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SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS' ACADMIC AND SOCIAL EXPERINCES IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Donia S. Almadani

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DePaul University
College of Education

**SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS' ACADMIC AND SOCIAL EXPERINCES IN
AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

A Dissertation in Education
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

By
Donia Al-Madani

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

June, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The present research explores the experiences of Syrian refugee students in American schools. This qualitative research project is based in interviews of five Syrian students from refugee backgrounds aged between 11-18 years old who had come to the United States after the civil war raged in Syria in 2011. This qualitative research examines the educational barriers and supports, from the Syrian refugee students' perspectives, by understanding their educational and social experiences. Based on the findings, these five Syrian refugee students had both positive and negative experiences in the United States schools. Major themes were found in the data that are central to the students' educational and social experiences. These themes presented as (a) social and academic experiences in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt and then, (b) learning a new language, and then, (c) current experiences in U.S., with attention to the building of relationships. Recommendations on how educators can support their quest for belonging and inclusion are discussed. Recommendations on how Syrian refugee can be supported in the U.S. schools are discussed.

Key words: Syrian refugees, refugee educational and social experiences, sense of belonging.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The reconstruction of Syria has become more difficult as the war has continued since 2011. The war presents unique health, educational, political, and economic issues. The issues that Syrian people face today illustrate the extent of the crisis. Around the globe, more children are displaced today than ever before and the costs of helping and supporting them are rising (UNICEF, 2013). Pertinent to education, a shocking report by UNHCR (2015b) shows that children are increasingly affected by war: “Children below 18 years of age constituted about half of the refugee population in 2015, up from 41 percent in 2009 and the same as in 2014” (p.3).

With all the risks and challenges, organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Save The Children, and others are supporting refugees in specific areas, by providing homes, food, hospitals, and education.

Every student comes with a unique background and experiences (Yu,2012) Refugee students bring their own cultures and histories to the classroom in their host countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2015); as such, they add to the diversity in a school’s environment. Students’ backgrounds, histories, and cultures, along with positive and negative experiences both in their home countries and beyond, may affect their educational experience in the U.S. The cultures and histories of Syrian refugee students are important to be explored in the United States schools because they are the newest wave of refugees (so we know less about their experiences), and refugees have some significantly different experiences than other international students.

Refugees have often grown up under the sounds of explosives and fear; these experiences could impact learning and how children build relationships with people. Furthermore, the

cultural and historical reasons for refugee resettlement are possibly not completely known by their American teachers and other stakeholders, which might exacerbate the gap between the students' needs and learning goals. Similar to other immigrant students, English language barriers and cultural misunderstandings could also make communication between teachers and refugee students in the U.S. schools more difficult.

My research focuses on the educational and social experiences of Syrian students who attend schools in a large Midwestern city. This study used qualitative methods – primarily interviews of Syrian students who have attend American schools – and it focuses on exploring the successes and challenges for this group. Furthermore, this research examined the educational barriers and supports, from the students' perspectives, by understanding their educational and social experiences. Because the Syrian crisis is recent and ongoing, published research on this community in the Unites States is limited.

The Research Problem

All children should have the right to learn in a healthy, positive, comfortable, and safe school (UN convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Since the war started in Syria in 2011 children have faced issues like separation from family, trauma, anxiety, and travelling alone. Kanu (2008), in the article, Educational Needs and Barriers for African Refugee Students in Manitoba, shows “Separation from family not only created acute loneliness for many of the students but also robbed them of the role models who had provided the example, stability, and structures needed to thrive academically” (p.924).

According to UNICEF (2013) Most of the Syrian refugee children did not attend schools before they moved to the U.S, which impact their lives and education. Syrian refugee students’

families flee their homes and are often in a number of other places before becoming resettled as refugees or seeking asylum. Moreover, the political and economic situation has encouraged refugees to quit school when they were in their country (Human Rights Watch, 2015). One of the most significant dilemmas facing refugee students is memories of their experiences and of living through war. The need for resettlement of Syrian refugees is large, and the US is responding.

Zong and Batalova (2017) state:

In response to the civil war in Syria that began in 2011 and has resulted in the displacement of more than 11 million people within and beyond the country's borders, the United States in 2015 began to accept for resettlement significantly more Syrian refugees than ever before. (para.1).

Accepting Syrian refugees means accepting more Syrian students in U.S. schools, which requires American schools to be responsible to teach these students the knowledge and skills to support them in coping with their new lives. Rong and Preissle (2009) explained that American schools are responsible to integrate refugees into American society. They claim that:

U.S. schools have been the most important social institution for absorbing newcomers; few public institutions have been as directly affected by high levels of immigration as the nation's schools. However, the task of integrating new groups of people into U.S. society has become increasingly challenging. (p. 5).

It is possible that refugee students might not be prepared to adapt to the new educational environment. Some refugee students face psychological problems because of the circumstances and life that they have experienced, these psychological problems in turn hinder their learning. According to Human Rights Watch (2015), "If a person is sick, they can get treatment and get better. If a child doesn't go to school, it will create significant problems in the future—they will end up on the streets, or go back to Syria to die fighting, or be radicalized into extremists, or die in the ocean trying to reach Europe." (p.1). Mandhani (2016) shows that one of the issues experienced by refugee students is that when they travel to a new country, they usually do not

understand the changes and they struggle to learn new academic or social skills in schools. For that reason, my research aims to explore Syrian refugee experiences in the United States schools to better understand their experiences and provide useful information about their challenges and success.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the successes and challenges that Syrian refugee students face in the American schools. This study highlighted the supports and barriers they face every day in school that affect their learning. Refugee students and their families travel from developing and war countries to the United States with the hope of finding a positive and supportive place to learn and grow up. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the American school experiences of Syrian refugee students, in order that the future will include more help for this group of students to be successful in schools and in their experiences becoming integrated into American society. This study hopes to open the door for educators, teachers, and researchers to understand the challenges and positive experiences that refugee students face in schools. This research focuses on the educational and social experiences of Syrian refugee students who arrived in the United States after the civil war in 2011. The end aim of the study is to highlight of the school experiences for Syrian refugees in a way that gives educators an opportunity to understand the needs of these students.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. How do Syrian refugee students experience US schools?
 - a. What are their social experiences?
 - b. What are their academic experiences?

2. How do schools influence the refugee students' experiences?
 - a. What are the challenges Syrian refugee students experience in the US schools?
 - b. What successes have they had in U.S. schools?
 - c. What are the students' perceptions about how their school supports or hinders their learning?
3. How do the students perceive the relationship between migration and refugee experiences (on the one hand) and learning?
 - a. How are these life experiences related to social experiences?
 - b. How are these life experiences related to academic experiences?
 - c. How are these life experiences related to the challenges and successes, barriers and supports they experience in U.S. schools and U.S. society?
4. How have the students' experiences in American schools shaped their sense of belonging in the United States?

These research questions reflect three areas of concern, as demonstrated in Figure 1:

movement from Syria to the U.S, learning experiences in Syria and the U.S. and in between, and social experiences.

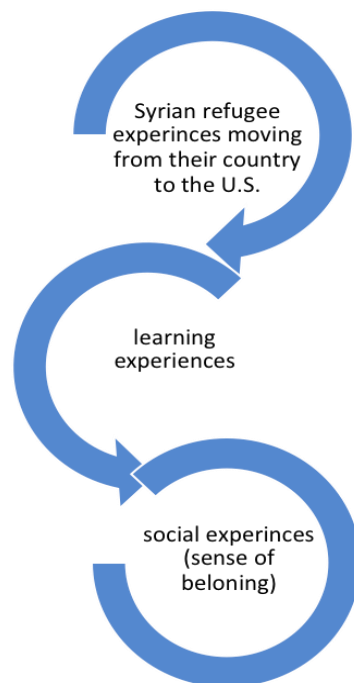


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Reflecting Research Focus.

Approach

In this study, the researcher used a phenomenological methodology. The study used interviews to collect data. Five students from 11 to 18 years old were interviewed. Interviews were audio recorded and each interview was transcribed verbatim, then coded, and the themes were thematically categorized to reveal similarities and differences between the participants' experiences, along with the main elements of their experience.

Researcher Assumptions

As the researcher, I have faced educational challenges and opportunities in the American universities which have supported me to learn and to gain new social and academic experiences. Challenges include living and studying in a different culture, in a different language, with different dominant religions. Most people who move internationally experience a variety of cultural challenges. Moreover, opportunities such as learning a new language, a new culture, and communicating with people from varied countries, have helped me to think critically and accept opinions from different perspectives. For that reason, my interest has shifted to helping Syrian refugee students whose life histories include all of these cultural changes, but also are influenced by war and all that being a refugee entails. As with any research, I have to bracket my experiences and assumptions so that I can hear and understand what the participants tell me about their lives, as it is possible that their experiences will be different than mine.

Significance of and Rationale for the Study

Understanding and exploring Syrian students' successes and challenges, barriers and supports, open opportunities for educators to understand the gap between learning and students' situations. Also, this study will hopefully help educators to improve school practices as they

affect refugee students. Overall, Syrian refugee students may gain some minimal personal benefit by participating and expressing their feelings in this study – or not – this is not an explicit intention of the study, although it may happen. Furthermore, this study will help me as an international student who has a somewhat similar situation to the refugees (although I am not a refugee student) to learn more and gain new experiences about refugee students.

The United States is one of the advanced countries who are welcoming Syrian refugee students. For that reason, American educators should improve their educational services to meet the Syrian refugee needs. More importantly, as an international student, I gained knowledge from this dissertation how refugee students should be treated and supported in schools. It is an opportunity for me as a future leader to be prepared for dealing with refugee students in Saudi Arabia (my country).

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the academic and social experiences of refugee students in the American schools. This literature review focuses particularly but not solely on exploring the academic experiences of one group of students: Syrian refugee students. Moreover, the literature examines what we know about the academic and social experiences that challenge and benefit Syrian refugee students through their educational live in the U.S. Therefore, a focus on how the academic and social barriers were seen through the Syrian refugee students in American public schools would guide one to see the recent experiences that impact them. Furthermore, it will examine what educational challenges and successes Syrian refugee students have faced in the United States of America during the past six years, since the war started, this will help compare the experiences of past Syrian refugees to Syrian refugee students today. The following contents shall be discussed; what is a refugee, definition of refugee protection, Syrian refugee backgrounds, definition of asylum, sense of belonging, cultural change processes, and finally, educational barriers and supports for Syrian refugees.

What is a Refugee?

One of the important themes to explore within refugee students' experience is understanding the concept of refugee, which leads to understanding the academic and social experiences of refugee students. Moreover, it is necessary to realize the meaning of the word refugee to determine the students' rights at the education level. In this section of the paper I will explain the definitions of term refugee, and what kind of persons are legally protected as refugees. The term refugee connotes someone who was forcefully chased or removed from his/her country to live in another country.

According to the UNHCR (2017) a refugee is:

someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. (para.1)

The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) defines the word “refugee” as a person with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”. Shacknove (1985) has a simple definition, which is “a refugee, we might say, is a person fleeing life-threatening conditions” (p.247).

From these definitions, we can realize that refugees are people forced out of their countries, often in violent circumstances such as civil war or economic issues. Refugees seek to take up residence in other countries (Cowart and Cowart, 1993; Huyck and Fields, 1981; McBrien, 2005). According to Shacknove (1985), understanding the concept and meaning of the term refugee hood is important in understanding refugees’ educational experiences and situation. Shacknove (1985) argues, the reason refugees exist is “the absence of state protection of the citizen's basic needs. It is this absence of state protection which constitutes the full and complete negation of society and the basis of refugee hood” (p.277).

In conclusion, refugees are a group of people who are fleeing danger, and for that reason, some of them have been forced to travel to live in other countries; some have lost their children, parents or other relatives. Research shows that the most common reason for traveling to countries is to be protected legally due to the dangers and the fear of persecution in their countries of origin. Children are uniquely influenced by this experience, as they are governed by

their parents' decisions, and they have had much less life experience than older people to draw on.

According to Huyck and Fields (1981), refugee children are:

likely to have spent most of their lives in conditions of ongoing violence. Even in those rare instances of distance from violent scenes prior to their flight, the flight itself has been violent, traumatic and consequently stressful. These experiences are exacerbated through the dynamic interactions of these stressed children with their traumatized parents and significant other adults in their lives. (p.249)

Not everyone who has left violence to seek a new place to live is a refugee in the legal sense. Refugees have applied for refugee status and have been determined to be refugees under the UN protocols. They then begin a process of resettlement – to find a home in another country. This process again entails a vetting process, as particular countries have a process by which they accept refugees for resettlement (or not). Two closely related issues to be discussed are the protections afforded to refugees, and the asylum process.

Refugee Protections

Legally, refugee protection is given for people who have left their countries of origin because of political issues as described above. Heltin (1990) says, “The terms 'refugee' and 'protection' are often invoked in discussions of the needs of individuals for shelter and asylum” (p.119). In Heltin's article “What Is Refugee Protection?” (1990), he offers his definition of the word protection; also, he explains that not all people who traveled to live in different countries for political or economic issues in their countries are under refugee production:

[W]e mean legal protection. The concept must be associated with entitlements under law and, for effective redress of grievances, mechanisms to vindicate claims in respect of those entitlements. An inquiry, then, into whether a population has 'protection' is an examination of the fashion in which the pertinent authorities comply with the entitlements of individuals under international law, and the manner in which these legal precepts are implemented and respected. (p.120).

In addition to the protections for refugees as they are in transition (including in refugee camps), host countries often provide supports. In the U.S, for example, historically, refugees have been provided with housing, English language instruction, help in finding jobs, and the like. Refugee resettlement organizations and humanitarian organizations in the US help refugees to become integrated into U.S. society.

Asylum

Asylum is a protection granted to foreign nationals already in the United States of America or at the border who meet the international definition of a “refugee” (American Immigration Council, 2016). According to Helton (1990), the term asylum is “not defined in international law, but for present purposes it can be taken to mean the act of providing 'protection' to refugees” (p.122). Under international refugee law, the categorical right for refugees to receive asylum protection is not clear yet.

Nakeyar and Frewen (2016) say:

To determine whether an asylum seeker qualifies as a refugee they must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country, and the legitimacy of this claim is determined by the host country. The refugee status determination is conducted by the state or the UNHCR—if the state is unable or unwilling. (p.233).

The difference between asylum seekers and refugees is mainly procedural. A person who requests asylum in a foreign land is called an asylee or asylum seeker. Similarly, a person who requests protection whilst he/she is still overseas, and consequently is given permission to enter the country of desire as a refugee, is obviously called a refugee. The term asylum seeker is used to describe the situation of a person in host countries who is seeking to be classified as a refugee but who has not yet obtained that classification.

The term asylum seeker is slightly different from that of a refugee, although both are entitled to forms of legal protection for people who live in danger of any form of persecution whether it's moral, physical, psychological and / or social and have decided to travel to live in different countries. According to Connor (2016), "Refugees to the U.S. are different from asylum seekers, who claim asylum after already being in the U.S. or crossing into the U.S. via an airport or land border" (para.3). According to UNHCR (1951) asylum can be sought by: "someone who is outside his or her country of origin and unwilling to return, based on a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a social group or political opinion" (8 U.S. Code, Section 1101). Utržan and Northwood (2017) show the difference between refugee and asylum as:

The essential difference between asylum and refugee status has to do with the location of status determination, not the person's history. To that end, an asylum seeker must be physically present in the United States or request admission at a port of entry (e.g., airport) upon arrival. A refugee, however, must obtain status outside of the United States. Thus, persons who arrive as refugees in the United States already have legal permission to stay and to pursue an established legal pathway to citizenship. They also often arrive with family members, ... and receive initial resettlement assistance, work authorization, as well as later legal assistance in applying for other family members to reunify with them. (pp.5-6.)

Recent data gathered by the UNHCR (2015) shows Syria as having the most asylum seekers in 2015 with proximately 4.2 million Syrian asylum seekers. According to the UNHCR (2015b) "More than half (54%) of all refugees worldwide came from just three countries: the Syrian Arab Republic (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), and Somalia (1.1 million)" (p.3). The UNHCR (2015b) shows that in 2015, there were asylum applications in Germany, the United States of America, Sweden, and the Russian Federation from different countries, but Syria has the highest number. By the end of 2015 Syrians were the highest number of new individual asylum seekers, above 90 per cent in most countries. (See Figure 2.)

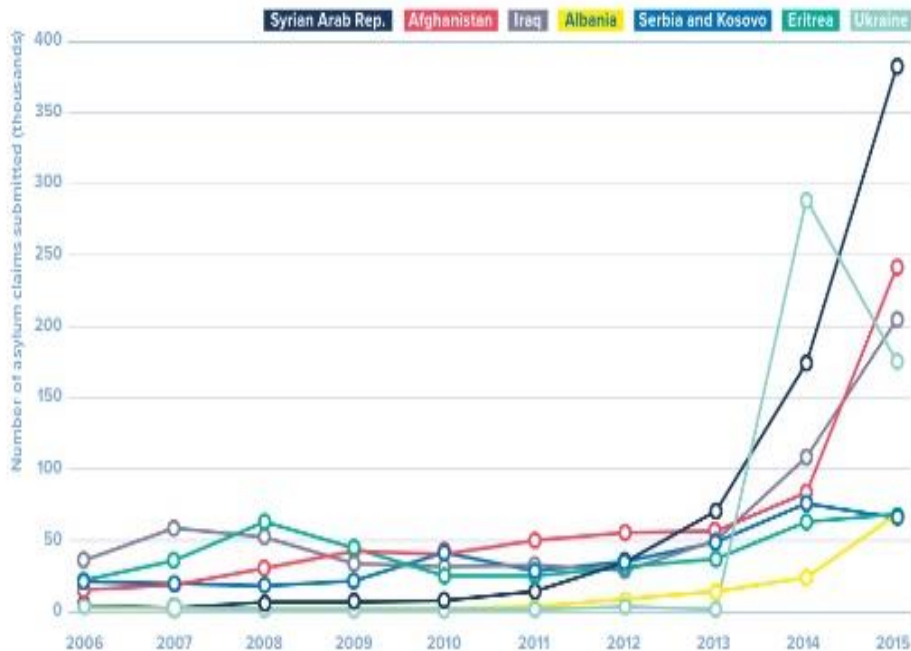


Figure 2. Main Destination Countries for New Asylum-seekers, 2006-2015

Source: UNHCR. (2015b). Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015. Geneva: UNHCR, p.39. Retrieved May 20, 2017, from: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unherstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>

The Migration Policy Institute (2017) shows that states like Illinois, Michigan, California and Texas are receiving the most Syrian refugees. They show that Syrian immigrants are located in these states for various reasons including “their family ties in the United States, health, age, family composition, and language, as well as the cost of living and the availability of jobs, housing, education, and health services in potential placement sites” (para.7). The Migration Policy Institute shows that from 2011 to 2016, San Diego and Chicago are the most common cities for Syrian refugees of all major U.S. cities, with 6% and 4% respectively, with more refugees in other California and Midwestern cities and towns. (See Table 1.) As is evident from

Table 1, most Syrian refugees settle in the West (Sacramento, CA, and Glendale, AZ) or the Midwest (two Michigan cities), with nearly 1000 more in Texas.

