actual issues/barriers Congolese refugee students face while in higher education or attempting to enroll into higher education in the Northwestern United States.

The primary goal of the study is to contribute to the body of literature on refugee students in higher education, for which purpose this chapter delivers those findings. The data and findings that follow are drawn from the ten participants’ interviews. Findings are presented by sharing excerpts from their stories—and in response to the research question. These findings arose from the multiple stories shared by the study participants.

The ten Congolese participants, five female and five male, were interviewed using open-ended questions (see Appendix A) to describe their experiences pursuing higher education in the United States, including perceived barriers and/or successes. Participants shared their stories through face-to-face interviews. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The researcher also collected data through field notes and field group sessions with willing participants.

The findings in this chapter represent perspectives of five female and five male Congolese students within higher education in the Northwestern United States; therefore, these findings are not a representation of all Congolese student populations in higher education. However, these findings will shed light on and provide needed insight into the struggles of refugee students, particularly Congolese refugee students in higher education. The data gathered from participants offers crucial understanding of what it means to be a refugee student in higher education—to navigate higher education as a refugee and at the same time be a black student. In order to portray true stories, in this chapter I make every effort to share participants' experiences and feelings using their unique voices.

The first part of the chapter provides a brief outline of the participants. The second part discusses overarching themes that emerged from careful analysis of participants' interviews.

### **The Short Outline of Participants**

This section provides a brief overview of five female and five male participants who came to the United States as refugees and are currently pursuing higher education or have already graduated from an institution of higher education in the United States. The Congolese students in this study came to the United States during different time periods and from different parts of Africa, and they range in age from 18 to 49: Female participants range in age from 18 to 25, and male participants from 21 to 49 years old.

### **From Civilians to Refugees**

These narratives portrayed traumatic experiences of once free civilians, who were forced to become sorrowful refugees. Very quickly, these people were deprived of their

right to citizenship and freedom, and they were left for themselves. Many of the factors that refugees experienced prior and during escape were directly or indirectly related to their higher education experiences. Therefore, these narratives provided important foundational data that allowed me to draw conclusions by connecting participants' prior-and-post refugee experiences—such as forcible escape from their country, life in exile, refugee camps experiences, coping with traumas—and to look at how these experiences together with other related domestic factors in the United States may hinder refugee students' well-being and access to equitable opportunities in higher education.

The five female participants who participated in this study are Gia, Ngenge, Denise, Sarah, Evelyn; and male participants Kia, AM10, Eddy, Blue and Pirens. The researcher used pseudonyms to preserve anonymity and confidentiality of research participants. All participants were resettled to the United States due to the conflicts in the DRC. One participant resettled to the United States in 1992, and the other nine participants came to the United States after the year 2008. In Chapter 3, Table 3.1 provides the participants' biographical descriptions. Also, below is the brief introduction of their individual forced resettlement and educational experiences.

**Gia** was born in Tanzania in Nyarugusu refugee camp. 18 years old, she never experienced life in her native country of the Congo. She was resettled to the United States when she was 9 years old. As Gia noted, “I spent 9 years in the camp and then we came here. [...] The camp had red soil. That is all I remember. [...] We had brick houses with like straw on top of it, like a roof.” Gia’s father was a teacher in the refugee camp, Gia commented, “so we had a little bit of a convenience. [...] So, we were better off than most people but umm...that’s all I remember” (Interview, December 16, 2017). Gia is



currently finishing high school, taking advanced placement (AP) classes and she is accepted to a university in the Northwest region of the United States. She is living with her parents and three younger siblings.

**Ngenge**, currently, 25 years old, is pursuing a bachelor degree in biology/healthcare. She was born and raised in the DRC, and in the year 2004, at the age 14, Ngenge was forced to leave her country after witnessing many people dying. She spent three years in the Burundi refugee camp called Gatumba, and during the stay she was going through the interviewing process to be resettled to the United States. In 2007 she came to the United States. Ngenge states that the refugee camp did not provide education, and this gap in education on top of the English language barrier caused substantial challenges after her resettlement to the United States. Ngenge, the oldest of her siblings, explains, “I came to America when I was sixteen years old and I continued my education here. But if I were older it would be harder for me” (Interview, December 21, 2017).

**Denise** is 20 years old, and she was resettled to the United States in 2014. In 2010, Denise was forced to leave her country—after witnessing the execution of her father and two siblings. After Denise and her mom were tortured, they escaped to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She remembers that soldiers were saying to her and her Mom, “you need to go back to Rwanda, you are Rwandese.” Denise, a 12-year-old at the time, didn’t understand why the soldiers were doing that, and what was happening: “it was like a bad dream. I had horrible feelings at a moment, like something that you cannot imagine, like you are losing your entire family.” After coming to the United States Denise felt happy:

Wow, ‘my dream is going to come true’ because all those four years while living in Ethiopia I was not expecting anything or having any dreams. All I was seeking

for at that time was peace. And then when we came here, I was thinking ‘now I can have peace.’ (Interview, January 11, 2018)  
Currently, Denise, the first-generation student, is a junior year at a university, pursuing a degree in social work. She states “wow, if there is an opportunity for me to go to college, I am going to take that opportunity” (Interview, January 11, 2018).

**Sarah** is a 20-year-old woman who at the age of 10 was forced to leave her country together with her mom and four siblings, three younger brothers and one sister. The war in the Congo separated her father from them. They escaped to Kenya. For five years, Sarah did not know if her father was still alive. Five years later, in 2012, the family was finally reunited after her father, who resettled to the United States in 2010, asked for family reunification. During her stay in a city in Kenya for five years, her mom did not have money to pay for her education, so she went to school, for only two months. After resettlement, Sarah describes the United States school, stating that “it was very hard for me because I didn’t speak the language, so school was difficult and making friends in high school was hard. How are you going to make friends in high school if you cannot talk to them?” (Interview, January 11, 2018). Despite all hardships in her life, Sarah, a first-generation college student, is currently majoring in pre-nursing and her younger brother started college as well.

**Evelyn** was born in the Kasulu refugee camp in Tanzania, but she and her family moved to Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania, where she spent first four years of her life. Evelyn is not sure what happened to her father. She and her mom and four other siblings stayed there for about four years. Then, they were relocated to Dukwi refugee camp in Botswana where they lived for eight years before getting resettled to the United States in 2012. Evelyn describes their life in the refugee camp in Botswana as very bad. The

Botswanan government planned to close the camp and get rid of all refugees by the year of 2016 “so the way they treated refugees was not very nice. They had a term for refugees ‘makwerekwere’ which has a bad connotation to it, and they used it to belittle and discriminate refugees. [...] So, I mean we used to live in tents. Sometimes it would rain and the tent would be soaked up in water.” There was shortage of food and drinking water: “So, like I said, they would give us food once a month and refugees weren’t allowed to leave the refugee camp to go outside to look for jobs. [...] We experienced extreme poverty”; “I remember, my sister would go digging in dumpsters trying to find shoes for my young brother”; “it was just a lot of poverty” (Interview, January 17, 2018).

**Kia** was born in the DRC, Kia was attending his first year of college when war broke out. He states that he was lucky that his parents were able to afford to send him to school as not everybody could afford it. Because of the war, he escaped the country. First, he went to Zambia and then Tanzania, and finally Botswana where he was granted political asylum. He lived two years in the Dukwi refugee camp in Botswana before escaping from the camp and relocating to Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. Thankfully, the United Nations offered Kia scholarships to go to college. He completed his undergraduate degree in Gaborone. Kia spent 13 years in exile before he was resettled to the United States. He was resettled to the United States in 2008. In 2015 he graduated from his master’s program in education. He is the only one in his family of six who earned a college degree. He has three siblings, he is married, and he now has four children.

**AM10** was born in the DRC, AM10 had a good life before the war. His father was a doctor and his mom a tailor. In 2004, because of the war in South Kivu region, AM10’s

father was killed and his sister went missing. AM10, with his mother and siblings, escaped to Uganda and spent 9 years in Nakivale refugee camp near the town of Mbarara. The situation in the camp was brutal. Because of water shortage, people were drinking water from a dirty lake nearby the camp. Due to unhealthy living conditions in the camp and the presence of mosquitos, many people got sick from malaria and other diseases. AM10 attended school in camp, but his mom could not afford to pay for all of her kids to go to school. AM10 explained that “many children who didn’t have money didn’t go to school” (Interview, December 19, 2017). Currently, AM10 is recipient of soccer scholarships, and he is a sophomore at a university in the Northwest region of the United States.

**Eddy**’s education was interrupted in 2005 by war in the Congo, and he was forced to escape the country. Eddy spent five years in Lugufu refugee camp in Western Tanzania, and in 2010 he was resettled to the United States together with his mother and three brothers. Because of war and prolonged stay in the refugee camp, Eddy had to attend an evening high school after resettlement to Boise. Currently, 28 years old, Eddy is a first-generation student. At a university, he is a senior pursuing a degree in social work. Currently, all his younger brothers are attending higher education.

**Blue** was born in the DRC where he completed college and taught in a school. In 2004, after his only brother and his nephew were killed, Blue escaped his country to save his life. He escaped to Cameroon. In 2008, Blue was resettled to the United States together with his wife. He wanted to pursue higher education, but his diploma was not recognized in the United States. After he provided official proof of credentials from the DRC, a university decided to recognize some of his credits. Currently, Blue, 43 years old,

possesses a master's degree, and he teaches the French language at a charter school, and he is working on his education (K-12) certification.

**Pirens** 49-years old Pirens was born in the DRC, where he earned his high school diploma. He explains that education back home was not so good because of the broken system of education. Pirens escaped the country before the war and came to the United States in 1992 as a political refugee. Pirens spent several years in Burundi, Tanzania, and Kenya before coming to the United States at the age of 23. After his resettlement to the United States, he started pursuing higher education, but after becoming very ill, his doctors strongly recommended that he put his education on pause. Recently, Pirens resumed his educational endeavors even after the university did not recognize his previously earned credits because of a time limit on the validity of his credits. Presently, he is a sophomore pursuing a degree in marketing and business management. Pirens has a big family: his father and two siblings passed away and he has 27 siblings alive; 11 of his siblings live in the United States, and his 83 years old mother and 12 siblings live in Africa.

### **Participants' Themes through Narratives—Overview**

This section discusses overarching themes that emerged from in-depth analysis of participants' interviews. The purpose of this section is to back up each theme with participants' stories, and to connect themes with the flowing theories, which are explained in Chapter 3:

- Kunz's (1981) refugee theory
- Ogbu & Simons's (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority students' school performance

- Barry's (1997) theory of acculturation
- McCoy and Rodricks's (2015) critical race theory in higher education

My narration of the participants' experiences will relate their experiences to one another through themes, creating an 'umbrella narrative' that brings together the individual narratives. These narratives defined as umbrella narratives hold together themes connected through meaning and relationship of the narratives in this study, which are the product of the participants' lived testimonies that stand together and support each other.

Throughout the themes in my study, I discuss participants' pre- and post-resettlement experiences including surviving in camps; traumatic experiences and the effects on the students' education; cultural stress; otherness and discrimination; support they received in pursuing higher education; and finally, explanation of how these previously mentioned factors may affect their educational endeavors and other barriers and issues they face while accessing and pursuing higher education. Through these themes, participants will be able to share the pieces of their life experiences, which will turn each theme into a life story. Overall, this chapter presents the research findings through the five main themes:

- Theme 1: Escape, Surviving in Camp(s), Exile, and Coping with Trauma
- Theme 2: Gap in Education: Interrupted or Limited Education during the Exile and Prolonged Stay in Camp(s)
- Theme 3: Colliding Cultures: Acculturation, Cultural Differences, Feeling Discriminated Against, and Coping with Trauma after Resettlement
- Theme 4: Higher Education as Opportunity: Aspiration and Support

- Theme 5: Issues in Higher Education: Otherness, Discrimination and Institutionalized Discrimination

These themes arose after detailed analysis of the participants' interviews by the researcher. Then, another professor member checked data and themes for consistencies. Themes 1 to 5 in this chapter are listed in the chronological order as they emerged.

### **Escape, Surviving in Camp(s), Exile, and Coping with Trauma**

This theme is the product of the initial question where I asked participants to talk about their life in the Congo before the war and their reasons for escaping the country. This question also revealed traumatic experiences and their ways of coping with those experiences. After finishing demographic questions, the female participants started the interview by talking about their country and war experiences.

Ngenge started her interview with a short pause and then continued describing her traumatic experiences by stating:

I was born in the eastern part of the Congo. When I was six years old the war started. [...] I don't know much about the war but life wasn't good when the war started. [They escaped] from Congo to Rwanda in the camp. So, I was like size years old. I don't remember the camp name. So, in 2004, there was another war. At that time, I was 14 years old. [This time] we went to Burundi, Gatumba camp, as a refugee. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

In her story, Ngenge described her forced exile and the refugee camps experiences. She was forced twice to escape from her country the first time, in 1998, when she was around 5 or 6 years old, and the second time in 2004, when she was 13 years old. She explains that the first time they escaped "from the Congo to refugee camp in Rwanda" where she stayed for some time before returning to the Congo. The last time they escaped their country was in 2004. Ngenge states, "there was another war, I was 14 years old." During that war she and her family escaped to the refugee camp in Burundi called Gatumba. She

explained: “many people died in the camp, and Americans said, ‘you know people here kill you for nothing, so we need to help you come to America’” (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Ngenge’s story about mass killing in the Gatumba refugee camp was documented by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) extensive investigation in 2004. In their report, Human Rights Watch concluded that

On August 13, 2004 a force of armed combatants, many of them members of the Forces for National Liberation (Forces pour la Liberation Nationale, FNL), massacred at least 152 Congolese civilians and wounded another 106 at Gatumba refugee camp, near Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. The FNL is a predominantly Hutu rebel movement known for its hostility to Tutsi and the victims were largely Banyamulenge, a group often categorized with Tutsi. (HRW 2004, para. 1)

Gia does not remember her native country as her parents escaped the war in the Congo a little bit before she was born. When the war started in the Congo, Gia’s parents were afraid for their unborn child’s life, and they escaped the country. Gia shares her story, stating “they were afraid for me because they knew I was going to be young, so they escaped to a refugee camp in Tanzania called Nyarugusu camp”; and they stayed there, 9 years, until they were resettled to the United States. As Gia was 9 years old when they resettled to the United States, she does not remember the situation in the camp very well. She stated “in the camp, I felt pretty safe. And of course, people would steal and rape girls”; however, “I mean in my opinion it felt safe, but maybe that was, because I was a kid and I didn’t know any better” (Interview, December 16, 2017).

Denise was very young when war started. She remembers that during the first days, before war started, there were many people with and without uniforms who were carrying guns. She shared her traumatic experiences before and after their escape:



First, they came and took our dad. They tortured him in front of us. Indeed...and my mom then, too. [...] They tortured us and then, they would go away, and then a few days later, they would come back and say 'you are from Rwanda, you are Rwandese, go back to your country.' Another day, soldiers killed people, and then, the war started. That day, they killed my dad and my two siblings. My siblings were running to dad because they thought dad could save them, but they were killed together with my dad. They killed them in front us, my mom and I were watching. Then, they turned to us, placing us in a wagon. They tortured my mom and me, continuously yelling 'you guys need to go back to Rwanda, you are Rwandese.' We were grieving, we did not even understand what was happening in that moment.

