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“We’re Still Learning and Growing”: An Ethnographic Program Evaluation of an After-School Program for Refugee Youth

by

Shelby Anderson-Badbade

Under the Direction of Kathryn A. Kozaitis, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

Community-based programs for refugee youth are an integral component of their adjustment to life in the US. This study is a program evaluation of an after-school enrichment program for refugee youth, conducted in partnership with a resettlement agency. It examines the ways in which community-based programs can and are currently assisting in refugees' psychosocial adaptation and acculturation to US culture. Using qualitative participatory action research methods, this study evaluates the program from the perspective of the students. Analysis of the data collected indicates that the program has assisted refugee youth in adjusting to American life through developing meaningful social relationships, supporting their emotional growth, and encouraging students to acknowledge themselves as agents of their own experience. This study also proposes recommendations based on contributions from refugee youth and literature that are designed to assist with social and emotional hardships, encourage peer-to-peer connections, and elevate youth voices in program development.

INDEX WORDS: Refugee, Acculturation, After-school, Community-Based Programs, Education, Program Evaluation, Participatory Action Research

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2021

“We’re Still Learning and Growing”: An Ethnographic Program Evaluation of an After-School Program for Refugee Youth

by

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Georgia State University

May 2021

DEDICATION

To the students of the Building Tomorrow after-school program.

I hope you always remember how important and influential your voice can be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Despite only my name listed as the author, this work was fashioned by the efforts of countless individuals who offered mentorship, support, insights, and encouragement. The names and contributions I mention here are in no way a comprehensive list of every person. I hope that I have conveyed to each and every one of you, personally, just how important your time and efforts were to me during the process of researching and writing this thesis.

First, to the people who were essential in the formation of this project: The Building Tomorrow after-school program staff and students. Students, thank you for letting me into your world, showing me your experiences, and demonstrating your concerns with wisdom far beyond your years. Staff and volunteers, thank you for your support, cooperation, and friendship in this endeavor. I truly hope my work here has helped in some small way.

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Though this may seem like a simple document, this thesis truly is an amalgamation of the knowledge, insights, support, and encouragement from each one of you. Thank you for helping me get to where I am today.

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1 INTRODUCTION

It was fairly cold Friday in February of 2020. I was shivering outside, watching the many students of the Building Tomorrow after-school program play soccer on the field, walk around the track, and enjoy their free time outside after their long school day. Students did not seem to mind the cold- as long as they could spend time outside running around. I was watching all the students play when Sanga asked me to come and join in the daily group soccer game. Sanga is a 7th grader, around 12 years old, and always displays high energy and high spirits. Every day, he was adamant that leaders join him on the field. He loves it so much, that he will ask at the beginning of homework time, “Is it time to go outside yet?” I was not in the right attire to be outside in the cold or to play sports (my boots and jeans were not exactly mud-proof) so I gently refused. Despite my protests, he kept encouraging me; “Come on it will be fun, Miss” he said.

I asked Sanga why he liked playing soccer so much. What makes it so important to him? What is worth the cold and the mud? He shook his head and smiled, seemingly amused by my question. In a very matter of fact tone he said that back home in Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, he always wanted to play sports or soccer with friends, but he did not have the space or equipment. “Here I can run free,” he explained. In the Building Tomorrow after-school program, Sanga had an opportunity to be himself in a safe environment. For Sanga, playing sports outside with his friends was freedom and self-expression, more than just a game.

Sanga’s experience is a local articulation of the global phenomenon of displaced families. Across the globe, humanity is facing a crisis of the most individuals displaced worldwide from their homelands since World War II (Loschmann 2016). Rigid nation-state borders, increasingly stringent immigration laws, and international conflict are creating a worldwide increase in displaced individuals. According to the 2016 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee

reports, one in every 22 people is either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum (UNHCR 2016). Considering these numbers, Sanga's journey is clearly not unique.

Refugees from all corners of the world live in precarity and liminality until they are granted the opportunity to resettle in a new host society (Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009). Though resettlement agencies offer these displaced populations a safer space to live and grow, the process of resettlement can be arduous. When resettled in the US, refugees are met with intense structural, economic, and cultural barriers that often create an environment of uncertainty and instability, especially for the youngest refugees (Shepard 2008; Goździak and Ensor 2016). In this transition, refugees rely on community supports from non-governmental organizations and resettlement agencies to cope with the social and emotional challenges of resettlement and to adapt to American life. Since the 1970s, the United States has resettled over three million refugees, with a majority of those resettled being women and children (UNHCR 2016). While adult refugees have the difficult job of navigating the US workforce, youth have the difficult task of adapting socially in school and beyond. Their acculturation requires learning mainstream American cultural practices and values and acquiring linguistic proficiency in English, while also navigating childhood, adolescence, and identity formation (Berry and Sabatier 2011). Because of these compounding factors, many resettlement agencies host or sponsor after-school programs to assist in resettled refugees' social integration (Bajaj, Canlas, and Argenal 2017; Shepard 2008).

Increasing populations of displaced individuals in the last two decades have prompted a rise in anthropological research on refugee and immigrant experiences in the US (Ensor and Goździak 2016a). This ethnographic program evaluation explores how the Building Tomorrow after-school program facilitates the process of acculturation for youth of the program. It considers how and why students choose to participate in the program: Is it designed to help youth

adjust and adapt to their environment, provide after-school assistance with their academic work, or to encourage recreation? In particular, this study focuses primarily on the perception of the program by the students, considering if the program meets their expectations, whether and how the program may be useful to them, and if the students believe that they need more resources or assistance. Analysis of this after-school program contributes to the literature on community-based programs designed to foster the adaptation of refugee children in the US. The central focus of this ethnography is on the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of the youth who participate in the Building Tomorrow program. The use of a participatory-action research model generates data that privileges the voices and feedback of the youth in the program that shed light on the student's perspectives of their own sociocultural and psychological adaptation to American life (Lykes, McDonald, and Boc 2012).

This project centers on the experience of refugee youth resettled in Northern Georgia and their experience with the after-school program, Building Tomorrow. The program's host institution, Stonebrook Middle School, is built to service under-resourced youth in the area. The program exists solely to support the academic and social growth of refugee students in the school; it is primarily funded through a state education department grant and coordinated by a local resettlement agency. Building Tomorrow is held Monday through Friday 4:30 PM until 6:30 PM in a county that is one of the most densely resettled areas in the US for refugees. The after-school program operates every day after Stonebrook Middle School's daily schedule. It is run by a resettlement agency in the area that also hosts an elementary school program. The program follows an organized schedule which offers students academic assistance, enrichment lessons such as science, technology, math, and emotional health workshops, and the opportunity

for free play outside with peers. The program also offers occasional field trips and nights where parents can come to the school and enjoy the program with their children.

The focus of this work is the lived experiences, interests, and aspirations of the Building Tomorrow program's young participants. The program was home to a total of 90 students, ranging in ages from 11-15. Students' histories prior to the after-school program were not well documented, and most demographic information came from internal surveys and data that invited youth to self-report their ethnicity, country of origin, and home language. Considering the data available to the resettlement agency, most students were from Burma (Myanmar), the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Syria. There were some students who were born in refugee camps, and others who more recently fled their country of origin. The diversity represented in the program was not only in country of origin and language but also demonstrated in diversity of character and personal experiences. The students of Building Tomorrow were, and are, complex, full individuals with personal opinions and experiences. As these students, and other youth around the world, navigate this stage of life, their perspectives offer crucial insights into the constant cultural negotiation refugee youth face.

Key participants of this study are all resettled refugees under 18 years of age and analysis of their unique experience, as both refugees and young people, is imperative to a comprehensive understanding of their life in the United States. Throughout this ethnography, the participants of the project will frequently be referred to as "refugee youth." This is done with intention to focus on the unique and specific experience they have. The term "refugee" is a political designation, but it also carries social and cultural implications (Potocky-Tripodi 2000). In recent years, many scholarly works have strayed away from referring to resettled individuals as "refugees" as they believe it may stigmatize or dehumanize the participants. I have chosen to keep this political title

for two reasons, 1) this is how the program leaders and students refer to themselves, and 2) this political distinction carries with it embedded social and cultural connotations that are necessary to comprehend as part of this research. Additionally, referring to the participants as refugee *youth* is a crucial distinction the participants made known themselves. The students participating in this study are between 11-15 years of age. Legally in the United States, a youth in this age range is classified as a "minor" or a "child." However, the participants expressed an aversion towards being called a *child*, claiming it infantilizes them. There is wide cultural variance in the distinctive stages of childhood, and the informants of this study may be referred to as children, adolescents, pre-teens, or a number of other terms (Kottak and Kozaitis 1999). The students and I chose "youth" as an indication that the participants are young, but not without agency. Distinctions like this are imperative because the youth are grappling with identity formation and agency. By distinguishing them as "refugee youth," this label embeds the participants in the unique life experience of a resettled refugee youth who seek to define themselves and to express their developing identities as ethnically diverse adolescents in the US.

The Building Tomorrow after-school program staff consisted of one full-time program manager, two or three part-time staff, three full-time volunteers, and a rotation of approximately ten community volunteers. The program manager, Lynn, planned and coordinated all the logistics and hiring for the program. As a former Peace Corps volunteer, she has dedicated a great portion of her young life to non-profit and community work. Participation by the two or three part-time staff varied throughout my research time; Nadima and Steve were present every day. Steve was in his 30s and was a father to several foster children, some of whom are refugees. Nadima was a resettled refugee herself, who eventually was promoted to program manager when Lynn was promoted to another department. The three full-time volunteers were all AmeriCorps

volunteers, and all three were females in their 20s from immigrant families. The 10 community volunteers were from a variety of places, former AmeriCorps members, College students, individuals from the larger community that want to help, and even some teachers from Stonebrook Middle School. Each of these leaders played a crucial role in the operation of the program as well as the care of the students.

A critical review of the literature on psychosocial adaptation among refugee youth informs this ethnography of an after-school program. In this project, I explore refugee youth's adaptation experiences as an intersectional, multi-faceted, and embedded processes (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998). Employing literature from psychology, education, and anthropology, I analyze the changes youth undergo to cope with cultural duality as they adapt to their new host society's culture (Gibson 1988; Shepard 2008). I examine refugee youth's adaptation in their new cultural society as a constant, non-linear process alongside their personal development where youth can thrive in their host society and also recognize their natal culture as a valuable part of their identity (Guarnaccia and Hausmann-Stabile 2016; Berry and Sabatier 2011; Zhou and Bankston 1998). By focusing on the Building Tomorrow after-school program, I emphasize the importance and necessity of community-based programs for young refugees who rely on them for resources, opportunities, and support (Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011; Wong 2008). In this project, I concentrate on the social and emotional learning aspects of this community-based program and detail the youth's perspective of the program's efficacy and assistance.

I collected over 120 hours of fieldwork data with Building Tomorrow. My methods included participant observation in everyday routines as a volunteer; semi-structured individual interviews with adult staff and volunteers and group interviews with students; a free listing

exercise focusing on the students likes, dislikes, and ideas for improvement in the program; and analysis of internal survey and grant documents. Ethnographic analysis of multiple sources of data enhances understanding of the refugee youth experience as well as their opinions of the program. This project contributes to the growing body of literature on the refugee experience in the US while also contributing to local sustainable change for the after-school program.

In the following chapters, I explore relevant literature pertaining to the acculturation and psychosocial adaptation of refugee youth and detail the ethnographic and qualitative methods I employed to analyze and interpret their perspectives and experiences. Through analysis I found that the Building Tomorrow after-school program offers a safe and structured learning environment for refugee youth to navigate their social and psychological development. The program fosters strong social connections between the youth and their peers and program leaders. These social connections help the youth find solidarity and a sense of community amid the social liminality they experience as immigrants in the US. Additionally, Building Tomorrow provides students with the chance to learn about and explore their lives through social and emotional learning while fostering a future orientation and helping students realize their resilience and self-sufficiency.

As students face the tumultuous process of negotiating and re-negotiating their personal and cultural identity, the program provides resources, support, and encourages youth to find their own path. The students of the Building Tomorrow program see the value and impact of the program on their lives, but many of them expressed a desire for more agency within the program; they want to feel heard and have a voice in the changes and progression of the program. Students expressed that their experiences and lessons they have learned offer insights that may help other students negotiate the constant ebbing and flowing of cultural change and identity. The youth of

the Building Tomorrow program want to use their own stories to create a program that will better center refugee youth experiences and input while still enriching the lives of students academically, socially, and emotionally.

2 MULTIPLE WORLDVIEWS, MULTIPLE STRATEGIES

In our increasingly globalized world, displacement is progressively moved to the forefront of anthropological research (Ensor and Goździak 2016a). As of 2019, the world had over 70.8 million displaced individuals, with refugees making up around one-third of that statistic[1]. Research into the refugee experience ranges widely from focusing on specific ethnic groups and age ranges, to understanding health and economic barriers, and to even exploring the psychosocial wellness of refugees. A wide breadth of research is necessary for a holistic understanding of the refugee experience. A contextual understanding of the youth refugee experience as embedded in a "web of effects," reveals that the multiple factors of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, language impact their everyday lives (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). Research on the daily life of immigrant youth in the United States indicates that refugee youth experience a unique position in which they are simultaneously negotiating adolescent identity while grappling with the many structural barriers that surround them. This negotiation is often discussed in terms of acculturation and adaptation of refugee youth in their new cultural contexts.

The psychosocial adaptation of immigrant and refugee youth is most evident in their struggle to navigate identity. As Phelan and colleagues discuss, youth are often navigating "multiple worlds" at once, attempting to construct their identity at home, school, with peers, and in every other community (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998). For immigrant and refugee youth, identity navigation is coupled with the perceived cultural mismatch of their natal culture versus the country into which they have been resettled (Rumbaut 1996). To navigate the cultural variance, youth employ strategies of adaptation to adjust socially, culturally, and psychologically

[1] See https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

to their cultural environments. Refugee and immigrant youth are continuously shaping, molding, conforming, and reforming their identities to grapple with the cultural differences around them (Shepard 2008: 13). While not all immigrant youth are refugees, the experience of immigrant youth offers additional insight into the experience of adjusting to life in the United States. Immigrant youth in the US must not only forge their identities but also do so with the hegemonic pressures of assimilation, discrimination, socioeconomic challenges, and high expectations (Bartlett, Oliveira, and Ungmah 2018). Within this precarious chapter of life, many immigrant youth turn to community-based programs for assistance. For many immigrants who face the "web of effects" in their lives, community-based programs offer a conduit for youth to cope with their new environments through resources and social connection (Wong 2008; Shepard 2008).