Metropolitan Area	Number	Share of Total (%)
Total	18,007	100
San Diego, CA	1,040	6
Chicago, IL	765	4
Troy, MI	594	3
Glendale, AZ	489	3
Houston, TX	447	2
Dallas, TX	437	2
Clinton Township, MI	428	2
Atlanta, GA	404	2
Sacramento, CA	380	2
Dearborn, MI	357	2

Table 1. Top Metropolitan Cities Receiving Syrian Refugees.

Source: Zong, and Batalova,. 2017. *Syrian Refugees in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved [july,1] Para,14. from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states>.

Syrian Refugee Backgrounds

The United States of America has a long history in accepting and helping refugees around the world. The United States has opened the door for refugees since the Second World War. The number of refugees has increased slowly, in 2004, there were 53,000 refugees in the United States of America (U.S. Department of State, 2004).

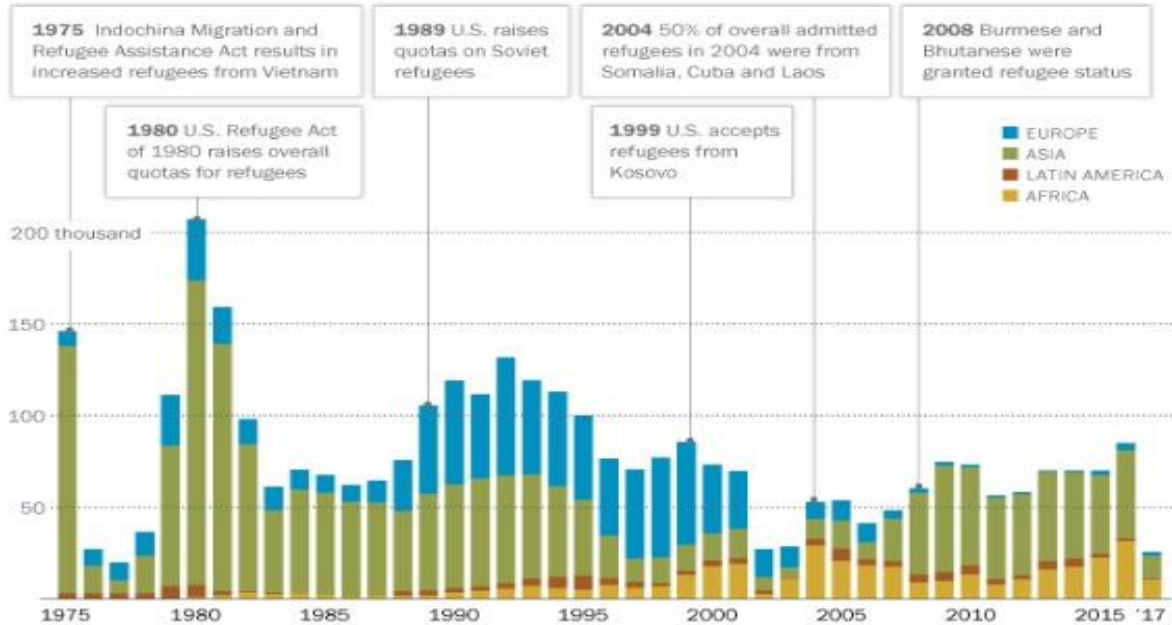
Historically, “The United States has often been a safe haven for the world’s refugees” (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2015, p.6). The number of refugees who come to the United States of America have fluctuated depending on political issues, persecution, armed conflicts, and natural disasters. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR, 2017). Refugees come to the United States from virtually all religions and ethnicities; they come from different countries and the numbers of refugees fluctuate based on events.

Desilver (2015) discusses the history of refugees in the United States of America since 1975, as

The shifting origins of refugees to the U.S. over time

Number of refugees admitted to the U.S., by region of origin of principal applicant and fiscal year



reflected in the graph below. (See Figure 2).

Figure 3. The Shifting Origins of Refugees to the U.S. Over Time.

Source: Pew Research Center (2015). The Shifting Origins of Refugees to the U.S. Over Time. Pew Research Center, September 22. From http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/24/how-the-u-s-compares-with-other-countries-taking-in-refugees/ft_15-09-23_refugeetousbyregion-2/

As per UNHCR (2015a), since 1994, half of the refugee population is children, and evidently children are required to be enrolled in the academic institutions of their host countries. The number of Syrian children refugees was highest in 2015, and the number of Syrian refugees who traveled to the United States of America has increased since the civil war started in Syria.

(UNHCR, 2015b). (See Figure 3.)

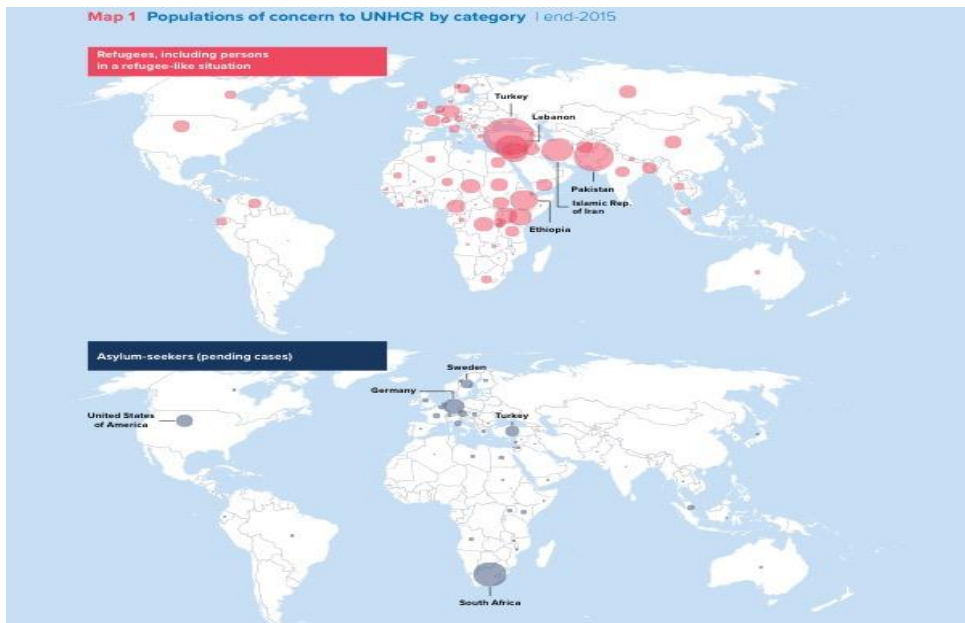


Figure 4. Map – Refugee Populations of Concern by Category.

Source: UNHCR. (2015b). Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015. Geneva: UNHCR, p. 10. Retrieved May 20, 2017, from: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unherstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>

The stability of some countries in the Middle Eastern region has been facing dramatic changes for the past two decades. Governments including Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria have been facing serious socio-political issues, the countries have been torn by senseless violence and severe oppression.

This violence and oppression has had a very negative impacts on neighboring countries. The need for welcoming and settling refugees started to become a crisis with the beginning of the Arab revolution (referred to as the Arab Spring). In 2011 because the number of Syrian refugees increased and there are some countries faced issues to meet the need of migrants. According to Akbarzadeh and Conduit (2016) the reason why the Syrian people left their country is because of the extreme violence:

Before 2011, Syria was a middle-income country with an educated population and growing middle class. Many Syrians enjoyed a reasonable quality of life which is reflected in the fact that the vast bulk of Syrian refugees surveyed in Europe indicated that they would like to return home should conditions improve. But the Syrian conflict has been extremely violent, and civilians have paid the highest price. (p.8)

The struggle in Syria became violent between President Bashar Al-Assad and groups of young men, mostly students demanding freedom from the Assad regime. In 2015, under the Obama administration, the United States of America opened the door for Syrian families and children to apply for refugee and asylum applications, which would have allowed them to apply for work and schools. In 2015, the United States America admitted 69,933 refugees, and of these, approximately 2,000 were Syrian refugees. (Zong and Batalova, 2017).

According to the Migration Policy Institute (2017) “The Obama administration surpassed its goal of admitting 10,000 Syrians via the refugee resettlement program in fiscal year (FY) 2016, up from just 36 in FY 2013 (see Figure 4). In total, 18,007 Syrian refugees were resettled in the United States between October 1, 2011 and December 31, 2016” (para,1). Today, The U.N. (2017) shows that since the Syrian civil war started in 2011, the number of registered Syrian refugees in the world has swelled to nearly 5,136 million.

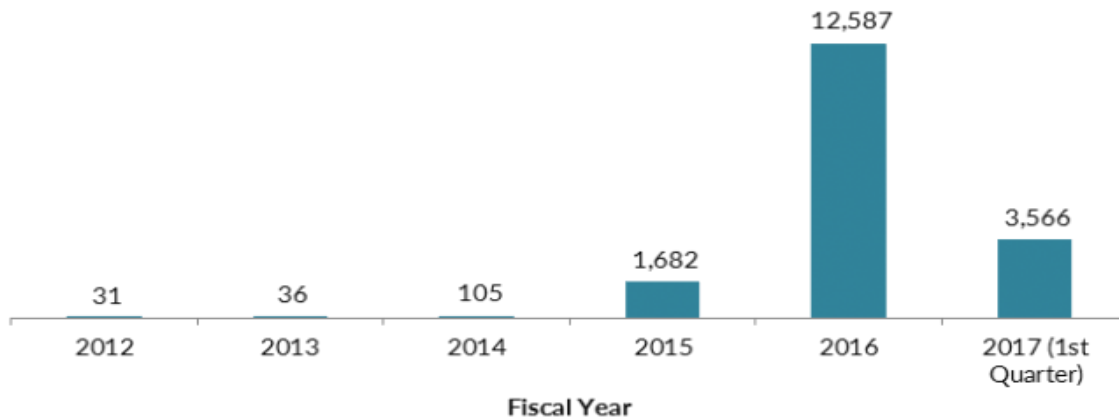


Figure 5. Syrian Refugees Entering the US between 2011 to 2016.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI). (2017). Tabulation of data from the U.S. Department of State Refugee Processing Center, para. 4. Accessed July 4, 2017, from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states>

The trajectories of refugees moving from one's home country to a host country are varied. Some move through several countries before being resettled, some move directly from the home to the host country, and others live in refugee camps along the way.

Life in a Refugee Camp

Refugee students who come from war-inflicted countries like Syria to live in the United States of America are socially and culturally different as compared to other students who have grown up and migrated from peaceful countries. The UNICEF (2016) show “An estimated 3.7 million Syrian children—1 in 3 of all Syrian—children have been born since the conflict began five years ago, their lives shaped by violence, fear and displacement” (para, 1). According to the Center for Migration Studies (CMS, 2017) a number of issues have generated critical policy concerns, including: “migrant deaths, large-scale forced movements of people, multiple crises driving forced displacement, and the debates and struggles of host communities and destination states to accommodate the uprooted” (para.1).

Since 2011, some Middle Eastern countries (though not all) have faced challenges because of civil wars. For example, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and recently Yemen are now conflict areas. In Aleppo, Syria, there are schools that have been closed since 2011. According to UNICEF (2015), “Some 2.7 million Syrian children are currently out of school, a figure swollen by children who are forced to work instead. The limited access these children have to quality education is part of the problem; moreover, children who work are more likely to drop out of education” (p.2). Nolan (2016) shows, two million Syrian children have crossed into Lebanon,

Turkey and Jordan alone. Providing basic services to refugee children and their families includes not only creating camps in which to live, but also providing food, shelter, schooling, and other services. Life in refugee camps can be challenging.

Human Rights Watch (2016) shows, Syrian refugee students in Lebanon faced some limitations in accepting Syrian children in camp schools. Lack of space, an unfamiliar language of instruction, lack of residency, risk of statelessness, and lack of transportation are some of the challenges. In Jordan, most of the Syrian children suffer from extreme isolation by staying glued to their camps during the winter months. Nolan (2016) shows in Lebanon, eight to ten Syrian children are not enrolled in school and more than six to ten Syrian refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line.

For instance, the Za'atari camp in Jordan has the largest number of Syrian refugee families (UNHCR, 2015a). The camp hosts around 150,000 Syrians who have been forced to flee the war in Syria (Guttman, 2016). This camp, like most refugee camps, is missing many of the necessities of life. Gary and Rubin (2014) describe the life condition of Syrian refugee families and children in Al-Za'atari based on interviews of people who were in the camp. According to an interview of an aid worker:

The camp is now the fourth largest city in Jordan and is home to over 150,000 Syrian refugees. A winter storm hit the camp the week before we arrived, flooding and collapsing all of the tents. Refugees were literally left homeless (or more accurately, tentless). What little clothing and food supplies they had, were destroyed. Our trip was an emergency relief trip to provide winter jackets, food aid, portable heating units and medical supplies. (Gary & Rubin, 2014, para.6)

Syrian refugee children face stress in refugee camps for understandable reasons. They may worry about their relatives who have been dispersed, moved to other camps in different

countries, or have been killed. Syrian refugees are facing stressors including violence, terrorist groups such as ISIS, rape, sexual assault, and torture (Quosh, Eloul & Ajlani, 2013). Moreover, according to their study, “Populations affected by situations of unrest, violence, loss, separation, and drastic changes in social and living conditions, are likely to experience a number of distressing psychological reactions such as hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, as well as behavioral and social problems” (p.13). The data of the study show, Syrian refugees who live in camps:

[N]eed for someone to talk and listen to them, visit them, or comfort them. In two of these instances, respondents mentioned a need for religious services and lessons such as “Wu’ath” (religious sermons). In addition, a need for improved health or educational services (schools) was expressed by 11%, with an almost similar expressed need for finding a job or securing work for a family member, as well as the need to have recreational activities for children to spend their time productively. (p.44).

For many refugees, the challenges of living in a refugee camp are experienced alongside joys and optimism for the future – refugee camps are supposed to be short-term options for those route to a better future. While not all refugees experience life in refugee camps, neither do other immigrants. What they all share, however, is a vastly changed context for life, and the experiences in figuring out how to reconstruct their lives in a new setting, a new culture, and a new social structure. This is a long-term and multi-faceted process that is much more involved than just the physical movement from one place to another.

Migration and Cultural Change

The experience of migration – whether as a refugee or a so-called voluntary migrant (Ogbu, 1982, 1992) – changes one’s life (Chavez, 1994). The host country presents a new

context within which to construct one's life, and people adapt to the social norms and cultural practices in that new space. Ogbu and Simons (1998) explain that voluntary minorities (immigrants) are people who "chose to move to U.S. society in the hope of a better future" (p.164). They tend to compare life before and after moving (they have a dual frame of reference) as they adapt to the new environment, which creates possibilities in how they understand the new environment and adapt to it, giving them some agency, although the environment can also present challenges.

This section explains the experience of living in a new place, and how people adjust and cope with a new culture and language, and traditions. As a life experience, it is much more than the act of moving from one country to another, it is more about learning life lessons, improving communication skills, meeting new people, and intermingling with new cultures. It is also about cultural change processes. Coping mechanisms and strategies of refugees who live in host countries vary based on the need to adapt and adjust to different cultures, languages and religions.

Cultural Change Processes

To understand the cultural change processes of refugee students in the school context, the difference between assimilation and acculturation need to be understood. Acculturation is a "process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact" (Gibson, 1995, p.90). The acculturation process does not replace student's background culture, but it may help and support students to deal with both cultures the old and the new. Additionally, it is a process that helps people to feel a sense of belonging. On the other hand, assimilation is a process that replaces the old culture with a new different culture. Sam (1992) describes refugee students who come from different languages, environments, and

identities may face the both processes. Also, they may face a clash of cultures, henceforth, and they may struggle with their learning process.

In talking about the children of immigrants, Sam (1992) argues that children come to know the norms and values of their parents' culture and the culture promoted by the host country on the other hand. Usually, there are difference between the two cultures, which force children to make choice between their family culture and the new culture. Sam elaborates on how the feeling of not belonging to either culture continues through the second- and third generations-explains:

Growing up in a society where their parents' values apply to a minority group, these children can experience an acute sense of shame in practicing their parents' culture in a society where mainstream people have different values and norms. Nevertheless, to reject their parents and their norms can be painful and result in extreme emotional problems. The child may experience guilt feelings, anxiety, and loneliness. On the other hand, rejecting the society and taking sides with the parents may also create another form of loneliness, alienation...Inability to integrate different cultural norms and values, with the child impelled to choose (or reject) sides, makes the maintenance of the ego identity difficult and the child susceptible to identity disorders. (p.23).

Refugee students, as with other immigrants, face challenges and difficulties in becoming part of the new culture and in reacting with their new community normally (James, 1997).

People who move to a new society face adjustment to make it in life. James (1997) show that refugees are affected by their background experiences and some of them face challenges to adapt to the new situations of living in a new country such as the United States. However, there are some refugees who have fewer challenges to cope with in the new culture, while some people experience positive and supportive experiences.

Refugee students have new cultures to learn, languages to acquire, and new social norms to contend with. Because of all these social changes in life, challenges become a normal part of

the new changes. They may face challenges with learning, work, and often job skills and professional experiences are not recognized in the new country. Transitions can increase challenges of living, while opening new opportunities. Furthermore, research shows that refugees students face challenges in the settlement process within the American schools' environment.

Research shows:

[F]or refugees, the transition from one country to another often encompasses changes in every aspect of daily life, including loss of work status, the need to communicate in a new language and the possibility of encountering discrimination. (Joyce, Earnest, Mori, and Silvagni, 2009, pp. 83-84).

The experience of cultural change is not easy, sense of belonging comes after understanding the new culture, system, and life style. Literature have shown that feeling belonged to a new community comes after understanding the new culture.