It was like a bad dream. Like, you are losing your entire family in that moment. So, after being tortured we decided to hide for two months, and then we escaped the Congo and went to Uganda. In Uganda we stayed for like a month and we did not feel safe because of the proximity of the border with the Congo. In addition, we coped with trauma, and that caused my mom to become really sick. So, we escaped to Ethiopia, which is far away from the Congo. We stayed 4 years in a city in Ethiopia, while going through the interview process to be resettled to the United States. During our stay in Ethiopia, the United Nations helped us find a place to live and provided us with medical assistance. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Like Gia, Evelyn does not remember the life in the Congo as she was born and raised in a refugee camp, until she was twelve years old. She spent the first four years of her life in Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania, and then, they relocated to Dukwi refugee camp in Botswana where she stayed for about 8 years. Evelyn describes her life in refugee camps:

I don't remember much about my life in Nyarygusu camp in Tanzania, because I was so little; but Dukwi refugee camp, I consider it as a place, where I was raised, as I started speaking, and learning everything about life in Dukwi. In the camp there was no jobs. I was there with my mom and four siblings. My mom, an only parent, was very ill, physically and psychologically. The food was really a problem, as they would give us food once a month and refugees weren't allowed to leave the refugee camp to go outside to look for jobs. We coped with poverty, I remember, my sister would go digging in dumpsters trying to find shoes for my young brother. So, we would seek help from the United Nations, and they would come like once a month and bring us food. (Interview, January 18, 2018)

To make the situation even worse, the Botswanan government treated them very badly as they planned to get rid of all refugees by 2016. “We were not their responsibility, and they made sure that we know it” (Evelyn, Interview, January 17, 2018).

Sarah can only remember her country a little bit, as she was very young when her family was forced to escape the Congo. Sarah explains:

We were like a happy family before the war [*and by shifting her tone of voice she said*] and the time came, the war happened and our family was forced to separate. So, my dad had to separate from me, my mom, and my brothers. We escaped to Kenya, and I didn’t know if my dad was still alive. After five years, we were informed that our father is alive and that he was resettled to America. [...] I was, in 2012, 15 years old when I reunited with my father. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

I asked the exact same questions to the male participants, and AM10 explained his traumatic refugee experiences before and during his escape from the Congo:

[*pause*] Yeah, when the war started my dad was shot. [*pause*] He got killed. Yeah, we lost a lot of people, and we fled from South Kivu to North Kivu region of the Congo. During the escape, we lost my sister—she went missing. So, my mother and my siblings, escaped to Uganda, Nakivale refugee camp, where we stayed for 9 years. [...] The camp experience was very bad as we didn’t have a good sanitization or supplies of drinking water. There was a lake, nearby, and all animals would drink water from that place. The lake had crocodiles, hippos, and big snakes. The water was very dirty but people used the water for cooking and drinking. So, people would make white rice, and the rice would turn grayish color. After more people came to the camp, the UNHCR started to use something like a tablet, and they would put it in a tank to clean the water, so people could drink it. But the tablet would clean the water, and at the bottom of the tank there would be like really dirty sludge. (Interview, December 19, 2017)

AM10 explains that many people got ill because of the dirty water and mosquitos, as the health conditions in the camp were terrible (Interview, December, 19, 2017).

Similarly, Kia describes his life in the Congo before the war as a normal life. He was attending college when the invasion by the Rwandan military began, forcing many Congolese to escape the country. Kia spent two years in the refugee camp in Botswana,

where they were kept like in prison, as they were not allowed to exit the camp. After a long struggle with the Botswanan government, Kia was allowed to relocate to the capital city Gaborone, where with the help of the United Nations scholarship, he completed a bachelor's degree. However, Kia states that "not everybody had that opportunity to receive the scholarship." Kia was in his twenties, in 1997, when he escaped his country, and went to Botswana. Eleven years later, in 2008, he was resettled to the United States (Interview, December 15, 2017).

Blue was forced to escape the Congo to save his life. The militia killed his brother and nephew. He said, "I hear they were looking for me, so I escaped to Congo Brazzaville"—Blue's life was in danger in Congo Brazzaville too, so he was forced to escape to Cameroon. Blue explains: "I didn't go to a refugee camp, in fact, I didn't know there was a refugee camp. I lived in a city. I stayed there for 3 years before coming to the United States" (Interview, January 18, 2018).

Like other participants, Eddy escaped the Congo because of the war. He states, "I lived there in a refugee camp in Tanzania, called Lugufu, for five years." During his stay in Tanzania, he applied to come to the United States, and after going through multiple interviews, Eddy was resettled to the United States in 2010 (Interview, January 16, 2018).

Kunz (1981) explains that newly resettled refugees who escaped violence and survived traumatic experiences will be living under the influences of their unpleasant memories—this unpleasant situation requires the presence of a welcoming environment in their country of resettlement in order to ease the effects of these memories.

### **Gap in Education—Interrupted or Limited Education During the Exile and Prolonged Stay in Camps**

The second theme portrays the gap in education as a significant issue affecting refugee students' educational experiences after their resettlement because limited education or the gap in education can affect students' performances and make their adjustment in a new country more difficult. Participants shared their stories explaining their struggles in education in Africa prior to their resettlement to the United States. Participants described their education mostly as limited due to their experiences in the Congo during the war and their experiences in refugee camps.

Ngenge described her education as sporadic. She says:

[My education before resettlement] was mostly shredded in pieces, you know there is a war and then you must stop it. You keep moving from one place to another. For example, if you're almost done with your education, and because you have to move, therefore, you cannot finish it. So, education was a struggle, because I was behind all the time—also, refugee camps didn't provide any education. (Interview, December 21, 2017)

Gia, who was born in the refugee camp, states that her dad was a teacher in the refugee camp. Gia says, "I feel the schools there could have been better because we didn't have that many resources and there were so many kids" (Interview, December 16, 2017).

Denise shared some interesting points about the school in Congo: "yeah, we had to take all classes in French language, and you had pay for school fees to go to school" (Interview, January 11, 2018). However, Denise was 13 years old when she escaped to Ethiopia, and her education was interrupted. She states that it was hard when she came to the United States. She elaborates using a low voice:

It was very difficult for me to go back to school after not being in school for four years. That's number one. Number two, I left school when I was young, at the age of thirteen, and then going back to school, in a new country, at the age of seventeen. So, it was very intense. I had to refresh my mind and see what I remembered from school, the real struggle was there. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Sarah, who is the same age as Denise, shared similar experiences after escaping the Congo and temporarily residing in Kenya. Sarah states, “we lived in the city and the United Nations supported us. My mother wanted me to go to school but she didn't have money to pay for me, so, I attended school there for only two months” (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Remembering her life in refugee camps, Evelyn explains her educational experiences in the Dukwi camp in Botswana, where she stayed for 8 years:

There was ‘school’ in the camp. [*She said it slowly, as if she would like to say something else instead*]. So, when I came to the camp I used to speak French and Swahili, so in Botswana [...] we had to learn English. There were not enough books, no enough teachers, or even chairs for all students. For example, I would sometimes sit on the ground, or we would share chairs, like I would sit on the one half and the other person would sit on the other half of the chair. This was primary school. But in another town, they had secondary education [...] and if you have money you can attend it. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

AM10 is currently 21 years old. He explains that school in his camp was a struggle for his family. He states, “to attend secondary school in the camp, we were required to pay and we did not have money.” He was able to get some scholarships, and with the help of his mom who was able to earn and save some money while working in the camp, he was able to continue his education. But, his mom could not afford to pay for all of his brothers to go to school (Interview, December 19, 2017).

Kia, who completed his primary and secondary education before the war in

Congo, explains that education in the Congo under the military dictatorship of Mubutu was not free: “even elementary education was considered to be luxurious for some people. So, not everybody had an opportunity to get an education. I was just lucky that my parents did some businesses, and also, they were making money doing agricultural activities” (Interview, December 15, 2017).

Blue states that because of continuous fighting in some parts of the Congo many schools are canceled and sometimes, internally displaced people reside in schools; therefore many children cannot attend school. Also, Blue explains that many parents or students who spend years in refugee camps, do not understand the real meaning of education (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Eddy explains that the education in the Congo would be promising. But, he states:

The problem is that there is a lot of wars going on, and if there is war in your country you may go without attending school. That is exactly what happened to me, I had to miss two years of school, and then in the refugee camp I had to start over. (Interview, January 16, 2018)

All participants shared similar refugee experiences—poverty, violent environments, and traumatic experiences. They all faced limited or no proper education because of war, which additionally increased educational gap between them and domestic students in the United States.

Kunz (1981) explains that in order to avoid separating newly arriving refugees into seclusion, both groups—society and refugees—should be able to overcome the cultural issues created by the presence of unfamiliar values. Thus, their well-being should be influenced by the cultural compatibility factor present between the two cultures. Similarly, Ogbu (1978) states that the different treatment of minority students forces them to develop unwelcome feelings and different perceptions toward schools; thus, they

are likely to drop out of school. This could be the case for refugee students who spent years or decades in refugee camps. Additionally, in this study, the inability to pay for school was a factor for Congolese students to be unable to attend higher education.

**Colliding Cultures—Acculturation, Cultural Differences, Feeling Discriminated  
Against, and Coping with Trauma after Resettlement**

The third theme relates to factors that affect Congolese students' educational experiences. These factors are cultural differences, acculturation, discrimination, and traumatic experiences after resettlement to the United States. These students face the cultural differences that precisely correlate with the cultural stress and acculturation refugee experiences in their new environments in the United States. In addition, otherness/feeling discriminated against and coping with trauma after resettlement—is directly or indirectly in correlation with, or the consequence of, the issues of colliding cultures and cultural stress. The theme explains how the mentioned challenges were mostly developed by the combination of refugee traumatic experiences caused by wars, the lack of opportunities and equitable resources in higher education, unpreparedness of faculty and staff to work with students across cultures, and lack of cultural sensitivity among educators and peers.

Barry's acculturation theory mainly focuses on two principal issues: "maintenance of group characteristics and contact between groups" that refugees face after resettlement (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001, p. 615). In order to avoid social disintegration, these two issues need to be considered and understood by resettlement and country professionals, who deal with refugee populations. Barry's theory provides support for researchers who study refugee resettlement issues. Barry (1997) claims that

the high priority for refugees and host cultures is to accommodate each other during the process of acculturation (Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001; McPherson, 2010; Sam & Barry, 2006; Strang & Ager, 2010). If the process of acculturation were not appropriately carried out, social disintegration would take place among diverse refugee groups within society, creating personal crisis among these groups, which is called acculturative stress; also, those oppressed are the most stressed, and those welcomingly integrated within host society are minimally stressed (Williams & Barry, 1991).

This theme describes refugee students' experiences after resettlement, which is directly connected with the main theme. The theme portrays issues of cultural stress, feeling discriminated against, and 'otherness'—here, participants shared the issues and barriers they experienced after resettlement and during their educational endeavors in the United States.

Ngenge explains her experiences after resettlement as difficult at first. She was 16 years old, and she faced many challenges. Ngenge did not speak English and could not communicate with her teachers. She explains her feelings:

I mean, sometimes people try to help but you don't understand what the other person is saying and there could be a miscommunication. The culture was also different from my culture. It was very different. I had to learn the new culture from them. Also, the food was terrible [*laughs*], it was very different than our food. I didn't get to get to know the community because it was just like home, school—home, school, so I didn't really engage with people. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Ngenge also described that many teachers were good and culturally sensitive teachers, but there were some teachers that were not very good. She states:

Teachers loved me [...], but students, NO. I mean you cannot speak English, so how are you going to speak to other students. Sometimes you think they laugh at you but you just have to mind your own business and pay attention to the teacher. Many teachers wanted to get to know me and learn my culture, but some are like



‘oh no, this is too much.’ ‘This person doesn’t understand me.’ And they just, don’t really want to learn about you. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Gia says that after resettlement, she did not understand English: “I was absolutely not familiar with anything. Food was different, everything was totally different.” She states that going to school was very difficult because of language barriers. Gia explains, “it was hard at first, you know it doesn’t take a day to learn English.” Also, she experienced the colliding of cultures within her identity—the feeling of not being here or there:

My parents are very conservative Africans, you know, we have our culture [...] and then this culture, you know, it like, kind of clashes sometimes. Like my parents will sometimes say, ‘you need to act more African, you’re too American.’ Not that being American is a bad thing, they just kind of wish that you’d stick to your culture. And it is really hard, it’s kind of like you don’t know who you want to be. So, you have this African mentality and then American mentality so it’s just best thing to mush them together. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Denise, similar to Gia and Ngenge, shared her challenges and experiences after resettlement to the United States. She states that pressures were high as she had to learn a new language, but “the culture shock was intense.” Denise explains that on top of language barriers, culture shock—and the four-year-long gap in education—additionally affected her educational experiences, so “the struggle was there.” Denise also remembers difficult moments in school and how she felt being treated as “other” in the classroom:

The way students were reacting to a new person, I was like ‘wow!’ So, I don’t know if it is me who doesn’t know how to make a friend or if it is the language barrier. That can be an issue also because it is like, ‘how are you going to introduce yourself, how are they going to see you?’ ‘Are they going to call you African?’ Because in Ethiopia I was also called ‘African.’ So for example, one day it was at lunch time, me and my friend Neli, we were having lunch and then in front of us, there were four girls, and when they saw, were going to sit across from them they said ‘oh, look at those chicken?’ Oh, we will never forget that. So we looked around to look for the chicken and we didn’t see any chicken, and those girls just got up and left. They were telling us we were chicken, wow! So,

when people ask me what do you really remember from high school that impacted you, that was it. We felt very bad, like ‘are we chicken?’ It was very traumatizing. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Sarah recalls her first experience after resettlement as worrisome:

It was very hard for me, because I didn’t speak the language, so school was difficult and making friends in high school was hard. [...] The ELL teachers they know refugee people, their refugee students, they know what they have been through. I only had two classes with American kids in high school, everything else was with the ELL kids.

Sarah explains that other teachers were less understanding toward refugee

students:

The other teachers in regular classes they don’t understand your background so they treat you like the other students, where they think you know everything the same as the American students. They talk about things, or American TV shows in class and you like don’t know what they’re talking about. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Sarah also remembers that her initial integration in the host society, was like being on a rocky road:

Like people where you go to church, they say you’re welcomed here, but there are other people who say like ‘these people they came from another country’, and they like, don’t want to talk to you. Hmm, you can like feel that. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Evelyn’s experience after resettlement started more on a negative side. Evelyn recalls her experience of being Black and a refugee and trying to integrate in the society as difficult and worrying:

[It is hard to integrate] here, when I was in Africa, even in the refugee camps, [people] were all Black, you know. And I am Black here, and it is so noticeable here. People treat me differently. So, I went to [grocery store in in the city, where we were resettled], I am buying water, and you know you can do the ‘self-checkout.’ So, I did the self-checkout and I had my receipt and everything. I put it in my pocket, and other people are doing the same, they pay and leave, and this cashier stopped me and asked ‘are you sure you paid for this, can I see the

receipt?’ [Evelyn also describe her experience of being treated as ‘other’] And also, the questions that people ask me here, like ‘in Africa did you guys sleep outside?’ Or you know, like the stereotypes that people see about us [Black people from Africa—African refugees], like you’re always hungry, and stuff. Like the questions they ask are horrible, they could be more educated and informed, but they just choose to believe whatever they see on the news. But, there are also some really nice people. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

Also, Evelyn recalls her experiences in school here in the United States:

The schools in Africa were terrible, so when I went to school here, it was such an upgrade from the schools in the camp in Botswana. [Here in the United States] the teachers were encouraging. [But], I did have some difficult time to adjust because there were majority white people in the schools here. [...] I always felt judged by other students and other people no matter how well I did in school because of who I am—so, I always kept to myself and I did my best. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

AM10 experienced struggles more connected with cultural adjustment and acculturation within the society. He explains that after starting high school here in the United States, “they tried to make me go to English Language Learners (ELL) program, and I told them, that was really low for me, because I already understood much English.” AM10 explained that he wanted to start taking regular classes, and then, they transferred him to a regular high school. However, AM10 recalls some uneasy cultural and social experiences after resettlement:

Well, everything was really different. Especially with starting over. You know, I mean, even the fact that we were in a camp we made friends, and we had to let all that go. So, when we came here we had to start all over. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

Kia, who was in his early 30s when resettled to the United States, describes his hardships:

[...] It wasn’t easy. It actually was very difficult to understand where I was...I mean in United States in Idaho. I mean, I didn’t expect that. So, it was difficult. So, life wasn’t as easy [...] in a new country. You know, I started everything like [...] on a baby stage, to understand the culture, the people, the weather, the food. [...] I didn’t know how to smile, how to behave. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t

know how people reacted. [...] So, it was super tough. It was super tough. I couldn't sleep because of the period of time, it was in the summer time. And in summer the days are longer than the nights, and in Africa...you know in Africa 6 o'clock is 6 o'clock, and 7 o'clock is 7 o'clock, but here it was like 10 o'clock p.m. or 11 o'clock p.m. and the sun was still there. So, I was like 'what time am I going to sleep?' So, it was...for some of us night means night, you know. it is not about the time, it is about the light, you know. So, I had to sleep shorter time, and then go to medical appointments the next morning, and so on. It was tough. And then the winter came and I had never seen the snow and it was so cold. And I had to go to work, I had to drive for the first time in the snow.