2.1 The Refugee Experience in Context

The term *refugee* is a political term, standardized by global governments to mean individuals who have fled their home country due to violence, persecution, or war (Shepard 2008; Potocky-Tripodi 2000). Refugees are often fleeing their homeland from intense conflict or political unrest, escaping to neighboring nations or fleeing far from home. Once in a safer nation-state, refugees typically seek out camps where other refugees reside temporarily. However, temporarily can mean anywhere from a few months to nearly a decade. Refugee camps can be formal or informal depending on the location, government and NGO support levels, and the likelihood of access to resources like school and job opportunities (Losoncz 2016). The process for resettlement is long, thorough, and arduous; only a small population of displaced individuals are ever resettled into third countries, or host nations.

In the United States, the process of resettlement includes a lengthy and invasive biomedical screening, multiple personal interviews, and several international background checks.

This process can take nearly a decade in some cases, and even after participating in the screening process, refugees can still be denied admission into the US. Not knowing when or if they will be resettled, refugee families exist in a cloud of instability and liminality, while in camps and long after. As Simich et al. describe, refugees experience social liminality, meaning that they are experiencing a psychologically stressful and transitional state, while they exist on the margins of society (Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009: 225). Goździak and Ensor (2016) echo the impact of displacement and use the term "worldlessness" to describe the feelings refugees experience. Worldlessness is the situation wherein a person, in this case refugees, do not belong to a world where they believe matter as human beings (Goździak and Ensor 2016: 357). Goździak and Ensor state that worldlessness is "a radical sense of disconnection and alienation from the physical and social world individuals share with others," which can develop into severe mental health problems over time (Goździak and Ensor 2016: 357).

If the US approves resettlement, families or individuals are moved to a location in the US selected by US resettlement authorities. Increasingly, resettled refugees are being moved into rural and low-population areas, limiting their job options and social connection (Shepard 2008). Refugees resettled in the United States come from diverse countries of origin and speak varied languages and dialects. Originating from over 60 nations, US refugees are predominantly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma(Myanmar), Ukraine, and Bhutan (UNHCR 2016). Once in the United states, refugees face an array of structural and social barriers which complicate their pathway to stability, safety, and contentment (Ahearn 2000a). In their work with refugees and resettlement agencies, Chen and Hulsbrink found "the structural and organizational barriers compound with multiple individual factors to amplify difficulties for refugees" (2019: 218). They claim that the "web of effects" confounds singular issues into broader systemic ones,

making what may otherwise be isolated issues become interdependent and difficult to address (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). Compounding social factors and barriers make the transition from resettlement camps and fleeing conflict to host nations one fraught with complexity for refugee adults and youth alike.

One significant barrier to adjusting to life in a host society that refugees typically experience is language and cultural orientation. English-learning resources are limited prior to arrival in the US, but as Chen and Hulsbrink (2019) report, even with the English-language resources offered in the US, adult refugees often only get short introductory classes before they are required to find work and provide for their families. Language classes are typically given in tandem with cultural orientation classes, meant to teach newly resettled adults the essentials of American life in an extremely short time. Chen and Hulsbrink share this sentiment by an employee of a resettlement agency: “We spent a ton of time trying to teach [resettled refugees]. But our cultural orientation classes are only funded for one week. It is twelve hours! It happens within the first thirty days of arrival. You are so overwhelmed at that point, who knows how much of that information you actually absorb!” (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019: 222-223) Similarly, according to Li, refugees are in a precarious position of attempting to navigate acculturation from a point of social disadvantage due to limited English language skills (Li 2013: 68). In Li’s research with Sudanese refugee families, she found that adult refugees’ limited English learning placed the whole family unit in economic and social precarity, often causing generational rifts between adults and youth in the family. The lack of access to English learning restricts job opportunities and can drive refugees into low-wage positions. The linguistic barriers refugees face in the United States compound into economic barriers and have direct effects of refugee children as well.

Over the last decade, the US has increasingly prioritized economic self-sufficiency, wherein refugee families must earn income that satisfies their basic living standards within eight months of their arrival in the US (Loschmann 2016; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). The US government provides resources for refugee families for a minimum of three months, providing housing, food, medical screenings, and a crash-course orientation to American society (Bates et al. 2013). However, after three months, refugees may only receive minor assistance from local non-profits and resettlement agencies or may be entirely on their own to support their family. The drive towards economic self-sufficiency often pushes adult refugee into occupations that are high risk, require irregular schedules, and demand odd hours, such as factory work or construction (Habibah 2017). Occupations like these often force adult refugees to work multiple jobs, be absent from the home, and have little to no opportunity to adapt fully to the linguistic and cultural practices of the US.

The economic climate of the US can challenge families and typically requires every adult in the household to work and bring in income. When resettled into the US, the work that is available to many adult refugees is often a far cry from their professions in their home country. Adult refugees, while having years of professional experience, can lack the certifications and degrees required to be eligible for high-paying occupations. Additionally, as Losoncz (2016) notes, some refugees come from strict patriarchal cultures and when women in those households are forced to work to support their family, they may not be able to fulfill traditional household duties. This can lead to tension and cultural disruption for some refugee families. Some women may find higher wage jobs than men or simply have to work rather than stay home and care for the household, forcing the men to struggle between the family's economic needs versus their personal and cultural beliefs on gender and household dynamics (Losoncz 2016).

The power dynamics of resettled refugee households can be shifted through gender as well as through generations. The lack of substantial language acquisition, cultural orientation, and ample economic transition into the workforce for adult refugees fosters precarity and imbalance within resettled households. The complex challenges adult refugees face from resettlement can be placed onto their children, as the youth have more continued access to resources through school. In fact, research indicates that many youth may socialize faster because of their exposure to the American school system (Losoncz 2016). Youth's immersive environments typically turn them into both cultural and linguistic translators for the family (Ensor and Goździak 2016b; Castañeda 2019). Children assume the role of the family's cultural brokers, who help their parents navigate life in the US and can even become key players in their parent's economic opportunity through youth's social network (Losoncz 2016).

2.1.1 Refugee Youth

The multitude of sociocultural factors that complicate the refugee resettlement experience are only further compounded among refugee youth. The sense of worldlessness refugees experience can be intensified for child refugees, who often have limited memory of their country of origin, and can struggle to find a sense of belonging in newly resettled nation-states (Ensor and Goździak 2016a; Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011). While scholars claim refugee youth adapt faster to their new environments as compared to their adult counterparts (Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011), youth still face extensive challenges that they must learn to navigate. Ensor and Goździak state that refugee youth are often placed at a "crossroads" of conflicting social, cultural, and personal challenges (2016: 2). While each of these features is also experienced among adults, Ensor and Goździak (2016) argue that the resettlement and acculturation experiences of refugee children and youth are significantly different from that of their parents but

are intrinsically related. The struggles and difficulties refugee parents face are intertwined with the experience of their children, and vice versa.

While refugee parents face the economic challenges, their children experience the side effects of financial insecurity. The hasty push for parents towards economic self-sufficiency in the first eight months forces them into work environments with long hours and less time at home. Because of these working conditions, refugee children are often left home alone or may live in neglectful households as a result of the structural and economic barriers their parents face (Losoncz 2016). Refugee children often lack consistent parental or adult figures in their life to help guide their development and adjust to a new environment (Bates et al. 2013; Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011; Ensor and Goździak 2016b). In Losoncz's (2016) research with South Sudanese families resettled in Australia, she claimed that the demands placed on adult refugees caused a significant delay in acculturation to the host country, while youth acculturated faster. Losoncz claim that, "one of the main sources of conflict [in refugee families] is the more rapid acculturation of children and youth relative to their parents, which impacts family power dynamics," often forcing responsibilities of navigating resettled life onto the youth (2016: 282).

This power dynamic shift is also evident in linguistic acquisition of English, since refugee youth often receive limited English language orientation before they are placed in the US public school system. Despite this challenge, youth are typically forced to continue, or sometimes to start for the first time, their educational instruction in English. Language acquisition research indicates that the immersive environment and the cognitive adaptability of youth help them develop proficiency in English at a faster rate than that of their parents or guardians, often placing the responsibility onto youth in the role of translators (Reyes and Ervin-Tripp 2010). This dynamic situates youth as cultural brokers, tasked with discovering adaptive

strategies quickly enough to assist in their parents' acculturation (Losoncz 2016; Shepard 2008). Refugee youth's adaptation to a new culture is not only necessary for their adjustment but is also vital for their family's success.

2.2 The Acculturative Balancing Act

The pressures of acculturation and adaptation are multi-faceted for refugee youth, who are still attempting to navigate their identity as a developing person. In *Cultural Adaptation of Somali Refugee Youth*, Raynel Shepard (2008) analyzes the negotiation of identity in both developing as a youth and as a refugee in a new cultural context. In her research, she found participants constructed their identity through "various processes of learning, negotiating, reinforcing, and challenging modes of differentiation between themselves and the people around them" (Shepard 2008: 13). Shepard argues that "personal and social identities influence the ways in which immigrants in particular acculturate to new cultural contexts" (Shepard 2008: 12). Theories of personal identity often label late youth as a crucial time for identity formation. Foremost psychological developmental theorist Erik Erikson cites late childhood, or adolescence, as a time to navigate the struggle for autonomy, describing identity formation as an internal crisis or process (Erikson 1994). In contrast, Shepard claims that identity in this stage of life, particularly for refugee youth, is not solely an internal crisis, but also an external process, formed through an individual's interaction with society and self (Shepard 2008: 11). Through this dialectic relationship, refugee youth form their identities in tandem with their adaptation and acculturative experiences.

While negotiating a personal sense of self, refugee youth attempt to carve out a social identity in their new worlds. Refugee youth undergo a vast and tumultuous journey when they resettle in a new environment; however, once in their new host nation, refugee youth must

acculturate to their new society. Acculturation is the process of cultural and psychological change through cultural interaction (Berry and Sabatier 2011: 126). This process varies between individuals, as not every person will face the same barriers, experiences, and opportunities. Phelan et al (1998) describe this phenomenon in *Adolescents' Worlds,* analyzing the way youth negotiate the social realms of family, peers, and school. In a framework referred to as Student's Multiple Worlds Model, they state that this model "assumes that the differences in the sociocultural components of student's worlds can function as boundaries," and understanding and analyzing how youth navigate these boundaries contributes to a better understanding of their adaptive strategies (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998: 11). Phelan and colleagues claim that there are three key adaptation strategies youth utilize: 1) adapt completely, or assimilation; 2) adapt situationally, or conform to the majority, but allow a cultural duality at home; and 3) blending aspects of worlds, or not hiding community and home patterns of behavior from majority peers (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998).

While these adaptation strategies align with the choices refugee youth are often faced with in the United States, the multiple worlds model is constructed as a broad understanding of adolescent cultural navigation and is not specifically centered on refugee or immigrant youth. For refugee youth, these three adaptation strategies are applicable. However, they exist within the web of effects refugee youth face and are not as simple as three succinct categories. Literature about acculturation and adaptation has typically come from psychology, education, and sociology, and focuses on rigid categorizations of cultural adaptation and Likert scales of acculturation (Guarnaccia and Hausmann-Stabile 2016). Initially defined in anthropology by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), acculturation focused on the dynamic relationship during cultural exchange. Redfield and colleagues observed that cultural changes occur in both

groups, rather than simply one group simply taking on the features of the dominant society (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936). Contrary to this foundational perspective, many scholars of acculturation portray adaptation as a linear progression towards one culture, often without consideration for the hegemonic pressure and structural barriers that directly influence acculturation. As Guarnaccia and Hausmann-Stabile (2016) argue, acculturation is not a passive movement of a foreigner into assimilation, but rather a non-linear process of exchanging cultures. The process of acculturation and adaptation exists on a sliding scale within the sociocultural power dynamics of the society in which it is taking place. By acknowledging acculturation and adaptation within power structures, these processes can be understood in a more comprehensive and holistic way. A multiple worlds framework offers introductory insights into the refugee youths experience with assimilation, cultural blending, and cultural duality.

2.2.1 Assimilation and Americanization

For refugee youth the process of acculturation often results in what Rumbaut refers to as "the crucible within," or the process of psychosocial adaptation among immigrant youth during identity formation (Rumbaut 1996: 122). "The crucible within" phenomenon addresses the multiple worlds Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998) refer to by analyzing the multitude of identities made available to, or pressured onto, youth based on social factors like ethnicity, nationality, perceptions of discrimination, aspirations, cultural preferences, well-being, and more. In the United States, immigrants and refugees have historically (and still today can be) pressured into a "melting pot" mentality of cultural assimilation. Often viewed as the path towards success in the United States, assimilation enumerates the assumed ways immigrants *should* behave based on the dominant culture (Rumbaut 1996). Assimilation assumes migrants will shed their natal culture in favor of the dominant group's culture. The term

"Americanization" is often used to illustrate the cultural assimilation of an immigrant into American society. The social pressures of assimilation are continuously reinforced by the structures that exist within the dominant culture of America (Olsen 1997). Olsen's (1997) account of immigrant students in public schools, *Made in America*, includes institutional language requirements as a primary example. Olsen argues that, "the educational task of becoming American is viewed as a matter of becoming English speaking" (Olsen 1997: 91). According to Olsen, the American school system does not concern itself with the ethnicity or nationality of immigrants; Rather, it seeks to "Americanize" immigrants by ignoring their cultural origins and forcing English learning in a uniform manner (1997).