Sense of Belonging

A number of studies in different disciplines including education, psychology, and sociology have focused on the social and emotional; sense of belonging; mental health; and educational experiences of the refugee children and youth (Goodman, 1993; Ogbu, 1995, Faircloth, 2009). The literature shows that the refugee students are facing isolation, school discrimination, and other negative experiences while they move from their country to other host countries, which can impact their social and learning path. Studies such as Baumeister and Leary (1995) show that feeling a belonging to a new community is the first basic need to help the refugee students rebuild their future. Once the need for feeling a sense of belonging is fulfilled, people will be motivated to achieve their needs (Maslow 1943, 1954). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes a sense of belonging as a motivational theory.

Furthermore, belonging is one of the needs that human must have in their life (DeWall, Deckman, Pond, and Bonser, 2011, Maslow 1970). Belonging is a word that divided in two parts “be” and “longing” “be” means to live, “longings” means to adapt, to be a part of a community, or to be a member of group (Kumsa, 2006).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) explain that the need to feel belonged is categorized by a need of relationship stability. Related to the ‘belongingness hypothesis’ it is clear that when people feel belonged, they will not feel social isolation. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) “a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and to propose that the need to belong can provide a point of departure for understanding and integrating a great deal of the existing literature regarding human interpersonal behavior” (p.497). The researcher for the study also advising that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) explain that the need of feeling the sense of belonging can be seen as a foundation of a social connectedness. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue, humans should feel the need of sense of belongingness before the need for social contact. They argue that humans need to feel “stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future.” (p. 500).

Fiske (2004) also believes that a sense of belonging is one of the human needs. Building interactions with others is important to satisfying the need of the belonging. They also show, people who do not feel the sense of belonging cannot express their feelings strongly as people who feel belonging to a community. The need of social interaction is driven by the need of belonging. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995):

Interactions with a constantly changing sequence of partners will be less satisfactory than repeated interactions with the same person (s), and relatedness without frequent contact will also be unsatisfactory. A lack of belongingness should constitute severe deprivation and cause a variety of ill effects. Furthermore, a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and thought is caused by this fundamental interpersonal motive. (p.497)

Belonging could be defined as sharing the same culture with others and feeling the need of relatedness (Vallerand, 1997). Humans need to feel they are a part of a community to be motivated and supported (Webster's New World Dictionary of American English, 1998).

There are studies that touched on the impact of interaction, rejection, and acceptance paradigms on people's behaviors. (DeWall, Deckman, Pond, and Bonser, 2011). The researcher showed that belonging can impact human behaviors; when people feel accepted in a new community, they may have the ability to adapt to the new lifestyle and behave normally. In contrast, rejection condition is one of the reasons for aggressive behaviors.

For Goodenow (1993) belonging is defined as "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others" (p.25). Goodenow (1993) has found that there is a relationship between students' motivational experiences and a sense of belonging. He argues that feeling belonged, motivated, and supported is significantly linked to the students' achievement. As the study shows, when a person feels valued, motivated, and supported, students' outcomes may improve. Faircloth (2009) found that the need of sense of belonging can impact the students' engagement, inspiration, and achievement in school.

Kumsa (2006) argues that refugees faced negative war effects and lost their home, which may lead them to feel uncertainty about their place and future. In the Kumsa (2006) study, she shows that refugees feel uncertainty of the large society reaction toward their situation and

experiences. In other words, refugees usually travel to a new country with no expectation whether the new society will or will not accept them, and that feeling may impact the students' learning.

To achieve the sense of belonging and fit into a new community successfully, studies show that refugee students need to feel valued. They need to have the sense of self-esteem, self-concept, motivation, and their social skills need to be improved. (Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1998). While these studies shared the implications to achieve the sense of belonging, Ogbu's ideas focused on the effect of the majority on the minority (refugee) and how the school can impact the students' adaptation. From Ogbu's perspective, the system (schools) is fully responsible for providing an environment that helps minorities to cope with the school culture.

All the studies above present the definitions of sense of belonging and discuss the impact and the importance regarding the sense of belonging. However, there are limited research focuses on the impact of school belonging on the students who came from a refugee background. In this field, Due, Riggs, and Augoustinos (2016) have done research about refugee backgrounds living in countries of resettlement. Due, Riggs, and Augoustinos (2016) found that school belonging impacts students' developmental outcomes including teacher relationship, peer relationship, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, and most importantly school belonging can impact their academic achievement. The study explored experiences of school and school belonging from the perspective of children under 13 years.

The findings of Due, Riggs, and Augoustinos (2016) study show that school environment is one of the factors that can impact the students positively or negatively in a way that school is one of the places that reflect the students' identity and value. According to Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) Schools are:

one of the first and most influential service systems that young refugees come into contact with after resettlement. Learning to manage the school system is essential for young refugees, but it is also fraught with challenges, especially since young refugees sometimes face large gaps in their previous education due to the context of war and flight. (p.30).

Students in this study were able to create a sense of school belonging through aspects of the school environment. Furthermore, the study presents, the relationships with their peers and teachers play as an essential aspect that motivated them to feel the sense of school belonging. They argue that the school need to ensure that refugee students have their spaces to demonstrate their identity, social skills, and value. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) argue that schools have:

A unique and influential impact on the lives of adolescents. In adolescence, school takes a central position in defining and affecting one's overall sense of community. For refugee and immigrant youngsters, who often view school as their 'second family', their 'mother and father', and the most important factor contributing to their future success, education takes on a prominent role in preserving hope. (p. 30).

In a study conducted by Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) they found that decreasing the levels of depression and increasing the levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy of the refugee students is related to the level of school belonging. In this study Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) show that higher level of school belonging impacted 76 Somalian refugees aged between 12 and 19 in the United States schools. school environment affects the wellbeing outcomes of the refugee students. Ehntholt, Smith, and Yule (2005) suggest that school belonging and its relationship to their education is an important area to study for the reason of the important impact on the students' path.

The term “sense of belonging” is increasingly used in education, and often refers to various aspects such as a student’s emotions, feelings, self-awareness, self-confidence, interaction, and social behaviors. Some refugee students face social and interaction issues while they are studying in host countries’ schools (James, 1997). Sense of belonging factor can affect refugees’ learning process because when they live in different environment, with people from other cultures, they may resist accepting the new society, which leads to miscommunication between parents and the students or between teachers and the students (Rutherford and Ahlgren, 1990). This situation may happen to the refugee students inside or outside the school’s environment.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding the new language, tradition, and culture can hinder their ability to prepare, learn and communicate in a new place (Birman, Trickett, and Bacchus, 2001). This motivational factor may challenge or strengthen refugee students’ resolve to build relationships with their teachers and community, which plays as an important aspect in their learning and social experience.

Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson’s (2003) mixed method study, “Counseling Considerations Among Arab Americans.” focuses on the social and mental health of refugees from different countries such as Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Yemen. Their research shows that many refugees tried counselling to escape their social problems and to reduce stress while they are coping with the new society. However, when they come to America some of them face negative stereotypes and discrimination because people think all Arabs are Muslim. This research found that Syrian refugee students may face the same challenges in American schools as refugee students from other Arab countries, which may impact their learning and their social interaction.

Durlak, Weissberg, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) presents results from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, by involving 279,034 students from kindergarten through high school. Durlak Weissberg, et al. (2011) found that SEL programs can develop and support student's achievement, also supports the improvement of social behaviors and communication skills in school including, sharing with others, kindness, and empathy. These categories can help students learn positive behaviors from each other.

Mosselson (2002) found that the social and emotional processes were very complex for the girls. The refugee girls in this study worked hard in their school to be successful and they were able to achieve high grades. The girls worked hard in schools because they were afraid that their peers viewed them as alien. Mosselson (2002) found that the experiences of the refugee girls in this study in the United States of America were negative. Mosselson (2002) argues that despite the fact that some girls were depressed because they felt they were different than others, they were academically successful despite any depression they felt. The refugees in this study were succeeding in their schools. However, the students' psychosocial adjustment was poor. Felling different can be one that impact the students socially and academically in a way that may impact their sense of belonging. In some cases, students who come from different culture cannot emerge to the new culture easily.

Bigelow (2008) did a study on social and cultural capital at school and the focus was on how students from different cultures and identities learn in the American schools. Do Muslim students need to lose their Islamic identity to be successfully adapt in the new schools? Why do some of the Muslim students not have social lives in America? All these questions were answered in Bigelow's (2008) study. The purpose of the study was to explore "the issues of race

and religion as they pertain to adolescent Somali immigrants and their lives at school, among their families, and in their communities” (p.29).

The results of the study show that social life is an important factor that could support students’ learning. Also, it could be the reason that can negatively affect the student socially and academically. Schooling challenges from this researcher’s perspective relate to languages barriers, Islamophobia, gender, and culture. For a female refugee, it is hard to be engaged successfully in American school because of the gendered Islamic roles. Bigelow (2008) shows that Hijab becomes a “gendered issue when it comes to talking about immigration and schooling” (p.31). As it is clear from the studies, practicing religious culture in school may/might be a barrier to feel belonging.

From a psychological perspective, anxiety and trauma can impact students’ social life, which could be one of the barrier to achieve a sense of belonging for the refugee students. To explain the impact of trauma, it is hard for people to locate themselves in new social and academic environments like schools, while there can be negative and painful memories from the past. Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003) did a qualitative study in Australia titled “Young Refugees Talk About Wellbeing.” The purpose of the study was to understand the refugees’ backgrounds challenges in the settlement process within Australia. Their study show that the refugee students must find ways to locate themselves within a new cultural, social, and adult space.

The study also show that refugee students need to find security with the new community and families because “traumas of the past can mix with painful experiences of the present...the stressors in the lives of these young people can be both complex and diverse” (Brough, Gorman,

Ramirez, and Westoby, 2003, p.193). The research argues that depression, stressors, and anxiety impacted young refugee people who are trying to cope with their new communities.

While Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003) show that “refugees hold with them a past involving persecution or fear of persecution” (p.1), they also reveal that “refugees also embody hope for a brighter future” (p.1). The students’ relationships with others influences their social emotional learning. Langer (1990) argues that to understand refugees’ experiences, we should have a sense of the refugees’ trauma. According to Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003) “trauma emerges as the past mixes with both the painful experiences of the present and anxieties about the future. The outbreak of war again in the country of origin will often trigger experiences that link to the past a complex nexus of individual emotion and broader social and political forces” (p.2). It’s important to understand the relationship between students and their parents, and also their relationships with others in the new community.

Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003) show that emotions can lead to improving or limiting the social lives of refugees’ students. According to Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003):

[I]t can be difficult to neatly separate past, present and future. Although we cannot avoid such separations, we also know at a deeper level that the past inextricably reaches into our present and future. By definition, refugees hold with them a past involving persecution or fear of persecution. Yet refugees also embody hope for a brighter future. (p.194).

Two examples from the participants in the study are presented below. One of them, from Sudan, expresses his feelings about the challenge of coping with education; he explained:

The depression that I had is because how I feel about the gap in my education. I started my schooling in English in Southern Sudan but due to war, I fled to Northern Sudan where I found the education there in Arabic language. I found it difficult to cope with that and it affected my educational progress. Then, I left for Cairo. I thought the situation would change but I found the same problem. (p.6).

Another refugee was from El Salvador in this study. He had a positive and supportive experience in Australia, and says, “I feel comfortable and proud to be from El Salvador and being associated with everything over there. I like to talk about it. I’m not sure about many things but what I feel about being from El Salvador is very positive” (p.6).

Another study done by Shoeb, Weinstein, and Mollica (2007) focuses on adapting a data collection instrument in working with Arab refugees including Iraqi refugees. The goal was to measure torture, trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder by using The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire. This questionnaire “is an ambitious attempt to balance cross-cultural standardization with cultural specificity in developing assessment tools” (p.448).

The purpose of the study was to examine social and physiological health and its impact on refugees. The study was conducted in Detroit Michigan, with different Arab refugee groups. In one of the examples from the study, “Iraqis needed not only the words with which to tell their stories but also an audience willing to hear their words. Research shows the importance of open-ended interviews, emotional attunement and genuine curiosity” (p.454). The study shows that it is not only the refugee backgrounds that affected the social and cultural practices in their lives but also the sense of being accepted by other people, both of which can impact refugees’ emotional health and feelings.

Trickett and Birman (2005) did a study in United States, the purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between the school support and the school sense of belonging in a sample of 110 first-generation Soviet refugee adolescents. The funding of the study shows that there is a relationship between the students’ behaviors and their belonging feeling. Interestingly, Trickett and Birman (2005) found that students who experiences “fit in” were well behaved.

On the other hand, students who did not feel supported and belonged, behaved in ways seem to be abnormal. Moreover, the study shows that based on the data, sense of school belonging can impact the students' outcomes positively. According to Trickett and Birman (2005):

[F]indings suggest important differences. For example, several studies have found that retention of the culture of origin serves as a positive factor in school performance. In this sample, overall retention of Russian culture did not serve this function while overall American acculturation did. (p.35).

This can be an answer to one of Ogbu (1968-1995) questions. During these years Ogbu tried to find answer to: why refugee students are doing well in school more than other students. The answer could be: the need for experience sense of school belonging for refugee students is one of the important aspects that educators need to understand. Supporting, motivating, new system, learning new knowledge, and may be healthy school environment all these reasons are playing as reasons to achieve the sense of belonging, for refugee students that might impact their success socially and academically in a positive way.

Shifting Culture

The experience of cultural change is difficult, even more so when added to the difficult experiences that refugees have in life. Changes in culture happen whenever two cultures come into contact; groups have to adapt because culture changes. Culture is much more than the superficial characteristics that many people talk about such as language, religion, food, or clothing. According to Rutherford and Ahlgren (1990):

Every culture includes a somewhat different web of patterns and meanings: ways of earning a living, systems of trade and government, social roles, religions, traditions in clothing and foods and arts, expectations for behavior, attitudes toward other cultures,

and beliefs and values about all of these activities. Within a large society, there may be many groups, with distinctly different subcultures associated with region, ethnic origin, or social class. If a single culture is dominant in a large region, its values may be considered correct and may be promoted—not only by families and religious groups but also by schools and governments. (p. 89).

Rutherford and Ahlgren (1990) explain that culture influences behavior because exploring the cultural experience can open the door for the struggles and challenges of adapting to a new life. According to Merkin and Ramadan (2016):

If communication is to be productive, interactions based on cultural knowledge and mutual respect will be needed to encourage Syrian and American relations to progress. Although there are numerous reasons for intercultural contact, misunderstandings between members of different cultures tend to occur less for political reasons than for cultural differences in values, norms, and negotiation styles. (p.2).

Yako and Biswas (2014) did a mixed method study with Iraqi refugees in the United States to explore the experiences of the refugees entitled, "Acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees in the United States." Specifically, the goal of the study was to measure acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees. A sample of 154 Iraqi refugees were chosen to be interviewed and surveyed in the study. The study focused on experiences of culture shock, continued persecution, suggested alternatives, safe and adequate housing, continued financial aid, English as a second language program, and role of resettlement agencies.

Yako and Biswas (2014) explain that before immigrants come to the United States they develop ideas from other refugees and television; however, these expectations and ideas are often not realistic. The research shows that the Iraqi refugees felt social isolation, a sustained hopeless, and they experienced a sort of cultural shock. The results of the study shows that the Iraqi

refugees in this study did not expect to encounter issues related to housing, finances, and employment. Yako and Biswas (2014) explain the initial adjustment issues, using participants' interview data, with their own interspersed narrative:

“[E]ntrance into this country was cold and unfriendly; agencies made us feel like we were brought and dumped here.” The participants narrated being met by agency representatives who painted a dismal picture of what awaited them, and some even insulted them for their ignorance of the refugee system. (p.138).

Another study conducted by Shakespeare and Wickham (2010) investigates Sudanese refugees in Australia and their adaptation experience in the three phases: pre-immigration, in-route, and post-immigration. Sudanese refugees in this study reported life threatening, traumatic, and negative experiences in the first phase. They used several coping strategies in the refugee camps that helped them to focused on their future. The study identified a number of broad themes related to difficulties and coping strategies:

Homesickness and separation from family', 'acculturation difficulties', and 'obstacles to participation in Australian society'. Within the category of 'acculturation difficulties' were difficulties with language and communication, making social connections, the law, parenting and gender roles and independent living and-? social isolation. They had several social problems like the language barriers, racism, lack of security, lack of funds, and lack of social support. (p.14).

As it is show from the study participant “expressed a sense of loss and longing in reference to their homeland and/or their family in Africa.” (p.13). some of the participants in the study “identified difficulties with the English language as a problem for refugees attempting to adapt to life in Australia.” (p.14). and some of the participants in the study reported “experiences of racism and racial discrimination recounting incidences of verbal abuse, physical violence, and

denial of access to services. These experiences caused feelings of exclusion, fear, and regret.” (p.15).

Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, and Greenslade’s (2008) study about “Difficulties and Coping Strategies of Sudanese Refugees” explores the difficulties and coping for Sudanese refugees in Australia. One of the result from Khawaja et al. (2008) is that refugees felt homesickness because of the separation from their families. Additionally, the study shows that Sudanese refugee in Australia face difficulties experienced in the post-migration period including “a lack of environmental mastery, financial difficulties, social isolation and the impact of perceived racism” (p.503). As one of the refugee reported in Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, and Greenslade’s (2008) study:

I mean not knowing people is because you are very new in the country and you do not know who are you dealing with and you don’t know who are you talking with and you feel lonely and you need someone and it’s very difficult. (p.504).

Both studies show that while refugees come to live in host countries with inherited social issues, they face more social and cultural challenges to adapt with the new community. Khawaja, et al. (2008) found that:

The fifth difficulty identified by refugees during this period was instability and fear for the future. Refugees who were in transit reported that they feared being sent back home and feared for their lives, despite being away from the war in Sudan. Because of their illegal status, those living in Egypt feared being deported to Sudan. This fear, combined with limited access to basic necessities and subjection to constant verbal and physical abuse, made them feel unsafe. (p.501).

Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003) mention that religion plays a significant role in Arab culture “Muslim traditions and values are often upheld by Muslim and Christian Arab

American alike. Overall, though, Muslims have had a more different time assimilating into mainstream society in the United States” (p. 151). For many Muslim people there is a reluctance to go outside religion structure. This could be one of the barriers that students may face in school because, as Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003) show, there are Muslim families who believe that their children should only build relationships with Muslims. According to the study “perhaps, one of the most significant barriers to counseling mentioned was the overall reluctance among Arab American to seek counsel outside of the family for problems within the family” (p.154). Cultural change is one of the normal process that happen when people travel to live in different society in this case the structure that related to religion beliefs can be one of the barriers to adapt to the new culture.