[In addition, in school], my experiences compared to American students are different. I want to say, I was scared. I was scared of everything. I was afraid if someone beats me up, you know. For Americans, they know what they can get in trouble for. For example, if they [assault] me and I fight back they know I can get in trouble. They know how to get away. (Interview, December 15, 2017)

Blue, who came to the United States as a grown person, recalls his initial experiences:

So, there is a different between Africa and America. It's two worlds! African culture and American culture are not the same, [...] and the food is completely different here, and as far as cultural differences, [...] I was aware of it but I tried hard to not see it, [...] most of them do not understand our culture, and they don't believe there are other people. [Also], when I went to the university here, I only knew two African people from Rwanda, one girl who didn't graduate and a young man who graduated. Those were the only African refugee people in college at that time. Can you imagine, one day in my class in my English class we were doing presentations, and one of my classmates, presents about Africa—and for him 'Africa is a country!' No! I said, 'Africa is a continent, not a country!' But I would say, is easier for them to go to college because they speak the English language, and they know the [leading] culture. Their mistakes are forgiven easily—for us, not so easily. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

### **Higher Education as Opportunity: Aspiration and Support**

The importance of education in this country is enormous. Throughout generations, education has been seen as a stepping stone for children to attain better socioeconomic status than their parents. This is often seen as happening with children of immigrants whose parents are mostly struggling at a lower socioeconomic status. Many believe in the support of education as one of the ways to achieve their American dream.

Therefore, this theme portrays the relationship between factors such as aspiration or no aspiration and support or no support for refugee students—in particular Black refugee students—in higher education, and it provides important information for researchers on how these factors affect equitable education and well-being for refugee students in higher education. Because this study focuses on Black refugee students, it is important to connect this theme to critical race theory. McCoy (2015) explains that the critical race approach deeply illuminates the complex power discrepancies within institutions of higher education, and in order to provide an opportunity for refugee students in higher education, these complex power discrepancies that are a root cause for inequality and inequity must be interrupted and dismantled. McCoy also critiques concepts of “color blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality,” stating that this is “systemically framed by law and supported by institutional programs and policies that demonstrate an interest convergence” (p. 33).

When participants shared their stories about the opportunities in higher education, one of the prominent themes was linked to aspiration and support. Ngenge states, “education is the key for our future. A good education means you get an education, and you find a job, and help your family, and you help your community.” Ngenge recalls that she was encouraged to go to college. She recalls experiences in high school when her teachers were saying:

‘Ngenge, you are so smart, you need to go to college!’ And I was like ‘yeah, that’s a good idea.’ Then they helped me apply to college. [Teachers aspired and supported her] I got a scholarship at university, and I was like ‘that’s good.’ They told me ‘you are good, you are an outgoing person, and you should major in Nursing,’ you know. [...] If the teacher didn’t encourage me, I would end up working and make some little money, but I wouldn’t go to college. If I didn’t have anybody who encouraged me, I would just try to live. It is very important to

encourage students, like they did with me. They helped me apply for financial aid, as at those times my English was low, so yeah. (Interview, December 21, 2017)

Denise recalls her experiences of being encouraged to go to college. She states:

I wanted to attend higher education, because I am the first in my family that will have a degree in higher education. [This is the opportunity] that I didn't have before, so right now I have the opportunity, let me use it. But my family encouraging me as well. Because, I'm like 'I need to help my mom, one day's she'll be sitting and not have to suffer the way she's been suffering' or 'one day, I'll at least understand the system in the country' [...] And yes, in high school, people [...] were also talking about college, like 'what do you want to be?' [...] Especially my English teacher was like 'so think about college, what do you think about college?' And they would bring in some speakers who would tell their stories. So, there was this TRiO program, and during my last year of high school I joined the TRiO program. That's when I was like, 'wow, if there is an opportunity for me to go to college, I am going to take that opportunity.'

Also, Denise remembers her first months at university:

So, first semester when I started, I can say that there was little if any support. I guess, I cannot say that there was no support. I am sure there was support but for people who knew how to get that support. So, when, I started college, I didn't know there was support. All I knew was TRiO. I didn't know any sources like the writing center, etc., outside of TRiO. So, when I came to the orientation you know they say, 'this is the math building, this is the education building, history building,' but they don't tell you what support there might be at each building.

Denise explains that the university experiences were very different for refugee and

American students:

For us we have to fight for our education. Our parents don't even [understand it]. So, for us we have to fight, we have to figure everything out by ourselves. But for Americans, they likely know how the education system works. Like, they have their grandparents, their parents, who can help them. Sometimes when the semester starts, you see the orientation person and the parent, showing the student around campus, and you think to yourself 'do I have a parent to ask for help?' So, [the higher education experience] is way different for us. [...] So [the biggest barriers for refugee students are]: Language, financial stability, and lack of confidence. [Many refugees] don't have anybody to encourage them, and some students feel like it's a waste of time. So, students will think like 'so if I go there what will I do? I don't know anything.' So, they feel like they don't know anything. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Evelyn recalls how she was encouraged to pursue higher education:

As a refugee, I saw many students dropping out of school and it still happens a lot here. So, I feel, this is because of the way the system is set up. Schools are designed for the American kid and that is what teachers trained for. When these refugee students start school in the United States they drop out eventually because no one gets them. They can't relate to anyone and there is no advocacy for their support. What [these students] don't realize is that they need education. This is why I chose to go into education field, to be an advocate and create change in the system; to ensure success for these students. I have received side opinions about, how I should be a doctor, or a lawyer and go make a lot of money because I am too "smart" but I chose education. I am passionate about educating minority students to help them get out of poverty. (Interview, February 28, 2018)

Evelyn would like to be a role model and the support for her community:

For me and my family, education means being financially secure. For example, like we refugees go through a lot of poverty, and I think the best way to help is to educate, this is why I am going for an education degree. [...] I hope my education will positively impact so many people that want to go to school. [...] For example, I want to do elementary education, because some parents come with little children and sometimes, they are the ones to take care and help their parents, and I feel that, if I encourage those kids to go to school, and to study, they can help themselves and their families. So as a future teacher, I feel my education will really help my community. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

Sarah explains her aspiration to go to college:

Since I was young I said I want to finish college because of my parents, my aunts and my uncles, like they didn't have that education. [...] So, my dad has inspired me, he would say 'look we're doing this hard work job so I don't want you do have to do a job like that.' [Also, TRiO was helpful] When I was in 12th grade, I went to this event [...] and there was TRiO, and I didn't know what TRiO was. I asked 'what is TRiO?' So, a person explained to us that it is a program for first generation students, they help students to apply to college. That sounded interesting to me and then I said 'give me an application', and then I told my friend, 'so, [...] we applied, but they said to us 'we cannot pick you because you are in 12th grade and you have to be in eleventh or tenth grade to join TRiO, because they help you through a two year program'', and we said 'please we are refugees, we don't have any other way to ask for help, so can you take us please' So she said, 'ok I can take you.' So, we were able to apply for scholarships, financial aid, and so on. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

However, Sarah explains that refugee students are at a disadvantage at the university because “our parents don’t know how college works or what college even is,” and they “don’t understand what we’re going through, but for Americans, it’s different”: their parents “can lead their children to the right path” and refugee students lack that support.

In addition, Sarah is encouraged by her future. She continued:

I want to be in the medical field, and the reason why I chose that major is first; if I go back to Africa, I can help them, because they don’t have many people who work in the medical field. [...] I can go back to Africa and help people who are sick. This has been my dream since I was young, to help sick people. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

AM10 got an opportunity to play soccer in high school, which helped him get into higher education. AM10 describes his opportunities, stating, “my teachers and my coach helped me out since I was involved in a sport.” AM10 explains that he knows many refugees from the Congo who could not go to college because they do not have adequate support to go to college or money to pay for college; also, there is a lot of financial responsibilities toward their families as well, which force many Congolese students to quit school and find a full-time job. AM10 states that going to college is not easy, but he understands that without education, he would need to do jobs like his parents are doing.

He sees his mom as his biggest encouragement to go to college:

My mom encouraged me to go to college. She never got a college degree but she is one of those people who believes in school, and she says to me ‘if you don’t go to school I’ll kick you out of the house’ [laughs]. So, she is positively [very influential person] over me, and she is many times, very inspirational. So, she motivated me the most. So, when I finish my education, I can be independent. I don’t have to go to borrow money, or depend on someone. I will also be able to help my community in many ways. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

Kia remembers being discouraged after he faced many barriers as a non-traditional and refugee student at the university. He recalls his experiences:



When I got here in 2008 to go to the university, as an example, the refugees were considered as expatriates [...] and not as permanent residents. So, when I went to register, they said 'so you are an international student.' So, the administration fees were more expensive for me. [...] I said, 'I cannot do that' but they said that's the policy there is no other way, you have to pay as an international student.' I was discouraged from going to school. [I told them], you cannot treat us refugees as international students, we are residents here [...] and finally they said, "yes, we'll treat you as residents.'" (Interview, December 15, 2017)

However, this was not the end of his struggles, as the university at first did not recognize his bachelor's degree from Africa, and he could not apply for his master's program.

Finally, he was encouraged by a few professors at the university, who helped him register and start his master's program. Kia recalls his struggles paying for college: "I was paying my school out of pocket. I didn't know I could apply for scholarships, I didn't know, there was financial aid, and nobody ever told me about scholarship." Kia states that refugee students should get more support at the university, and many times, there is nobody to ask when you need help.

Blue states that he encouraged people to go to school by explaining to them the importance of school. Since Blue completed his college degree, he encouraged many Congolese people to pursue higher education. He states that refugees are not encouraged to go to college: "they don't encourage you to go to college, they ask you to find a job immediately"; but they should provide opportunities for refugees to pursue higher education (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Eddy was not supported in pursuing higher education. Eddy's story is quite upsetting. He states, "unfortunately, no one encouraged me to go to college and after you finish high school, you are on your own." When Eddy applied to college he was accepted but did not know how to apply for financial aid, or how to proceed further, and because of that Eddy missed one year of college. Then he met a university professor who helped

him to reactivate his student status, waive re-activation fees, and enroll in courses. Eddy recalls, “no one, but that professor, helped me”; “I met many people, but the problem is, those people only gave information, and that is it.” Eddy explains his struggles accessing the university:

So, for example [people would say] ‘here is the paper and call this number.’ So, you call the number, and they transfer you to some department, and that department would transfer me to another department, and because of my English, I didn’t know the right questions to ask. So, finally, they would say, just ‘go online’ and that was it. But I needed someone who I could meet with, who could show me where I needed to go, and what I needed to do. It felt like I was going in circles.

Eddy says that many students he personally knows who graduated from a high school in his area faced similar challenges and never went to college. He said that only students who were supported or encouraged by someone were inspired to continue higher education:

Only a few enrolled in college because they had a teacher who supported them. But many don’t go because they have trouble enrolling into college because they don’t have anyone to ask, and their parents cannot help them, because their parents don’t know anything about American schools. And the kids are wondering ‘how am I going to get there?’ (Interview, January 16, 2018)

Pirens, who is a nontraditional student, explains that he met a good person at the university who helped him start taking classes. He explains, “education means a lot to me. When I came to America I didn’t know how to use computers for example.” Now Pirens uses his computer daily to write emails and do his homework. Pirens states, “if you finish education you are successful,” and he is grateful to many people who helped him, like his family, friends and some other people in the community. Now, “I am almost done with college!” (Interview, December 19, 2017).

## **Issues in Higher Education—Otherness, Discrimination and Institutionalized Discrimination**

McCoy (2015) explains that critical race theory advocates for the importance of seven doctrines that highlight inequalities and inequities in higher education structures.

These principles emphasize

- 1) that racism is not random but widespread and a permanent aspect of people of color's daily lives in the United States;
- 2) that the ruling elite—mostly white people—will be in favor of racial justice for people of color and support people of color's social and political advancements only when the ruling elite knows that they have their own interests in it;
- 3) that the experiential knowledge people of color gain through their lived experiences must be available to fight against hegemonic powers in education and to teach about racial subordination and structural inequality in education;
- 4) that race is a part of an existing system of oppression, which includes other identities “such as gender, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, etc.,” and they all interrelate with each other, and in order to understand this system of oppression, they should be studied as inseparably linked;
- 5) that whiteness as property still exists in higher education, and that the privileged individuals or groups “who have historically accessed higher education through admissions” seek to protect those unearned possessions;
- 6) that instead of the color blindness promoted by liberalism, the critics of liberalism promote the conscious race approach to be implemented in education;

7) that in order to dismantle structural racism in higher education, an enduring effort in “commitment to social justice” is required for all people, which includes a planned strategy that promotes a safe, and secure environment with equitable resources in higher education (McCoy, 2015, p. viii).

Similarly, Ogbu and Simons’ cultural ecological theory supports this theme by backing up the claims Congolese students shared about their lived experiences in higher education. This theory highlights the current educational issues of Black and other minorities—it helps researchers understand the issues these refugee students face, whether studying student’s school performances, educational success, or the fairness of standardized tests that may hinder their ability to access higher education in the United States (Ogbu, 1990). Ogbu and Simons’ theory explains “the minorities’ perceptions of and responses to education” and “explores the impact of the white treatment of the minorities” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). This theory helps us understand the educational issues of “Black and similar minorities” whether we study their school performances, educational success, or the fairness of standardized tests that affect students’ ability to access higher education (Ogbu, 1990, p. 122).

Ogbu and Simons blame the biased school system ruled by the dominant group for how minority groups are treated in schools—thus, minority students are compelled to develop perceptions that schools are unwelcoming toward minority students like them (Labelle & Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu, 1978).

On top of Congolese students’ racial issues in higher education, these students also face post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by being victims of brutal wars and by their prolonged stay in refugee camps outside of their country of origin. Thus, it is

important to include Barry's theory of acculturation in order to better understand issues refugee students face in higher education. In his theory, Barry explains the importance of acculturation for successful integration within the society—this will help refugees to cope with traumatic experiences and ultimately support their educational endeavors. Then, Barry explains, that higher education strongly correlates with lower stress—therefore, higher education opportunities for refugee students will have a positive effect on the cultural stress within refugee families (Barry, 1997). In his support of acculturation, Barry states:

There is now sufficient psychological evidence to support the development of national policies that neither force culture shedding (assimilation), nor ghettoization (segregation), or some combination of them (leading to marginalization). Instead a policy “balancing act” between these alternatives (the policy option termed “integration” here) can be sought (Barry, 1984, 1991). (Barry, 1997, p. 28)

In this final theme, the participants shared their lived experiences in higher education. Based on their stories, I was able to identify the four most influential factors that affect refugee students in higher education. These factors are 1) refugees' traumatic experiences as an issue that affect Congolese student experiences in higher education; 2) issues accessing higher education; 3) otherness or discrimination as a barrier to higher education; and 4) institutional discrimination.