The acculturation of children in the United States has a history of forcing the hegemonic culture onto minority cultures (Shepard 2008; Chuang and Moreno 2011). Historical accounts of the Federal Indian Boarding Schools recount histories of forced assimilation for Native American children to meet the hegemonic standards of the white, euro-descendant Americans (Riney 1997). These school punished natives for speaking their natal languages, wearing their hair long, or simply discussing their tribes or families. Similarly, immigrants to the United States have been ostracized and demonized for expressing their natal culture throughout US history. Historical accounts of immigrants who migrated to New York in the 19th century discuss racism and prejudice for not being the "right" kind of white or not speaking English (Fairchild 2018). Today, there are still prominent structural barriers that reinforce the hegemonic ideals of American society and work in favor of assimilation. Refugee children attend schools with only English instruction, often being told to not speak their native language (Olsen 1997).

Additionally, US schools uphold white, mainstream models of education in standardized testing and curriculum (Bialostok 2019). Because of this, refugee students often experience a

dualism between their home culture and their school culture, where home culture is natal and cloistered by structural oppression and school culture forces hegemonic ideologies onto students (Shepard 2008; Chuang and Moreno 2011). Aside from the tragedy of stripping an individual of their natal culture, assimilationist policy and ideas also disregard the glaring hurdles of ethnic and racial inequity in the United States. Considering that assimilation focuses on immigrants conforming to the hegemonic ideal, some immigrants, and particularly racialized populations, may never be able to meet the criteria of assimilation. Refugees often come from non-European nations, and since the hegemonic ideal in America is to be white, or at least light skinned, there are a great number of refugees and immigrants that could never fully assimilate (Gibson 1988).

2.2.2 Blending, Negotiating, and Adapting

In *Accommodation without Assimilation*, Margaret Gibson (1988) traces the experiences of Punjabi Sikh immigrant students in a California high school and examines how they navigate their different cultural worlds. Gibson uses “cultural discontinuity theory” to understand the internal challenges Punjabi students face because of cultural variance between their home culture and their school culture. Gibson discusses that even students who viewed themselves as more Americanized recognized the impossibility of them ever being fully accepted as anything other than an immigrant because their skin was not white (Gibson 1988). Olsen (1997) echoes these challenges in *Made in America*, she observes that, “immigrants face what feels to them to be polar choices between being accepted by becoming as American as possible and remaining marginalized and holding on to their traditional cultural forms.” (Olsen 1997: 241) Refugee youth are placed in a difficult situation of deciding between the dominant culture and their home culture, often feeling like they are forced to choose one or the other.

To cope with the pressures to conform and the pressures to carry on homeland traditions, refugees develop personal and social strategies to navigate their new environments. Berry and Sabatier's (2011) research with immigrant youth in Canada reveals that "adaptation" depicts how well immigrants function in their new lives, and that immigrant groups cope and adjust to their new life in varying ways (Berry and Sabatier 2011). Refugee adaptation to new communities involves both psychological and sociocultural behaviors and values. Psychological adaptations include, "personal qualities of well-being, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction and a lack of symptoms such as depression and anxiety." (Berry and Sabatier 2011: 127) Sociocultural adaptations consist of "qualities of relationships between the acculturating individual and their social contexts; these include knowledge of life skills, doing well in school work , and lack of problem behaviors in the community." (Berry and Sabatier 2011: 127) The concept of psychosocial adaptation encompasses both the psychological as well as the sociocultural adjustments of individuals (Ahearn 2000a).

Berry and Sabatier (2011) explore refugees' psychosocial adaptation not as a final destination or goal, but rather the process of continuously changing and remodeling oneself within new cultural contexts. The continual process of adaptation can also be understood as a "cultural negotiation," wherein immigrant youth are continuously deciding not only what aspects of their new culture to incorporate, but also what aspects of their natal culture they wish to keep (Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009). The continuous remodeling of self, entailed in adaptation is explored in Zhou and Bankston's (1998) work with first-generation Vietnamese immigrant youth, *The New Second Generation,* who are constantly shifting and developing to fit into different communities. Zhou and Bankston (1998) claim that immigrants' constant adapting is a search for a kind of acculturative balance between their two worlds of home and school. They

conclude that finding a balance between the two is how youth find success. Without the teachings of Vietnamese guidance, they would conform to Americanization potentially losing out on Vietnamese societal values and cultural traditions. However, without the educational opportunities offered by the US school system, they would not be able to fully participate in American society. Youth benefit from their Vietnamese heritage as well as adapting into the new American system (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

In *Accommodation without Assimilation*, Gibson echoes the Zhou and Bankston analysis; she argues that this internal struggle can be navigated through "accommodation," or "a process of mutual adaptation between persons or groups for the purposes of reducing conflict and allowing separate group identities and cultures to be maintained" (Gibson 1988: 25). According to Gibson, mutual adaptation of both the system and the individuals to meet one another's needs is necessary for an acculturative balance, stating it is "both possible and desirable," for all parties (1988: 141). The concept of multiculturalism is society's acknowledgement and acceptance of the balancing act immigrants of all kinds face. As Kottak and Kozaitis note in their book *On Being Different*, "[multiculturalism] promotes the affirmation and practice of cultural/ethnic traditions. A multicultural society socializes individuals not only into the dominant (national) culture but also into an ethnic culture" (Kottak and Kozaitis 1999: 127). The model of multiculturalism in a society 1) recognizes "a multiplicity of legitimate cultural cores, or centers;" 2) acknowledges, "cultural criteria as the source of group formation;" and 3) promotes, "democratization and equity among groups" (Kottak and Kozaitis 1999: 127). In contrast to the model of assimilation, multiculturalism allows people from diverse backgrounds to attempt to exist equally in society.

Berry and Sabatier (2011) found that a multicultural environment is ideal (and even crucial) for psychosocial adaptation among refugees and other immigrants in their work with Canadian immigrant youth. They claim that a multicultural model allows for immigrants to form their own individual identity without the psychosocial pressures of assimilation (Berry and Sabatier 2011). However, multiculturalism does not always play out perfectly when enacted in policy and society. As Coello de la Rosa (2014) notes, multiculturalist policy seeks to allow for integration of the “other," while not recognizing that deeming immigrants as “other” places a barrier of power between immigrant culture and the hegemonic culture. Coello de la Rosa claims that this power differential is based upon the ideal adaptation society seeks to impose upon immigrants. When immigrants fail to meet the expectations of those in power, such as when immigrants score lower on standardized tests, immigrants are deemed “maladaptive” rather than having cultural differences. Considering this argument, it is still pertinent to acknowledge the goal of integrating immigrants through multiculturalism in which immigrants’ culture is considered equally as valuable and important as the host society’s culture (Coello de la Rosa 2014).

While some multiculturalist literature many lack insight into its own power differentials, it still remains that immigrants must find a way to navigate dominant society. In this respect, multiculturalism, while not always understood clearly or practiced appropriately, seeks to forge equitable growth for culturally diverse individuals and groups within mainstream dominant institutions. If societies acknowledge multiculturalism as a process of accommodating and adapting as a society to the needs of immigrants, then immigrants will be able to adapt and grow, in their own right, with less threat of assimilation. Cultural exchange does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it a passive experience. Refugee and immigrant youth are not bystanders to acculturation,

but rather active formers of their own experience. They grapple with the hegemonic ideals of a society and they bring their own cultural experience with them to continuously form and reform their identity.

2.3 The Role of Community-Based Programs in Psychosocial Adaptation

The process of psychosocial adaptation offers insight into the experience of the psychological, social, and cultural changes that refugee youth undergo in their host country. Community-based programs, such as the after-school program and the focus of this project, are considered by many scholars as vital to the social and academic success of refugee youth by serving as a source of social support (Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011; Este and Ngo 2011). As Ahearn notes, "The lack of social support and social interaction [among refugees] has been linked with alienation and poor mental health status in refugees" (2000: 9). After-school programs and other community-based programs often provide safe and constructive environments for refugee youth to adjust to the structural and cultural changes they are experiencing with resettlement (Shepard 2008; Bajaj, Canlas, and Argenal 2017).

Community-based programs assist in refugee's psychosocial adaptation and acculturation by providing them with resources, social connection, and a safe place to learn and grow. In Wong's (2008) research Chinese American immigrant youth, she reveals that youth depended on a community-based organization and its programs to help them access resources and tap into a social network that could create economic and social opportunities for immigrants. Wong uses the term "social capital" to describe this relationship (Wong 2008). Social capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1986), is generally defined as access to resources or networks that help individuals gain capital and therefore can access more power. Social capital is absolutely an essential aspect of community-based programming as it can be a tool to alleviate the power differentials refugees

and immigrants experience with the pressure of assimilation (Guerrero and Tinkler 2010). However, the notion of social capital does not encompass the entirety of what community-based programs offer refugee youth. In her work with Somali youth, Shepard (2008) found that after-school programs provided literacy help and after-school tutoring gave refugee youth both academic and social support, helping them feel more welcome and prepared for life after high school. While some of those resources may be considered social capital, there is also the notion of social connection and safety for the sake of personal development, not simply to get ahead or to gain access to resources.

Psychosocial adaptation is not simply about access to resources and opportunity, but is also about finding connection and safety for the sake of personal development (Shepard 2008). Community-based programs offer a chance for youth to learn and grow in safe environments and to understand how to negotiate their identity. Providing access to social capital as well as opportunities to empower youth to grapple with their identity, community-based programs are a necessary and crucial component of refugee psychosocial adaptation. As Guerrero and Tinkler (2010) note, community-based programs create contexts where youth are agents of their own development. These programs not only offer resources but equip and empower youth to discover and negotiate their cultural identity. Refugee youth spend a large portion of their time in school and in after-school community-based programs. School and after-school time are deemed some of the most crucial areas for refugee students to learn how to adapt to society (Wong 2008; Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011). As major sites of social interaction and learning, after-school community-based programs, such as the one examined here, allow students to discover their own skill sets, understand and manage their emotions, navigate social relationships, and envision and plan for life beyond survival.

2.3.1 Social and Emotional Support

Considered a crucial aspect of youth development, social and emotional support is listed as one of three primary goals for the Building Tomorrow after-school program alongside academic support and parent involvement support. The definition of social and emotional support for the Building Tomorrow after-school program is defined loosely in internal documents with no singular meaning. It is presented frequently alongside concepts like "social adjustment" and "social adaptation."[2] According to program supervisor, Lynn, and youth and education department head, Tara, the agency's idea of social and emotional support was focused primarily on confidence in navigating schooling, empowering students, and helping students plan for their future. These goals are closely related to social and emotional competence which is, "an individual's ability to meet self-needs while maintaining positive relationships" (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009: 164). The authors operationalize this definition through key features of social connectedness with adults and peers, self-regulation and motivation, and self-sufficiency as crucial aspects with which to measure and evaluate social and emotional competence (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009).

Research on social and emotional support in community-based programs and elsewhere indicates that competence in early childhood is indicative of later mental health and well-being as well as academic and social success among peers (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009; Durlak et al. 2011). While most research on social and emotional support focuses on early childhood, this project centers on students in middle childhood and early adolescence. Because of the precarious status that refugees face prior to resettlement, refugee youth often go without traditional schooling and have limited access to educational services; accordingly, refugee youth typically

[2] Concepts taken from internal resettlement agency documents, not disclosed here for confidentiality.

do not receive any formalized social or emotional support or learning prior to resettlement (Bates et al. 2013). Researchers of education and childhood view social and emotional support as vital to youth development (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009; Durlak et al. 2011; Wright and Masten 2005). Research on refugee childhood and youth also indicates that acculturation and development are intersectional and interdependent; as the after-school program assists students with social and emotional support, it also assists with youth acculturation, and therefore their psychosocial adaptation (Berry and Sabatier 2011; Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011).

As a key component of social and emotional support, social connectedness with peers and adults is understood here as the interactions and connections between peers and adults where students utilize empathy, trust, and prosocial behavior, or giving due consideration to others in social interactions and relationships(Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009; Durlak et al. 2011). These social connections are vital for refugee youth who are often socially disconnected from their families and are relocated to areas where they know few people outside of their own family. Zhou and Bankston explore this phenomenon among Southeast Asian refugee children where, "traditional forms and bonds of families have been disrupted, [and] refugee parents often lack the social capital to help their children succeed in their new world." (Zhou and Bankston 1998: 198) Zhou claims that Southeast Asian refugee families found social connection and opportunity among their ethnic community and community resources. Though refugees in the US may find themselves isolated from their ethnic community, resettlement agencies and community-based programs offer a chance for social connection. The social connections developed with both adults and peers are vital in refugees' cultural negotiation, as they learn to adapt to a variety of social circles (Losoncz 2016).

As social relations help refugee youth develop connection and opportunity, learning about self-regulation assists refugee youth with navigating and controlling emotional responses as well as understanding motivations and having a future orientation (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). Self-regulation is vital in youth development for individual psychological wellness as it establishes a foundation for prosocial behavior and mental health (Naglieri and LeBuffe 2005; Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). Additionally, motivation is a key aspect of self-regulation. Refugee youth experience acute social liminality and worldlessness, as such they may not be able to conceptualize their future or see a purpose in goals or dreams due to their social disconnection (Ensor and Goździak 2016b; Bates et al. 2013; Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009). Understanding refugee youth's recognition of personal self-regulation and motivation provides insights into the psychological adaptation of refugee youth. Additionally, programs that foster competence in self-regulation and motivation provide refugee youth with an outlet to negotiate their own ideas of their future (Bates et al. 2013).

Self-sufficiency is often regarded as a high priority "skill" for refugees by the US government as well as resettlement agencies. In their study with refugees in Colorado, Chen and Hulsbrink documented and analyzed the organizational and structural barriers that restrict economic self-sufficiency among adult refugees. They found that economic self-sufficiency was exceptionally difficult for adult refugees in the US, as they face a web of effects impacting their opportunities for sustainable and substantial wealth (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). Among refugee youth, self-sufficiency is more than access to economic possibility in the future, it also encompasses endowing students with the ability to adapt quickly without heavily relying on structural supports and in the face of adversity (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). Tying in

closely with self-sufficiency, resilience is the "ability to bounce back, recover, or successfully adapt in the face of obstacles and adversity" (Este and Ngo 2011: 28).