In addition to cultural change, social and emotional changes also occur.

Academic Challenges Experienced by Refugees

Refugee students who come from different cultures, languages, religions, and ethnicities face educational dilemmas in the American school systems. American educational systems have deal with the influx of the refugee students integrating into the educational system to help them adjust with the new life. According to Peterson (2015), “refugees arrive in the United States with varying levels of English proficiency. Over 30 percent of refugees under the age of 18 residing in the United States are limited English Proficient (LEP)” (p.8).

Dryden-Peterson (2015) article explores the educational experience of refugee students in first-asylum countries to presents an analysis of research that they conducted over a decade. Dryden-Peterson (2015) explains refugee students have gaps in their knowledge and skills, which could be one of the challenges they face when they attend the U.S. school. These gaps

may have related to the experience of missing school in first host country. As Dryden-Peterson (2015) said:

Experience in an English-language school system does not guarantee proficiency in English, Experience with teacher-centered pedagogy means that resettled refugee children may have a different understanding of the behaviors and approaches to learning required of them in U.S. classrooms. (p.15)

According to the article, there are four key aspects that affect refugee student's academic life. The four aspects are: limited and disrupted educational opportunities, language barriers to educational access, inadequate quality of instruction, and discrimination in school settings. The report includes findings from studies involving students from Syria, Myanmar, Somalia, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Dryden-Peterson (2015) explained that:

Refugee children may experience interruptions to education for multiple reasons. They experience multiple barriers to accessing education, including acute violent conflict, discriminatory laws and policies, and ongoing migration, which can lead to late entry into school and/ or interrupted schooling. When resettled refugee children arrive in the United States they may experience further major shifts in their educational trajectories. (p.14).

Akbarzadeh and Conduit (2016), show that the education system in Syria "has also been decimated by the conflict. Prior to the war, Syria had an almost 100 per cent enrolment rate in schools. Today, it has the second worst school attendance rate in the world" (p.9). Additionally, "By 2014, 2.8 million children in Syria were not attending school. In areas particularly hard hit by the conflict, such as Syria's largest city Aleppo, school attendance was just 6 percent" (p.9). This situation suggests that teachers in the US would do well to understand the extent to which refugee students from Syria have experienced schooling before arriving in the U.S.

Bigelow (2008) found that languages play an important tool in the students' social lives because it is one of aspect that has a direct impact on their academic endeavors. Vygotsky (1978) argues, Language is one of the primary tools that shapes how people think, and a tool which enables communication with others (Vygotsky, 1978).

Bigelow (2008), Zain (2011), and Gilbert (2004) all found that religion could be another challenge that Syrian students' face in the schools because, as Niitamo (2002) explains, there are many Muslim refugee who practice and locate their Islamic identities in their religion. According to Zain's (2011) study, "Youth in Canadian schools: education and the politics of religious identity," Muslim refugee students face challenges related to religion and stereotypes in schools. Henceforth, they were not as successful as they could have been in their schools because they were busy explaining and defending their religion instated of studying. Gilbert (2004) discussed the relationship between the individual and the school from religious discrimination perspective. Gilbert (2004) explained that Western "schools and teachers maintain a powerful prejudicial discourse, immersed in unequal power relationships, where [Muslim] students are, at best, misunderstood, and, at worst, deliberately discriminated against" (p. 253). Gilbert (2004) explained that refugee children in schools are given the same curricula and they need to practice it, some schools' regardless student's religion. In this case, school could be one of the main issue for Muslim girls.

Syrian refugee students also face challenges in the Turkish schools with the educational system. Their experiences go beyond learning the new language: It is more about facing a new educational system and the actual content of the curriculum. In Turkey, a greater challenge concerns the actual content and substance of the curriculum. According to Kirişçi (2014):

Should Turkish and the Turkish school curriculum be taught?... At the same time experts also highlight the importance of emphasizing education in mother-tongue or native language.⁷⁸ Striking a balance between the two will clearly not be an easy exercise that indeed will require considerable cooperation between the Turkish government and all stake-holders. (pp.24,25).

Syrian refugee students who have migrated to Turkey since 2011 are facing challenges to adapt to the Turkish curriculum. Kirişci (2014) explains that Syria and Turkey are significantly different countries with different social, cultural, and historical differences, which reflect in the educational systems and curricula of each country. “For example, while older boys and girls study in sex-segregated government schools in Syria, boys and girls study together in Turkey. Thus, children who receive an education based on the Syrian curriculum are less likely to easily adapt and function in a Turkish environment” (p.29). Kirişci (2014) shows that lack of language, new school culture, and new curriculum can affect students’ academic experiences. In the case of the Syrian refugee students’ experience in United States schools, it would be interesting to learn how the American school curriculum affects the students’ learning.

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed current research about refugee students with most studies referred to describing the experiences that related to the academic and social of Syrian refugee students in American school. Also, the literature review presented studies that reflected the experiences of refugee student who lived in Australia, Jordan, and Turkey. This chapter has focused on the core concepts of what is a refugee and asylum seeker, and what are refugee protections; some background about Syrian refugees; migration as a sociocultural process, sense of belonging, and finally learning experiences for Syrian refugee students, educational barriers for Syrian refugees.

Chapter 3. Research Design

This chapter explains the research methodology, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness.

Methodology

In a qualitative study, there is more than one methodology that might be considered. For example, in this study, “narrative research, case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology, and participatory action research (PAR)” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales, 2007, p.237) were all possibilities, as is ethnography. This research was based on a phenomenological methodology, which is designed to “identify a phenomenon” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales, 2007, p.252).

Related to the educational and social experiences of refugee students who participated in this study. The goal of approaching this research within phenomenology was to enable us to gain a deep understanding of the experience of being a refugee student in the U.S.

According to Murray and Holmes (2014), “The goal of a phenomenological study is to understand the ways in which individuals perceive the world around them and make sense of their lived experiences” (p.17). In other words, phenomenology aims to understand the nature and meaning of everyday life experiences (Merriam, 2009).

The reason for choosing this phenomenology was to understand the essence of Syrian refugee students experiences in their schools. In this research, the researcher asked the participants to describe their everyday experiences. Johnson (1995) argues that researchers must "engage in research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features"

(p.3). Furthermore, a goal in this research was to seek to analyze, explore, and describe the refugee thoughts, emotions, and social activities (Husserl, 1982).

Merriam (2009), states that in qualitative research the “researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (p.22). She continues: “The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences.”

(p.23). Furthermore, the reality is an important concept for the students’ experiences. This research focused on everyday life experiences to learn the academic and social experiences.

The data in this research was collected by conducting interviews with five Syrian refugee students to “focus on describing the “essence” of a phenomenon from the perspectives of those who have experienced it” (Merriam, 2009, p.93). Furthermore, Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and the father of phenomenology, shows the meaning of phenomenology as a method that explained how individuals assigned significance to their experiences (Husserl and Gibson, 1931).

Husserl’s believes that in order to understand the phenomena it should be understood through personal experiences. Creswell (2007) states “in the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issues.” (39). Phenomenology, is a method that helps to describe a situation to isolate specific phenomena. A phenomenological approach leads the researcher to gather a specific information about experiences of Syrian refugee students, in order to get the essence of their experiences to create an analyze results for educators who works with refugee students to improve the understanding of the Syrian refugee students’ experiences.

Data Collection

In this study, Syrian refugee students between ages 11 and 18 years old were recruited and interviewed by the researcher to understand their academic and social experiences in their US schools.

Sample Selection

Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2007) show, in a qualitative phenomenological method study the researcher typically needs to interview five to twenty-five participants while Morse (1994) suggests that phenomenological research needs at least six participants. In this study, five Syrian students from a public school in Midwestern city between ages 11 to 18 recruited by the researcher. I have chosen to use typical sampling because “it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998, p.62). All the participants in this study are attending American Schools. The participants in this study need to be from Syria, they need to be refugees, and they need to have been in the U.S. since the war started in Syria 2011 or after.

Recruitment

I communicated with the principal of the Islamic center and I asked to schedule a meeting with Syrian refugee students who would accept to be involved in the study to be interviewed as volunteers. Family permissions was received before the interviews were conducted with a number of five Syrian refugee students for my dissertation. The Islamic center is located inside the mosque. The center has after school programs and activities for Syrian refugee students. The program starts at 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The meeting was conducted on Friday after the prayer time. Families and children attends the meeting based on the previous appointment through the Islamic center principle. A flyer was

distributed which includes the explanations of the purpose of the study and why volunteers were needed to participate. Families and their children read the flyers and they have signed the assents before the meeting was over. A few days after, I started to receive calls from the families to schedule for the interviews. The study involved face to face audio-recorded interview. The interview took one hour for each interviewed student. Two of the interviews were started at the mosque and had completed at the participant's house. The three other interviews were conducted at the participant's house as their families preferred.

Interviews

The interviews for this study were conducted from November 2017 to January 2018. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Interviews were recorded by using the researcher's personal phone. Each student in this study was interviewed individually for one hour each. Participants preferred the interviews to be conducted in English. The interview questions were designed to get at the essence of the Syrian refugee students' experiences and to explore their unique experiences in the American schools. I asked the students open-ended questions that were related to this study. The questions were about their learning and social experiences in their current American schools and also about their previous experiences before they experienced the life in the U.S. (See Appendix A, Interview Guide.) I preferred to use the interview method of data collection for this study to understand how the Syrian refugee students, make meaning of their experiences, and how they express them in their own words.

Data Analysis

The strategy that I used was advanced by Moustakas (1994) and described by Creswell (2007). Moustakas (1994) recommends that each interview should be recorded individually. The

next step was to organize the data for transcription process. The audio recorded interviews was transferred from my cellphone to my Apple's Mac Book Pro laptop. The Apple's Mac Book Pro has an in-built virus protection software, and a software supported and monitored by Apple's security team to make sure that no data breach can be caused by data hackers or malicious computer malware and viruses.

Interviews were transcribed individually on my computer. Each interview's transcript was checked carefully to make sure the transcript matched the recording. Then important statements were highlighted. Different colors and highlighters were used in data row coding to organize and identify codes and themes.

After inductively analyzing the data, ideas were organized thematically and presented the data on the themes in Chapter 4 with an accurate analysis. In Chapter 5 the data was summarized from the themes presented in Chapter 4. Finally, in the concluding section of Chapter 5, findings and analysis were synthesized to answer the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations in this study include the usual issues related to informed consent, confidentiality, and an assessment of risks and benefits. The study was reviewed and approved by DePaul University's IRB to ensure that the research abides by ethical standards. (see Appendix B).

The important ethical issues are discussed below. Kellner (2002) argues that research is more about morality, not ethics. According to Kellner (2002):

It is our morality, our diffuse, unlimited obligation to the welfare of the other, that must inform these more important aspects of our conduct in the field. And where ethical requirements and moral requirements conflict, the latter must take priority. (p.32).

Confidentiality. I did not use the participants' real names and did not refer to their school names or mention private information about the participants or their families. I changed the real names of the participants into other names in the transcripts, dissertation, and will do the same for any other (future) write-up for privacy purposes.

Security of Documents. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved on my personal laptop. These electronic files, and all other files related to this study, need a password to open them. My computer also requires a password to open it. Only I know the passwords. The audio recordings will be destroyed as soon as they are transcribed and checked for accuracy. The transcripts and other documents will be deleted three years after the completion of the study.

Privacy and Safety. Shaw (2008) shows that the researcher is responsible for providing privacy protection to participants in a study. For that reason, participants were interviewed in a comfortable place that helped them to feel safe; an empty room with a door ajar was an appropriate place for the interview.

It is important to apply these ethical and justice standards because this research is about exploring people's life experience. Privacy in this case is important and to avoid ethical issues researcher in this study need to understand that:

Ethical issues are raised by the fact that as we encourage people to tell their stories, we become characters in those stories, and thus change those stories. In presenting a life story there develops a complex relationship between the biography of the research subject and the autobiography of the researcher. (Shaw, 2008, pp. 408-409).

A good researcher able to manage multiple types of relationships with the participants and make decisions ethically. Becoming a character in participants' stories can sometimes be in conflict with the desire of a researcher to gather data.

Risk. The participants in this study were refugees who came from war-torn countries and who have a potential emotional risk. The most difficult part of the interview process was to manage the participants' feelings and to validate and reduce focus on sad memories, and/or support their emotional health. Necessary steps were considered to address these issues such as I have changed the way of asking questions and asked them about their favorite memories.

There are students did feel sad because they remember their families who died in the wars, or from remembering the struggles of living in a war-torn place. When students in interview felt sad I had asked them a follow up questions that helped them to think about their current situation. They had experiences in school while they felt afraid of bombing. In interviews, the five participants in the study had remembered their life in Syria. Some of them felt sad and some of them reacted by not wanting to answer the question. In some cases, if the participant reacted that she/he didn't want to answer the question or seemed to be bothered, the question changed and the way of asking questions that was different from participant to another.

Some of the participants needed more time to express their feelings. As a researcher, I have given them all the options. And, finally, I reassured him or her that he/she doesn't need to answer all questions – the interview was voluntary. I reassured him/her, to help him/her to feel comfortable and recognized. In addition, I provided them with a resource sheet after the interview. The resources only have resources in English.

Informed Consent. As discussed earlier, as a researcher, good practice is to “inform” the children and their parents about the study so they understand what they would be agreeing to. I asked in the mosque to distribute a flyer to the students and parents to sign the permission Forms and the children to sign the assent forms, before the interviews begin. I have explained to the participants' parents that all the participation is voluntary, there will not be real names used in

the write-up, I don't anticipate any negative consequences to participating, interviews will be as private as possible, and participants will be interviewed in a safe place.

Children and Refugees as Research Participants. When including children in research, we must pay more attention to vulnerabilities. The refugees in this study categorized as vulnerable by the IRB.

Trustworthiness – Strengthening the Quality of the research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned that there are four criteria to assess trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) refers to the “quality of [research] (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (Schwandt, 2001: 258). The four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985), as alternative criteria to traditional positivist criteria, are:

- a) credibility (in preference to internal validity).
- b) transferability (in preference to external validity).
- c) dependability (in preference to reliability).
- d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity).

First, I will define the criteria, and then describe the strategies I used to strive toward reaching the goal of trustworthiness.

Credibility

Readers should be able to see clearly how the participants' expressed their perspectives and how the research represents it. Also, to insure credibility, I asked the principal of the Islamic center to help me to translate some of the interview questions. She helped me to modify the

dialect from the classical Arabic language to the Syrian dialect to help the participants understand the interview questions easily. To insure credibility of all the information from the participants, the last step before finishing each interview was to make sure that all the interview questions have been answered, to make sure that the participants' answered the interview questions the way they want, and to make sure if the students want to add more information. These lenses were important to achieve credibility, and to support Lincoln and Guba (1985) argument that focus on, the research data "worth paying attention to" (p.290).

Transferability

Transferability is about asking how are the findings of this research useful to, or transferable to, other settings. This study involved five Syrian refugee participants', due to the fact that I use only five Syrian refugees in the study, transferability in this study of the five refugee students who came after the civil war started in Syria in (2011) should be useful to, people who interested to learn about the Syrian refugee students' experiences but with limited transferability. This research provides useful information about academic and social experience for refugee students while they were moving from their country to the U.S. information included how past experiences can impact students learning, the impact of learning new language, and the positive impact of feeling sense of belonging on these particular students' academic and social life.

Dependability

Keeping the following questions in mind helped the researcher in developing and documenting a data collection: Are the findings grounded in the data? Are inferences logical? Is

the category structure appropriate? Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified? What is the degree of researcher bias? What strategies were used for increasing credibility? (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 128).

Confirmability

Confirmability focuses on the relationships among the “assertions, findings, interpretations,” etc., so readers can see that the data and analysis “[are] not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Schwandt, 2001: 258-59). Confirmability was enriched by ensure that the finding section confirmed similar ideas that presented in the literature review section. In the analysis process I find similar ideas and suggestions that was provided in the literature review.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are important to establish trustworthiness between the interviewee and interviewer. Furthermore, using a critical strategy like “collaboration” with the participants in this study helped me to achieve credible data and the aim of the research. According to Creswell and Miller (2000):

Credible data also come from close collaboration with participants throughout the process of research. Collaboration means that the participants are involved in the study as co-researchers or in less formal arrangements. This validity lens is one of building the participant’s view into the study. It belongs to a critical paradigm perspective because the intent of the process is to respect and support participants in a study. (p.128).

Strategies

A number of strategies are typically used to establish trustworthiness. Those I may use include thick description, an audit trail, peer review and member checking. Overall, the trustworthiness of the data collected in this study suggest credible and dependable findings with

respect to the perspectives of the five participants in the study, meaningful relativity to the existing literature, and an important contribution to existing research of war affected refugee youth; but with limited transferability beyond the context of the study.

I had recorded each interview individually. Writing memo and taking notes about all the details was the guide that helped me in understanding and analysis the data. To ensure dependability, coding was a process started with reading each interview carefully to understand the students' experiences. rereading each interview and highlighted the important sentences and phrase was the second step. Writing notes about each highlight was to ensure responses matched in both cases. After coding the interview, the researcher waited at least three days and then returned and recoded the same data in order to analyze data more accurately.

In chapter four, I carefully presented the participant's voice to share their experiences with the readers. The reader can read the participants' stories as they expressed in the interviews. This presentation of data verbatim is necessary so readers "see" how the data are the basis of the findings and analysis.

Thick Description. Using thick description is one of the essential aspects to rich credible data. According to Creswell and Miller (2000) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). I have study explained in detail the method, themes, data, and the setting. According to Denzin (1989) "thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts... Thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail and simply report facts" (p. 83). The purpose of a thick description is to establish credibility and to help the readers understand the experiences that will be provided in the study. In this study I have used phenomenological theory to explore the academic and social experiences of five Syrian refugee students aged 11 and 18 who entered U.S. after 2011.

Audit Trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that an audit trail is usually used in dissertations. In this study, I kept a journal that included detailed description of the process of doing the research, so that a record exists of all the decisions and procedures; as such, it provides depth and clear documentation of all the research activities. “When faced with students that seek rigor and a systematic review of procedures, the process of establishing a clear audit trail is most important.” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.129)

Peer review is about reviewing the processes and details in the study with a peer – someone who would be familiar with one or more aspects of the study (e.g., the population being studied, the methods used, etc.). Peer review was important as well as kept me logs to improve the research processes. I have met with DePaul librarian who expertise at education research guide. I asked the librarian to help me in providing feedback on the coding process. The peer in my doctoral program served as a sounding board for organizing ideas. Ideas and feedback seemed plausible.