These issues are interrelated with each other, so I will be using an overarching term—Issues in Higher Education—to more flowingly portray the participants stories in this theme.

Gia, who was born in Tanzania in the refugee camp, spent 9 years there before she was resettled to the United States. She states that the transition to college is much easier for her, because she came at age 9, than for many Congolese students who were

resettled at an older age. It is much easier to transition to college, but Gia, like many Congolese students, is most concerned about how to fit in. She explains the hardships of fitting in:

It is kind of hard to fit in, you know, just you know being black. You know, taking advanced classes they just don't see you as equal. I feel like people judge you based on the color of your skin. I mean, not everyone does it but some people do. It is pretty hard being underestimated, it is just like an extra burden that you don't need. That how it feels like. It feels like, I should be able to go to school and get the same education as my white counterparts in this country. It's a little hard. [...] You're doing the best you can, and then just go to school and then people just don't see you as equal and it's just very discouraging. Like 'why am I doing this in the first place?' (Interview, December 16, 2017)

Gia is also afraid that there may be a lack of equitable resources needed for the inclusive involvement of African and other refugee students in higher education. She also shared the importance of understanding refugee past experiences when integrating refugee students within college culture. So, Gia states:

For refugees it is more difficult in college because there is so much they're going through, like they still have to be able to overcome the traumas of war. Like some people still have PTSD. Many cannot let go of what happened in the war. [...] And that may affect their education—it's difficult to learn when you experience trauma. See, I know that there are like counselor and stuff that you can talk to, but I don't know anyone who is going to talk about [traumatic experiences]. Like in my culture, men are not supposed to show emotions—and even some women don't show emotions either. In Africa, you just don't talk about your emotions, or terrible things that happened to you. (Interview, December 16, 2017)

Also, Gia states that in addition to the above, there are other barriers in higher education that Congolese women face—for them, it is much harder to go to college. For example, “In our culture, Congolese women shouldn't be living away from home—and I see that this is a barrier to go to college” for many Congolese women, which “limits their education” (Interview, December 16, 2017).

For Ngenge, her transition to university was smooth because of help from her high school teachers, but the initial university experience was not so smooth. Ngenge clarified, “it was hard to go to the university” because she is an English as a Second Language student. And, on top of that, sometimes she felt unwelcomed:

There were a couple of times where I felt like ‘oh man, maybe I’m not meant to be in college because English is my second language.’ Textbooks have big words and one hour from a tutor won’t help me at all. I could talk to the professor, but the appointment is like half an hour and that is not enough either. The professor never asked me how I was doing, because they were busy and just doing their job. [...] Sometimes, I am embarrassed—I feel that the professor pays more attention to the American students than me, because I’m from another country. (Interview, December 21, 2017)

Ngenge explains that many privileged students “make noise and don’t pay attention” in class, and it may be disturbing at times. This is disrespectful, but the teacher says nothing. She says, “I feel, if I would act like them in class, I feel the teacher would warn me. For Ngenge, it is necessary to pay attention during the class. She states, “it takes longer for me to understand” course material because of the language (Interview, December 21, 2017).

Denise explains that refugee students, because of their circumstances that they could not have controlled, face many barriers when they want to go to college, including language, financial stability, lack of confidence, lack of encouragement, and institutional discrimination—standardized tests (SAT). Denise explains the institutional discrimination by sharing her experience:

Yesterday, I was talking to my friend about the SAT exam. So, this exam is a big deal to Americans, but for us, we just came to the United States, and then they say ‘you guys have to take the SAT’ and we don’t know anything. I did badly on it, because, I just came to the United States, and there where things on the exam, where I didn’t know, because I [never] studied that, or also, because I didn’t understand some of the words. And the teacher says, ‘just do your best!’ I was looking at my score, and I was so sad. You know, this SAT score will follow you

everywhere. It is on your transcript in college, and it will follow you everywhere, even when you apply for a job. Some scholarships asked you for your SAT score, and the score is so bad, because I just came to the United States.

I wish we can change something in education. When refugees get here. See, no one doesn't want a higher education, but if you have the encouragement, if you have somebody to tell you 'you can do it!' helping you with resources, you will not be discouraged and will not fail. Also, in high school they put you in these ELL classes, like they isolate you. They isolate you because your English is very low, but it affects you a lot. It's like they're setting you up for failure in high school. But American students, they already start learning about how to do research in ninth grade. They prepare them but not us. The English they give you, it's like English for 'babies', and that hurts you, [because, when I came], and they ask me to write like a ten-page research paper, I dropped the class. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Denise recalls her university experiences as very difficult and somewhat discouraging.

Wow, so, it was hard! It was really hard! First, it is a large university. I never thought about being in such a large community. I never thought about it before, and I was like; 'am I going to survive in college? Am I going to make it? Where can I get help?' The first semester, I took some classes where the classes don't count. It was confusing. I wish [somebody] could tell me what classes I needed to take. There was no support to guide me.

Also, Denise remembers feeling unwelcomed at the university, at the time:

There were times, I felt welcomed. But there were [times that I] didn't feel welcomed. I tried to make a welcoming impression with other people but other than that it is what it is. Also, like when you sit in class, you don't have a friend, you don't even feel like you have anyone to talk to. I didn't feel welcome in class! And the instructor is just there, talking and talking, and you just leave class lonely. So, for example, when the professor asks to get into groups, it is difficult to find someone, because they're going to their friends, and there is time when you feel like 'oh, I'm all by myself here', so you go to the instructor and ask 'which group can I join?' You just feel humiliated. Instead of feeling you're welcomed, you feel like you're only an outsider. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Denise recalls challenges she faced at the university. She felt people intentionally pretended that they did not understand her. She explains:



So, first barrier is the language. Even if I speak the language, and you understand me, there will still be a language barrier there. There, however, will be time where people would say ‘what did you say? What did you say?’ So, for that it makes me feel like, I still don’t know anything, I still feel like that I don’t speak English at all. So, [for example] there are some professors where they understand you, and there are others, who completely don’t understand you. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

For example, I took kinesiology class. That class was an easy class. I cannot say it was hard because, I could use a book, and go take a quiz by myself, but when I ask the professor something that I didn’t understand, ‘she [the professor] was really...wow.’ Even when I think about it, I feel like ‘I cannot imagine a person can be that way.’ I wish I could know why she was very rude to me, and especially, when I go to ask a question, she would be answering me while she is walking away. She would say ‘go to Blackboard.’ [*This is very important to note*], but when other students go to ask her a question, she will give them attention and be calm. But when it was me, it will be different [otherness]. That was number 1, but number 2, if I have an opinion, I can raise my hand, and she would just jump to another student, and after that, she would start another topic. It was a really bad experience. I wish, I could really know why. In that class, I didn’t get a good grade. I failed it. I stopped going to class, because I felt I wasn’t welcomed there. I felt [that by] being in that class, I am no one, they don’t see me. I got a ‘D’ but I knew I could do better, but I just couldn’t go to that class as I felt ignored and humiliated. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Sarah, like Denise explains barriers that affect refugee students in higher education. She recalls difficult experiences at the university, stating:

I didn’t know I could go to the writing center or how to use the library. I had to find everything out on my own. For example, my first semester I was taking some classes and they didn’t count, so I found out the university had me as a part time student instead of full-time, because of some of those classes that didn’t count. I still don’t know why some credits didn’t count. I didn’t know that, and no one was there to tell me. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Because of the language barrier, Sarah explains that refugees must work very hard to understand the material presented in the class. She states:

You have to work extra hard to master the material, and some professors understand me, but some don’t know how to work with a refugee. Some don’t even know what a refugee is. Like, we know what we’ve been through but those

professors don't understand our experience and cannot relate and therefore, they cannot help us much. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Sarah shares a very tough experience. She recalls feeling discriminated against in her sociology class—they were talking about refugees in the United States:

I felt offended. [The class discussion] was about Black people and refugees. They would say 'why do refugees come here?' They also said 'they just get our money, we don't need them here' and so on. I was really offended, but I could not say anything. They knew I was a refugee but they still said those mean things. The professor only said 'you guys have to respect each other'. But I was already offended. That was a very bad experience. I wanted to say something, but [...] I got scared, and I was afraid to say anything. We [refugees] actually contribute to the community and economy, but [she silently pointed her finger to her arm, showing the 'Black' color of her skin and then continues], I was the only one with 'skin of my color' and the only refugee in class. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Evelyn, who was also born in the refugee camp came to the United States when she was 14 years old, recalls her experience in English class at the university:

When I went to my English class, I was like the only black person and everyone was always looking at me like [it almost felt they want to ask] 'when will we have the topic about Africa?' So, I'm always noticing stuff like that at this university. I mean we are pursuing higher education, and you would think people would be more sensitive, or know more about diversity, but it still happens, and that really shocks me. In high school, I felt more included, because even though there were many people who would be ignorant, there were a lot of people like me, like from Africa or other refugees. So, I had like a community and here in college it is different, it doesn't feel like a community. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

Evelyn, felt that there is discriminatory system in place. This is an unfair system that was designed with an objective to prevent refugee and African students from accessing higher education. In the follow-up member check interview, Evelyn explains that:

After only one year in the United States, I was forced by the education system to take the SAT, ACT—standardized tests. These are exams designed for white people, who were [systematically] prepared, yet I had to take them too. I worked so hard to get good scores but that did not happen; these scores are required when applying to colleges and other programs in higher education. Now, I am embarrassed every time that I am asked to provide these scores. I feel, I was and I

am still institutionally discriminated against and I cannot do anything about. (Member Check Interview, February 28, 2018)

Evelyn recalls some unpleasant and discriminatory experiences that she very much remembered:

I did have some difficult time to adjust in [school], because it was majority white people. [...] I like having my grades up, so I had a 4.0 GPA when I was graduating, and some people were really shocked by that, maybe because of who I am, that's so unexpected. Yeah, that's a bit discouraging. I always felt judged by other students and other people no matter how well I did in school, because of who I am, so, I always kept to myself, and I did my best. Like, I could really never join any clubs in high school, like Debate because of people look at me, and my accent, or when I try to say something, they have so many questions about Africa or other stuff that it comes to the point where it just gets uncomfortable. So, I've always held back to myself. And then, I always have to explain myself, improve myself for everything that I do, because they think that I may be incapable to do things. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

Evelyn also shared how it is to feel like an “other” at the university. She states that if the professor seemed open-minded, she would be encouraged to reach out to that professor. But, some professors were closed-minded. Evelyn continued by recalling her experience where she felt “othered” in her classroom:

When I was writing a paper for a class, and I was asked to relate the book I read with my experiences. Then, I got pushback from my professor for relating it to my refugee experiences. Now, in that class, I have to make sure when I write that I am not adding any kind of African or refugee experiences [issues] because she [the professor] does not care about that at all. I think that professors should be culturally sensitive and well trained and prepared in order to know how to teach students across cultures. (Member Check Interview, February 28, 2018)

Also, Evelyn doesn't think that there is equitable support available for minority students on her campus:

So, for example, I had to learn how to figure out things by myself. So, at home I don't get much done, so I would come to the library and work, and for example in math class, they would say if you need help to go to the math center. And in English classes when we're writing papers they say that there is a writing center. So mostly in all classes, that's where I was told about resources. So, I personally

haven't used the writing center, but I used the math center a few times, and I feel that they get annoyed with students who ask many questions. Or if they don't understand what you ask...so, for example I have a friend who doesn't speak much English, and when she asks them a question they're like 'what?' You know, then they get annoyed, so they don't really know how to help, so they could use some training on how to work with refugee students. And I don't visit the writing center because I don't want people to judge me, because I don't feel comfortable, and I don't want them to see my writing. And I don't even know who works there [at the writing center] but I am sure it's mostly American people [she pointed to her skin], so... If there was a refugee or someone who understands us, I would go but I don't want to go to places where people don't understand me and my background. Maybe [people from] these centers should come to classes and introduce themselves and make their place safe and comfortable for refugees and people who are not born in America. (Interview, January 17, 2018)

Among male participants, AM10, the only traditional college student, shared his experiences in higher education: AM10 described his initial experiences at the university as difficult. He elaborates:

It was tough. It was tough for me because I didn't understand how things [worked] in college, I mean it was easier for my American friends because that is how they grew up, they understood it better. The culture was different. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

AM10 emphasized that many refugees experience barriers in higher education. He pointed out that big barriers for refugees in higher education are:

[First] scholarship, knowing that there is money that you don't have to pay back if you qualify for it; then knowing where to go to apply; then also applying to school. A lot of people maybe don't want to go to college in town, maybe they want to go to college outside of state but parents don't know how to help them apply. Parents of refugees say 'ok, go to college' but they don't understand how to help. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

AM10 recalls, at times, being discouraged to go to college: "For example, I had a guy tell me that my English is not good enough and that I will struggle in college. I didn't listen to him." AM10 did not pay as much attention to potential bullying. He ignored being bullied because "where I am from it is legal to bully others, so I thought it's the same

here.” He also pointed out the issues female Congolese student may face in higher education, by explaining:

In my country it is not very common but here it is different. Here if you want to go to school you can but, in my culture, women usually get married early. It’s not like, the American culture, where you go to school and the guy can wait for you. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

For Kia, the most important barriers in accessing higher education were institutional bureaucracy and discrimination. He explained that refugees were legally admitted to the United States, and after a year, they are eligible to become permanent residents, but the problem is that they have the burden of explaining to everybody in their institution of higher education that they are completely different from international students in order to avoid application and tuition fees and other standards associated with international students. But refugee students are not international students; they do not have money and they are not entitled to receive same help the international students receive on campus. Kia also stressed that even some teachers ostracize refugee students in their classes. Kia concluded:

No, I didn’t feel welcome. I felt like I was pushed out. Because I didn’t have mentors, I didn’t have someone to show me anything. I was doing everything by myself. And at that time there were not that many black students at the university. [...] There were a few people. In 2008 there weren’t many refugees on campus. There are very few refugees, like African refugees, on campus. (Interview, December 15, 2017)

The students who were born and raised here, they have so much more advantage. They understand, like for example, in class they would say ‘go watch the Disney channel’ and I would be left out, I would be like ‘what’s Disney?’ I never watched the Disney channel. [...] The teachers would be relating the class material with the American culture (famous people, movie stars, etc.) They have to internationalize education. [...] For example, answering questions after reading some paragraph was difficult. So, the speed rate for reading and comprehension was not the same for me as for the locals and I wasn’t given any reasonable accommodation. [...] Then, there was this other experience about Blackboard. I

didn't know what Blackboard was because nobody taught me how to use the Blackboard. I figured everything out by myself. All they would say, 'go to the Blackboard' and that is it; I didn't know that there was helpdesk. (Interview, December 15, 2017)

Kia indicated that refugee students carry traumatic experiences with them and their experiences in school additionally complicate their healing process in what is supposed to be a safe country. He explains that many refugees are discriminated against in school by other kids, so they do not do well in school. Kia added:

[Discrimination] I have seen it, and I had one student tell me that other kids called refugee students bad names like 'we're stinking, we're Black.' You know, those kids face a lot of challenges. Especially, when they [...] put them together with the other kids in regular classes, they feel out of space. And even when they report that to the teachers, many times nothing gets done. Then, they become the problem, because teachers think that they are the problem. [Blame the victim]. This prevents high school students to go to college or many of them may just drop if they get in and many don't even know how to register for classes. (Interview, December 15, 2017)

Kia argued that many students were additionally traumatized in school and "many students won't even say if something bad happened to them because they think their voice is not going to be heard (Interview, December 15, 2017).