While the concept of resilience seems positive, the literature and understanding of the concept can be problematic. Some resilience-centered research has been used as a tool to evade accountability for the systemic barriers that exist in society. Scholars argue that instead of researching and working to restructure or remove the barriers refugees face, resilience literature encourages a narrative of "toughening up" and disregards the individuals who may not have the same structural support. Accordingly, youth who may not be as academically, socially, or otherwise successful are then labeled maladaptive, or failures, due to their lack of resilience, despite the web of systemic barriers they face (Howard, Dryden, and Johnson 1999). Considering this, current holistic scholars seek to contextualize resilience in youth. For them, the concept of resilience is viewed as a developmental and continual process for an individual, rather than an end goal (Naglieri and LeBuffe 2005). As youth negotiate their sense of self, resilience is an innate trait that can be fortified or damaged due to the structural factors one experiences in development (Este and Ngo 2011). For refugee youth, resilience is not simply an acquired skill but a necessary trait of survival, as the web of effects they experience will require them to be able to adapt quickly and consciously to the challenges they face (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; Este and Ngo 2011). Resilience is a trait refugee youth have within them that is fortified by the resources and protections to which they have access (Naglieri and LeBuffe 2005; Sesma Jr, Mannes, and Scales 2005).

Community-based programs offer a safe place for students to access social and emotional support that helps them navigate the complex dynamic nonlinear process of psychosocial adaptation and acculturation. Community-based programs are widely considered by educational

and developmental scholars as vital to the social and academic success of refugee youth (Sheridan, Eagle, and Dowd 2005). Providing safe and constructive environments, community-based programs help youth adjust to the structural and cultural changes they are experiencing with resettlement (Shepard 2008; Bajaj, Canlas, and Argenal 2017). Often services like after-school programs are the only link to community and assistance resettled refugee youth and their families have, creating high demand for their services (Alvarez 2019a).

In the US, recent refugee policies have put these resources at risk. Since 1980, the US accepted more refugee resettlement cases than the whole world's resettlement combined. However, since the Trump administration came to power in 2016, the refugee ceiling, or the maximum number of federally admitted refugees, has significantly dropped (Alvarez 2019a). On average before 2016, the US was accepting 80,000 refugees per year. As of 2019, the current administration has lowered the refugee ceiling to 18,000 (Alvarez 2019b). This decline in admissions has led to decreased funding for resettlement agencies and even caused closures of resettlement agencies all over the United States. Closures not only hurt employment in local communities, but also leave existing refugees, who relied resettlement agencies for resources, without the resources they need (Alvarez 2019b). Additionally, many of the services resettlement agencies offer rely on federal and state grants for support which have also faced significant cutbacks in recent years. While the new Biden administration has expressed desires to reinvigorate refugee services and resources in the US, resources like the Building Tomorrow after-school program for refugee youth remain at risk from previous government cutbacks. Without immediate action the programs and the resources necessary for refugee youth are at risk of depletion and devastation.

3 RESEARCH FOR THE YOUTH, BY THE YOUTH

"Children, after all, are not just adults-in-the-making. They are people whose current needs and rights and experiences must be taken seriously."

-- Alfie Kohn

This ethnographic program evaluation is based on more than 120 hours of fieldwork from August 2019 until June 2020 in a northern Georgia city. It focuses on an after-school program for middle school-aged refugee youth, referred to in this work as "Building Tomorrow." This project explores how the after-school community-based program facilitates youths' acculturation and psychosocial adaptation into life in the US. Through ethnographic qualitative methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and free listing exercises, it analyses how, or if, the program is beneficial to the youths' acculturation, and how the program may be developed to further assist youth in a sustainable and culturally-tailored way. Utilizing the conceptual models of participatory-action research and center-outer reform (Kozaitis 2013b), this project centers around the concerns and voices of those who are most affected by programmatic reform: the youth.

Within the discipline of anthropology, there is, for some, an assumed binary opposition of theory versus practice, or between academic anthropology versus applied anthropology (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and Van Willigen 2006). The division is rooted in the false notion that practice and theory are somehow separable in anthropology; that one could exist without the other. When, in fact, anthropological theory informs practice, as practice generates theory. Despite the interdependence of theory and practice, there still remains a disconnect in communication between theorists and the direct service personnel who require the theoretical foundations to do their work (Kozaitis 2000). The information and resources that exist from a rich body of theory

do not connect meaningfully with those who actually utilize it. In this project, I attempt to mitigate this disconnect through praxis, utilizing theory by integrating it into direct action(Warry 1992; Kozaitis 1997). Praxis-oriented anthropology focuses on culturally informed, sustainable, and equitable reform; it is centered on the practical application of theoretical, empirical knowledge to study and to help solve social problems, and to assess and help meet human needs (Kozaitis 2013a). In this project, I employed anthropological theory and methods to conduct a program evaluation of an after-school community-based program for refugee youth. The project explores the acculturative experiences of refugee youth and their psychosocial adaptation to life in the US through the lens of their program experience. Additionally, this project makes culturally tailored, sensible recommendations for programmatic development that may more effectively and fully meet the needs of the youth.

Ethnographic research is ideal for program evaluations as it focuses on the ideas, assets, and needs of the people and their cultural environment in a holistic manner. Traditional non-ethnographic program evaluations can decontextualize data, reducing complex cultural phenomena and human experiences to rigid statistics and indices. Instead, ethnographic program evaluations provide the necessary insights into the culture, recognizing assets of the program and areas of improvement within the structural barriers that the program operates. Additionally, ethnographic program evaluations are particularly suited for work with refugee and immigrant organizations as they can bridge the gap between overworked organizations and a large body of theory that could assist in developing the programs that those organization offer (McInnis 2012). For this project, I employed a systems approach to evaluation, which focuses on the activity and the effects of the program contextualized in the broader context of the cultural system (Ervin 1999: 86). While the Building Tomorrow program has had external evaluators document

program effectiveness with survey data for grant applications, the agency's staff has not had the opportunity to contextualize the data in a meaningful way that may lead to programmatic improvement. Here I examine the program using the conceptual models of center-outer reform and participatory-action research to center the evaluation on the voices of the refugee youth, and their understanding and experiences with acculturation and psychosocial adaptation within the program. By employing a praxis paradigm, my efforts, in partnership with the program's leaders, help to mitigate social injustices in a culturally informed and ethical manner.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the United States has a devastating history of pressuring immigrants and non-white individuals to assimilate into the ideal white, American image. Because of the historical and modern structural barriers and injustices related to acculturation and adaptation in the US, this project's goal is to elevate the voices of refugee youth, giving them a platform to convey their opinions, ideas, and concerns about their experience in the program. This project uses a participatory-action research model, focusing on the youth as collaborators in the project as well as experts of their own community. In participatory-action research the voices of those most impacted by cultural change, the youth, guide the research question, the interpretation, the analysis, and the implementation of the research through the duration of the project (Lykes, McDonald, and Boc 2012). Additionally, this project promotes center-outer reform, where the students are viewed as individuals with agency and therefore experts on their lived experience (Kozaitis 2013b).

The goal of this program evaluation is to elevate the voices of the refugee youth in Building Tomorrow. I use the word "elevate" with intention, recognizing that I am not "giving voice" to the youth, but rather simply using my position as a researcher to elevate their concerns to the powers that effect change (Freire, Bergman Ramos, and Ramos 2014). Viewing children,

or youth, as research collaborators and experts may be unconventional. In fact, much of the research I analyzed argued against this, claiming youth could be unreliable or uninformed. However, one must acknowledge that the worldviews, opinions, ideas, and priorities of youth are quite different from those of adults. Youth have their own ideas and solutions; they interpret their realities in different cultural, environmental, and political contexts (Johnson 2009). While youth may be naïve to the world beyond them, they are very much the experts and arbiters of their own life experiences and their own culture. It is imperative to a holistic and contextualized ethnographic program evaluation to center the voices of those most impacted by the changes that may occur from the evaluation.

3.1 Into the Field

When I set out to find a project for my thesis, I knew I wanted to conduct research with a local resettlement agency, but I did not have a particular preference concerning what department or initiative. Since I was quite flexible, I decided I would reach out to a resettlement agency's volunteer coordinator, attend a volunteer orientation, and see if there was a department that was interested in having me conduct a project with them. The Youth and Education department was the first and most enthusiastic to take me up on the offer. I told them that I was a graduate student and they told me they would "take whatever help I could give them." On my first meeting with Lynn, the Building Tomorrow manager, and Tara, the youth and education department director, I proposed to them the prospect of a program evaluation, and they were both enthusiastic about the idea. According to Tara, the only tools they had to evaluate the program were three quantitative surveys and an external evaluator that came for a few weeks a year to help them compile data for grant renewal applications. The surveys were extensive, over 30

questions for each of the three documents, and were given to students ages six to sixteen three times a year.

Despite the frequent surveys, Lynn told me they felt that these instruments did not provide insights into whether the program was working for students in a meaningful way. The academic surveys they used were straight forward, and they knew students were more successful academically with the program. However, the survey focused on student experience and social and emotional support was difficult for them to interpret. They reported contradictory results and believed that some students did not even fully understand the survey when they were given it. Tara cited several questions that provided conflicting data, such as students answering a five out of five for how much they loved school and then answering later a five out of five for how much they felt unhappy at school. She also noted that several students seemed to lose interest in the survey and would begin to fill them in sporadically, distorting the data. Tara and Lynn wanted to better understand the students' opinions and views of the program, and they were thankful to finally have someone who could dedicate the time exclusively to the project. This meeting ultimately resulted in a service-based learning project during the fall of 2019 that served as a foundation for this project.

This first meeting was not only the start of my project, but it also served as a crucial point of gaining entry with adult gatekeepers. As Corsaro and Molinari discuss in their work with early childhood education in Italy, establishing trust and rapport among adult gatekeepers is just as crucial to ethnographic field entry as acceptance among the youth is (Corsaro and Molinari 2017). Gaining entry into the field is often portrayed as a major obstacle to many individuals' research, but my experience was slightly different. After my discussion with Lynn and Tara, I became a volunteer for Building Tomorrow and attended the program one to three times a week.

Before I began my research in the field, Lynn informed me that the refugee youth who attend Building Tomorrow are exposed to dozens of adult volunteers every school year, and they are relatively desensitized to the idea of "stranger danger." If you are a volunteer with the after-school program, you have passed background checks, attended orientation, trained with Lynn, and actually shown up, and therefore, in the eyes of the students, you are trustworthy. In fact, on my first day volunteering I received three hugs from students before I even introduced myself.

However, this trust did not translate quite as easily into participant observation and my position as a researcher. For the students, the notion of an "outsider" or "foreign researcher" entering their culture did not phase them. They were used to being observed and researched because of their multiple extensive surveys they take and the external evaluator that visits the program. However, many of the students recognized a line between adults and youths. From the beginning of the program, all the students and adult staff and volunteers were aware that I was there as a volunteer researcher because Lynn announced my presence to the entire program. However, students still referred to me as "teacher" and "miss Shelby" because I was an adult. Additionally, because of the high volume of students, I was often an additional leader, serving as a homework tutor, lesson assistant, and occasionally a rule enforcer. Due to my role as a volunteer, during my pilot program interviews, youth tended to give me the answers they thought I wanted to hear or would gloss over topics because they did not think I would understand or believe them. I took another note from Corsaro and Molinari and tried to show vulnerability with the students and become an "active member" of the program. Whenever I found myself in large group settings, I would put myself inside of groups with the students, rather than stand to the side like some other leaders, attempting to make a clear distinction for the students so they would trust me with their concerns and opinions about the program. I played their games, learned

trending social media dances with them, and slowly I began to hear more personal stories, honest opinions, and gain the trust of students as more of a peer, rather than a teacher. The youth's holding back was not entirely because they were afraid to be honest and candid with me about their experience; rather, they did not think I wanted to hear about their compliments, concerns, and ideas about the program. The students often discussed how they felt their concerns may be a burden for the leaders or their burdens may not be considered valid. This sentiment indicated to me that focusing this program evaluation on the voices of the youth was absolutely necessary.

3.2 Methodology

The Building Tomorrow program hosts around 90 resettled refugee students, ages 11-15 enrolled in Stonebrook Middle School. By grade level, the program has roughly ten 8th graders, thirty 7th graders, and thirty 6th graders attending daily. The youth and their families are from a broad diversity of nations and there are over a dozen languages represented. Considering the diversity of the program, selecting a representative sample of the students would have been nearly impossible. Additionally, IRB approvals required written consent in English from both the youth and their parents. The consent process reduced a pool of roughly 70 students to only 28 who could participate in interviews. In this respect, I used convenience sampling for youth data collection. In an attempt to build a more representative and holistic data set, I also conducted a free listing exercise that was anonymously done with all students who attended and were willing to participate. I also interviewed adult staff and volunteers to provide insight into the structural aspects of the program as well as their perceptions as leaders. For adult interviews I was able to be more selective in my sample, interviewing the full-time manager, two AmeriCorps members, and one part time staff member out of the 7 leaders who attended daily. I did not include any of

the adult volunteers in interviews as the project was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown and several of the volunteers declined interviews.

This project was based on a pilot project conducted with the Building Tomorrow program to help the agency evaluate where students' needs are within the program's social and emotional learning curriculum. In this project I used participant observation as a volunteer and focus groups to develop a preliminary needs assessment. The pilot project helped me gain entry and familiarity with the students, provided the agency with data and insights, and demonstrated themes of interest to explore for my larger thesis project. The pilot program revealed themes of desire and appreciation for social connection among adults and peers, preference of greater agency and choices, and an expressed need for assistance with emotional regulation. These themes guided my background research into acculturation and psychosocial adaptation. I focused on the ideas of youth development, cultural negotiation and duality, social and emotional learning and how immigrant and refugee youth process and cope with their experience in the after-school program.