According to Creswell and Miller (2000):

A peer review or debriefing is the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored. A peer reviewer provides support, plays devil’s advocate, challenges the researchers’ assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations. (p.129)

Member Checking. For member checking, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that participant checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility.” (p. 314). In this study, it is important to check the emerging analysis with the participants to ensure credibility has met. I have applied member checking with three of the five participants’ in the study.

Participants were able to listen to their voice recording in order to confirm credibility. One of the three had added more information on the interview. The two other who did not participate in the member checking were out of state, I have call their parents as they provided me with their contact number in the interview, and I asked them if they allow me to speak with their children and ask a few questions. I have talked with the other two participants' and I have reviewed some of their information and answerers. In the data section, I carefully presented the participant's voice to share their experiences with the readers. In chapter four of the study reader can read the participants' stories as they expressed in the interview.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Study

Delimitations

For the delimitation of the research study, only Syrian refugee students between age 11 to 18 participated in this study, all the five participants are attending one public school. To collect descriptive data, interviews included only open-ended questions.

Limitations

While I was working on outlining the study, the intended sample size was ten to fifteen students aged from 11 to 18 years. Once I start recruiting the students, there were some limitations to finding students to participate in the study. Although, I did explain to the students' families that the study will not use their children's real names, some of them showed a lack of trust, I understood and respected their perspective. Some families did not accept the idea of recording their children's voice, in this case, I did include them in the study, I tried to find other families and participants who accept to be required. Also, because the study was conducted with

different ages from 11 to 18 years, the data in this study generated an understanding about a range of refugee students' experiences from different positions of experience.

A literature review is an important part of any research project. The availability of pertinent literature for this study is the second limitation in this study. Finding existing research regarded refugee student's experiences was challenging comparing to immigrant and asylum students. From that point, finding a literature to build the foundation for the study was one of challenges.

Conclusion

This phenomenological research study aims to explore and identify the educational and social experiences of Syrian refugee students who are attending one of the American public schools. Through interviewing participants in this study, we explain the success and challenges for the refugee students in U.S. schools. Refugee students are a group of people who need more attention in educational research and practice in order to support them in life and give them the tools to improve as they become increasingly integrated into American society.

Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter of the study presents the findings of a particular group of Syrian students experience in the American schools. The primary purpose of choosing five participants between ages 11 to 18 to participate in the study is to hear stories from different views. The primary purpose of the study is to explore refugee students experience in the American school, which was the focus while collecting the data. This chapter aims to share all the stories and offer an overview of the successes and challenges that some Syrian students have. In this chapter of the study, I will present the data based on the participants' interviews. The experiences of the students in this study are not similar. However, there are common themes of the academic and social experiences emerged to inform the phenomenon in the U.S. school. Although each participant in the study has a different experience and each came from a different family, and city in Syria, environment, and different story, they all share common feelings, experiences, and similar academic challenges. These experiences and stories shed light on how the particular students' respond and negotiate to cope with new lives and new educational environments.

Five refugee students from Syria had participated in this study, two girls and three boys from ages 11 to 18 years old. Introducing each participant in this study with a brief profile is the first section of this findings chapter. This chapter focuses on delivering the participants' voices and sharing their experiences in the American school to people who are interested to understand the Syrian refugee students' academic and social experiences.

Because the study used a phenomenological methodology, the results chapter designed to open the door to understanding the essences and details of the everyday experience of the five refugee students. Sharing their lives' details in the school such as their relationship with teachers,

principals, their peer, and families are considered to be one of the goals in this chapter. Furthermore, sharing information from their background journey may help to understand their experiences at the American school. Every student in the study has a unique story, and despite the variety of their experiences, common themes appeared to unite their cooperative stories.

Ahmad, Sara, Rami, Huda, and Sami (all names are pseudonyms) offered rich data that might help to understand the broader phenomenon of the refugee students in the American schools. All participants were born in their homeland Syria; all participants were in Syria at the time of the war. Some of them have mentioned that they remember the sound of bombs and shootings and some of them want to travel back to Syria to play at the school playground.

This chapter highlights the participant's stories of success and challenges in school. There are highlighted themes emerged from carefully reviewing and coding of all the data. The themes presented in this begin with linguistic knowledge, social and academic experiences before coming to the United States, relationships in the U.S, and, finally desired changes. First, however, I present profiles of the participants.

Participant Profiles

Sami, Huda, Ahmad, Rami, and Sara are refugee students who came to the US between 2011 and 2015. These students and their families were forced to leave home, friends, school, and family for the reason of war to find opportunities to learn and find jobs in other countries. Before the first interview at the mosque, I was preparing myself to listen to experiences about war and pain at the school in Syria and refugee camp stories more than happy moments, but that's not what happened. I have learned from each interview, and all of them have shared with me positive energy and experiences besides some of the personal and academic challenges.

Ahmad, Sami, Huda, and Rami have faced and maybe still facing emotional, academic, and social challenges at the school. However, they handled them and learned how to deal with most of the challenges.

Sami

After the civil war started in Syria in 2011, Sami and his family decided to move to Jordan to find a new and safe place, but with the hard situation in the Jordan schools and the lack of jobs, in 2015 Sami's family decided to move from Jordan to the United States seeking to find new opportunities and better education.

Sami is in sixth grade, he is 12 years old, and he has been learning English for one year. He dreams of being a computer genius. He loves to learn about software and creating websites. Sami came from a Muslim family. He grew up with an awareness of all the circumstances that made his parents move from Aleppo, Syria, to Jordan and from Jordan to the United States. Sami has an older brother who is almost in high school and a little sister who is in kindergarten. Sami wanted to be like his brother:

My brother is almost high school. I want to be like him. I want to be like, act like a man not like babies. Like some people act, like in the school, they are in 8th grade, and they act like kids like babies at kindergarten. But you want to act mature, so the people look at you in a good way.

He also said:

It is like you cannot compare it from here and Syria. Is a big difference I mean here is better? It is better. They care about you here, but there they do not like I mean like they do not teach you the right thing either.

Sami loves to learn religion; he also teaches religion at the mosque. About this experience, Sami said: "I learned a lot. I was like I learned that teachers matter. They teach us in

our religion there. Like the most thing that I like there that's how they teach us religion.”

Experiencing the war has made Sami grown up quickly, and that affects the way he acts and thinks. From the interview, he shows that he likes the school in the United States, but he needs to learn more English to improve his grades and to communicate better with others.

Huda

Huda is in seventh grade; she is 12 years old. She loves to learn different languages. She also comes from a Muslim family. Huda was eight years old when her parents decided to leave Syria and move to start a new life in Egypt. Huda went to school in Egypt, From Egypt, Huda and her family decided to move to the United States when she was ten years old. Today she dreams of being a doctor one day and to have two master’s degrees.

During the interview, she shows that she like the school she said “the good things goes on in my school, that my friends all of them talk with me I do not fight with them. the teachers are nice to us like do not give us any bad grades.”

Huda has two younger sisters and one older brother. They were all born in Syria; her two sisters started school in Egypt. Huda shared with me how in 2012 her family survived a violent attack in Syria. Huda as a devout Muslim, Huda wears Hijab, she covers her face and wears Abaya when she is not at school in the United States, and she covers her hear while she is in school. She is working hard to learn and get as in all of her subjects. Furthermore, her experience at the school is different than other participants in this study because her parents want her to have A grades in all the courses, Huda feel supportive. She said:

I loved the school like when I came to America they gave me a teacher; he speaks Arabic and English; ... he teaches me English and the teacher did not say anything about my, the Hijab or anything about my religion, they just care about how I learn. And they did not think of my like, I was, they thought me I'm American not a Syrian or a different one.

Ahmad

Ahmad is the youngest participant in the study. He is in 5th grade. He is 11 years old. As a very shy person he was often covering his mouth with both hands during the interview. Ahmad also came from a Muslim family. He had a very long journey. His family moved from Syria to Lebanon, then to Jordan, then they moved from Jordan to Egypt:

[W]e were like just waiting to go like to another country. We went to, we went to, like, we got to Egypt; after that we stayed there like for seven to eight months and like I did not go to school over there because I wasn't really gonna stay there for like a long time. We like stayed there, we went to places in Egypt. Like in four places in Egypt, [we lived in] four houses.

Ahmad shared with me the reason why his parents decided to move to another country; he said, “when I was like in Syria I heard about wars and fights and like guns and shooting a lot of stuff. I like tried to ignore it, and like all the shooting were like coming to my house, I heard like the shootings. In the night like there is like some criminals are coming.”

He was in the middle of the fourth grade when his family decided to move to the United States, he completed the fourth grade in America. He is facing some issues at the American school such as bullying: “Sometimes there is kids a lot like trying to do something bad to bullying or stuff. Like every time I just stop studying and like it's kind of hard.” However, he shows that he recently felt like he belonged, and he was comfortable at the school, he also loves helping other students and works with them.

Rami

Rami is from one of the small villages in Syria; he is freshmen. Ahmad is from Muslim family. his family traveled to Lebanon and then Jordan before arriving in the US. He is 15 years

old. He likes his school because he can use technology. He explained, "... there [in his Syrian hometown] they do not have the technology, but here it's a lot of technology. Here they bring laptop. We study in laptops."

Rami likes the school in America and he compared the school in Syria and the United States, saying, "In Syria, we bring the food like our food but here they give us food." He has not seen his grandmother and grandfather since his family moved from Syria. He explained how the US makes it hard to keep families intact, yet he wants to see his relatives: "like, we gonna go to Lebanon maybe we can go there to see like, we have like five years and a half, and we did not see our family. We can, maybe, we gonna go there and see our family."

Rami faced racism in school in Jordan and as he explained that was one of the reasons that convinced his family to travel to the United States. One of the challenges he faces in the school now is the English language. In addition, Rami feels a sense of responsibility in to help his parents learn English.

Sara

Sara also came from Syria. She is 18 years old and has two brothers and one sister. She quit school for two months when the war started in Syria in 2011. Her family then left for Egypt. Sara and her brothers and sisters did not go to school for seven or eight months while they were in Egypt. Today Sara and her siblings are attending American schools. Sara was a very shy student, but now she feels more self-confident because sometimes she is taking the role of her parents when they visit the American school: she always translates for her parents when they visit the school. Sara said, "they got my report card pick up. They went there, and they went like too many teachers I had and asked them about me, and I was the translator".

Sara has friends from different race and cultures. “I have really good friends here. I’m really happy. I have too many friends now, and I’m not shy anymore.” She likes her teachers also: “the teachers are very nice, and the students are nice.” Sara wears Hijab she covers her hair when she goes to school.

Table 2 reviews the basic demographic information in the above descriptions. While their ages and grades vary quite a bit, the time they have been away from Syria is more consistent, some of them have been away since 2013 and some of them are in U.S. since last year.

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Locations between Syria and the US</i>
Sami	Male	12	6 th	Jordan
Huda	Female	12	7 th	Egypt
Ahmad	Male	11	5 th	Lebanon Jordan Egypt
Rami	Male	15	9 th	Lebanon Jordan
Sara	Female	18	12 th	Egypt Jordan

Table 2. Participants

All the participants have shown that they are very ambitious to learn. Most of them remembered the first day of the war; they also remembered their schools in Syria. Three of the participants talked about the sound of shootings and bombs in Syria. Most of the participants dream about achieving a high level of learning to use in rebuilding their country. All five of these students are strong people because they tried and are still trying to improve their grades in school, and they are also trying to cope with living in a new society. From all the interviews, I

have realized that there are virility reasons that motivated and still motivating the particular students to learn in the American schools, one of the most effective influences is teachers.

All five of the participants explained that their teachers are playing a vital role in their lives. These particular students seem to be fully accepting their situation of being refugees, they are moving in their lives and trying to adapt into the American life. They seem to feel that this history and experience does not affect their lives negatively in the American schools: they do not feel different, they feel like they belong, and they are comfortable. On the other hand, some of them are facing problems at the school such as fighting and bullying, which affect their social skills. Some participants, like Sami and Rami, think that is a normal challenge for international students who do not speak the language. Sami shared that, “Yeah because I wasn't speaking English. There was a lot of bullying for me; then I was like I was not happy so every time they bullied me I don't know what's happened to me. Then I get in fights.” Rami also said:

DA: Is that mean the language you face is the hardest thing in school, is there any other umm problems is there any other challenges you face beside the language?

Rami: try[ing] to get friends.

DA: is there any problem trying to get friends?

Rami: when when you do not speak [English], it's hard to let them to communicate because of that.

Clearly, their struggles to fit in and participate in school life now relates to specific barriers like language, which affects communication, as opposed to attitudinal issues related to not wanting to participate or longing for home. The generally positive outlook of all five participants reveals that they are oriented toward their futures in the United States. All five participants are clearly oriented toward recognizing their past yet wanting to transition toward constructing a future life in the U.S. This transformational process is informed by both social and academic experiences.

Based on the participants' interviews in this study, major themes were found that are central to their educational and social experiences in the United States and in other countries. These will be presented as (a) social and academic experiences in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt and then (b) learning a new language, and then, (c) current experiences in U.S., with attention to the building of relationships. Within each of these themes, the participants shared a variety of both positive and negative experiences. Following these three themes, I present data on how they look to the future through how they express their "desired changes": the changes participants hope to see taking place in their new lives in the U.S.

Presenting the data in this order will help us to understand their experiences more critically. Within the first section below readers will first read background information about the students' experiences, and then their challenges moving from their first host country to the U.S.

Social and Academic Experiences in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt

Presenting the experiences for all the five particular students is the first theme to discuss in this chapter because it is necessary to be knowledgeable about their experiences in different countries in order to understand their current social and academic experiences in the U.S. schools. From my perspective it is necessary to have sense of their past experiences to understand their current emotional, feeling, reacting, and behavior in the American schools.

All participants in this study have experienced either verbal or racial violence in Syria, Jordan, or Egypt their very first host country. Also, some of the participants faced racial issues in American schools especially in their early stage of their academic life in the U.S. Males participants suffered more for such problems than females.

All participants faced emotional and physical abuse in schools before they came to the U.S., which might affect their feeling and communication skills. One of the negative experience Rami encountered in Syria was presented as follows “we cannot go to school and sometimes when we go to schools the bombs come, and they shoot a lot”. Sami also said in Syria “They never care They never care about you.” Also, he explained that, “In Jordan, I learned, but I think that all four years that I live in Jordan was for nothing it was just wasting time”. These were some of the issues they faced before coming to the U.S. Ahmad is one of the participants who has shared more negative experiences than positive ones.

He stated the following: “they tried to make a fight, say bad words a lot, say about the Moms and a lot of stuff.” He also shared that “in Syria, it was kind of difficult because like if you just did something like if you talk in the class if you did not do your homework. It's kinda different ways, like there you gonna be hit with a stick and all of that.”

Past Experiences - Positive Academic Experiences

In the participants’ interviews, no one recounted positive academic experiences at homeland schools or at first host country schools. Rather, many of the academic experiences were negative and will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Interestingly, they did (as will also be seen later) share positive social experiences in their journey through other countries to the U.S. this might be explained as one of the reasons why the students are very ambitious to learn in the American schools and to settle into life in the U.S.

Past Experiences – Negative Academic Experiences

All the students demonstrated that they faced a hard time in their academic lives in Syria, and Jordan. Sara and Ahmad who went to Egypt, did not experience school in Egypt because

they were out of school. As Sara shared “We left to Egypt like for six months and I stayed there without school I did not go to school, but when I went to Jordan I started there.”

They all compared their academic life in the U.S. to that of Syria, and other host countries. In Syria, school corporal punishment was the way teachers used to treat and discipline participants. For example, Rami shares one of the negative memories in one of his old schools. He said: "There is like if we do something or a little bit bad or did not do our homework, they just bring the roller pin the teacher and they hit our hands." Sami shared that “if I want to compare it from the school there and school here it’s a big different like there they if we did a mistake they hit but here they do not, they talk but there they do not talk they just hit and like, I do not, I think the school here are better.”

Scheduling differences were also noted. Many countries have two shifts at school – a morning shift and an afternoon shift. Usually this relates to overcrowding and giving everyone some time in school. Sometimes, as we will see here, shifts are also related to segregation between regular Jordanian students and refugee students.

The refugee students went to schools during the afternoon shift, and the Jordanian students went during the morning. That school system makes the students feel they are not welcome and do not belong. Rami sees a double shift as not “normal”; he explains: “Is there normal people goes to school at 12:00 o’clock? That not normal right! You go to school at 12 o'clock in Jordan, not at 7:00 o’clock like normal people.” He continues saying that :

Some people, they always like want to fight us but we do not. And then when we went to another school, it was just for Syrian. Like in, in the morning it's for Syrian. No in the morning it's just for Jordan, and in the evening, it's for Syrian and when we go to school like at 12 o'clock. When we go, Jordan people leave. But some people of them, Jordan, they took stone and like threw to Syrian people.

Sara also shared: “we had like to go school like after 12 P.M. to 4 and it was not that good education for us”. These are examples that happen to be in Jordan that reflect a feeling of not belonging.

Similarly, Sami had explained his experiences while he was in Syria, he mentioned that he did not receive a proper education in Syria; he said: "when I came to America I thought that all what I learned in my life was so wrong, was not right. Like the math, science, ummm like like the history. The history almost like, I mean like there is something wrong in the, like, I mean not everything is wrong there, but there is something that's we do not agree to, we do not agree about what we are learning there you know what I mean?" Sami continues:

Because they care about you here. But there they, like, they do not care about you mistake what you did what you do. When you do a mistake, when they tell you what is your mistake and they tell you like stop, you did not learn anything from the mistake, like it is a little mistake and you do it again then they do not teach you how to do it right, then you do it again, then you do it again then you do not learn anything.

As shown in this sup-theme student had encountered negative and positive experiences before they came to the United States, which could impact their behavior, communication skills, and their social interaction.

Past Experiences - Positive Social Experiences

Socially all participants have had positive experiences. They have many friends in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as meaningful family relationships. Sara shows: “in Jordan, we have family there it was better there. But was hard for refugees to live there and ummm school was not good for refugees.” Most of the participants’ stated that their friends are mostly their cousins; they grow up together, and they have a lot of good memories together as well. Sara said:

I went to school in Syria but, I like my childhood friends. I knew all of them like I went every year like we went to the same class we sat together. I have too many [a lot of]

friends. We only had one school like in like town. It's like a small town we went to the same school, so I used to see all my friends every year.