Pirens recalls his experiences in college stating, the teachers love me, but, "there is also this where I feel strange, kind of a discrimination." He explains that some students were bullied in school due to the differences in their culture and race. He emphasized that the university needs to ensure that everybody is treated equally. He argued that college administrators should not just "tell refugee students to go here, then go there, and confuse them. They should help refugee students, treat them equally in order for them to succeed." Thus, "professors and the college staff need to understand different cultures

and the diversities of cultures” in school. Many “professor understand what refugee students go through but some don’t understand it” (Interview, December 19, 2017).

According to Pirens, refugees face many burdens in higher education such as the cultural challenges, language barrier, lack of resources and support, and financial abilities to pay for college. For example, “refuges don’t know how to apply for scholarships. Colleges and universities should create “a better structure to help refugee students, especially with scholarships. We’re struggling because we don’t understand the American school system. Also, they should start recruiting refugees to play soccer and other sports to get scholarships” (Interview, December 19, 2017).

Eddy recalled his college experiences as challenging at first because of the cultural and language differences. He stressed that American students were raised “with the American school system, they have parents, and family who can help them. But we [refugee students] don’t have any of that.” Many refugee students are mostly “the first generation to go to college. We have to figure out everything on our own” (Interview, January 16, 2018). Eddy also explains that “some professors still have bias toward people who were not native to this country.” For example, his sociology professor advised Eddy to drop the class just because he was several minutes late finishing his online quiz, even though Eddy explained that he may need a little bit more time to translate and understand the quiz questions because English is not his native language. Eddy paused for a second and asserted:

But, I decided that I will prove myself, and I mean, I pass the class with a B. I wasn’t happy because I knew, I could do much better. So, I don’t know how to describe her [professor’s] attitude, and that was just a terrible experience. She must have stereotyped me because of my English, and because I’m black. She could see my picture after all on the student roster. (Interview, January 16, 2018)

Eddy pointed out that Congolese refugees struggle financially, not knowing how to pay for their education. He states, “Some students know that there may be scholarship opportunities but some don’t know that there are those kinds of opportunities.” Eddy explained that the poverty is one of the biggest challenges in his community. Thus, “many students don’t go to college but instead, they find a job” to support their family at home.

Also, Eddy explains that some Congolese students are not encouraged to go to college. This is because

[s]ome parents don’t understand the importance of education, and even those who understand the importance of education are looking [to find the way] how to survive. That’s the most challenging thing in my community. Or even if [Congolese kids] are lucky to go to college, they apply but struggle with the online paperwork. And they give up! Again, the parents [do not know] how to help, because the kids speak more English than their parents. I mean [many] students want to go to college. But, there is just not enough support to help them get into college. (Interview, January 16, 2018)

After experiencing horrors of wars in the Congo, prolonged stay in refugee camps or in exile, these students face additional burdens after resettlement in the United States. Their previous and current experiences, which was no fault of theirs, such as refugee status; limited or no education; their traumatic experiences and its current consequences in higher education; limited English; and experiences of day-to-day discrimination and ostracization continue to hinder their higher education endeavors in the United States. These students’ narratives shed light on their lived experiences after resettlement to the United States, especially their lived experiences in United States schools. Their stories are example of a new type of a struggle. Children who survived wars, traumatic experiences and refugee camps are experiencing additional traumas, this time in the country they believed should welcome them and provide them with equitable education:



After they suffer so much, they dream about education, the education that will provide them with the peace, stability, and security in their new lives.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes the summary, implications, recommendations and conclusions found in this study of Congolese refugee experiences in higher education.

### **Summary of the Study**

My main purpose was to provide Congolese refugee students an opportunity to reveal any barriers they faced when accessing and pursuing higher education in the United States through stories of their lived refugee experiences. Additionally, this study aims to highlight factors affecting their educational experiences, their well-being, and integration within the host community.

The study was guided by and intended to answer the following research question: What are the issues that Congolese refugee students experience accessing and pursuing higher education?

The data in this study was collected through interviews, focus groups, field notes and observations, and member checks. The participants were five female and five male students who are Congolese nationals, racially Black, and came to the United States through the refugee resettlement program. The participants are currently alumni or they are pursuing higher education in the Northwest region of the United States. This study consists of five chapters:

**Chapter 1** focuses on the background of the study, the rationale, the purpose of the study, problem statement, research questions, and definition of terms. In this chapter, the researcher introduces the Congolese population and provides a comprehensive introduction of the Congolese refugee students in higher education. Chapter 1 also discusses threats to validity and limitations of the study.

**Chapter 2** provides the review of literature in three main sections: It delivers a short history about the DRC and Congolese people; discusses critical race research, refugees, and forced migration; and sheds light on the dilemma of refugee students in higher education.

**Chapter 3** presents the steps and methodological approaches used by the researcher to provide reader the information about the rationality and trustworthiness of the study. In addition, the chapter introduces the study participants and the methods of analysis used in the study. The study utilizes narrative inquiry to lead the qualitative research methods in this study. Furthermore, the chapter explains the data collection methods, data analysis, and research validity measures implemented in this study.

**Chapter 4** reports the information of the study—the findings from the data analysis process. Through the analysis, five themes emerged from participants' narratives. All the themes connect to the research question, describing factors that affect the Congolese refugee students' opportunities and the issues they have experienced in higher education.

In this final **Chapter 5**, the researcher includes a short summary of the findings followed by discussion of the results. The researcher discusses the outcomes of each theme and provides study conclusions, implications, and recommendations throughout

the chapter. The final section includes recommendations for appropriate actions supported by this study.

### **Summary of the Findings—Conclusions and Recommendations**

The main research question—What are the issues that Congolese refugee students experience accessing and pursuing higher education?—highlighted crucial challenges Congolese refugee students face, through five distinct themes that evolved from the findings. Themes were declared after analyzing and coding each participants' transcripts. This study data revealed five main themes:

1. Escape, Surviving in Camp(s), Exile, and Coping with Trauma;
2. Gaps in Education: Interrupted or Limited Education During the Exile and Prolonged Stay in Camp(s);
3. Colliding Cultures: Acculturation, Cultural Differences, Feeling Discriminated Against, and Coping with Trauma after Resettlement;
4. Higher Education as Opportunity: Aspiration and Support;
5. Issues in Higher Education: Otherness, Discrimination and Institutional Discrimination.

To ensure the integrity of the findings and to be free of bias, the codes and themes that emerged were reviewed independently by two people: the researcher and a professor who has also worked with refugees. The key quotes from the interviews were highlighted, and these quotes were used throughout the findings. It is important to note that the researcher noticed that when talking about cultural misunderstanding and discrimination, participants mostly used the word “they” to describe non-refugee white people.

The following findings are organized and arranged in chronological order using the five themes that emerged from the data analysis. See figure 5.1 below.

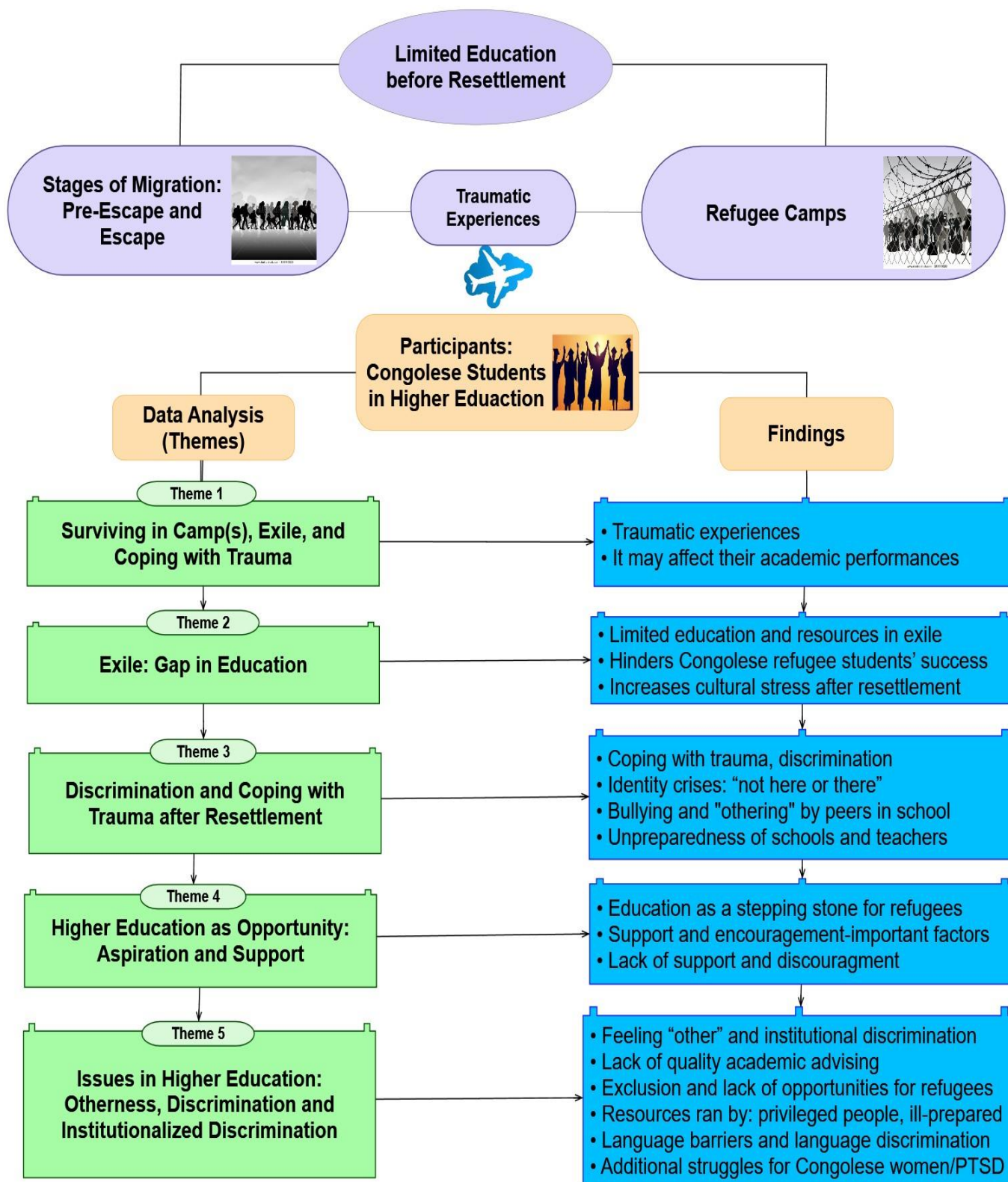


Figure 5.1 Study Findings Chart (Source: Sadikovic, 2018)

### Escape, Surviving in Camp(s), Exile, and Coping with Trauma

The first theme revealed traumatic experiences that Congolese refugees went through prior to resettlement to the United States. This theme includes shocking stories of refugee participants' pasts, describing how they escaped their country, lived in refugee camps and exile for years or even decades, and how they have coped with trauma after losing family members. Many had watched their loved ones being killed. All participants described their traumatic experiences during their time spent in exile as disturbing. They endured inhuman treatment, lack of food, adequate education, clean water, and security. All these conditions engraved a permanent mark in their lives. Most of the study participants experienced their traumatic escape and sufferings as children. Some of them were born in refugee camps, growing up in camps and not even knowing that a better life existed.

Gia and Evelyn do not even remember their native country. Their parents escaped the Congo before they were born. Evelyn spent the first four years of her life in Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania, and then they relocated to Dukwi refugee camp in Botswana, where she stayed for about 8 additional years before she was resettled to the United States. During their stay in Dukwi refugee camp, her mom was very ill, and they were faced with trauma, hunger, and poverty (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Gia spent the first 9 years of her childhood in Nyarugusu refugee camp. She does not remember her time in the camp so well. She stated, "In the camp, I felt pretty safe. And of course, people would steal and rape girls"; but, "I mean, in my opinion it felt safe, but maybe that was, because I was a kid and I didn't know any better" (Interview, December 16, 2017). Gia's recalled experience in the camp connects with Lahad's (1999)

research: Most normal people affected by mass evacuation disasters will have “normal reactions to abnormal situations” because they will try to cope with the new situation—as in Gia’s case with the refugee camp experience—and work to reinstate trust, sense of community, and their confidence in their new environment (p. 33). As explained in my “Researcher’s Story,” I also spent some period of my life in refugee camps in Croatia during the Balkan Wars in 1990s. During my stay in refugee camps, I also observed refugees coping with traumatic situations and events by treating them as normal, and at that time, I experienced it as a normal and a needed occurrence for survival.

Ngenge explained that she was forced two times to leave her country: the first time, in 1998, when she was 5 or 6 years old, and again in 2004, when she was 14 years old. She recalls her second escape, when she was resettled to the Gatumba refugee camp in Rwanda. She was lucky that she survived the massacre in that camp. Ngenge states that “many people died in that camp” and the American government decided to resettle most people that survived the massacre to the United States (Interview, January 11, 2018). According to Human Rights Watch, rebel forces “massacred at least 152 Congolese civilians and wounded another 106 at Gatumba refugee camp” (HRW 2004, para. 1). This massacre was the turning point for the United States’ decision to resettle most of the remaining refugees including Ngenge (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Sarah was very young when her family was forced to escape to Kenya and her father was separated from them. Sarah reunited with her father after she was resettled to the United States at the age of 15 (Interview, January 11, 2018). Eddy, like Sarah, escaped the war in Congo and lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania, called Lugufu, for five years before coming to the United States (Interview, January 16, 2018). Blue was



forced to escape the Congo to save his life after the militia killed his brother and nephew. He stayed in Cameroon for three years before he was resettled to the United States (Interview, January 17, 2018). Like Blue, Kia recalls his traumatic experiences. He explained that they were kept like prisoners in the refugee camp in Botswana where he stayed for two years (Interview, December 15, 2017). AM10 also shared difficult experiences being forced to leave Congo. His father was killed, and he and his family escaped to the Nakivale refugee camp in Uganda where they stayed for 9 years. Like other participants, AM10 faced poverty and lack of basic necessities in the camp. They faced many diseases in the camp because of unhealthy conditions, dirty water, and mosquitos (Interview, December 19, 2017).

Participants carried these traumatic experiences with them into and after their resettlement to the United States. Traumatic experiences in addition to their racial identities, follow them everywhere: at home, at school, at work, and even when they study for class. These experiences suggest that Congolese students, after resettlement to the United States, may experience greater struggles adjusting within their new society, and in fact, their experiences may affect their academic performance. A plethora of research agrees that refugee traumatic experiences before resettlement may negatively affect their educational endeavors after resettlement to a new country, which means that refugee students need additional academic support (Kunz, 1981; Burns, 1991; Atwell, Gifford & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009; Harris & Marlowe, 2011).

Thus, this study also shows that in order for refugee students to feel welcome in the United States, they will need more academic support than domestic students. In addition, if equitable support specific to helping with trauma and navigating the U.S.

system is provided to refugee students as soon as they arrive, this would be beneficial for the refugee acculturation and integration process, their educational endeavors, and the whole community in the long run.