After the pilot project and my preliminary research, I returned to the program following the school's winter break and commenced my role as a volunteer researcher. My primary method of fieldwork was participant observation, but my role as a volunteer occasionally complicated my research approach. As a participant observer, the goal is to strike a balance between being an active part of a community and its practices while remaining removed enough to contemplate the cultural phenomena you are witnessing (Bernard 2011). Due to the low ratio of adults to youth, I was often more a participant than an observer. On days with plenty of volunteers, I had a notebook out during homework time, lessons, and outside time and could take detailed fieldnotes, observing the interactions of students. On days when there were 70 students and five

adults, my notebook stayed in my pocket and my only fieldnotes were reflections I wearily audio-recorded into my phone before my drive home. Regardless of my position as a participating observer or an observing participant, I always transcribed and analyzed my fieldnotes within 24 hours. Despite the ever-shifting duties I had as a volunteer and researcher, my role as a volunteer was invaluable to the project, affording me insights into the innerworkings and structure of the program. Additionally, my role as a volunteer and my emotional connection to the youth invested me in the overall success of the program. My experience is not unique, as other researchers have expressed the value of emotional connection in fieldwork (Doige and Sandri 2019). In ethnographic research it is impossible to be completely objective. My emotional investment as a volunteer helped me gain a better understanding of the youths' experience and further demonstrated the importance of social connection between youth and adults in the program.

After a few months in the field, I decided to reintroduce myself to the students as a researcher before I began conducting interviews. The after-school program frequently has visiting professionals and organizations that teach brief lessons to the students, such as zookeepers bringing in animals, leadership organizations delivering lessons on realizing one's abilities, or business owners leading a workshop on creating your own imaginary business. Inspired by these lessons, I asked the program manager, Lynn, if I could host an interviewing workshop and teach the students briefly about ethnographic research. Other participatory-action research projects have incorporated workshops into their research design to give a needed service back to the community, gain insights into community, and solicit opinions, ideas, and contributions from attendees (Lykes, McDonald, and Boc 2012). The intention of the workshop was to engage the students in the research while simultaneously informing them about the

interview process so they would not be intimidated. Participating students received a brief lesson on interviewing, open-ended questions, and deciding what questions are important to use in research. I told the students that my research focuses on how the Building Tomorrow program could improve for them. I also tasked them with developing some questions that would be good to ask in an interview, reminding them of the importance of open-ended questions. What evolved was an organic set of three questions: 1) what do you like about the program, 2) what do you dislike about the program, and 3) how you think the program can be improved. In line with the participatory-action research model, these questions were a guiding focus of the program evaluation (Ervin 1999). After establishing questions, the students then divided into groups of two or three and conducted interviews with one another. This exercise was fairly well received, though there were a few students in every grade level that chose to opt out so they could work on their homework.

The interview workshop also doubled as a free listing exercise, as all the interviews were kept confidential. Free listing is a simple but effective qualitative method where individuals simply list their answers to questions. In these exercises, the frequency, infrequency, and novelty of answers demonstrate areas and themes for further investigation (Bernard 2011). A total of 47 youth participated in the exercise, with some students not answering questions, and others giving multiple answers. The three questions presented three lists of youths' likes, dislikes, and suggested improvement for the program. In table 1, most notably the students reported that their primary dislikes about the program were disrespectful peers (13), lessons (11), some teachers (5), and food/snacks (5). There were also two responses indicating that they disliked "my abilities," and while it is not focused of the program itself, it raised questions regarding youth's self-confidence. I further explore this concept through group interviews and analyze it further in later

chapters. Table 2 lists the main aspects of the program students liked. The key results were outside time (14), time with friends (12), teachers (8), and homework help (5). It was extremely intriguing that among both lists, there were things like "teachers" that were named in both the "likes" and "dislikes" lists. These contradictory results prompted further exploration in group interviews and revealed that students had particular preferences for some leader over others. Finally, table 3 features the youths' main suggestions for program improvements: more outside time (14), freedom/choices (8), no lessons (5), and more homework help (4). The suggested improvements appear to correlate with the likes and dislikes of the program, but it was interesting that youth called out the concept of freedom and choices. When I showed the results to resettlement agency staff and adult volunteers, they seemed to believe that the contradictory nature of the students' answers was proof that the students do not truly know what they want from the program. However, though some of the results of the exercise seemed contradictory, the youth had explanations for these discrepancies uncovered in interviews.

Table 1: Free Listing Exercise Results of Youth Dislikes

Dislikes	Total
Disrespectful Peers	13
Lessons	11
Some Teachers	5
Food/Snacks	5
Everything	2
Assigned Seats	2
Doing Homework	2
Length of program	2
Not enough homework time	2
Short time outside	2
No Freedom	2
"My Abilities"	2
Staying Inside	1
Nothing/All is good	1

Table 2: Free Listing Exercise Results of Youth Likes

Likes	Total
Outside Time	14
Spending time with Friends	12
Teachers	8
Homework Help	5
Everything	3
Learning New Things	3
Nothing	3
Love/Care	2
Physical Exercise	1

Table 3: Free Listing Exercise Results of Youth Suggested Improvements

Improvements	Total
More Outside Time	14
Freedom/ Choices	8
No lessons	5
More Homework Help	4
Better Snacks	3
More "cute" boys/girls	3
More time with Friends	2
Nicer Teachers	2
Better Bus Drivers	2

The results of the free listing exercise, themes from the pilot program, themes from participant observation, and themes from literature all informed the development of my interviews. The agency requested that all interviews with youth were conducted as group interviews, so the questions I chose were much broader than I would have used in individual interviews. I conducted five semi-structured group interviews with student groups from each grade level: two from 6th and 7th and one from 8th. Groups were anywhere from 3-5 students, with a total of 21 students in group interviews. All group interviews were conducted at

Stonebrook Middle School in essentially whatever area was available to us in that moment. Two were conducted in the cafeteria, two in hallways outside of classrooms, and one in an empty classroom.

To begin, I wanted to gain a comprehensive understanding of youths' perception of the program. I asked questions focused on the structure, purpose, perceived importance, and necessity of various program aspects such as homework time, outside time, and lessons. Additionally, I wanted to investigate the social relationships and the ways the program has assisted in facilitating students' acculturation. To investigate this, I asked students to tell me stories of times the program has helped them, when they have felt included, and how the program has helped them with school and life beyond school. Finally, if it was not already addressed in previous questions, I asked students to explain some of the results from the free listing exercise, such as "teachers" being listed as both a like and dislike. Admittedly, in retrospect, I may have underestimated the students and their ability to articulate their ideas, needs, and desires for the program. In interviews, I discovered that the students were much more astute in their responses than I had expected, and my simple questions sparked interesting narratives and fascinating data which is analyzed in the following chapters. Though my pool of interviewees was limited, the students who could consent and received consent from their guardians were incredibly insightful and upfront in their interviews.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with four adults, two staff members and two full time AmeriCorps volunteers. These interviews were similar in style to the interviews conducted with the youth, but also included a few questions pertaining to the adults' motivations for volunteering in, or working with, the program. The interview with the program manager was conducted at the agency headquarters, but all other adult interviews were conducted over the

phone due to the shutdowns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to interviews, participant observation, and a free listing exercise, I was also given access to several internal agency documents—past deidentified surveys, summative annual reports from evaluators, and parent and student handbooks—which helped me gain further insight into the goals of the program, its structure, and the expectations of the students, parents, and adult staff and volunteers. Lastly, as this program evaluation is based in a model of participatory-action research and the voices of the youth should be elevated and represented clearly, I conducted continual member-checking with both the students and the agency staff. Member-checking is simply presenting your data findings to their research collaborators and ensuring your findings and analysis are consistent with the collaborators' actual ideas and opinions (Thomas 2017). With students, my member checking was consistently telling them the things I observed and heard. I would ask groups of students if I understood correctly, typically in informal settings and during interviews. For agency staff, member-checking occurred in the form of semesterly reports with interpreted findings.

3.3 Theoretical Framework and Analysis

This ethnographic program evaluation attempts to understand the role of community-based programs in the psychosocial adaptation of refugee youth. Guided by the participatory-action research paradigm, this study places youth at the center of the research, viewing them as experts of their own lived experience. Based on ethnographic data and analyzed within a relevant body of scholarly works, this work highlights the Building Tomorrow after-school program's areas of success and the areas of potential improvement. This study utilized multiple theoretical frameworks to interpret the data. Through theoretical frameworks of social and emotional support, acculturation, and psychosocial adaptation, this study explores a holistic picture of

refugee youth experience. Additionally, I also analyzed all data through grounded theory, utilizing inductive analysis to code the free listing exercise, interviews, and ethnographic observations (Bernard and Gravlee 2014: 506)

Research into psychosocial adaptation and acculturation, particularly in disciplines of education and psychology, tend to focus on a modernist view of adaptation and acculturation as a linear progression of cultural assimilation towards the hegemonic ideal (Suárez-Orozco, Carhill, and Chuang 2011). However, anthropological research on immigration centers on the cultural exchange and negotiation that occurs during acculturation and adaptation. It centers the narratives of immigrants and seeks to understand their cultural adjustment as a non-linear, fragmented process of continual exchange that occurs within the power dynamic of the new nation-state. In more concise terms, immigrants are not passive in the process of acculturation and adaptation, nor are they inevitably working towards a goal of assimilation and cultural loss (Guarnaccia and Hausmann-Stabile 2016). Instead, they operate within the power differential of their new nation and attempt to negotiate and renegotiate their relationship with the society around them. While I used literature on adaptation and acculturation from multiple disciplines to frame this project, the focus was always on the *process* of adaptation and refugee youths' role as agents of their own experience.

Early coding of participant observations and free listing exercise were guided by *a priori* themes from the pilot study including themes of social connection, agency, and self-regulation. As more data became available, themes developed through looking for repetition, *in vivo*, and theory-related codes (Bernard 2011). With theory-related material, careful consideration and evaluation was given to the data that appeared to support the themes, as theory-related material can occasionally lead to a biased analysis. Themes from social and emotional support and

adaptation theory emerged of social connection with both peers and adults, self-regulation, motivation, self-sufficiency, and resilience. After a break from data analysis, the data was analyzed again searching for repetitions, *in vivo* codes, and validation of theory-related codes that emerged from the first pass. Additional themes included a sense of belonging and community, gender variance in peer relationships, gender and emotional expression, future orientation and motivation, and desire for freedom and agency. All these themes aligned well with the key themes from the first pass of the data and enriched the depth of data analysis.

3.3.1 Limitations

There are several limitations that must be addressed in this study. While the data collected was gained from a sample of the students, the partnering agency requested that students only be interviewed in groups to ensure the safety of the students. The format of group interviews, while sometimes beneficial, ideally would have been complimented by individual interviews to provide in-depth analysis. Additionally, a broader diversity of interview formats would have helped give multiple data points to the overall conclusion. Furthermore, the study faced significant limitations due to language. The parents of the student had to give written consent and understand the English-language documents, restricting a significant portion of the population. While the resettlement agency aided in the translation and interpretation of documents, many parents were, reasonably, hesitant to sign their students up for a study they did not fully understand. While it is essential to have fully informed parental consent to conduct an ethical study, this process did leave out a significant number of students who expressed interest in participating in the study. Within the program there were also a significant number of students who were not deemed fluent in English and therefore could not consent or participate. Input from

newly resettled youth, or youth that have had difficulty learning English, would have been a valuable addition to the research.

As an additional limitation, there was a lack of information of the natal origin of students and the amount of time they have been in the US. The agency has information on the origins of some of the families but not all, and they could not fully disclose the information to me due to privacy concerns. Despite my efforts in interviews to get students to discuss their nationality or ethnicity, many did not know how to answer or gave no answer. For example, I met one student's mother who was Rohingya and identified her family as such. However, when I interviewed the student, they reported their nation of origin as Thailand because that was where they remembered living in a refugee camp. Examples like this are not uncommon, as many refugee youth may be born in refugee camps or may not have memory or paperwork to demonstrate that they are from a particular nation. Further research with the families of the youth may have offered more insights into students' ideas about nationality or ethnicity, and this area of my project was underexplored.

While the data collected in this project primarily reflects the youths' perspective, I was conducting research on behalf of the agency. I was not a paid employee, only a volunteer, but it is important to note the position I was in, as some may view it as an opportunity for bias in the data. Additionally, the project centers on a Building Tomorrow programmatic goal referred to as "social adjustment." Though I attempt to center youth perspective and focus on their experience, the study centers several westernized concepts such as social and emotional learning, self-sufficiency, and agency to analyze this programmatic goal. In this context, the opinions and ideas of students' parents would have added valuable insights into the goals and ideals of their home

life versus that of the program. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and my research timeline, achieving parent interviews and opinions was extremely difficult.

A case study, such as this one, focuses on a small microcosm of a social issue. This project analyzes a population of 90 students and their experience with social and emotional support and psychosocial adaptation with a community-based program for middle school students. Considering this, the study is not meant to speak to all community-based programs, or all refugee youth experiences. The data collected here represents these specific students, their program, and their experience over one-year of data collection. Despite these various limitations, this study does open the door to research that is youth-focused, community-centered, and praxis-oriented. The conclusions drawn here pave the way for new research into adaptive strategies for refugee and immigrant youth as well as research into community-based programs and social and emotional support.

4 BUILDING A SAFE PLACE TO LEARN AND GROW

While conducting research with the after-school program, my goal was to understand the experiences of the students from a holistic perspective. I wanted to uncover the role of the Building Tomorrow program in their lives, and how it impacted their adaptation into American life. Through ethnographic methods, I came to understand a program that is well structured, but under-resourced. The program prioritized research-based approaches to their curriculum and did so on a shoestring budget with limited staff. The program manager as well as the AmeriCorps program curriculum planner worked tirelessly to meet the expectations of students, parents, the resettlement agency, benefactors, and ultimately the standards of the American school system. The students are cared for and given many valuable lessons, but they face significant challenges navigating their identity within the cultural boundaries of the US. The student participants expressed positive attitudes and appreciation towards the program and saw the benefits of their attendance. However, they also recognize that they experience challenges that the adults and leaders do not understand. By allowing the students to express their opinions and needs, this study encourages the program to serve in the students' best interest.