Also, Huda said:

like the memory I loved, it was, when I used to go with my friends play outside and with my cousins when after school to go and play on Saturday or Sunday that when we used to have no school. And then after school, I loved to go to write my homework and finish them. I used to forget to eat lunch. At the same time, I used to fight my cousin; he is older than me one year. Like many times I used to fight him this is my favorite memory I remembered.

Past experiences – Negative Social Experiences

Most of the students have faced issues dealing with other people in Syrian schools, and in countries they were in between Syria and the U.S. They have explained that life was hard for them because some people in Jordan, for example, did not welcome them. In comparing social life in the U.S. and in the other countries where they were, Sami, for example, expressed that “here if you do something, they talk to, they do something to fix your problem but there [they] just [say] like ‘yeah, fix your problem and just go’; they even make problems for you. That's like, that's a problem there, yeah.” Ahmad also explained “I went to Jordan like the place over there was not really cool, like it was bad. Because there was a lot of fights and kids like in the street fight a lot like umm some kids like trying play like an idiot I'm sorry.”

Rami had mentioned that socially he was not feeling so good in Jordan because:

[I]n Jordan when we, the first year, when we went there, it like it was we did not know anything, we did not know like, we did have our one uncle that we know. There it was the same language and there, and there it was hard too, they do not, some people, umm, a lot of people do not like Syrian people. When, like, when we got friends after like seven

months. Then we went to school and some people they always like want to fight us, but we do not.

In summary, above we have seen that all the five students have faced positive and negative social experiences in Syria and while they were moving from their first host country to the U.S. Despite all the challenges they faced and still face in schools, these students think positively about America. That may be because these students have compared their life experiences in conflict countries to the life in America, which is relatively peaceful.

These particular students in the study were born and attended schools in their homeland Syria. All the students in the study have negative memories in schools in Syria, and in the countries, they may have lived in before coming to the US. From carefully reading the data, it is clear that all the students miss their families and friends; however, they feel like they belong in America. This means the students in the study are coping with the new society. Particular students' social experiences in other countries may impact how the students are forming meaningful social relationships. The data show that all students reflected on the impact that their past experiences have on their current experiences in the U.S., The results show that they remembered all of their experiences whether these experiences were negative or positive.

As the data presented above suggests, all the five students have positive and negative experiences. However, all the students in this study shared negative experiences more than positive experiences, especially in Syria or first host country, and with their experiences moving from Syria to the U.S. The data show that the relationship between the participants and their parents changed, perhaps because of the bullying, verbal operation, and painful experiences they faced in other countries or in Syria, which may be the reason for Sami saying: "I think I have to go there [the mosque] because I like the place you know. I cannot like to leave it. So I don't

know but even if my mom told me to don't go I will go because I don't know I like this place.”

Today, in the U.S. schools, these particular students have shared that they are experiencing school in a more positive manner; these more positive experiences in the U.S. seem to be represented in their increasing feeling that they belong here. This developing sense of belonging, I argue, is grounded in two important types of experience in the U.S. – acquiring English and using it to communicate and developing meaningful relationships with people here.

Learning a New Language

All five students came to the U.S. with limited English proficiency, and likely no fluency at an academic or abstract language level. Their talk in the interviews about their experiences learning language was generally positive, despite their limited English abilities continuing to limit understanding both in school and in social realms. As readers will recall, all the participants chose to use English in the interviews, despite fluency in Arabic shared with me, the researcher.

Clearly, this language-learning situation is looked at as a positively by all five participants. They are embracing their journeys toward English fluency, and, as would be expected, toward a fuller immersion in American cultural life. This might be explained using Ogbu's (1974, 1978) cultural ecological theory. These five refugees, like other immigrants which Ogbu refers to as “voluntary minorities” maintain a dual frame of reference – they compare life in Syria (and enroute) with life in the U.S. If they see life in the U.S. as offering better options, this creates motivation to work hard to acculturate into the new host country's cultural fabric. The experience of learning a new language is perhaps the most persistent point named by the participants. Learning a new language, particularly one that uses a different script and does not share basic grammatical structures, can be daunting.

All five participants have reflected on the challenge of the English language. Whether the students began learning English in their homeland schools or in other host countries, or only in a U.S. school, they all have expressed that there is a language barrier which is making it hard to fully engage within the school community. Each student has a different story and experience in dealing with the language issues. Some of them have been studying it since they arrived in the US – so, for a few months or a year – and some began learning it in a different country. However, they are still dealing with challenges of using the English language to communicate well. As Rami explained:

DA: okay is there any other challenges you face at the school?

Rami: Yeah, I don't understand some stuff. Biology I don't understand anything from it.

DA: Why!

Rami: because like its English, I don't understand. And science, too.

Thus, the English language challenge is the first theme to be discussed in the study as the language could be the underlying reason for other issues, such as lack of understanding other people, weak communication skills, and may also negatively affect their academic achievements. Rami touched on the impact of the English language with respect to the ability of understanding and learning. This theme is presented in four sub-themes, at the intersections of social and academic experience, with positive and negative impacts.

Language - Negative Social Experience

Negative social experience is a sub-theme that has to do with participants having difficulties communicating with people upon their arrival to the U.S., a problem which can also be attributed to the language barrier issue. In other words, participants did not have adequate knowledge of the English language to enable them to communicate well with others. This is

evidenced in Sami's interview when he said, "I was not speaking English when I came here. It was difficult; there was bullying and hitting, and I had a lot of problems last year." Sara also shared, "umm sometimes there is like mean students because like our English not perfect we are not native English speakers. So, they like being mean to us sometimes. But it's like yeah."

Ahmed expresses the following:

When I came like umm I didn't even have friends. I was just by myself. I came like in the last month of the fourth grade, so I came, I just went to the school I started going, and I did not know how to speak English a lot, So I just like afraid to talk to speak and kind of some people don't understand me before. But now I speak good they can understand, and they can understand me, yeah.

Huda also made the same point, and Sara shared one of the stories that happened in the school; she said:

Some student because we not American we do not speak English so like they do not really talk to us. Like one time the teacher said to work in groups. It was me and my other friend, who is Vietnams. She was not speaking English too. The science teacher said to work in group like three people, and she put with us another girl, she was American, and she treats us like she did not want to talk. She did not like to work with us. She was mean, yeah, that was the only one.

For these students' perspectives the language is an important key that opens the door for communication and that enables building friendships with American students. Once they can socialize and communicate with their peers, doors are then opened also for better academic learning.

Language - Positive Social Experience

Positive social experience refers to the ability to understand, communicate and socialize with colleagues and friends within or outside the school. For instance, Sara explained that she

became more comfortable in her school when she started learning the language. She said: “when I came it was like I went the first a few days and I’m like I do not wanna go. I was shy to speak even I did not wanna speak, and umm I did not have any friends. But now I [am] just used to it. I have many friends, I’m happy, I [am] used to the teachers and everyone.” As Sara shows, she become less shy and more socially open when she started learning the English Language. As she continues:

Sara: I sang two weeks ago maybe I sing in the school with like with my friends. We have like open mic and we sing there.

DA: Do you do that in Arabic in English?

Sara: in English.

Although, Sara started off in school being very shy because she did not know the language, it is clear that her social life has improved since gaining more English language skills, which demonstrates one of the positive social benefits of the language on the refugee students.

Also, Sami expressed a similar experience saying that, “Here is teaching anything. You ask questions. Like the teacher, if you don't ask any question one day he asks you to ask you to ask a question you have to ask a question.” Learning the English language provides students with the skills necessary for academic achievement as well as socializing skills. Moreover, knowing English has rendered students rather active in the school. In other words, they reported participating more and partaking in assignments as their English improved. Although all of the participants chose to use English as the medium of communication during the interviews, their primary challenge, as they have expressed it, lies in their inability to use the English language well enough for academic purposes.

As the data show, all participants in the study have learned the value of learning English as it makes them feel more comfortable and more confident, which in turn encourages them to use it more often. For instance, Huda stated: "a couple of weeks after the school, I had a friend ask me to be their friend. I did not [know] what they were talking [about] until like I learned English, and I started and started to speak with other kids." In Huda's comment, we can see that being with friends and listening to them interact in English has encouraged her to break the silence barrier and to speak the language more often.

Sami shared a similar story to Huda's. Sami used to teach English to students at the mosque as he expressed, "I teach English for people who do not speak English." Sami teaching English to kids at the mosque has also greatly helped him improve his language.

Language - Negative Academic Experience

While there are positive experiences of learning the English language, students are facing challenges using the English language to learn. For example, Sara shared: "The SAT it's a like the exam like when you wanna go to college. You have to do this exam, its five hours, it's only English and math, and it's very hard especially for like ESL students, it's very hard especially the English."

She also said:

At the school, we have ESL classes like being extra help for us. And there is I have regular classes, so it's all native English- speaking students, and there is only like me and my friend ESL students. It's a little bit challenges like when we are writing when the teacher saying something we have to write like after here so like I cannot spell some words I do not know how to spell it. Yeah like this challenge.

As Sami explained, “I study here from fifth grade, now I'm in sixth grade. [I've been studying English for one year, since fifth grade].” Also, he described “Yeah, the English, like my English [is] not perfect yet so what I mean by that. Like I don't see that I learned all the [English I need]. Not definitely learn English at first, but I hope I learned English.” Ahmad also explained:

It kinda bad you cannot do anything when you do not know anything, you do not have the language like you do not know how to speak English and stuff but when you learn when you learn English better after years, and years you start to feel like better in America. Yeah, so it kind of good that I do not get bad grades. I listen to the teacher; I'm kinda good student. Sometimes I finished the test like the first place the first one I get it right like that. I kinda like math and science.

These particular students are facing challenges to understand academic language used in class, as evidenced by Rami when he said: “Yeah I don't understand some stuff. Biology I don't understand anything from it because I do not know how to speak English.” Since high school subjects are more specialized, they involve a great deal of academic vocabulary. For that reason, it is a challenge for Rami to keep up with the lessons. Although students are facing academic difficulties due to their new language, they are willing to learn the language, which brings about some positive academic experiences.

Language - Positive Academic Experience

Students demonstrated that school staff is offering technology and group discussions to help them learn the language. This was evidenced in Rami's comment as he said, “when I came at the first day I did not speak anything, they brought the tablet and they translated to me. And they gave me like one iPad, I can take it with me for the whole day, and I need to give it back to like to translate.” Rami shared that learning how to use technology like an iPad was one of the

positive influences on his language development. If he had not needed to use the iPad to translate English words he did not know, he would not have learned how to use that technology, and his vocabulary might have also been slower to develop.

Most of the students showed that they have a sense of determination to learn the language and overcome its challenges. As Sami shared:

I deal with [the English language] by working hard to achieve the challenge like I do not say like I give up so the lessons I learned a lesson every day and learn a theme. I don't give up, don't do that. You have to do that next time, and you have to do that next time, so here I feel like I automatically I learn from my mistakes.

As Sami shared, his determination to learn English has manifested in a positive attitude toward school, because as he is learning English he is willing to overcome challenges and has learned not to give up and how to learn from mistakes. These are attitudes that are sure to benefit him in all academic areas.

In summary, the main point in this section about language learning is that as students' English develops, they feel more successful in school, their grades improve, and they are able to build a sense of self-confidence. As stated earlier, all participants chose to conduct the entire interview in the English language, even though they were told they could use either Arabic or English. This demonstrates that students are eager and determined to improve their English even though there might be a few challenges to grapple with.

Learning a new language is one of the significant experiences that plays an important role in the refugee students' lives, enabling them to more fully integrate with American society. The five students showed that learning the English language has positive influences on their social and academic lives. The five students showed that the positive benefits of learning English on

their social and academic lives outweigh the negative experiences of not being sufficiently fluent at times. All the students faced challenges in learning English, but as Sami shared, it was not an impossible challenge.

The data show that these particular students have put energy into learning to speak the English language in a short time; it undoubtedly helped because they were well developed in their first language. All five students show that they learned the skills to speak and write the English language, but it takes time and practice. It is clear from the interviews that the more they learn the English language, the more they become open to participating in American society. All the students shared stories on how English is a challenge for them to learn; however, they seek to learn to deal with the challenges. In this study, language plays an important role in the students' social and academic lives. By learning the language, they become more open to learning more academic content and to communicate with more people. They also feel more motivated because as their English fluency improves, they are understanding the culture better, they are acquiring more knowledge at school, and they feel a stronger sense of belonging. Their increasing fluency in English seems to be a critical door that opens to broader social and academic worlds.

Current Relationships in the U.S.

In addition to language learning, engaging meaningfully in relationships supports the participants' increasing integration into academic and social life in the U.S. All participants of the study stressed the importance of their relationships with their teachers and their parents regarding their social and academic lives. In this section of the paper I present data on the negative and positive relationship experiences in the students' lives since coming to the U.S.

Negative School Relationship Experiences

When the students came to the U.S, they encountered many issues. Among these issues are peer relations at school, interacting with the new school system, and some of the experiences with their teachers. After suffering negative relationship experiences in other countries before coming to the U.S., whether they were socially or academically related, participants encountered a cultural shock when they came to the U.S. In other words, participants did not know what to expect from people in the U.S. They wondered: Will they be more like those who they have come across in other host countries? Will they be different; if so, how? Not knowing what to expect, Huda shared the following about an experience with a teacher shortly after she arrived in the U.S.:

I really hate the reading teacher; she is like because she like like she gave me a C and she gave all of the kids a B, and I did not do a couple of words of the book, and, like, three of four vocabularies and other did not do like fifty vocabulary words. And she gave them a B and gave me a C. I really hate her because she said I'm a student still learning English. This was one encounter between [us].

Such experiences induce an adverse effect on participants' academic and social relationships. Lack of trust and misunderstanding of the new school culture led to the students getting into fights and altercations with their new peers in their first schools period in the United States. As evident "Every time they want to bully me I have to fight. I have to control myself. I learned from my lessons that you don't fight every time someone bullies you. I think then I will ignore them. I want to tell them I don't care. If they get mad, then they're the losers not me."

The data show, even if the students are open to building relationships with American students, American students are not always open to build relationship with them. As Sara shared:

It was me and my other friend, who is Vietnamese. She was not speaking English too. The science teacher said to work in group like three people and she put with us another girl she was American, and she treats us like she did not want to talk. She did not like to work with us. She was mean.

It is too bad the teacher did not do more to support meaningful interaction with the American student in this example. These kinds of experiences may seem minor to teachers and mainstream students, but they often have a big impact on students struggling to understand and engage. Once the students started understanding the school culture, speaking the language more easily, and adapting to the new school system, they started building trust and respect with the people around them. Although there were many negative experiences in the American schools, there were positive memories as well.

Positive School Relationships Experiences

Positive experiences were reflected in the participants' stories about their relationships with their teachers and other students, and stories about their success in the school in the U.S. For particular students who came from traumatic and painful experiences, all of them reported being motivated and supported by their teachers in U.S. schools; their teachers are playing an essential role in the lives of the students who came from refugee backgrounds. Thus, students felt more confident, and self-worthy than they did before coming to the States. That is mainly because their school offers opportunities to help them cope with the new learning environment.

All participants have experienced positive experiences in the U.S. schools, and these experiences affect their feelings, learning process and their sense of self. Sami, who is 12 years old, said:

I'm almost like a man. You know my brother is almost high school. I want to be like him. I want to be like act like a man not like babies. Like some people act, like in the school,

they are in 8th grade, and they act like kids, babies at kindergarten. But you want to act mature, so the people look at you in a good way.

Huda provides a few examples of how the school staff motivated and supported her. She maintains that her cultural identity did not affect her learning negatively. She shared:

I loved the school like when I came to America. They gave me a teacher, he speaks Arabic and English that he teaches me English and the teacher did not say anything about my Hijab or anything about my religion, they just care about how I learn.

Huda said that she was initially worried about her Hijab, but the teacher did not show any discomfort toward her Hijab, which could be one of the reasons that helped Huda feel more self-worth and become more comfortable at the school. As the data show, the positive impact of the U.S. teachers' relationships on the Syrian refugee students is that they trust the teachers. The students trust that the information that teachers give them is correct. Sami's current experience shows that American teachers care about their students based on what he mentioned below:

The situation here is sooo good. It is like you cannot compare it from here and Syria. Is a big difference I mean here is better. It is better. They care about you here, but there they do not like I mean like they do not teach you the right thing either, so like there was like just umm I could describe it that a teacher when I came to America I thought that all what I learned in my life was so wrong, was not right.

As it is clear above Sami believes his teacher would not lie to him; he trusts his teacher.

Positive relationships with teachers in American schools helped Sami to learn.

Sara also shared the following:

DA: Okay. What do you like about the school here in the United States?

Sara: The quality.

DA: Can you please explain?

Sara: because of we not. They do not treat us as a refugee. Like we can go with American people. They help us, the teachers helping us a lot in English and everything. Yeah, it's like everyone is nice.

All participants have touched on the living in the United States, all except Ahmad who feels that America was not his choice, although even he sees some benefit. He explained:

I'm like a kid from Syria, like had been traveling like for countries then came to American but like not if I want to do it. Like I came to America, like not because I want to, because like I do not wanna come to America before, but now I feel it is a better country.

One of the positive experiences identified in students' lives is their relocating from the first host country to becoming refugees in the United States. Huda shared that she was "so happy" because she "love[d] learning English" since she started school in her homeland. "When they said we were going to America, like, I was so happy that I will learn the language that I loved when I was a kid."

Despite differences in school systems, culture, language, and lifestyle, all participants except one participant showed that moving from their country or other host countries to the U.S. is one of the biggest and most formative steps of their lives. Moving from one country to another is usually not the children's decision, rather it is their family's decision. This can put children in a position of moving when they'd rather not. As Ahmad expressed, "then I came to America but like not if I want to do it. Like I came to America, like not because I want to." Additionally, the refugee students' relationships with the school staff and administration helped them to be part of the society and to make progress in realizing their goals in life.

It is clear that their experience in previous schools (before coming to the U.S.) has impacted the participants' aspirations negatively in that it made their goals vanish or be put on hold for some time. One of the interview questions asked the students about their relationship

with their American teachers; all the participants expressed similar positive relationships. All the participants showed that the school and teachers are supporting them to achieve their dreams.