### Gap in Education—Interrupted or Limited Education during the Exile and Prolonged Stay in Camp

This theme describes educational struggles and the gap in education Congolese students endured prior to resettlement and how these experiences affect refugee students' academic performance in the United States. Study participants described their education during their exile as very weak. Ngenge stated that their education before resettlement was “mostly shredded in pieces, you know there is a war and then you must stop it. [...] So, education was a struggle, because I was behind all the time” (Interview, December 21, 2017). Denise described her educational experience in the United States as very difficult because during her time in exile in Ethiopia, she experienced a four-year gap in her education (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Evelyn explained that even though she attended elementary school in camp, there were not enough books, teachers, or chairs in the school in the refugee camp (Interview, January 17, 2018). AM10 stated that in order to attend secondary school in his refugee camp, they were required to pay “and we did not have money” (Interview, December 19, 2017). Kia described education prior to his resettlement as limited, stating, “Even elementary education was considered to be luxurious for some people. So, not everybody had an opportunity to get an education” (Interview, December 15, 2017).

This theme portrays similar experiences of all participants. They all were refugees who experienced poverty, violent environments, limited education, and traumas before

resettling to the United States. UNHCR (2014) describes lack of education in refugee camps in Africa as very common. For example, in Kyaka refugee camp in Uganda, “only 65% of the Congolese refugee children receive any formal education and only 45% attend primary school” (p. 2). All these factors mentioned above can affect Congolese students’ experiences in higher education in the United States.

Therefore, in order to provide equitable and inclusive education for Congolese and other refugee students who faced similar circumstances, higher education institutions should become aware of students’ experiences prior to resettlement to the United States and how these experiences may affect their higher educational experiences. The study revealed that an education gap exists in Congolese students’ previous education. Also, the study shows that those previous educational experiences should not deter refugee students from pursuing higher education. Educational opportunities and achievements are very important for Congolese students and their communities. Participants in my study felt that they should get an opportunity for equitable education that takes into consideration their previous struggles and limited educational experiences.

The Congolese students believe that education is an important resource for their communities: It will help their successful integration in the United States, assist in building social capital within the community and provide resources to ensure community well-being. Students will use their knowledge and education to support their families and society as a whole.

Colliding Cultures—Acculturation, Cultural Differences, Feeling Discriminated Against, and Coping with Trauma after Resettlement

This theme revealed the reality of cultural differences, discrimination, and otherness. These unfriendly circumstances created additional stressful experiences for Congolese refugee students, even though they expected to be helped and welcomed in the United States. The situation where refugees are seen as “other,” feeling discriminated against, and coping with trauma after resettlement seems to be directly in correlation with or consequence of the issues of colliding cultures and cultural stress. I use the term “other” because participants shared that many people in schools and their communities treated them as different and not fully belonging to their group. Bruce and Yearley (2006) also use the term “othering,” which they define as “the action of making some group into a clear contrast to ‘us’” (p. 266).

The participants’ responses show that a huge burden for refugee students is caused by unpreparedness of schools and teachers to work with refugee students. Teachers might be overwhelmed, especially when they are uncertain about how to create a safe learning environment to include students from diverse backgrounds. This study shows that schools need to provide adequate training for teachers in order to increase cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills. Once teachers are equipped with this knowledge, it will be less overwhelming for them to reach out and work with their refugee students and other students across cultures.

Participants explained that in addition to the above-mentioned struggles, refugee students deal with cultural clash. Ngege, in her interview, described the difficulties of not knowing who she wanted to be. Refugee students are often “not here or there,” which

creates identity crises; they face feelings of isolation in school and the community, where they are “othered,” as well as pressure at home to preserve their native heritage (Interview, December 21, 2017). Blue explains that there is a big difference between African and American culture: “It’s two worlds! African culture and American culture are not the same, [...] and the food is completely different here, and as far as cultural differences, [...] I was aware of it but I tried hard to not see it, [...] most of them do not understand our culture, and they don’t believe there are other people” (Interview, January 17, 2018). Gia experienced pressure at home to behave more African. She states that her parents are very conservative Africans: “you know, we have our culture [...] and then this culture, you know, it like, kind of clashes sometimes, [...] my parents will sometimes say, ‘you need to act more African, you’re too American’” (Interview, January 11, 2018). Gia explains that she has both African and American mentalities, and she thinks that the best way is to blend them together, creating the best of both cultures, which is called acculturation (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Thus, this study closely relates with acculturation theory, which calls for refugees and the host society to accommodate each other during the process of acculturation (Barry, 1997; Williams & Barry, 1991; Barry, 2001; McPherson, 2010; Sam & Barry, 2006; Strang & Ager, 2010). If acculturation is unsuccessfully carried out, it could create additional crisis and cultural stress among members of the community because those that are the most oppressed are the most stressed, and those who feel welcomed within the host society are minimally stressed (Williams & Barry, 1991). Schools should promote multiculturalism and inclusion by teaching about the importance of diversity and

supporting refugee students as they preserve their cultural heritages while adjusting to a new culture.

The participants faced traumatizing experiences, bullying, and othering by peers in school. Teachers and school staff need to be trained on how to address cultural differences, misunderstandings, and conflicts in their classrooms in addition to delivering teaching that promotes cultural tolerance and understanding among diverse groups. The teachers need to be involved in educating students about being culturally sensitive and respectful of one another. They need to be able to model culturally sensitive, respectful behavior for their students, and this is only possible if the teachers themselves are adequately trained.

The study reveals that many of the teachers the participants encountered are not trained to create and implement culturally appropriate curriculum. The curriculum the teachers used was mostly connected to white American students' previous experiences, and it was not culturally appropriate. Sarah explained that teachers were not using an inclusive teaching style (Interview, January 11, 2018). Teachers need to create curriculum and instruction that is inclusive of diverse students who do not have previous American experiences. Teachers should design inclusive assignments appropriate to a diverse population in order to allow students to activate and build on their prior knowledge. If students do not have the prior knowledge to connect to the new ideas presented in class, their learning is hindered.

Beyond school, these students were ostracized and racially discriminated against in society, adding to their traumatic experiences and making the whole situation even worse. Congolese students see American schools as an upgrade when compared with the

refugee camp school in Africa, but students feel ostracized and judged for who they are. Evelyn describes her experience as difficult; she stated that she always felt judged for who she is by other white students no matter how well she did in school (Interview, January 17, 2018). When students like Evelyn are being traumatized by racism and discrimination outside of school, it affects their sense of belonging, how they participate in school, and their feelings of whether they were welcomed and included in school. To avoid negative school experiences among diverse students, teachers should make it a priority in their classrooms to encourage inclusion.

This study also reveals that high schools do not adequately prepare refugee students for college. AM10 explained that his school placed him in a very low-level ELL (English Language Learner) class where, if he stayed there, he would not be adequately prepared for college. AM10 stated that refugee students should not be treated like “babies” by the school system or by teachers by placing refugee students in the lowest ELL classes (Interview, December 19, 2017). When schools place students in lower-level classes and do not allow them to advance to higher-level classes, the students are underprepared for college, and they are set up for failure. Thus, their opportunity to access higher education is affected. Ngenge and Kia described life after resettlement as difficult because they, like many other refugees, felt isolated (Ngenge, Interview, December 21, 2017; Kia, Interview, December 15, 2017). Not only did Kia feel isolated, but he felt “othered” and ostracized. He feared being assaulted and not being able to defend himself and then being blamed for defending himself because the assaulter from the dominant group would know how to get away with breaking the rules (Interview, December 15, 2017). When refugees feel isolated and unwelcomed, do not understand

the culture, and have no one to explain it to them or provide guidelines, their acculturation and integration process is even more difficult, including cultural, social, and environmental factors.

Like Kia, Blue felt that refugees face discrimination by teachers and staff in school. They are harsher on refugee students: Blue stated that many teachers believe that if refugee students make any mistakes, they are seen as unprepared for school, but if other white American students make mistakes, “it is just fine” and they can stay in school (Interview, January 17, 2018). This is one way that teachers privilege white American students, and it can be seen as a form of exclusion of nonwhite and refugee students. Exclusion in school can impact the larger Congolese and refugee community because if one student is excluded and has no choice but to leave the university, other members of their community might be discouraged as well from pursuing higher education. They will not want to come because they feel that Black refugee people are already unwelcome in the university community.

Therefore, schools need to provide refugee students with equitable education that will prepare them for college, like the education that is given to mainstream students but not education that infantilizes them. In order to be inclusive, higher education institutions should also make sure that refugee students are aware of financial aid and scholarship opportunities. During the focus group conversation, Kia and Pirens suggested that “staff and the admissions office should be trained to understand that refugee students are different from international students” and require different support (Focus Group Interview March 6, 2018).



In summary, schools should raise awareness for teachers, staff, and administration about systemic racism, institutional discrimination, and inequitable practices that might negatively impact refugee students' college preparedness. The school should implement better practices to address this rising problem, supporting refugee students' academic success and offering a more inclusive education to all students. University staff, faculty, and peers should recognize the value of diversity on campus: they should serve as cultural informants who can advise refugee students about potential issues, how to deal with them, and how to share with the appropriate people any problems they encounter. These cultural informants should be trained individuals who will be able to provide answers to questions that refugee students have about cultural norms on campus and in the community.

In addition to cultural informants, there should be adequate cultural training in place for faculty and staff at the university in order to increase cross-cultural skills and awareness of issues that refugees and refugees of color face in education. The university offices and faculty should increase collaboration and communication within for reaching refugee students. These above-mentioned improvements will alleviate students' feelings of fear and unwelcomeness because people who are informed and know how they can get support if needed are less scared and more welcomed into the community and school. Welcomed and supported students will be empowered by knowledge and their support system, which will help them to feel that they are not alone.

#### Higher Education as Opportunity: Aspiration and Support

Many refugee parents see education as a stepping stone for their children to get out of poverty in a new country, as they lost everything after being forced to leave their

countries. All participants in the study expressed high aspirations through their stories. For example, Evelyn's goal is to help people in her community and minority students in general. So, she has chosen to become an educator despite pressure from family members to choose a more financially stable career. Evelyn is well aware of present issues in education: She talks about how to respond to an issue created by role reversal—when children take the responsibilities of parents as children's English language proficiency and knowledge of the host culture surpasses their parents'. Thus, Evelyn sees herself as a future role model for refugee students: a culturally responsive educator who provides support for parents and students and encourages refugee children to go to school to be able to help their parents and community (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Like Evelyn, Sarah's refugee experience drives her aspiration to pursue higher education. Since she was young, her dream was to help sick people in Africa. Sarah sees the struggles of people in her community, even back in Africa. She sees the problem of the lack of medical professionals in her home community, and she wants to address the problem (Interview, January 11, 2018). Refugee students like Sarah and Evelyn should get the opportunity to access and pursue higher education. This way, they can be part of the solution for domestic and global problems, as many refugee students act locally and think globally about problems. Also, their minds are always with their home communities.

AM10 is afraid that if he does not go to school, he will have to work low-paying jobs like his parents. He is also motivated by his mom's encouragement to attend school (Interview, December 19, 2017). In addition, participants talked about their dreams to acquire higher education and to use education as a tool to help themselves, their families,

and community to get out of poverty and to advocate for inclusion and rights for Black and other minority groups. For example, Denise is encouraged to finish college in order to be able to help her mom have a better life and “not have to suffer the way she has been suffering” (Interview, January 11, 2018). Evelyn’s dream is to use her education to support marginalized students and their families get out of poverty (Member’s Check Interview, February 28, 2018). Also, as a future teacher, Evelyn wants to use her knowledge and education to help her community prosper (Interview, January 17, 2018). Sarah’s dream, since she was a child, was to be a medical professional, to help sick people here and in Africa (Interview, January 11, 2018). AM10’s dream is to complete his higher education, which he believes would help him become independent and provide him with an opportunity to help his community (Interview, December, 19, 2017).

The study participants described support and encouragement as important factors needed for their success. So, in order for refugee students to successfully achieve their educational dreams, schools need to improve the educational opportunities for refugee children. Refugee students are well aware of issues and barriers they face while trying to achieve their ambitions of completing higher education, and despite all these barriers, they are determined to succeed. Their aspirations are very high, even as they felt that the educational system was working against them by setting them up for failure and not having real expectations for their success.

Thus, this theme explains how some participants in this study benefited from rarely available encouragement and support. On the other hand, the theme shows how these students of color felt discouraged and unwelcome when left without support or encouragement in high school and the university.

During high school, Ngeenge had teachers who encouraged her (Interview, December 21, 2017); Denise had teachers, TRiO and family who encouraged her. Both had access to resources for preparing for and applying to college. But, once Denise started school at the university, she encountered barriers: Necessary resources were not made accessible to her. She explained that in comparison with students who were born and raised in the United States, she did not have equitable support. She also felt that she and many other refugee students could not expect their parents to help them in higher education because they did not understand the American school system or American culture. Meanwhile, American-born students had help from their parents and families (Interview, January 11, 2018).

Kia would not be graduate alumni if he were not encouraged to pursue higher education by a few professors at the university. However, Kia faced discouragement by the university admissions office: Kia recalls being treated as an international student even though he was a permanent resident at that time. It took him several days of calling and emailing different people on campus in order to solve the issue. This discouragement and unpleasant confusion for Kia happened because the university staff lacked necessary training about how to work with diverse student groups in the community. In addition, Kia faced financial struggles paying for college because the university failed to inform him about financial aid and scholarships (Interview, December 15, 2017). Blue believes that refugees are not encouraged to pursue higher education: he understands the importance of encouragement for refugees, so he serves as an advocate in the Congolese community, and he often talks to Congolese people about the importance of higher education (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Like Kia, Eddy was not encouraged or supported to go to college after he graduated from high school. Therefore, his path to college was very difficult, as he did not know what to do after applying to university. He struggled as he was not helped by the university, even though he asked for help: he recalls being transferred from department to department, and he felt that he was going in circle. Finally, a year later, he was lucky that he met a university professor who helped him reactivate his student account and enroll in classes. According to Eddy, there are many refugee students who are left behind after high school: They never go to college because of the lack of encouragement and support. Eddy said that only students who were supported or encouraged by someone were inspired to pursue higher education (Interview, January 16, 2018).

Kia and Eddy, like many other participants, explained that the reason for their difficulties in higher education was merely because they did not understand the American education system and there was nobody there to help them. The paperwork is usually very hard. If you are a refugee who does not understand the complexity of bureaucracy in school systems and has nobody to ask for help, the struggle is real.

This study specifies the importance of positive influence from sponsors in refugee students' aspirations of pursuing higher education. It is important to note that only access to higher education alone is not enough: Opportunities for refugee students must be present in order to ensure fair access for refugee students in higher education. This study reveals that refugee students know that there is a lack of opportunities, and they are willing to effectively participate to create needed changes. For example, Blue offers a solution to the problem of the lack of encouragement for refugees to pursue

higher education. He shared his story and the importance of education for the well-being of the refugee community (Interview, January 17, 2018). Evelyn also talks not only about what the problem is but how to create solutions for the problem.

Both Blue and Evelyn act as advocates for their communities. They believe that it is important for refugees to be advocates who encourage members of their communities to pursue higher education. Evelyn's example shows us that it is crucial that refugees are a part of the educational system as professionals so that they can directly influence the school system by serving as role models, cultural informants, and support for minority students. Educators, schools, and society should understand that refugee students do not just receive help from their community; they are actively helping by creating inclusive and empowering solutions (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Refugee and immigrant representation is not only important in public schools but in colleges and universities. Given the shifts in the school demographics that have led to an increase in the number of students who are refugees, immigrants, students of color, and/or limited English speakers and a lack of teachers from diverse groups, "the resulting social distance can be an impenetrable obstacle to effective teaching and learning" (Gay, 1993, p. 102). Gay (1993) proposes that "colleges and universities incorporate cultural brokering and cultural context into their teacher education programs to ensure that teachers are maximally prepared to teach students of the 21st century" (p. 14).