The following sections explore the dynamic relationship of cultural exchange among the youth of the program, where they rely on one another and the leaders to help them navigate the complex sociocultural position they occupy. In the following chapter, I explore themes of self-regulation, social connection, and self-sufficiency while analyzing them in the context of gender, ethnicity, and other sociocultural constructs in which the students are embedded. I use the themes reflected in the literature and gathered from youth opinions to elucidate areas where students believe the program could develop to be more centered on their needs.

4.1 Organized Chaos

I first met Lynn, the program manager, at the resettlement agency office, where she plans and coordinates the program and leadership team. In an open office layout, with only senior staff having closed offices, I found Lynn and her desk buried at the back of a winding maze of connecting hallways, storage boxes, and desks. Her desk space was neat and tidy, with a handmade superlative reading “most likely to respond to an email.” The space surrounding her, however, was like an avalanche of children’s books, art supplies, and other miscellaneous items. She looked flustered and apologized for the mess. I chuckled and told her I have worked with children before, so I understand the chaos. The stacks of books and supplies were for both the middle school and elementary school programs. Lynn only ran the Middle school program but shared the space with elementary school. The school year was beginning in a week or so and she and her team were trying to get all their ducks in a row. I asked her to describe the program using a few words. “Organized chaos…maybe? Not one-hundred percent on the organized part.” She chuckled, only half serious. There’s truth to her statement, although I do not believe she gave herself enough credit for how well she kept it organized with her limited resources and circumstances. The middle school program was undoubtedly underfunded, under-resourced, and in desperate need of more volunteers, but all things considered, the chaos is definitely (somewhat) organized. The after-school program, and the resettlement agency, are in a position similar to most refugee agencies; they lack sufficient resources to meet the needs of the communities effectively (Chuang, Rasmi, and Friesen 2011).

The program, on paper, has a very structured organization. Students enter the cafeteria for snack and attendance at approximately 4:30 PM. After snack, students are separated by grade and walk to classrooms where they spend about 45 minutes on homework. Then they engage in

varied lessons depending on the weekday. Mondays are focused on social and emotional learning lessons conducted by representatives from other community organizations and volunteers. On Tuesdays, students read and write according to an English Language Learners curriculum. Wednesdays they engage in clubs in their area of interest, including photography, leadership, art, and music. On Thursdays, students are taught STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) lessons. Finally, Fridays are "stations" where students can participate in educational, artistic, and constructive activities like painting, beading, gameplay, and building blocks. The last third of the time is spent outside in free play where students can choose how they spend their time before going home. During this time students can engage in a variety of outdoor activities or simply sit and talk with friends. After this time, the program has busses that drop student off at their homes.

My first day volunteering with the program, I entered a large cafeteria filled with long empty lunch tables. Bright green and yellow writing decorated the walls reading "Forever Reaching Educational Excellence: Developing Our Minds," and the leadership team sat chatting at a single table in the corner near the serving line. The leaders were engaging in their daily meeting before the students came in, discussing student report cards, activities for the day, and general program notes. The 5 leaders at the table were dwarfed by the volume of tables in the room, and soon they would be dwarfed in numbers by the sheer volume of students. The bell rang and students began to trickle into the cafeteria. In a matter of minutes, the empty room is a crowded, energetic space, full of laughter, yelling, greetings, and general chaos. Leaders attempted to count attendance while students funneled in from every direction, trying to ensure that they all get their provided snack before they head to their classrooms. Students packed into the tables, talking, dancing, playing, and celebrating the end of another day at school. I recall

standing there, attempting to take it all in- the students, the room, the cacophony, the laughter. As I was staring in awe, Steve, a part-time leader, read my expression, smirked, and said, “Yes, it is always like this.” And this is just the first fifteen minutes of the program.

Though the program has a routine structure to it, the disproportionate ratio of leaders to students- a ratio of approximately 1 leader to 12 students- often invites chaos into the program. Trying to organize the sheer volume of students whether in a classroom, outside, or in the cafeteria requires every leader to be fully present and vigilant. After snack and attendance is taken in the cafeteria, the students split off by grade into classrooms where they focus on their homework. As soon as they enter the classroom, students raise their hands quickly as many of them need assistance with math, English, social studies, and science. Leaders circle the room, attempting to give assistance to students while also keeping other students engaged in their work. A nonstop chorus of “Miss can you help me?” and “Mister, how do you spell this word?” continues throughout homework time. After homework time ends, leaders try to start a lesson, but the students are already asking their famous chorus of, “Is it time to go outside yet, teacher?” Each lesson is received differently; some days students are fully engaged and excited, other days they are disinterested. Mostly students are invested in getting outside. Once outside, students are free to choose their activity, partaking in a number of sports like soccer or volleyball, scrolling social media and learning new TikTok dances, or walking the track that surrounds the field and talking with their friends. Despite the chaos, leaders manage to keep a pattern in the madness and still give students a program that is enriching and engaging.

The after-school program is hosted in a school I refer to as “Stonebrook” middle school in north Georgia. This school is unique in that it was designed specifically for the community surrounding it. Demographically, the area surrounding Stonebrook is one of the most densely

populated refugee resettlement communities. The city is one of the few in the US that opens its doors to thousands of refugees throughout the year and tries to create public policy with refugees in mind. With a rich population of refugees, youth resettled into this area are in a unique position. Research into acculturation often focuses on ethnicity as a crucial factor in a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, ethnic enclaves are not always present in areas of resettlement. In some instances, refugees are ethnically isolated and have limited social networks, much like the US scattering policies of 1975 which "scattered" Hmong refugees across the US with no regard for family or ethnic affiliation (Adler 2011). Whether intentional or not, separating refugees from others who share similar backgrounds can result in social isolation and reduced economic opportunity (Adler 2011). However, in areas like this northern Georgia town with a large refugee population, not only do many refugees have the chance to be close to others of similar ethnic identity, but they also have the advantage of living in a community that makes attempts to ease their transition. Many of the resettled families in the area continue to partner with local resettlement agencies to help with linguistic translation or even act as mentors to help newly resettled families. Additionally, the area is historically under-resourced with a majority population of minority (mostly Hispanic and Black) students. These two demographic features, refugees and minority students, motivated the county school board to establish a school that catered to under-resourced populations, offering innovative learning and plentiful after-school programs to try and keep students engaged and help them succeed. A local community that is dedicated to accepting refugees and supporting its diverse population fosters an environment where refugees can find solidarity among their neighbors while adjusting to their new lives in the US.

4.1.1 The Students

Building Tomorrow has an average of 70 youth attending every day, with 90 enrolled, a recorded high rate of attendance for the program compared to years past. Additionally, according to Lynn, it almost always has a waiting list of several families who hope they can enroll their children. Students are all refugees who have been resettled in the area, though the program is technically open to all students in the school. As the school was established specifically for refugee and under-resourced communities, the school's instruction is split into two sides, English Language Learners and Non-English Language Learners. Students in this after-school program typically receive specialized instruction in English int the English Language Learners component, with a few exceptions of students who have tested out. Students are in Middle School; in this state that means grades six through eight. However, their some students' ages vary from the average middle schooler, as many resettled youth are held back by a grade to supplement any missed education while displaced (Ensor and Gozdziak 2016).

On a sunny Friday volunteer shift, I was outside with a few students and another volunteer, Jamie. We were playing the children's game Simon Says. While I am not sure who began the game, Imani, a sixth grader from the Democratic Republic of Congo who is typically kind, but also fairly outspoken, took charge to give instructions. "I have to say, 'Simon says' else it does not count." All other students nodded, and some were excited to get started. With her first command, she did not say "Simon says," and roughly half of the students playing were out. Imani let out a loud laugh and stated that she knew she could trick people. The other students who were out, claimed it was Imani's fault and it was unfair. Kassim, in the same grade as her, shouted something at her in Arabic. She retorted in a sing-song voice, "I don't know what that means, *zoba*!" Then Jamie stepped in to quell the tension. "OK guys, no need for name calling!"

Kassim sat down and Imani continued with the game. "What did she say?" I asked Jamie, not knowing what words had been exchanged. "Zoba. It means like *idiot*." I asked her how she knew, since Imani mostly spoke Lingala, a Congolese creole language and Jamie did not. She said that with this many languages floating around, you catch on quickly, and *zoba* was a word that several students, even ones who did not speak Lingala, liked to use. "There's like seven kiddos here that don't speak a language anyone understands," said Jamie, and added that there were a multitude of languages represented, and some students spoke multiple languages. With such a broad linguistic diversity at the school and the after-school program, there are inevitably many linguistic and communication-based barriers that youth encounter on a daily basis. In Olsen's research with immigrant students in public schools, she details the challenges of learning English. Students that have difficult learning English can often rely on others who speak their language or can withdraw from social interaction (Olsen 1997: 95). In the Building Tomorrow program, students who had difficulties with learning English could often find a partner who would help them with translation or simply a friend who was patient and could help them learn more. While language diversity can be seen as an obstacle to good communication, in this program it fosters solidarity among the students.

The students in the program do not have an easily generalizable demographic make-up. Some students have been in the United States for mere months, while others were resettled here when they were infants. They come from all corners of the globe. Some youth claim their "home" country as the nation they were hosted in a refugee camp, some not even knowing where their families were originally from. Even statistical data collected from surveys and evaluation could not offer clear, consolidated answers. The report stated 97% of youth marked "other" as their self-reported Race/Ethnicity, clearly demonstrating youth did not identifying with the

American racial categories of white, African American, Asian, or Hispanic.[3] The key feature unifying all the students is their shared experience as refugees adapting to American life. The broad diversity of the students and multicultural setting is a crucial feature of the program, as the program leaders believe exposing refugee youth to diverse backgrounds will help them feel more comfortable with their own background and help them adapt more readily to their environments.

4.1.2 The Leaders

Every adult in the program, be they a volunteer or a staff member, is called "teacher" by the students. I choose here to refer to them as leaders, as not all of them serve in a strict teaching capacity and each of their official titles vary widely. The middle school after-school program only has a full-time staff of two leaders- a program manager, Lynn, and an AmeriCorps full-time volunteer, Sanaz. There are also two to three part-time teachers who work most afternoons (for several months of the program, one of the positions was vacant) as well as two other AmeriCorps members who split their time between the resettlement agency office and afternoons at the after-school program. Additionally, the resettlement agency recognizes a team of approximately 10 volunteers who show up at the convenience of their schedule. On average, there are typically six to eight leaders every afternoon, far dwarfed by the number of students.

On a rainy Friday in February, I arrived slightly late to my volunteer shift due to traffic, only to find just four adults present. The supervisor, multiple staff, and volunteers were all sick with some stomach bug and there were little to no back up volunteers. I only recognized three of the leaders there that day, Sanaz, Lynn, and Tim, a volunteer who came once every few weeks. The fourth was Tina, a former AmeriCorps volunteer with the program, who drove nearly two hours in traffic because she heard that the after-school program was short-staffed. Selfless

[3] Based on a Cumulative Internal Report from FY2018-2019

service is not uncommon with many of the leaders involved with the program. “I want to serve *wherever* I can be of service,” said Kaia, one of the AmeriCorps volunteers, when I asked her about why she chose to serve with Building Tomorrow. Kaia also mentioned that a large percentage of their volunteers are former AmeriCorps members who just “could not let the kids go.” Despite their limited numbers, there is no distance these leaders are not willing to go for their students, both metaphorically and literally.

Many of the staff and volunteers are former refugees or immigrants themselves. “It’s a good opportunity to give back and to serve my community,” stated one of the volunteers whose parents are immigrants. They view it as a way to be the support system many of them depended on or wished they had growing up in the US as an immigrant. Other leaders are typically college or graduate students from surrounding universities, or individuals who have a passion for working with refugee youth. Most of the staff have little to no background in education, so they follow the guidance of the leaders before them. AmeriCorps members, like Sanaz who is in charge of the Building Tomorrow Curriculum, typically serve for 11 months, so they rely on legacy documents from years past to help them make lesson plans and build the program. Though the program is under-staffed and under-resourced, the leaders work hard to give the students an enriching and engaging space. These volunteers and staff pull from their own personal experiences as immigrants, the stories and experiences or others, and the research they have available to help refugee youth understand their acculturation through the experience of others. The leaders of Building Tomorrow are not simply teaching and helping students with their schoolwork. Staff, volunteers, and AmeriCorps members are teaching the youth of the program how to adapt to and negotiate life in the US.

4.2 Social Connection: Mentorship

"Miss Shelby, I don't feel so good," Lwin said quietly, cradling her face in the middle of the cafeteria during attendance and snack time. I asked her what was wrong, slightly distracted by the boys a table over, who were attempting to toss milk cartons to one another. "I am not good. I want to go home." Lwin said with tears in her eyes, still cradling her face. Lwin was typically a cheery and bright 6th grade student, always one of the first to enter the cafeteria and offer a hug and a smile to each leader, so her dejected tone and desire to leave early was shocking. I asked her why she was holding her face, and she held up her coat, blocking away the view of others. She moved her hands and showed me her face was swollen and breaking out in hives. She told me she did not want anyone to see, and that she was embarrassed. I ran to get Nadima, who transitioned into the role of program director in my last month of research.

Nadima knew Lwin had allergies and knew where she could find her medications. She tried calling Lwin's mom several times with no answer. As we moved from the cafeteria to classrooms, Nadima kept Lwin close, helping her with her medicine and keeping other students from asking questions or making Lwin feel even more uncomfortable. When the students left for the day, I asked Nadima if she ever reached Lwin's mother, and she said that she had not. She told me Lwin's mother is a single mom who works two or three jobs to make ends meet. Nadima added that Lwin's case is not unique; many refugee students come from single-parent households, with parents often absent from the home due to occupational and economic obligations. A few weeks later, when I conducted interviews, I was discussing the topic of teachers and asked students their opinions about them. Immediately, Lwin stated, "When I was sad, Ms. Nadima helped me. When I hug her, I feel like I am hugging my mom. I can't always see my mom- sometimes she's gone for a long time working. Ms. Nadima makes me feel care

and love." To Lwin, the program offered an opportunity to experience the type of social connection she would have with her mother or other family member.