Sami shared:

So sometimes I go to my teachers after school yeah, he just stays from 3:30 to 4:30, it's one hour. I think it's good because, he like, ummm it's almost every day I go at 7:30 to my school so my teacher could like to help me with my homework [at] 7:30. So it's I have one hour. It's like good. I mean like it's very hopeful. You know if we have a test I go at 7:30 then he gives me the test. He helped me with it.

When I asked Sami about his teacher, he shows that the teacher is willing to help him; this motive him to keep working to improve his academic achievement and language development. In addition to the support these students receive in school, they also receive support at home from their parents.

Parental Relationships

The relationship between the students and their parents also plays an essential role in the participants' lives. Most of the participants except for Ahmad show that their parents were involved in their education even though some parents do not speak English at all. Huda mentioned "like they help me for everything I want help with. Even like when I have bad grades they go to the teacher and tell them why I got these bad grades. Then like they tell what I got bad grades on. Sometimes they took my phone away to just let me do my homework. And like now in high school they want me like to go to a good high school." Sami also shared:

They are like whatever I do wrong, they fix me. And sometimes when I get into fights in school, because last year I got a lot of fights in the school, so when they involved last year in some fights like they told me what is the right thing to do or like they helped me fix it and we fix it. It happened then I mean like I learned what I have to do there.

Sara explained: "they got my report card pick up. They went there, and they went like too many teachers I have and asked them about me, and I was the translator."

Rami also shared:

[T]hey look at the work. And sometimes they tell me what do you have what did you get, and they try to help me, but they do not speak English. Yeah, then like when they, sometimes when I open my back bag and show them the word and they tell me good, and like this they help me.

These are evidence that participants' parents were quite supportive and understanding when it comes to their children's education. For Ahmad, nonetheless, the situation was different. He shows that his parents were not helping him:

[K]ind of naa. Like from the fourth grade. Like when I was small they helped me. None of my parents, and brothers because my parents do not know how to speak English a lot. So now I started like working, doing it by myself. No one's helping me. Well, and sometimes me and my friend like do the homework together so works like a friendship we can finish it fast and easier.

Parents everywhere generally help as they are able to. The refugee experience for adults can be much more painful and anxiety provoking than for children. It is the adults who assess situations at home, consider options, and make decisions to leave their home countries. In this study I do not know much about the educational backgrounds of the parents. However, Syria has had a fairly high level of educational development, so we can assume that the parents have likely completed at least high school in Syria. Even though they may not be able to help with English language development, they may have other academic skills and knowledge that could be useful to refugee students. This study was not designed to ask about how parents help, so I do not have data on this issue.

The participants in the study compared their schools in Syria, Egypt, and Jordan and their current schools in the U.S. Learning religions was one of the aspects that the students reflected on. All the students in the study taught on the subject of religion and how it linked to their identity and culture in direct or indirect ways. For example, Rami said, “in Syria we learn about religions but here we do not learn about religions. It is good here we do not have religions classes.” On the other hand, Sami loves to learn about his religion in school; about this experience, Sami said, “like the most thing that I like there that's how they teach us religion but here they do not.” The academic experience in the U.S. does not include religion. As the data show, one of the participants sees it as a positive experience and other sees it as a negative experience.

In summary, coming from war, stress, trauma, and negative experiences including fights, verbal oppressions, and bullying in different countries are some reasons that explain the particular students' misbehaviors in the first period of school in the U.S. When the students attended the U.S. school, they did not know what to expect from people. (Kumsa, 2006). Teachers played an important role in their academic lives; all the students shared that their teachers are supporting and motivating them to learn.

All the students felt welcomed when they came to America. A sense of belonging in school guided the students to open their hearts and express their emotions. Building relationships with other people from different religions, cultural traditions, social systems, and languages helped the particular students to be accepted by (and accepting of) other people and to communicate more meaningfully.

Desired Changes

The last theme that emerges from the participants' stories is “Desired Changes,” in other words, things the participants would like to see changed in schools to improve the experience of refugee students like them. Before sharing their wishes to see some changes take place in their classes and school, they first compared the situation in the United States to that in Syria. For instance, Sami said:

Like what I want to change in my school is to... I do not know. I feel like the schools are almost perfect to me. What I think I need to fix there is, sometimes we do not have a lot of time to do something you know. They pause in middle when we do something that's like we need more time in school.

He also shared, “like, the help I need that, I have after school in December 5th and I need a help thing like math, my homework, sometimes I don't know how to do my homework. Yes, so it's hard for me, I need like help with this.” Although participants in this study demonstrate that they are comfortable and feel like they belong to the new school's environment in the U.S, still they continue with challenges with the English language. Some push themselves to improve their grades at math, social studies, and science, as Huda explains: “it was very challenging for me and the other kids they already know the history and I did not know it. Like I just got scared when I got bad grades.” One of the students' wishes is to have more help with their homework.

Rami, similar to the other participants' in this study, is still dealing with the language. He explained that he'd like to have:

[M]ore teachers in the class, like two teachers or three in the class to like let the students understand more. And ummm like have person for Spanish and person for Arabic and person for English. Like the one, the teacher for English and he talk English. If one, like

someone Arabic does not understand, here come the Arabic one, and he let him understand.

Rami clearly is wanting to understand more that is said in class. His assumption that having more teachers there to interpret, however, is not grounded in what we know about language acquisition, where mere translation can discourage students from listening to and trying to understand the target language (Krashen, 1996).

Moreover, because there is a variety of abilities of learning experiences that took place between the particular students in the study, Huda expressed a similar desire saying that:

I would love to change my schedules because like last year was so easy for me to do. And the math they gave me was so easy to do. And for all the kids was so easy. I love to add algebra to mine because when I go to high school, I do not wanna take algebra. If I took it like I know couple kids they like did not pass algebra.

Rami complained about the long school daily hours in his current school, he shared " like not to be like a lot of time, like from 7:45 to 3:30 it is a lot of time they can do it to 1 p.m. or to 2 p.m." Huda also complained: "I would love to change my schedules time."

In summary, when I asked them about the things they would like to be changed in their schools, the things that they mentioned were simple. For example, they asked for more time to submit their assignments, and to change their long school daily hours. None of the participants in this study mentioned wanting to change any major aspect of their school such as the school system, their peers or teachers, and none named concerns about feelings of belonging.

When I interviewed the students, I asked them questions such as: What is your dream? What do you want to become when you grow up? All the students showed an interest in learning and having dreams to achieve their goals when they grow up.

Having a sense of dreaming and hoping for these particular students is related to their feeling of belonging. As a result of this feeling, students were able to regain the ability to dream because they are learning in a positive school environment. From the students' wishes, it is clear that they seek to improve their grades, continue learning, and gain knowledge to achieve their dreams. They feel comfortable and like they belong in their school. As the data show, all the students in the study like school. As Sami said, "Like what I want to change in my school is, I do not know I feel like the schools is almost perfect to me."

Conclusion

Five Syrian refugee students have voluntarily participated in the study. Each participant has unique stories, yet there are similar issues some have in common. They all came from one country but with different cultures and beliefs that shaped their identities. Being a refugee means preparing yourself to potentially be unwelcomed in some places or not feel a sense of belonging, even to lose identity in some cases. Huda, Sami, Sara, Ahmad, and Rami, the five participants in this study, felt hope when they started school in America because they finally felt they had arrived where they would stay, and they were welcomed and valued. All the participants in the study have similar stories. They all faced challenges to live in neighboring countries to Syria, they encountered moving from conflict countries to the U.S. Limited learning opportunities, cultural barriers, lack of life resources, and discrimination in schools were common experiences for the refugee students before they came to the U.S. Here they have found meaningful and supportive relationships with teachers, peers and others, who have helped them to adapt to American life.

While I was doing the interviews individually, I was reading the students' facial expressions while they were talking about their memories. When I asked them about their memories before they came to the U.S., they looked puzzled. All of them furrowed their eyebrows and stared at the wall. This expression seemed to explain their hurt feelings. With all the pain, hurt, and losses they faced in Syria, Jordan, or Egypt, students smiled when I asked them about their first day in the American schools. Their living in the U.S. became a lifeline to begin again, feeling that they had been given new learning hope for their learning motivated them to dream again. Demonstrating this is a picture drawn by Huda when I asked her about the first day in the U.S. school – in response she asked if she could draw a picture. (See Figure 6.)

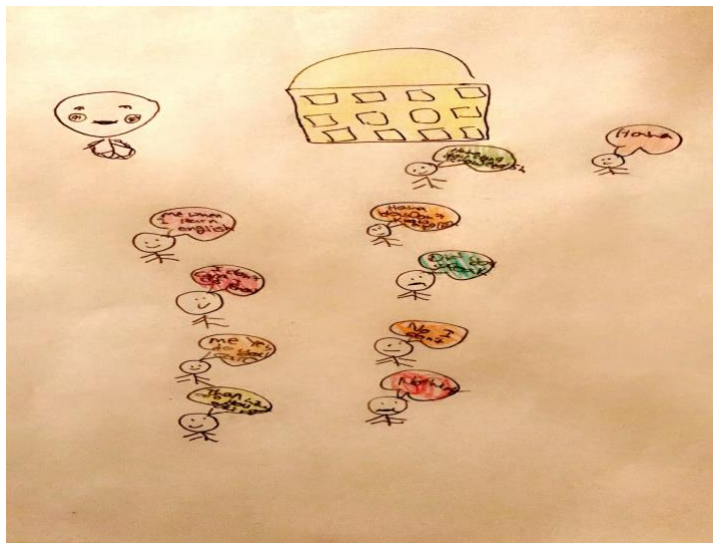


Figure 6. Drawing about the first day at school.

As Huda shows in the picture – she is the figure in the upper left corner – she was smiling and happy at the first day in the American school. We can also see, however, that she was not able to interact with the other students – she is the only person on the picture who does not have a speech bubble (indicating that they are talking). Limitation with English prevented interaction,

but she was hopeful that life in the U.S. and in her new school with her new classmates, would be a good experience. It is where she belonged.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experience of five Syrian refugee students who came to the U.S. between the ages of 11 to 18 years. The study was designed to understand what shaped the experiences of these five students who came to the United States after the civil war started in Syria in 2011. The study shows that these particular students have had both social and academic experiences in the American school system that were both positive and negative.

The study shows that their experiences in other countries could have impacted their learning in America. All five students have experiences in the first host countries that seem to have impacted their lives in the U.S. currently. All the students in the study shared that in some of the countries they moved to enroute to the U.S. – namely, Lebanon, Jordan, and/or Egypt – they faced a hard time coping with the new society, and since there was racism in school, it was hard for them to deal with most of the challenges.

All five students came to the U.S. having experienced trauma, fear, and other negative things. These particular students were worried about their new life experience in the U.S. and what they would face, based on their previous experiences living in other countries before they moved to the United States. They all seem to have found a fairly comfortable home (figuratively speaking) in the U.S., however.

Comparison to Other Studies

There are similarities and differences between the findings of the study and other studies in a variety of fields. In the data of this study, there were positive experiences more than negative experiences for the five participants in their social and academic life.

Language, Interpretation, and Adult Responsibilities

There is a huge number of studies that mention the topic of learning the English language as a second language for refugee students. Most of the studies that I have found either focus on the language as a challenge to learning for refugee students or they focus on the challenges to learn the language itself (Brooker and Lawrence, 2012). Although, the participants in this study face challenges to learn the language, they are motivated, and they are gaining positive experiences in the American schools. All the five students in this study show that learning the English language helped them to understand their school system, interact with friends, improve their knowledge, and improve their grades. They show that when they started speaking the language in their U.S. school, they started to feel more self-confident and have more self-esteem, which may be helping them to attain a high level of achievement in school, meaningful integration into social relationships, and to develop a positive sense of belonging.

All the students in the study explained that the English language is one of the major assets that would help them to achieve their dream in the future. In 2001, Pryor did a study about Bosnian and Albanian immigrant and refugee students in Michigan City. Pryor (2001) indicated that all the students in his study viewed the English language to be important to achieving their future dream and success in a new country. Similar to those results, all five students in this study have the ambition to learn English. At the same time, however, they also talked about the challenges to their own learning due to language limitations. Overall, it seems that those challenges are being overcome. The data show learning the English language set the foundation to the students to communicate with other, understand the school system, learn, and to adapt to the lifestyle. Students often take on the role of the adult; they take on responsibilities that many of their local counterparts do not experience. The particular students in this study are responsible

for translating for their parents when they visit the school. Sara, for example, shared that she is responsible for translating to her parents when they visit her school.

While some educators assume that children translating for adults, especially parents, can be a negative experience, giving too much power to the children, Orellana (2009) argues that translating language can be a positive experience. According to Orellana (2009) “translation work shaped Jessica’s [one of her participants] childhood” (p.2). She also argues, “children work as translators matters for their own processes of learning and development” (p.5) and she explains that translation experiences for refugee children shaped their identity positively. Weisskirch (2016) argues that refugee children can learn the English language faster when they translate to adults. On the other hand, there are studies that focus on the negative side. For example, Kam and Lazarevic (2014) show that when refugee children translate for their parents, that can actually lead to risky behaviors because children feel anxiety and under pressure. In my study, learning the English language, and translating for their parents, seemed to support their academic and social experiences, as seen in Figure 7.

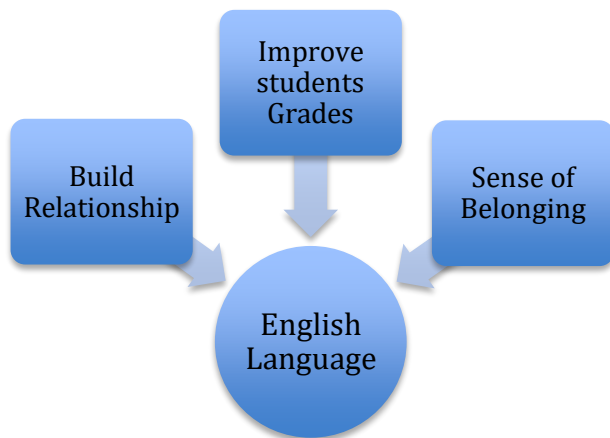


Figure 7 Learning English Opens Doors to Better Grades, New Relationships, and a Sense of Belonging

The figure above explains the positive impacts of learning the English language for the five participants in this study, as it shows, learning the English language open the door for the students to build relationships with their school peer, teachers, their family, and to improve their communicating skills.

The figure above explains that by learning the English language, the students had the opportunity to challenge themselves to study hard and improve their grades. Finally, by learning the English language the students had the chance to understand the new culture. Feel the sense of belonging, improve school grades, and build relationships are factors that influence by learning the English language.

Refugee and Earlier Life Experience

My understanding of the scope of the students' social and academic experiences in the American schools was not just restricted to the experience inside their school. In other words, to understand the essence of everyday experience, it was necessary to understand the students' background experiences. David (2015) explains that the experiences of the students who came from refugee backgrounds can be disturbing for the students while they adjust to a new language and school system and life. Complex settlement issues might affect a student's ability to accept new people in at school.

Dryden-Peterson (2015) also explains that refugee students have gaps in their knowledge and skills, which could be one of the challenges they face when they adjust to a new community. These gaps may have related to the reason of missing schools in first host country. As Dryden-Peterson (2015) said:

[A]sylum is variable and often poor. Experience in an English-language school system does not guarantee proficiency in English, Experience with teacher-centered pedagogy

means that resettled refugee children may have a different understanding of the behaviors and approaches to learning required of them in U.S. classrooms. (p.15)

As Dryden-Peterson (2015) shows, missing school can impact the students' educational experiences in the subsequent host countries. Similar to Dryden-Peterson (2015) opinion, Ahmad and Sara missed school when they were in Egypt. Missing school for Ahmad and Sara can be one reason for the gap between their past knowledge and the current knowledge that would enable them to be more successful.

This study shows that the students have experienced similar successes and challenges. All the students faced challenges in understanding the English language, yet they also described that learning the language is not a barrier; they just need time and practice to further develop their language fluency including both acquisition of social language to engage in social relationships, and academic language to improve their grades (Cummins,1984).

The participants in the study show that they managed to master the social language before the academic language. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) is the language of everyday interaction, the language of communication. and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is the formal language in books and academic learning. Cummins (1984) argues that teachers assume that refugee students who attain the English language fluency can overcome all the challenges and issues with the formal English.

With all the hurdles, students shared that they want to challenge themselves to learn more and to improve their skills. Learning the English language is not a permanent barrier; it could be a challenge that motivates. For the five students in this study, the English language is the most important key that opens the door for them to learn and communicate with others.

All the students in the study faced verbal or physical altercations in their first host country or initially in the American schools. However, from Chapter Four, it is clear that the students today feel comfortable and experience a sense of belonging in the American schools, with their peers and in their classrooms. The students today are learning to deal with their challenges, and they are still learning how to turn their fear and school challenges into tools to achieve their dreams.

Participants in this study show that they feel worthy, have self-esteem, and self-confidence since they have been attending the American schools. They feel a sense of safety, which is an improvement from previous experiences. As Sami shared, last year he got in a lot of fights because he did not know how to speak English, but today he has stopped getting into fights because he felt welcomed and has started understanding what people are saying around him.

Refugee Experiences of Trauma

Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, and Westoby (2003) argue: “Trauma emerges as the past mixes with the painful experiences of the present and anxieties about the future” (p.3). The results in this study are similar to other studies that show that trauma experienced by the students who came from a refugee background may impact the students (Sinclair, 2001). Literature shows suffering from negative memories may expose students to problems related to social and academic confusion (Rong & Preissle, 1998).

In some of the stories in Chapter Four, the participants mentioned the negative experiences of enduring verbal or physical abuse either back home, or in the interim resettlement countries. These experiences seemed to impact refugees’ behaviors in the U.S., as they for example, did not initially obey their teachers and parents and got into fights (Hynes, 2003, Igoa, 1995). The experiences of these participants in moving from tumultuous experiences in and since

leaving Syria, and their settlement processes in the U.S. suggest that their basic needs are increasingly being met.

Maslow's Basic Needs

These feelings such as feel self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth are part of the human basic needs (Maslow, 1970). Maslow (1970) argues that there are five categories of human needs: physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization. Humans need to feel the four basic needs before they achieve dreams (self-actualization).