In conclusion, the lack of equitable resources and support in higher education discourage many Congolese refugee students from pursuing and succeeding in higher education. All participants agree that higher education institutions would increase

Congolese refugee students' feeling of belonging by creating more inclusive and equitable school environments.

### Issues in Higher Education —Otherness, Discrimination and Institutionalized

#### Discrimination

This theme describes lived experiences based on ten Black Congolese refugee students' stories, particularly their experiences in higher education. The theme provides important information for researchers who focus on refugee and racial minority students in higher education. It provides important information about how these factors affect equitable educational opportunities and well-being of refugee students in higher education. Since this study focuses on Black refugee students, it is important to connect this theme to critical race theory. McCoy (2015) explains that the critical race approach deeply illuminates the complex power discrepancies within institutions of higher education. In order to provide an opportunity for refugee students in higher education, these complex power discrepancies that are a root cause for inequality and inequity must be interrupted and dismantled. McCoy also critiques concepts of "color blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality," stating that this is "systemically framed by law and supported by institutional programs and policies that demonstrate an interest convergence" (p. 33).

The participants' narratives shared their astonishing educational journeys, explaining how they were, again, traumatized, but this time they were traumatized and "othered" in school, in a new country. In this theme, refugee stories portrayed three major issues refugee students face in higher education:

- First, they experienced feeling “othered” and discriminated against by white students and white faculty at the university. This theme shows that being “othered” and discriminated against caused students of color to feel discouraged, un-welcome, and marginalized in school and university.
- Second, they attribute their troubling experiences with high-stakes standardized tests to institutional discrimination. The tests were in place to create additional burdens for refugee and minority students, making it more difficult for them to access to higher education.
- Third, additional challenges in higher education included feeling excluded and without equitable rights due to lack of support and understanding from teachers and lack of knowledge and opportunities for refugee students to access available resources on campus. These students felt that white students have the opportunity to access resources on campus because they are privileged to know how to use the resources. In addition, participants expressed their concern that people who are in charge of the resources are generally non-refugee, white, and privileged students or staff, who are ill-prepared to successfully represent and serve people of color and refugee students.

Discrimination and Otherness in Higher Education. Even though Gia was resettled to the United States, she still struggles with fitting in. The biggest struggle for Gia is that people judge her based on the color of her skin, and whatever she does, and no matter how hard she tries to fit, they just do not see her as equal:

I feel like [some] people judge you based on the color of your skin. [...] It is pretty hard being underestimated, it is just like an extra burden that you don't need. That how it feels like. It feels like, I should be able to go to school and get the same education as my white counterparts in this country. [You] just go to



school and then people just don't see you as equal and it's just very discouraging. Like why am I doing this in the first place? (Interview, December 16, 2017)

Like Ngenge, Denise faced discrimination and othering from one university professor.

The professor avoided her and did not want to help her when she had a question. Also, the professor ignored her when Denise raised her hand to answer a question in class, calling instead on other students:

It was a really bad experience. I wish, I could really know why. In that class, I didn't get a good grade. I failed it. I stopped going to class, because I felt I wasn't welcomed there. I felt [that by] being in that class, I am no one, they don't see me. I got a 'D' but I knew I could do better, but I just couldn't go to that class as I felt ignored and humiliated. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

In the focus group conversation, Denise explained that she was thinking about reporting the professor's discriminatory behavior, but she did not know how or where to report it and she was afraid of being targeted even more by the professor or administration (Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018). Eddy, like Denise, had some terrible experiences in class at the university that he believes happened because he is Black and he did not know what to do about it (Interview, January 16, 2018).

Sarah was exposed to an unwelcoming environment in a sociology class. She experienced discriminatory comments from other students during a discussion about refugees and Black people. The students said that Black people and refugees steal American money and that they are not welcomed in the United States. The professor attempted but did not effectively address the problem. Sarah experienced a hostile environment during the class, to the point where she felt afraid because of her race and refugee status. So, she did not get the opportunity to say anything. But, she was ready to explain to the students that refugees contribute to the community and the economy. It was

difficult because she was the only refugee and Black person in the classroom (Interview, January 11, 2018; Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018).

Even though Evelyn had a 4.0 GPA, she was discouraged by people's disbelief about her academic abilities. She states, "I always felt judged by other students and other people no matter how well I did in school, because of who I am." Also, Evelyn shared her experiences of being "othered" while taking classes from professors who were closed-minded:

When I was writing a paper for a class, and I was asked to relate the book I read to my experiences. Then, I got pushback from my professor for relating it to my refugee experiences. Now, in that class, I have to make sure when I write that I am not adding any kind of African or refugee experiences/issues because she [the professor] does not care about that at all. (Member Check Interview, February 28, 2018).

Evelyn felt discriminated against when she was prohibited from including her African refugee experience in her writing for the class (Interview, January 17, 2018).

Kia and Pirens stated that Congolese students are discriminated against by other students. They are called "stinking, Black." But, if they report it to teachers, the victimized students are treated as the problem and blamed for what happened to them—"Blame the Victim." Meanwhile, the students who are bullies do not experience any consequences for their behavior. They know that they can get away with bullying. This discriminatory behavior in school further traumatizes refugee students. Those students feel powerless, so they are afraid to report these issues (Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018).

Overall, participants felt discouraged, isolated, and traumatized by the treatment they received from several of their peers and professors at the university. This study

recommends that teachers should possess cultural sensitivity and awareness of privilege and power dynamics in the classroom.

Institutional Discrimination. Study participants felt that institutional discrimination is one of the causes of their troubling experiences with high-stakes standardized tests that are in place to keep them out of the university. Denise explained that she faced this kind of institutional discrimination while applying for college just a few years earlier. After resettling to the U.S., she was attending mostly ELL classes in high school, which did not prepare her for standardized tests:

In high school they put you in these ELL classes, like they isolate you. They isolate you because your English is very low, but it affects you a lot. It's like they're setting you up for failure in high school. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Teachers told her to “do her best” and not worry about her score. Later she faced consequences, as the test scores are of huge importance when applying to college admission and scholarships: The low SAT scores hindered Denise’s admission options to universities and scholarship opportunities as well. She was well aware of the consequences for having low SAT scores, and she understood that there is a discriminatory system in place that made her feel trapped.

Also, during the focus group conversation, Sarah and Denise defended their argument that the SAT scores hindered their opportunities to attend the university of choice. They both shared that these embarrassing test scores will follow them for the rest of their life (Interview, January 11, 2018; Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018). Denise felt discriminated against, as the institution required Congolese and other refugee students to take the tests, but they failed to provide refugee students with the necessary educational foundation and preparation for the tests. In contrast, American-born students

had the opportunity to prepare for tests and possessed the cultural background that the tests were built on:

They prepare them but not us. The English they give you, it's like English for 'babies', and that hurts you. [...] You know, this SAT score will follow you everywhere. It is on your transcript in college, and it will follow you everywhere, even when you apply for a job. Some scholarships asked you for your SAT score, and the score is so bad, because I just came to the United States. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Evelyn, like Denise, felt that there is a discriminatory and unfair system that was designed with an objective to prevent refugee and African students from accessing higher education (Interview, January 11, 2018):

After only one year in the United States, I was forced by the education system to take the SAT, ACT—standardized tests. These are exams designed for white people, who were [systematically] prepared, yet I had to take them too. I worked so hard to get good scores but that did not happen; these scores are required when applying to colleges and other programs in higher education. Now, I am embarrassed every time that I am asked to provide these scores. I feel, I was and I am still institutionally discriminated against and I cannot do anything about. (Member Check Interview, February 28, 2018)

Participants voiced their opinion about unfair treatment by the school system that requires standardized tests scores to enter the university and apply for scholarships. Students who have a lower GPA than 4.0 might not be accepted by university. Even refugee students with 4.0 GPA do not perform well on the tests, and their chances of acceptance to any prestigious university are lowered. This study shows that the educational system should take appropriate actions to prepare refugee students for the standardized tests or offer the opportunity to have the requirement waived.

Additional Barriers in Higher Education. Congolese students face additional barriers that affect their educational experiences such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); language barriers and language discrimination; barriers navigating university

resources; cultural challenges that Congolese women face in higher education; and financial resources and poverty. Stevenson and Willott (2007) state that many refugees have experienced traumatic and abusive treatments before their resettlement to a country of permanent resettlement:

These experiences are compounded by the isolation, upheaval and separation experienced in fleeing one country and attempting to settle in another. It is, therefore, of little surprise that mental health problems amongst refugees and asylum seekers are widespread, particularly anxiety and depression, suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder. (p. 675)

In addition, Gia described that the issue of PTSD is present among members of her refugee community: Many refugee students suffered a lot, spending years and decades in wars, refugee camps and exile; “many cannot let go of what happened in the war,” and these experiences may affect their education. To make the situation even worse, many Congolese students or their parents would not bring up the issue of PTSD in school. Gia said, “I don’t know anyone who is going to talk about their traumatic experiences”; “In Africa, you just don’t talk about your emotions, or terrible things that happened to you” (Interview, December 16, 2017).

Also, Kia, Pirens, Sarah, and Denise during their focus group conversations explained that PTSD is a big issue among refugees, who survived wars and traumatic experiences, but many of them will not talk about those issues as they are afraid that they may be seen as crazy by the Congolese community. Talking about mental health is still a taboo for many people in the community (Denise and Sarah, Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018; Kia and Pirens, Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018). Therefore, educators and schools should be aware of the presence of traumatic experiences among refugee students, even when the students do not reveal those experiences to school

faculty and staff, including counselors and social workers. Schools should create a safe, welcoming environment to reduce the effects of traumatic experience on refugee students' well-being and educational success.

### Language-Based Discrimination

Study participants shared stories of language-based discrimination in school.

Ngenge explained that there were a couple of times where she “felt like oh man, maybe I’m not meant to be in college because English is my second language.” She believed that adequate support for refugee students was missing: she stated “one hour from a tutor” in the writing center or from a tutor in any other class is not enough: “I could talk to the professor, but the appointment is like half an hour and that is not enough either. I feel that the professors pay more attention to the American students than me, because I’m from another country” (Interview, December 21, 2017). She felt “othered” because of her English language proficiency, which marked her as a foreigner who did not belong in the United States or the school system.

Sometimes, Sarah felt that people purposely pretended that they did not understand her. She explains: “Even if you speak the language, there will be time that people would say “what did you say? ‘What did you say?’” For example, “there are some professors where they understand you, and there are others, who completely do not understand you,” so these experiences were humiliating and discouraging.

The participants explain that refugees must work extra hard to understand the material presented in the class. Sarah stated:

You have to work extra hard to master the material, and some professors understand me, but some don’t know how to work with a refugee. Some don’t even know what a refugee is. Like, we know what we’ve been through but those

professors don't understand our experience and cannot relate and therefore, they cannot help us much. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

This study shows that there is a need for equitable treatment for all students. Refugee students should be provided more time with resources, such as tutoring and other academic support services; otherwise, they are being disadvantaged and potentially oppressed by the educational system. Also, because they are emerging English language learners, they should receive equitable support to succeed in school. Examples of support include additional time for learning English and taking tests and quizzes. Teachers and staff should move from “treating everyone equally” to equitable teaching practices and support. In other words, institutions of higher education should provide additional resources for refugee students. This way, all students will be able to enjoy the opportunity of higher education. Teachers should reach out to refugee students and offer them accommodations, as many refugee students, because of their traumatic experiences and cultural norms, might not feel ready to approach the teacher for help.

Congolese Women—Challenges in Higher Education. In addition to many issues that Congolese students face in higher education, Congolese women face more cultural barriers than Congolese males: they are expected to stay close to home and to get married, at an early age. This cultural barrier may limit their educational endeavors. Kia explains that Congolese women get married early, and they are unlikely to continue higher education after getting married because of the African cultural norms. They will usually stay at home and take care of children. AM10 states:

In my country it is not very common but here it is different. Here if you want to go to school you can but, in my culture, women usually get married early. It's not like, the American culture, where you go to school and the guy can wait for you. (Interview, December, 19, 2017)

Also, I asked Sarah and Denise during their focus group conversation if females go to college when they are older. I asked this as my female participants are 18, 19, 20, 20, and 25 years old, and my male participants are 21, 28, 43, 43, and 49 years old. Sarah and Denise laughed, stating that in their culture, only males go to school when they are older because females need to take care of children, and even if they have the opportunity to go to college when older, they do not have a desire to go because of cultural norms and beliefs (Interview, March 2018). Therefore, additional support should be provided to empower Congolese women to pursue higher education such as college preparation workshops, cultural orientations about differences and similarities between cultures, and educational presentations that provide an opportunity to learn about resources for Congolese women to succeed in society. This support can help Congolese women and their families to negotiate cultural norms and the importance of the pursuit of higher education for women.

Barriers Navigating the University Resources. Sarah faced barriers such as lack of quality academic advising for refugee students. There was nobody to explain how to navigate university resources. Sarah states:

I didn't know I could go to the writing center or how to use the library. I had to find everything out on my own. For example, my first semester I was taking some classes and they didn't count, so I found out the university had me as a part time student instead of full-time, because of some of those classes that didn't count. I still don't know why some credits didn't count. I didn't know that, and no one was there to tell me. (Interview, January 11, 2018)

Evelyn, like Sarah, explains that universities do not provide equitable support for refugee students on her campus: She had to learn how to navigate campus resources by herself.

She experienced indifference from tutors in the math center. She said, "they get annoyed



with students who ask many questions. You know, they could use some training on how to work with refugee students” (Interview, January 17, 2018).

AM10, Kia, and Eddy shared similar experiences about lack of equitable support on campus. AM10 explains: “It was tough. It was tough for me because I didn’t understand how things [worked] in college, I mean it was easier for my American friends because that is how they grew up, they understood it better” (Interview, December, 19, 2017). Eddy and Kia also shared that they had to figure out everything on their own on campus (Eddy, Interview, January 16, 2018; Kia, Interview, December 15, 2017).

It is important to reiterate that these previously traumatized and currently marginalized and “othered” students, who are trying to live in peace in the United States, are in constant struggles in school. They constantly worry about classmates’ perceptions of them, professor bias, their language skills, their skin color, their status within the school, and their right to challenge various types of discrimination because it is hard to fight for your right if you are seen as “other” by the system of power. These students feel like second-class residents again, left to themselves to continue their long struggle, this time a struggle for an equitable education and their well-being in their new community. Despite these barriers, these women and men are very resilient and determined to succeed in accessing and pursuing higher education.

Financial Situation. Participants explained that poverty and lack of finances are a barrier for many Congolese. For example, some students do not go to school because they must go to work to support their families. Eddy pointed out that Congolese refugees struggle financially, and they are not able to afford to pay for education. Eddy explained that poverty is one of the biggest challenges in his community (Interview, January 16,

2018). Kia and Pirens explained that refugee students cannot afford to pay for school. He states that he is still paying for his tuition loans (Focus Group Interview, March 6, 2018).

In conclusion, all these challenges mentioned in this study are very real issues that affect the well-being of Congolese refugee students and the community as a whole. It is crucial to understand how the factors of sociocultural and linguistic background, historical circumstances, traumatic experiences, previous educational experiences, and experience of discrimination, including institutional discrimination, impact Congolese refugee students' academic success and their opportunity to access higher education. This all impacts their current educational success and successful acculturation and integration in the United States. Finally, based on this study and my personal experiences, I conclude that it is also important to act with understanding of the issues these students face in higher education by providing equitable resources for all students. I will elaborate more on the issues the Congolese and many other students from refugee backgrounds face in higher education in the recommendations section.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Even though there is limited literature about refugee students in higher education, all other studies also found that refugees face similar struggles in United States schools. This research study was conducted with Congolese students in the Northwest region of the United States, and its findings may apply to other Congolese students in other parts of the United States. But, the findings may not be transferable to all refugee students in the United States or other parts of the world because of differences due to race, religion, socioeconomic standing, and other factors (Kunz, 1973). Additional studies need to be conducted with different refugee populations in other parts of the United States and the

world in order to get a full picture of the issues refugee students from all backgrounds face in higher education.