The social and emotional connections the students share with the leaders is one of the most significant features of the program. All interviews and observations with students from every grade revealed deep connections with many of the leaders. Students felt they could rely on leaders for comfort or advice, and that they viewed the leaders as role models. Temporary volunteers- those who only showed up a few times a week- tended to have less mentions from students, whereas staff and AmeriCorps volunteers were mentioned explicitly in every group interview. In observations, temporary volunteers were often referred to simply as "teacher," and students would ask if they were new, even if they had volunteered many times before. In contrast, the staff and AmeriCorps members who attended each day received hugs from several students every day while checking in for attendance and referred to them as "Mr." or "Miss" followed by their first name, indicating their familiarity with the leaders.

The final day of the program before students went on Thanksgiving break, leaders taught a lesson on gratitude, appropriate for the upcoming holiday. I was in the 6th grade classroom with Sanaz, an AmeriCorps volunteer and curriculum planner. We had fewer students in the room than normal, around 10 students to the average of 20. Students were full of energy and excited for the break from school, so they were talkative and bubbly. Sanaz got the students quieted down as I handed out a paper with a large, patterned circle on it. Sanaz explained to the class that the mandala pattern on the paper represented the different parts of our lives that include people, places, and things. In each of the three patterned circles, students were to write or draw people, places, or things for which they were thankful. Students did not initially understand the explanation, so Sanaz and I went around table by table to explain the activity. "You just need to

write things that you are happy you have," I told them, like books to read, a safe home to be in, your parent or family member that makes you happy. Students nodded and asked for markers to decorate their papers.

Amari and Fatima, two girls with whom I had been spending a great deal of time walking with during outside time (since walking was one of the few activities that fit my athletic capabilities), called me over to their table. As was typical, they were giggling and gossiping about their classmates. "Miss Shelby, how you spell spaghetti?" Fatima asked, since she had it for lunch and was, apparently, very grateful for it. Imani then asked me if I knew how to spell a K-pop singer's name. I said I did not know, but I asked why she was putting them down. "Aren't you thankful for people you know?" She said she had to think about it. Fatima looked at me and said, "Miss Shelby, how do you spell Miss Sanaz's name?" I told her and she happily wrote it in the "people you are grateful for" circle in bright purple letters on her mandala. Imani noticed and stated she wanted to know too, "And how do you spell Miss Meena's name?" Other students began to chime in and soon the whole room was asking how to spell leaders' names. "How do you spell Lynn?" "How do you spell Steve? Tim? Jamie?" "How do you spell your name Miss Shelby?" By the end of the activity, almost every paper circle was covered in the names of leaders of the program, next to family, friends, and a few celebrities.

During the gratitude exercise, it was intriguing to me that the first people mentioned on the activity sheets were typically celebrities and fictional characters. And even when asked about people in their everyday lives, many students named staff and volunteers before they proceeded to add friends and family. While this response could be peer influence –if one student writes something down, others want to follow suit-- it was evident that many of the students shared genuine connections with program leaders. Much like Lwin's story, many refugee youths'

parents are often absent from the home. Due to economic pressures and underemployment, adult refugees have to work multiple jobs and irregular schedules to stay moderately economically stable (Sheridan, Eagle, and Dowd 2005). In youth development research, adult role models and influences are considered vital to healthy mental health development, helping them mitigate feelings of isolation through feeling care (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998). For refugee youth, adult influences are not only crucial to their development, but also to their process of adaptation. Adult figures help youth negotiate their experience in the dominant society (Wong 2008). They help youth understand how to navigate their cultural settings and provide solace and comfort for youth when they are struggling. For the students of Building Tomorrow, the leaders of the program served as positive adult figures in their life, where their parents may not be able to due to the structural barriers that keep them away from the home.

In the free listing exercise, students explicitly stated that one of their favorite things about after-school program was "the teachers." Alternatively, students also listed "some teachers" as one of the things they disliked about the program. Across the classrooms, eight students reported they liked "teachers" and five students reported they disliked "some teachers" out of 47 respondents. (See tables 1-2.) The contradictory results were evenly split across the three classrooms, all reporting the same contradiction. In group interviews, students clarified that there was a difference in how some teachers treated students. Certain leaders took the approach of being stricter on rules and policies such as bathroom visits or vending machine use. These leaders were often the ones students mentioned in interviews as their least favorite. Most of the youth favored teachers who treated them with a mentor/mentee mentality, meaning leaders would present themselves as role models and often negotiate the rules to give the students a small amount of leeway (Goldstein and Brooks 2005). Research with immigrant children

indicates community-based programs with adult mentors and role models are crucial to guide them in their transition into new environments (Losoncz 2016; Wong 2008).

While many leaders had social connections with the students, the variety of students, and the leader with whom they connected, created an unclear line between *teacher* and *mentor.* This resulted in some students claiming unfair or unequal treatment. In one group interview, Nyla, an 8th grader, was complaining that she needs to be able to use the bathroom more often. “We can only go once at the very beginning! It’s crazy, some people have small bladders!” Directly after, Helen, another 8th grader, chimed in, “Wait, that’s a rule? I never knew that was a rule. They never make us follow that.” Helen and Nyla debated for a while about the legitimacy of the rule until Nyla resigned, stating, “It’s probably because the teacher does not like me.” Uneven enforcement of the rules by varied leaders led the students to believe they were personally disliked, rather than a variance in leniency among the way leaders ran their classrooms.

During the pandemic of COVID-19, the after-school program was forced to move their operations online. One of the key features of the program that leaders intentionally kept was mentorship, now in the form of phone calls. In an interview with Kaia, and AmeriCorps volunteer, she stated that she was on the phone with one of her 7th grade students, Hope, for over three hours helping her with homework and checking in to make sure that she was handling the change of routine well. “On Saturday [Hope] was like, ‘Oh my god I cut my bangs and it looks bad’…and I said you do not even need to feel bad. I cut my hair too, it’s all normal and we’re going to be okay.” Kaia went on to call it a “humorous bonding experience,” because it showed Hope she was not alone and she had someone she could talk to and rely on, something Kaia believes is necessary for all students to have. “Just showing them that you care, that there is someone who cares, is a big deal.” Kaia’s sentiment is echoed throughout youth development

literature. As Goldstein and Brooks (2005) demonstrate, having caring adults who build trust with youth helps them face and recover from struggles with support. For refugee youth, support from adults creates a comforting and familiar environment, helping them learn how they can adapt and adjust to their lives in a new society (Fernandez Kelly and Schauffler 1996).

Based on analysis of interview and free list data, it is evident that the students prefer leaders to be mentors in their lives rather than distant or strict teachers. In group interviews students overwhelmingly discussed a desire for leaders who would talk with them, comfort them, and trust their judgement. Literature on youth development and acculturation encourages the same; adult role models who respect and gain the trust of youth act as a support system to help youth deal with the social and emotional issues they face (Goldstein and Brooks 2005; Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998). However, even the leaders who demonstrated strict enforcement still had a few students speak highly of them. Amari, a 6th grader, stated one of the strictest teachers was her favorite. When others dissented, Amari said, “Miss is not mean, she just wants to give us education…She treats me with kindness.” Even when leaders had mixed reviews, the social and emotional connections between students and leaders built positive relationships. The adult leaders of the program fill a potential gap for many students whose parents cannot be present for them due to economic pressure and structural barriers (Li 2013; Losoncz 2016).

4.3 Social Connection: Peer Relations

The peer relationships between the students afforded many of them an enhanced sense of confidence and comfort in both the after-school program and life beyond the school. In free listing, students overwhelmingly stated, “time with friends” and “time outside”, a time largely for socialization, as their favorite features of the program (See table 2.) During a group interview, a student named Sang-Mi spoke up about her experience connecting with her peers

socially. She had always impressed me as a vivacious and social young woman, always talking with teachers and students about anything and everything. However, she told me this was not always the case. "I went crazy, but in a good way. I was actually myself [at the after-school program]. When, in school, I wasn't." She went on to say that her new friends and the other kind students of the Building Tomorrow program helped her come "out of her shell." Other students shared similar sentiments, attributing their new-found confidence and comfort to the connections they were fostering with their peers.

Research into adolescent peer connections indicates that peer relations are of great importance to the psychological and emotional well-being of students (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998; Shepard 2008). As Bates and colleagues found in their work with Sudanese refugee youth, "youth found solidarity and support among peers who were experiencing similar hardships." (2013: 177) Peer connections were visible in the field in many forms including fictive kinship, or what students referred to as fake families, among close groups of friends, collaborating with peers, and sharing of limited resources, like food or school supplies. Each of these social and emotional connections illustrate the impact and importance of peer relationships among youth and the interdependence of peer relationships and self-image. The Building Tomorrow program offers youth a place to develop peer connections with youth who share similar experiences and can show solidarity and support during times of transition and development. Their shared experiences as immigrants into a new community draws them together in solidarity (Gibson 1988).

4.3.1 Fake Families and Sharing Snacks

"What do you mean Helen is your grandma?" I asked Suhana, as she called out to Helen, passing down the hall. "She's part of my family. The fake one," she said. Suhana, two other

students, and I were all in the hallway for a group interview and all of them were distracted by the students lining up to go to the bathroom. I asked Suhana to explain a bit more because I still did not understand what she was saying. She smiled, rolled her eyes, and explained. “I started my first fake family in gym last year.” Suhana explained that fake families were something she and other students created to show who is part of their friend group. “Now I have three daughters, two nephews, and a grandma.” Another student, Bashir, questioned her, “Wasn’t Joseph your Dad?” Suhana responded, “Yeah well he got moved to be my nephew because I found out he’s younger than me.” Other students nodded their head in agreement that Joseph should be labeled as her nephew.

In interviews with 7th and 8th grade students, the participants frequently discussed their “fake families,” or fictive kinship connections made with peers. Although it may appear as a joke, for many of the students, it endows their peers with emotional ties and seemingly permanent social connections. When coloring with chalk outside one day, I was talking with a student named Nancy. Another leader had mentioned she had a sister, Esther, that was previously in the program and I asked her how Esther was doing in high school. “I don’t know. It’s like I don’t even have a sister. I don’t ever talk in my house,” Nancy responded. She went on to say, “I have more family here than I do at home.” Peer connections such as the fake families the youth have constructed offer students an opportunity to find a sense of belonging, fighting the social liminality and worldlessness many refugee youth experience (Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009; Bates et al. 2013) Nancy’s story of disconnect with her family at home also speaks to the situational nature of identity for many youth (Shepard 2008). Refugee youth can view their home and school cultures as completely separate, and have difficulty grappling with the duality. Some refugees, like Nancy, may even experience feelings of alienation and liminality at home, due to

their family members not understanding their developmental and cultural adaptations (Losoncz 2016).

In another interview with 8th graders, the youth spoke of their "fake family" to me and even invited me to join. "That's how you know we like you," said one student named Sein whom I was assisting with homework. "So, what is my title? Do I get to be a niece?" I asked. "No, you can be an auntie because you are old." Despite my protests that I was still young, I was called and referred to as "auntie" by that small group of students for the rest of our time together. The students used these titles as a way of demarcating peers – and some adults- whom they have interacted with and built a connection. Sein explained why Henry, her "son," received that title. "He asked me for help all the time, all the time. So, I call him son because I always have to take care of him." The students that formed these "fake families" were also many of the students in interviews who attributed the after-school program with giving them confidence and helping improve their social skills. For many youth in the program, Building Tomorrow is a chance to find solidarity among their peers, helping them navigate the waters of acculturation (Wong 2008). With a support system of peers, youth can find confidence, solidarity, and empathy (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009).

Beyond the "fake families," other students demonstrated social connectedness with their peers in the form of cooperation and sharing. While in classrooms, any candy a student possesses is not kept hidden and selfishly eaten; rather, it is distributed among other students. While interviewing 6th graders, I brought some candy for students to eat while we were talking. Since there were no available classrooms, the students and I were sitting in the hallway on chairs and on the floor. Because of our location, students would frequently walk by on their way to the restroom. Whenever a student walked by our group, participants would toss them candy, even if

they did not know their name. Food sharing was a connector, a collectivist mentality, a way for students to extend a metaphorical hand to anyone they encountered. It was often the first thing students offered to each other before engaging in play or talking. This form of reciprocity was also commonly paired with cooperation. While observing the 7th grade class during a lesson, I saw newly resettled student, Zara, sitting quietly alone while the rest of the class was working. Noor, a student who had just resettled to the US the year prior, saw Zara alone and went over to talk with her, making sure to go into her backpack and grab her gummy worms first. Noor offered some food to Zara before talking to her about the lesson and helping her complete the assignment. This simple exchange was the first step in helping Zara adjust to the program environment and feel welcome. According to Kaia, an AmeriCorps member, "Noor reached out and helped Zara become comfortable, helped her confidence." Students utilized sharing as a conduit for building and establishing social and emotional connections with their peers.

Students frequently attempted to reach out to one another in assistance for social and academic matters. On my first day in the field, I heard a 6th grade student, Imani, talk about her helping another student with her homework.

> *Imani: "I am helping her learn English. I work with her every day, every day. But she [is] taking so long, teacher. I cannot do it anymore."*
>
> *Steve: "But you remember how hard it was for you to learn English, right? She's going through the same thing."*
>
> *Imani: "Teacher, did I take this long? I will not stop helping her, but she needs to hurry. I have work too."*

While Imani was lamenting about her workload, I later found out that she was helping two other students with their English and had assisted many other students along the way. This type of

collaboration was frequently observed in all three classrooms; however, it was received differently by some leaders. In a few cases, leaders would discourage classroom collaboration between certain students because they may cause a disruption, or a leader did not think the students were actually completing homework. In a group interview Amari mentioned, “We try to help each other with homework, and we are told to go back to our seats and stay away from each other.” The students wished they could work together, as the teachers often do not have time to help each of them with their homework. As Gibson found in her work with Punjabi Sikh immigrant youth, immigrants shared experience draws them together as a sense of solidarity, support, and strength (Gibson 1988: 35). The students’ willingness to assist their peers demonstrates their collectivist mindset and sentiment of solidarity with fellow refugee youth.