Individuals need to feel a sense of self-esteem, love and belonging, safety and security, and to have their physiological needs met in order to attain their capabilities. In the case of the five participants' in this study, they touch on the positive memories in their U.S. schools that led them to feel a sense of love and belonging. Maslow's (1970) theory suggests that the particular students in his study were able to dream again because their basic needs were being met sufficiently so they can dream and live life toward a positive future. While the five participants in this study felt a lack of a sense of belonging when they were in the first host country, their chance to escape war in Syria and finally settle in the U.S. schools was talked about as an increasingly positive experience. Another way to express this is that they felt a sense of welcoming and belonging, enabling them to move forward to deepen their acculturation and integration of life in the U.S.

Acculturation Processes

The students in this study seem to be acculturating to American culture much like Ogbu (1991,1992) would predict. Cultural Ecological Theory (Ogbu, 1991,1992) shows how minority

student's performance in school is linked to culture. According to Ogbu (1990) cultural ecology is "the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment" (p.122). According to the theory:

here are two sets of factors influencing minority school performance: how society at large and the school treats minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces). The theory further posits that differences in school performance between immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities are partly due to differences in their community forces. (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156)

Ogbu (1991,1992) argues that primary cultural differences, which are evident with voluntary minorities, enable a dual frame of reference, which situates immigrant children as able to make choices to move toward integration with the new host culture without feeling like they have to give up their identities or past heritage; they can live in both worlds. This typically enables a positive impact on the students' school achievement, according to Ogbu (1991,1992). The data in this study show the five participants' grades in schools had improved. Also, they are more socially active in the U.S. compared to their situations in the interim countries. Ogbu (1991,1992) argues that when students become active and involved in a new society, they do well in school. Some of the studies that were discussed in Chapter Two in this study have similar results.

Belonging

Correa-Velez (2010) said, "The refugee experience is one of being cast out, of being socially excluded, where belonging to family, community and country is always at risk. Formal resettlement in a third country not only offers a safe haven for building a stable life and a hopeful future but also the opportunity to belong" (p. 2). For Ahmad, Huda, Sara, Rami, and Sami,

resettlement in America not only offers a safe place to live, grow up, and create an optimistic future but also it gives them the chance to feel a sense of belonging and to feel the essence of being a part of a community.

In Chapter Four it is clear that feeling a sense of belonging is supporting the students to learn the language, communicate, and to feel worthy. Due, Riggs, and Augoustinos's (2016) study shows similar results to this study. The school environment is one of the influences that can impact the students positively or negatively including the students' skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Schools are one of the places that value the students' identity. As they have been accepted as legitimate participants in their school communities, the five refugee students in this study were also able to experience a sense of school belonging. The relationships with their peers and teachers play as an essential role in motivating them to feel a sense of school belonging.

DeWall, Deckman, Pond, and Bonser (2011) show that belonging can impact human behaviors; when people feel accepted in a new community, they may have the ability to adapt to new lifestyles and behave in a normative manner. In contrast, feeling rejection is one of the reasons for aggressive behaviors. Similar to this study, Sami shared fighting stories that happened in the first period of school, but when he felt accepted and more integrated into the new community, he stopped fight with other students. When refugee students feel socially welcomed and motivated in schools, they become more willing to learn (Goodenow, 1993).

The participants in this study expressed their feelings of the positive impacts of their relationships with American teachers, peers, and family in a way that enhances their engagement and learning in school. In some situations, this manifests as students making difficult choices between one culture and another, with an understanding that only one is possible. Yet, in others,

students do not feel torn between two cultural spaces, and embrace both (Rouse,1991). The student in my study did not demonstrate a conflict between their Syrian identities and their emerging U.S. cultural identities, suggesting that the students are all acculturating in a positive manner, developing a bi-cultural identity where they can participate in both American culture and Syrian culture without undue conflict.

Coming from a religious culture can be one influence that impacts the refugee students' interaction experiences in a diverse culture like the United States.

In Mosselson's (2002) qualitative study of Muslim refugee girls from Bosnia she shows the challenges for fifteen adolescent Muslim girls in school. It was concluded that because of their religious background they felt as if they will not be able to succeed, hence it caused them to become depressed. Mosselson (2002) discovered that the girls worked and studied hard in their school; however, they did not have a social life and that could be related to specific reasons such as they are Muslims. Similarly, in my study, Huda and Sara reflected on their experience of wearing Hijab in school as a part of their Islamic identity.

As was mentioned in Chapter Four, Huda felt comfortable in school because she can wear Hijab. As she said, “the teacher did not say anything about my Hijab or anything about my religion, they just care about how I learn. And they did not think of my like, I was, they thought me I'm American not a Syrian or a different one.” In Huda's story, she felt a sense of belonging because she could practice her religion and not feel different than others in her American school community.

From the interviews of Rami and Sami it is clear that learning about religion is part of their education in Syria. However, Rami and Sami had different perspectives about learning religion in the U.S. For them religion is part of their identity. From their experiences in America,

it is clear that learning in U.S. schools gives them the opportunities to think about how they understand, and want to understand, the relationship between religion and schooling. Rami feel happy because he is not learning religion in his school. On the hand, Sami wanted to learn religion in school, but since it is not taught in public schools, he goes to the Islamic center in the mosque for his religious education. In other words, American opens the door for the refugee students to be themselves, as they determine, and to practice their identities.

The result of this study is similar to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) study. All five participants reveal that feeling a sense of belonging can be seen as a foundation of a social interaction. Baumeister and Leary (1995) "stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" (p. 500).

DeWall, Deckman, Pond, and Bonser, (2011) The show that belonging can impact human behavior and social integration. When people feel accepted in a new community, they may have the ability to adapt to the new lifestyle and behave in ways that further promote a sense of belonging. In contrast, rejection can be one of the reasons for aggressive behaviors, which we saw in the early days of life in the U.S.

Responding the Research Questions

Each of the research questions has been answered in this study. A synopsis follows.

1. How do Syrian refugee students experience U.S. schools?

As it shows in the Chapter Four, Syrian refugee students have had both positive and negative experiences the American schools, although most have been positive. All the five students in this study are eager and determined to learn in school, and to develop their English language abilities. Socially, they felt welcomed in schools and none of the students felt different

because of their refugee identity. Their acculturation processes mirror Ogbu's (1990) theory about how voluntary minorities – immigrants – adapt to life in the U.S. The students in this study have demonstrated a sense of belonging.

2. *How do schools influence the refugee students' experiences?*

a. *What are the challenges Syrian refugee students experience in the US schools?*

Learning the English language has been the main challenge that the Syrian refugee students have faced in American schools. Furthermore, as the data show, the language challenges were manifested in the students' difficulties in understanding their peers when they first came to the American schools, and also affecting access to the content they are being taught. While this has been a challenge, all of the participant students also reported how they are overcoming these challenges.

b. *What successes have they had in U.S. schools?*

From all the stories of the five refugee students in this study it is clear that when they started learning the language, that opened the door for them to understand the school culture, interact with peers, and build relationships with their teachers and peers. Most importantly, their grades have been improved since they started experiencing success in school.

c. *What are the students' perceptions about how their school supports or hinders their learning?*

The five students in this study shared stories about teachers supporting and motivating them. Students show that their school staff are helping them to achieve their goals.

3. *How have the students' experiences in American schools shaped their sense of belonging in the United States?*

As the data show, feeling like they belong in the new community is an important component of these students' positive experiences in the American school. After reading the data

carefully, it is clear that despite the challenges facing the students such as the new language, school system, culture, and environment, they are feeling positive about their overall experiences in American schools. Their sense of belonging in school has helped them to feel self-confidence and worthy, which influences their academic and social experiences positively, and further deepens their sense of belonging.

Research Recommendations

Although this study has provided some important insights into the experiences of five Syrian refugees in U.S. schools, future studies can build on this foundation and answer some additional important questions. In a general sense, additional research can provide more understanding about refugee student experience in schools. One recommendation would be to observe in classrooms and interview teachers to learn more about their perspectives about how refugee students are integrating into schools in host countries. Another recommendation would be to include parents in the study, to get at their perspectives. And, a third would be to do a more ethnographic study with the students, to get to know them better, which should enable deeper discussions of their experiences. This study focuses on the refugee students experiences, as a recommendation, for a future studies would be to include teachers experiences with refugee students in the U.S. schools in order to gain more knowledge.

Implications for Practice

Because the students came from war zones, different cultures, and conflict situations, teachers in American schools need to be prepared to understand refugee students' backgrounds and their situations. In addition, a deep understanding of acculturation processes is important, so

teachers can help students to develop a sense of belonging in schools. Furthermore, teachers need to know how to facilitate meaningful interactions when English language is limited.

Focusing on multicultural education would be beneficial for teachers with refugee students in their classes. While many teachers address these issues, some are less skilled. And, while there were not a lot of examples in this study that revealed teachers who fell short in these areas, there was one significant example. The grouping of a Syrian student and a Vietnamese student – both with limited English proficiency – with an English-speaking student, with no support for these three students to enable communication, suggests that this teacher might benefit from knowing more about language acquisition, orchestrating meaningful group work processes, and perhaps the complex relationships between culture and language.

From a philosophical concept, leaders are the most effective segments of the school because their ideas toward improving the school can support students' future. For that reason, it is my responsibility as a future leader to help and support each student in the school. It is my responsibility to care about each child future. As a future democratic leader, I need to understand that each individual inside and outside the school can support the organization to achieve high level of education. According to Covey (2004) "leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves" (p. 98). Furthermore, as a future transformation leader, it is my job to motivate and inspire all teachers in school to think critically and work hard. Trust and respect are important to develop the school and improve educational system.

From a logical view, nothing is impossible; with refugee students, patience, time, and ambitious should be required to achieve learning improvement. Educators and leaders want better society and the end aim for a school leader should be to help students to learn and teachers

to teach. Positive and affective leadership set the foundation to build a positive school culture and environment, which help the refugee students to feel the sense of belonging to a new community. According to Yu (2012) “schools should also have strong leadership, a safe school environment, responsible teachers, effective use of instructional time, monitoring of student progress, and high levels of parental involvement” (p.40). Yu (2012) explain that school leadership can provide a healthy and positive environment to the refugee students to learn. Teachers and school facility in the U.S. school should corroborate to create appropriate learning support such as to provide teaching resources that meet the students need, to communicate with the students’ families in a way that support the students learning. As a future leader, understanding the students need should lead to improve their learning. Creating after school English programs may improve the students to speak English fluency. Creating a multicultural class environment may help the refugee students to communicate. Designing group projects can improve students communicating skills and improve their education. Teachers preparing programs is one idea that may improve the relationship with teachers and the students. Creating a school vision that focus on each individual inside the school is value and worth to learn would always motivate teachers to improve their teaching schools and motivate the refugee students to feel belong.

Final Thoughts

I hope this qualitative study has shown that schooling is not only about teaching math or science, but that school, for some people, might be the only place to feel secure or safe. School is not just a system, pedagogy, or curriculum, school is a place where students like Huda, Ahmad,

Sami, Rami, and Sara can dream again. It is about the socialization of students for their expected education as humans as they develop a sense of belonging in their new homeland.

Even as I wrote this dissertation, I was thinking that, I'm not American, I did not grow up in this country, I do not have family who live around me, so why did I choose to do this dissertation about students who attend American schools? When I reflect on my experiences as international student at the graduate level, I have realized that belonging is not limited to the place in which we were born. Moving to America and having feelings of self-worth and self-esteem is enough to make me feel like a part of the society and has motivated me to help other people around me, no matter their race, religion, or nationality. I have learned new knowledge from people who came from around the world that has opened my eyes to new experiences. It is my responsibility as an educator, a Muslim, an Arabic speaker, and an American resident to help refugee students. America is a place where people can live together in peace, and all people can help each other toward achieving the vision of building a positive and powerful community. If people around the world could have the sense to think in the same way, we would improve education, help refugees to dream again, and support their learning and cultural acculturation and integration. This notion of belonging relates to understandings of citizenship, not legal status, but to what society people feel they are part of the society (Kristina, 2017). Even though I do not have the blue passport, I'm proud to say that I'm an American.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

English	Arabic
Tell me a little about yourself.	أخبرني قليلا عن نفسك؟
What country are you from?	من أي بلد انت؟
Why did your parents decide to come to the United States?	لماذا قرر والديك أن يكونا لاجئين في الولايات المتحدة؟
Describe school in your homeland.	اوصف مدرستك في بلد المنشأ؟
What do you like about the school in your home country?	ما الذي يعجبك في المدرسة في بلدك؟ ماذا عن هنا أخبرني كيف هي المدرسة هنا؟
Tell me about a vivid memory you have from your school in Syria. Or, a 'favorite' or 'a memory about something important to you'	أخبرني عن أفضل ذكري لك في سوريا او اي ذكري مهمه بالنسبة لك
How about here - tell me how is the school here?	ماذا عن هنا أخبرني كيف هي المدرسة هنا؟
What is going well for you in school here?	ماهي المواقف الجيدة في المدرسة؟
Are there any challenges you face in your school? (Tell me about them. What are they? How do you deal with them? Who helps you to deal with them?)	هل هناك أي تحديات تواجهها في مدرستك؟ ماهي؟ لماذاه تعتبرها تحدي؟
What is the most challenging for you? Why do think this is a challenge?	ما هو التحدي الأكبر بالنسبة لك؟ لماذا تعتقد أن هذا يشكل تحديا؟
Are your parents involved in your education? (How so?)	هل والديك يشاركون في تعليمك؟
How much contact or interaction do they have with your school? Give some examples.	ماهي العلاقات المدرسية التي بنيتها؟ هل من الممكن ان تذكر بعض الأمثلة؟
What do your parents understand – or not understand – about school here in the US? Why/How so?	ماهي مفاهيم والديك من المدرسة؟ هل هم متفهمين للوضع المدرسي؟ لماذا؟ وكيف؟
What does the school expect of your parents?	ماهي توقعات المدرسة من والديك؟
What do your parents expect of the school?	ماهي توقعات والديك من المدرسة؟
What do you like about your classes?	ما الذي يعجبك في فصولك؟
Tell me what would you like to change in your classes? Tell more	هل هناك أي شيء تريد تغييره في الفصول الدراسية؟

what do you want to be when you grow up?

Describe your relationship with teachers? (Are they supportive to you? Is there any specific thing you would like to improve?)

May want a question about how/if your teachers or school staff are specifically helpful to refugee students (special things that they do or services that they offer refugees that they don't offer other students)?

What kind of support do you want or need in your school?

Do you have any American friends? (Tell me about them. – or – Why not?)

Is there anything else you would like to talk about, related to your experiences here?

Thank you for your time. In my dissertation, to protect your privacy (so others won't know who I am talking about) I will not use real names. Would you like to choose a name I can use for you in my writing?

ماذا تريد ان تصبح عندما تكبر؟

صف علاقتك مع المعلمين؟ (هل هي داعمة لك؟
(هل هناك أي شيء معين كنت ترغب في تحسين؟

ما نوع الدعم الذي تحتاجه في مدرستك؟

هل لديك أي أصدقاء أمريكيين؟

هل هناك أي شيء آخر تود ان تخبرني عنه عن
مدرستك؟ ذلك يعود لخيرتك المدرسية؟

اشكر تواجدك معي واشكر وقتك هذا البحث لن
يستخدم أي من معلوماتك الشخصية كالاسم. هل تريد ان
تستخدم اسم لك في هذا البحث؟
شكرا.

Appendix B. IRB Approval

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY



Office of Research Services
Institutional Review Board
1 East Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2201
312-362-7593
Fax: 312-362-7574

Research Involving Human Subjects NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

To: Donia Al-Madani, Graduate Student, College of Education

Date: October 31, 2017

Re: Research Protocol #DA090817EDU
"Syrian Refugee Students' Experiences in American Schools"

Please review the following important information about the review of your proposed research activity.

Review Details

This submission is an initial submission. Your research project meets the criteria for Expedited review under 45 CFR 45 CFR 46.110 under the following categories:

"(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes."

"(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

Approval Details

Your research was originally reviewed on September 26, 2017 and revisions were requested. The revisions you submitted on October 4, 2017 were reviewed and further revisions were requested on October 13, 2017. The revisions you submitted on October 18, 2017 were reviewed and further revisions were requested on October 30, 2017. The revisions you submitted on October 31, 2017 were reviewed and approved on October 31, 2017.

Approval Period: October 31, 2017 – October 30, 2018

Approved Consent, Parent/Guardian Permission, or Assent Materials:

- 1) Adult Consent, version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 2) Adult Consent (Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 3) Parent/Legal Guardian Permission, version Oct. 30, 2017 (attached)
- 4) Parent/Legal Guardian Permission (Arabic), version Oct. 30, 2017 (attached)
- 5) Assent ages 14-17, version October 30, 2017 (attached)
- 6) Assent ages 14-17 (Arabic), version October 30, 2017 (attached)
- 7) Assent ages 11-13, version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 8) Assent ages 11-13 (Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)

Other approved study documents:

- 1) Recruitment Flyer, version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 2) Recruitment Flyer (Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 3) Verbal Announcement (English and Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 4) Script for Email (English and Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)
- 5) Script for Phone (English and Arabic), version Oct. 18, 2017 (attached)

The Board determined that the research satisfies 45 CFR 46.404; it is not involving greater than minimal risk, therefore children may participate in this research project. The Board determined that according to 45 CFR 46.408 one parent must sign the permission document, as one parent's signature is sufficient, and age appropriate assent will be obtained from each child.

Number of approved participants: 20 Total

You should not exceed this total number of subjects without prospectively submitting an amendment to the IRB requesting an increase in subject number.

Funding Source: 1) None

Approved Performance sites: 1) DePaul University

Reminders

- Only the most recent IRB-approved versions of consent, parent/legal guardian permission, or assent forms may be used in association with this project.
- Any changes to the funding source or funding status must be sent to the IRB as an amendment.
- Prior to implementing revisions to project materials or procedures, you must submit an amendment application detailing the changes to the IRB for review and receive notification of approval.
- You must promptly report any problems that have occurred involving research participants to the IRB in writing.
- If your project will continue beyond the approval period indicated above, you are responsible for submitting a continuing review report at least 3 weeks prior to the expiration date. The continuing review form can be downloaded from the IRB web page.
- **Once the research is completed, you must send a final closure report for the research to the IRB.**

The Board would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation and wishes you the best of luck on your research. If you have any questions, please contact me by telephone at (312) 362-7592 or by email at dalfaro@depaul.edu.

For the Board,



Diana Alfaro, MS
Assistant Director of Research Compliance
Office of Research Services

Cc: Karen Monkman, PhD, Faculty Sponsor, College of Education