Furthermore, research on Congolese students in higher education revealed that the 60% of male participants were older than 43 years old, while all female participants were younger than 25 years old. This age disparity between Congolese female and male participants, and issues that Congolese female students face in higher education, require further study.

Additionally, researchers need to be culturally sensitive when conducting research on students from different backgrounds, as many of the refugee students of color may not trust white researchers and may decline to participate in the study. I was informed by several of my participants that they would decline to participate if the researcher were white. Because I am white, I was confused by that statement. I did not ask anything but waited for them to continue. After a short pause, the focus group participants continued: “you are different, you went through similar suffering, you understand our issues [...] and we see that you are an honest person we can trust” (Focus Group Interview, March 6). I was not expecting participants to see me this way, as I am a white and a male refugee researcher. At the same time, I am aware of many privileges that are given to me just for being white and male.

### **Summary of Recommendations in the Field of Education**

Recommendations for teachers, staff, and students were discussed in depth in Chapter 5. Here, I provide a brief summary of those recommendations.

Theme 1: Escape, Surviving in Camp(s), Exile, and Coping with Trauma

Participants' traumatic lived experiences before escaping the DRC and during their life in refugee camps and exile in Africa may affect their well-being and academic performances in a resettlement country. Many of them experienced torture, and some of them even witnessed their family members killed in front of them. Now, these refugee students are still coping with their cruel past. In order to help these students integrate and thrive in the society, they need additional support after resettlement based on the following recommendations that emerged from this theme:

- There should be a welcoming environment for refugees after resettlement in schools and the surrounding community.
- The host society and schools should offer supportive services for refugees to help with healing and transition to a new country.
- Schools should provide culturally appropriate treatment for refugee students that considers issues of race and justice.
- School districts should provide appropriate training on how to work with refugee students, who are traumatized, disadvantaged, and marginalized.

By providing the above mentioned resources to refugee students, schools and communities can help these students integrate into their new community. Well-integrated refugees will be able to prosper and contribute to their new community.

#### Theme 2: Gaps in Education: Interrupted or Limited Education During the Exile and Prolonged Stay in Camp(s)

The study reveals that most participants faced limited resources and education during their stay in refugee camps and exile. This created learning gaps and educational struggles after resettlement: In most cases, when refugees continued their education in the

United States, they were placed in their grade level corresponding to their age, and their academic knowledge did not always match their actual grade level. In the case of my Congolese participants, schools failed to bring them to the same level with other students.

Besides their traumatic experiences, their unfair past educational experiences, absence of equitable resources in refugee camps hinder Congolese students' success in school and their well-being after resettlement to the United States. Thus, in order to close the achievement gap and opportunity gap between refugee and native-born students, this study recommends that schools provide the following:

- Equitable distribution of resources and benefits for refugee students.
- Equitable and culturally relevant teaching to build on students' previous knowledge.
- More resources for teachers who work with refugee students.
- Teachers who are culturally sensitive and well-prepared to make these students ready for college.

In order for Congolese and other refugee students to receive fair and equitable educational opportunities, above mentioned recommendations should be available for them.

### Theme 3: Colliding Cultures: Acculturation, Cultural Differences, Feeling Discriminated Against, and Coping with Trauma after Resettlement

In this theme, study participants described how cultural differences, discrimination, and otherness, yet again placed them in a traumatic situation—a situation they never anticipated nor were prepared to deal with. These additional burdens of being treated differently, being “othered” by some members of the host society, created feelings

of not belonging. These students coped with trauma while experiencing cultural differences; identity crises (“not here or there”); discrimination by the host society and institutions; the unpreparedness of high schools to deal with refugee students; and bullying and othering by peers in school. This theme revealed significant issues that Congolese students face after resettling to the United States. Therefore, I recommend the following:

- Schools should provide equitable educational practices in order to give all students an opportunity to go to college.
- Schools, teachers, and staff should promote diversity, inclusion, and safe learning environments. They should tackle bullying practices and “othering,” systemic racism, institutional discrimination, and inequitable practices that might negatively impact refugee students’ college preparedness and well-being.
- Schools should promote acculturation values that require both cultures to accommodate each other and endorse multiculturalism and inclusion by teaching about the importance of diversity and supporting refugee students as they preserve their cultural heritages while adjusting to a new culture.
- Schools and school districts should create inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum and instruction and provide adequate training for teachers on how to address cultural differences in classrooms.
- It would be beneficial for school to recruit cultural informants to help refugee students and teachers in their learning process.

If these recommendations were to be implemented, refugee students would feel welcome in their new country; they would experience lower cultural stress, which would

help them in dealing with identity crises. This will help refugee students alleviate their feelings of fear and unwelcomeness because people who are informed and know how they can get support if needed are less scared and more welcomed into the community and school.

#### Theme 4: Higher Education as Opportunity: Aspiration and Support

In this theme, participants, through their stories, described that they experienced limited encouragement and support while accessing higher education. They also highlighted the importance of encouragement, aspiration, and support in creating opportunity to access and academically grow in higher education. In addition, participants offered important information explaining how these factors affect equitable education and success of refugee students in higher education. Thus, this study recommends the following:

- Education should be recognized as a driving force for successful refugee integration within the society. Refugee students' aspirations to go to college should be supported and encouraged.
- There should be specific opportunities for refugee students to go to college—not just an access—because refugee students need more resources than native-born students.
- Schools should include refugee students in creating opportunities, encouragement, and inclusion. Refugee students should be employed to assist with other support services for refugee students on campus.
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Theme 5: Issues in Higher Education: Otherness, Discrimination and Institutionalized Discrimination

The final theme describes how participants' lived experiences after resettlement—including factors such as traumatic experiences after resettlement, issues accessing higher education, and discrimination—affect refugee students in higher education and their well-being in the society. Thus, this theme suggests the following recommendations:

- High schools should fully prepare refugee students for college.
- High schools should reconsider administering SAT and ACT tests to newly resettled refugee students. These tests could create additional stress and re-traumatization of these students, creating negative consequences as their generally low scores may hinder their future educational endeavors.
- Higher education institutions should reconsider requiring SAT and ACT scores for the refugee students' admission into college.
- In order to create a safe environment for refugee students on campus, higher education institutions should provide training workshops for faculty and staff on campus to prepare them to work with ethnically and culturally diverse populations.
- Higher education institutions should promote diversity and inclusion through education in order to reduce stereotypes, prejudice, microaggressions, and discrimination on campus.
- Higher education institutions should create equitable treatment for all students on campus by providing accommodations such as extra time with tutoring, extra time in the writing center with culturally sensitive personnel, and culturally-informed



advising services that are able to support refugee students navigating higher education and resources on campus.

By following the above-mentioned recommendations and by providing equitable educational resources and support for refugee students, higher education would become a driving force of acculturation and integration of refugee students. It will help refugee students cope with traumatic experiences, reduce cultural stress, support their educational endeavors, and create a positive effect on the society as a whole (Barry, 1997).

### **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude my study by illuminating that Congolese refugee students are very resilient and hardworking students through all challenges that are placed on them. These students are being discriminated against, “othered,” marginalized, and they have been left without equitable opportunities in higher education. Nonetheless, these students are eager to succeed. They see their education as extremely important for them, their family and their community. They believe that they as future advocates will be able to voice their struggles, teach and share knowledge, and advocate for their communities to help future refugee students in higher education. During my member check with Evelyn, she stated she was very excited about this study. She sees the potential of the study to help refugee students have credible sources that they can use to advocate for themselves in higher education. For example, if she experiences discrimination in class, she will be able use the study to back up her ideas and opinions about black and refugee students.

If ethical norms were to be applied in higher education and all refugees were given equitable and rights to opportunities, it would help refugee’s integration and

acculturation process in the United States, and it would increase the well-being of society as a whole. I hope that this research study will offer valuable information for school staff and teachers to strive for equitable rights for all students and empower refugee and marginalized students to continue their struggle for justice and their rights in education.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his speech in Atlanta on February 4, 1968, shortly before he was assassinated, echoed the important message to always strive for justice, peace and righteousness in the United States:

If you want to say that I was a drum major,  
say  
that I was a drum major for justice, [...]  
Say that I was a drum major for peace.  
I was a drum major for righteousness.  
And all of the other  
shallow things  
will not matter.

(Weingarten & Ruane, 2011, p. 1)

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APPENDIX A  
**Informed Consent**

**Study Title:** Access and Participation of Congolese Students in Higher Education

**Principal Investigator:** Refik Sadikovic

**Co-Investigator:** Dr. Stan Steiner

This consent form will provide the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. This form describes what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form, and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

▪ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to participate in a research study that will explore access and participation of Congolese students in higher education who resettled to the United States as refugees. This research is being done for my dissertation. The information gathered will be used to examine and understand refugee student needs accessing and pursuing higher education. You are being asked to participate because you identified as a Congolese who came as a refugee to the United States. You also, are planning to access higher education, currently pursuing higher education or have received a college degree.

▪ **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Allow me to interview you privately (in person, on the phone, or via Skype) one time and audio-record the interview. This interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. If at any time you are uncomfortable in the interview or would like me not to record you, all you have to do is tell me. You will not need to answer any question you do not want to answer. After this interview, I will ask you if you would be willing to also participate in the focus group interview. I will also ask you if you know of any other Congolese refugee who might like to participate in this research.
- After the interview, I will be scheduling a focus group appointment with you (and the other study participants) for a group interview. For this interview, your identity will be known to the other participants in the group. This interview will last approximately 1 to 2 hours. You will not need to answer any question you do not want to answer.
- After the focus group interview, I would like to follow up with you to make sure I have recorded your answers correctly.
- Finally, I would like to have one last individual meeting with you to review any direct quotes I would like to use have been conveyed accurately. This meeting should take 10-30 minutes. There are no specific questions for this meeting. I only wish to be sure I have captured your thoughts and experiences correctly.

Your real name will not be used in my dissertation, or in any publication. Instead I will use a pseudonym.

- **RISKS**

Being audio recorded may make you uncomfortable. You also may experience unpleasant memories from your past during the interview. However, you are always free to withdraw your participation at any time.

- **BENEFITS**

Although there may be no direct benefits to you from participating in this study, the information that you provide may help governmental and educational policy makers as well as teachers and our society to better understand how to work with recent refugees and to create more effective policies that will positively affect the refugee population in the United States.

- **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The principal investigators and the Boise State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications, which result from this research. A pseudonym will be used in any written reports or publications. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

**Focus Group:** If you decide to participate in the focus group, I—the researcher—cannot guarantee confidentiality to focus group participants as it depends on the willingness of other participants in the group to respect that privacy.

- **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

There will be no payment or compensation for participation in this project.

- **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

- **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you should first contact the principal investigator at [RefikSadikovic@boisestate.edu](mailto:RefikSadikovic@boisestate.edu) or (208) 275-9719. You may also contact co-investigator/advisor, Dr. Stan Steiner at [StanSteiner@Boisestate.edu](mailto:StanSteiner@Boisestate.edu) or (208) 426-3962.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the

protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

#### **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

For each of the phases of data collection, please place your initials on the line:

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in an individual interview(s) that will be audio recorded and analyzed.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in a focus group interview that will be audio recorded/analyzed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name** of Study  
 Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature** of Study Participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

APPENDIX B

**One-on-One In-Depth Interview**

## **One-on-One In-Depth Interview Questions**

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Institution: Boise State University**

**Interviewer: Refik Sadikovic, Doctoral Student**

**Interviewee/Pseudonym:**

### **Demographic Questions**

1. What is your age?
  2. Where were you born (country)?
  3. What is your gender?
  4. What is your nationality?
  5. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?
  6. What is your major/academic discipline?
  7. What is your year in college? (Circle):
    - a) Planning to Attend   b) Year 1   c) Year 2   d) Year 3   e) Year 4   f) Year 5+   g) Finished
- College

### **Background questions:**

8. Can you tell me about your life in Congo before the war? What was it like to live and grow up in Congo?
9. Describe your life during the war in Congo and your reasons for escaping?
10. Have you lived in any other country or city after escaping from your home (how long) before coming to the U.S. – Describe your experience.
11. What year did you resettle to the United States? How old were you when you moved to the U.S.? Can you tell me about this experience?

12. Can you tell me about your initial experience after resettlement to the U.S.?
13. Can you tell me about your experiences integrating into the host—U.S. society?

**Questions about Education and Community:**

14. Can you tell me about your experiences with education in the Congo?
15. Can you tell me about your experiences with school in the U.S.?

Depending on the participants' response, I may need to ask some of the following question:

16. Had you ever planned to access higher education prior to resettlement or after the resettlement to the U.S.? If you currently pursuing or already finished higher education; tell me when, why and how you came to the idea to start your education in the U.S.?
  - a. Did anyone help/influence/encourage/motivate you to go to college? How so?
  - b. Did anyone help you with the higher education application process? How so?
  - c. Did you get any help in a U.S. high school with your college application? process? If so, what kind of help do you remember receiving?
  - d. What was it like to apply to college?
17. Can you tell me anything that you remember about your first/initial experiences at X University?
18. What types of support are/were available to you (refugee students) at X University and how do these support systems affect your higher education experience?

- a. Did you feel that you were welcomed at your University and is there a time when you felt like you did not fit in?
  - b. Can you tell me about any times that you may have felt unsatisfied with your experience at your University?
  - c. Can you tell me about any times you felt, your University was the perfect fit for you?
19. Are/were there any challenges/barriers accessing and going through higher education?
20. Is there anything you wish is /was there to help you (have helped you) while going through higher education?
21. From your viewpoint, how does your higher education experience compare to the experiences of domestic students that are not from refugee backgrounds?
22. What does your college experience mean to you and your family?
23. How is your education and your degree going to affect you and your family/Congolese community?
24. What is your current role in your community and has your education had any impact in achieving your role within the community

**Concluding Questions:**

25. What do you think are the biggest barriers/challenges for current refugees who want to attend college?
26. Is there anything that you would like to add about your college experiences that we have not already discussed?



APPENDIX C

**Focus Group Follow-up Conversation Questions**

## **Focus Group Follow-up Conversation Questions**

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Institution: Boise State University**

**Interviewer: Refik Sadikovic, Doctoral Student**

**Interviewees/Pseudonyms:**

Thank you for participating in the focus group part of my study about Congolese refugee students in higher education.

The purpose of our focus group is to follow up with you (participants that were interested to participate in the focus group) for reassurance that any quotes I use in this study are accurate. Do you have any questions before we begin? Thank you. Now, let's begin.

### **Questions**

1. Tell me about your experiences with school in the U.S.?
2. Tell me anything that you remember about your first/initial experiences at X University?
3. What types of support are/were available to you (refugee students) at X University and how do these support systems affect your higher education experience?
  - a. Did you feel that you were welcomed at your University and is there a time when you felt like you did not fit in?
  - b. Can you tell me about any times that you may have felt unsatisfied with your experience at your University?
4. Are/were there any challenges/barriers accessing and going through higher education?
5. Is there anything you wish is /was there to help you (have helped you) while going through higher education?

6. From your viewpoint, how does your higher education experience compare to the experiences of domestic students that are not from refugee backgrounds?
7. What does your college experience mean to you and your family and your community?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your college experience?
9. What factors allow a person to access and effectively pursue higher education and integrate into American society?
10. How would you define equitable access and equal opportunities in higher education?
11. What are your goals for the future and how your education may affect these goals?