The mentality of collectivism in the face of challenges varies from the typical American values of individualism and competition. Research in acculturation and adaptation can paint the process of adjusting to a new culture as an inevitable path towards assimilation, where youth are passively experiencing social pressure to conform (Zhou and Bankston 1998; Berry and Sabatier 2011). However, the students’ tendencies toward collectivism and solidarity are not something they are likely taught in the American school system. Rather, many of the natal cultures youth come from promote a collectivist mindset and encourage youth to work for a communal good (Zhou and Bankston 1998). The process of psychosocial adaptation is not a simple process of assimilation for the youth of this program. Instead, youth are urged to recognize the cultural value of their natal culture and are encouraged to negotiate their identity between and within both cultural value sets.

4.3.2 Early Romantic Relationships

We had just released everyone for outside time and all the students were running to their own corners of the field. I was standing at the top of the sidewalk as I usually did, overlooking the large track and field space where students spent their outside time, to make sure students who were still in the building placed their school bags down on the designated section of pavement. As the students made their way onto the field, I spoke to a small group of students and asked them what they were going to be doing today. They began talking about drawing with chalk or just walking the track as usual. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lwin in a brightly colored, elaborate sari with full jewelry and her hair and makeup done. She was sneaking over to see her friends, avoiding the main area of the field. I told the other students to have fun and that I would catch up with them later and walked over to Lwin and her friends. She was standing with three other students, Fatima, Amari, and Imani, all in casual clothing, and I asked her why she was so dressed up.

"I'm just dancing for the school. I was showing my friends, but I don't want the others to see." Lwin said. The other students were fascinated, asking Lwin about her sari, jewelry, and her upcoming dance performance. They were excited and loud until Lwin noticed a boy, Omar, slowly walking over. Lwin blushed and playfully tried to hide behind her friends. Omar did not approach the group of girls, but rather lingered and paced close by, trying to sneak a look at Lwin but pretending to stare up at the sky. Omar started to talk to me, which is surprising because he has barely spoken a word to me before. I laughed a little and asked him why he was over here and not playing soccer. "Miss, I saw Lwin from over there and she looks so good." He shook his head and laughed, hiding his face. I told him standing and staring could be seen as rude. "You should tell her she looks pretty!" I encouraged him. I heard Lwin's friends laugh, as

she tried to hide behind them, embarrassed. “Omar and Lwin like each other,” Fatima says, loud enough for everyone to hear, for Lwin to hide more behind her friends, and for Omar to blush. Omar leaned in towards me and gestured for me to come closer. “Miss, can you tell Lwin she looks pretty for me,” he whispered. I chuckled a bit and encouraged Omar to tell Lwin himself. “It will mean more coming from you,” I said. He shook his head as I encouraged him once more and nodded to the other girls to follow me as we not-so-causally walked away from them. Lwin and Omar stood practically five feet away from each other, hiding their faces, nervously shuffling, and barely saying anything.

Fatima, Amari, Imani, and I walked a bit farther away and giggled at the awkward couple. The girls told me about how Lwin has dated other boys before, which both they and I found shocking since Lwin is only in the 6th grade. They discussed how their teaches tell them they should only think of “school, school, school first.” “They say we will have time for boys later,” said Amari in a sing-song voice, mocking the advice. Fatima shook her head and reminded Amari and Imani that they are too young to be thinking about boys. (Advice she likely received from a teacher or parent.) The girls then discussed how Lwin dated a boy at the beginning of the year. Imani explains that he was in her class and he was always acting out and disrupting class. She claimed that when Lwin dated him, he was mean to her and she did not understand how to handle it. She began acting out in school too, stopped doing her schoolwork, and became incredibly sad. Amari said she was glad he was gone and that they broke up a while ago. “What about Omar, is he a nice boy? Do you think he will be nice to Lwin?” I asked them. Fatima said that he has been loud in class before and stole her pencil one time, but Amari and Imani argued that he is nice.

Exchanges like this were not uncommon in the program, despite the young ages of the students. Other students expressed explicit interest in flirtation and early romantic relationships during my time in the field. In both interviews and free list exercises, students discussed, while giggling, that the program needed “more cute boys” or “more cute girls.” (See table 3.) (When I told the students that they could be honest in the interviews, I was not fully prepared for this response.) Despite the giggle-fueled answers, their responses opened up an under-researched area of study for refugee youth: romantic relationships. As youth age, the concepts of romance, relationships, and sexuality become harder to navigate between healthy relationships, social pressures, and cultural expectations. I mainly discussed and witnessed this topic with female students, not because the males were uninterested, but likely because the females were more comfortable discussing the topic with another female. In several discussions, girls expressed that they believed they were held to a different standard than boys. Girls were given strict rules about what to wear, where they could go, who they could talk to, and were held to social scrutiny at school and at home. In contrast, boys were given the freedom to flirt, date, and live their life without restrictions from their parents. When I was drawing with chalk outside with a few students, they were discussing dating and boys because a 7th grader, Vivian, said that her brother was dating another student’s sister. She was frustrated because he was allowed to date and talk to whomever he wanted, while she was not even allowed to talk to boys. Vivian’s friend Hope chimed in, discussing how strict her parents’ rules were for relationships. “My mom told me if I tried to marry someone not Asian, she’d slap me,” Hope said, shaking her head. Hope seemed to take this statement as a fact, believing there would be real consequences if she dated outside of her parents’ preferences.

While still in the early developmental stages of romance, relationships, and sexuality, students in the program are already having very real experiences negotiating the cultural differences of western romantic relationship ideals versus their home culture's relationship ideals. There is a clear double standard of gender which youth will have to navigate. In Shepard's work with Somali refugees, she found similar themes of social monitoring, restrictions, and high expectations for females versus males. Female youth were held to higher standards to preserve their parents' ideas of marriageability (Shepard 2008). Students' engagement and interest in romantic relationships highlights the oncoming cultural negotiation they will have to prepare for in the next few years, grappling with their home culture's expectations and the social pressures of American society (Shepard 2008).

Additionally, students had not explicitly discussed race or ethnicity with me up until my conversation with Vivian and Hope. While in the Building Tomorrow program, youth are exposed to students from various ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. My conversation with Vivian and Hope exposed the delicate position they may have to encounter in the future (or now). The school and program they attend promote diversity and multiculturalism, thereby encouraging friendships and potentially relationship with people from all ethnic and racial backgrounds. However, students may be receiving different messages from their family about only associating or entering relationships with students from the same background as a way of preserving their heritage or potentially because of discrimination. The potential of cultural duality can lead to future situations like Lwin experienced, where she was in a relationship that affected her socially and mentally, but she did not have a support system to turn to for help. Hopefully, the social connections youth make in the program, will help students share their experiences and learn from one another how to navigate and negotiate the tricky domain of

romantic relationships and dealing with cultural differences (Wong 2008). The program leaders typically view early romantic relationships as futile or innocent. Leaders would discuss how advice on relationships could come at a later age. However, students in the program were clearly facing real relationship conflicts that challenge them socially and emotionally.

4.4 Self-Regulation

The grass was muddy and slippery on a cold October afternoon, but that did not stop the students from playing soccer. Nothing really could. Those who had cleats or good shoes wore them, while some wore sandals with, socks or went completely barefoot so their parents would not get angry if they ruined their shoes. Soccer was never organized, no strict rules or teams, just two sides fighting for a goal with as many players as wanted to play. Steve, one of the leaders, was always at the helm, coordinating sides, and making sure no one fouled, and that everyone stayed safe. It was cold, and I wanted to get my blood pumping. I normally never play soccer, but on that day, I had brought the right shoes and had the cold to motivate me. I went out on the field, on a team with at least 15 students. Brothers Hasan and Yusuf were on separate teams, Hasan on mine and Yusuf on the other. Hasan is older by a year or so and the boys seem often to be at odds. That day they looked at one another with puffed up chests and a hint of anger. They were clearly mad at each other about something, but there was not time to dwell; it was time to play the game. We proceeded in the muddy field, balls being passed, goals being scored. No one really counted on a typical day, but today Hasan and Yusuf made it a point to call each other out when their team scored.

Our team was not fairing very well. Scoring only a few goals, Hasan was becoming visibly frustrated. He finally got a hold of the ball and was playing down the field trying to score a goal and right before he took the shot, Yusuf came behind him and took the ball, knocking

Hasan back in the process. He fell, looked around, and then began to wail that he was hurt. Game play stopped so Steve could make sure Hasan was okay. There were no visible marks or cuts on Hasan, but he was crying and angry. He kept saying that Yusuf hurt him, so he could not play anymore. But Steve told me later that he was mostly upset because he was angry with his brother for beating him. Hasan sat to a side for the rest of the day, refusing to talk to anyone until it was time to go home and lashing out at anyone who tried to calm him down.

A story like Hasan's is echoed throughout the after-school program, as some of the youth in the program are not always sure how to channel their emotions and regulate their behavior. Youth in the program are faced with the average emotional trials of adolescence which can be exacerbated by their stressful home lives, pressures of acculturation, and even past trauma. Self-regulation for refugee youth in the after-school program is a constant struggle but can be supported by the tools and resources the program provides. Self-regulation encompasses not only emotional regulation but also concepts of a growth mindset and personal motivation (Durlak et al. 2011). For youth, the ability to handle one's emotional response and think about one's future is vital for psychosocial wellness (Naglieri and LeBuffe 2005; Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). Refugee youth, additionally, must negotiate not only personal development, but also cultural differences and barriers beyond their control. Refugee youth often face the challenge of grappling with their cultural identity while meeting the expectation of society around them. Moreover, barriers like poverty and language can exacerbate the stresses refugee youth are experiencing (Olsen 1997; Li 2013). Due to the stressors of liminality, structural barriers, and cultural variance, refugee youth may have difficulty conceptualizing or working towards their future (Simich, Maiter, and Ochocka 2009; Bates et al. 2013). Understanding refugee youth's

experience with self-regulation within the after-school program provides insights into how they cope and conceptualize the future.

4.4.1 The Hard Stuff: Gender and Emotional Expression

During a group interview with 7th graders, two female students, Waan and Hope, were discussing their opinions about the other students. "There are some really nice, and some not so nice. Mostly it's just those loud people," she stated, pointing at one of the male students, Daruk, in the interview. "It's not me. I swear, I am not like the others when they be throwing their bags and stuff," Daruk rebutted, referring to the other male students in class who are disruptive. In the free list exercise, students listed their "disrespectful peers" as one of their main dislikes in the program. (See table 1.) They claimed the behavior of their peers was disrespectful to the leaders, and that their peers' behaviors would impact their ability to focus on homework and make them late for going outside. During my time in the field, I witnessed several instances of male students throwing objects or slamming doors in discontent, demonstrating a lack of emotional regulation in the moment. I also heard leaders and students alike label the male students as "wild" or "rowdy," some even suggesting that the female students would *never* act in the same manner.

While I did not observe the same raucous behavior from the female students, there were other instances where emotional regulation was challenged. During my first month with Building Tomorrow, I was informed about several female students who had cut their wrists to cope with stress, anger, or other emotions. While the leaders acted swiftly, calling parents, referring students to counselors, and talking to students themselves, it was evident that both the female and male students needed support with their emotional regulation. The after-school program manager worked to bring in programs specializing in social and emotional support and regulation that started in March right before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools. These programs

are fairly new and will be an important component of further research, but there is not enough data to analyze currently. However, one component of interest with the program's social and emotional learning was that they separated the students based on gender.

Lynn and Nadima both discussed with me the social and emotional learning was separated due to the organization that came in to work with the boys. The organization selectively worked with males, hoping to provide "positive male role models" for young boys. The program involved weekly lessons where they played games, learned mental health coping mechanisms, and met successful adults from the community; the boys also had the privilege of going on monthly field trips with the organization. Meanwhile, the girls did not have an organization to offer these services, but rather a health teacher from Stonebrook Middle School called Mr. John who would conduct lessons on self-esteem and mental health. Though the girls liked Mr. John, they were very vocal about the unfair opportunities that were given to the boys versus the girls. When I was discussing the topic with 7th graders, two of the girls in the group referred to the divide as "sexism," a topic they had learned about in school the week prior. Tina, a quiet, reserved girl, discussed how unfair it was that the boys get to go on field trips and get snacks. "It's almost like they like the boys better," Tina said. Anika, the only other girl in the group, shook her head and waved her hand, dismissing Tina's claim. "They do all the extra stuff for the boys because they need it. The girls are good," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Research concerning the psychosocial wellness of refugee youth indicates that all refugees are at high risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges due to the stresses of adaptation as well as the structural barriers that directly impact their lives (Ahearn 2000a). Moreover, as youth age, they are at higher risk of trauma and mental health concerns due to the increasing compounding factors of development (Betancourt et al. 2015). The after-school

program's approach to teaching and handling emotional regulation offers all youth some exposure to skills on how to cope and deal with one's emotions and self-esteem. The leaders of the program also offer a robust support network to help mitigate the challenges individuals are facing. However, the program seems to have labeled all the boys as aggressive troublemakers who need more help and the girls as mature individuals who only need light encouragement. This pattern of categorization is not novel. In fact, in Lopez's research with urban education, she found that male youth were typically labeled wild and unruly while girls were perceived as docile and tame (López 2003). Despite this compartmentalization, research shows that young female refugees are actually at higher risk of depression, low self-esteem and self-harm (Rumbaut 1996). The key difference is that typically male emotional regulation is tied to loud, obnoxious behavior; their actions are hard to ignore and therefore must be addressed. However, when females struggle with self-harm, depression, and other mental health issues, they do so quietly and can be overlooked. Though female and male students may express their emotions in different ways, both genders of students expressed their desire for equal attention.

4.4.2 "Being Someone"

"I come here because I want to be a businesswoman and that will be hard. I will need lots of degrees, and after-school will help me," said Hope. She went on to talk about how Building Tomorrow was helping her be eligible for a five-year leadership program next year and had also helped her win academic awards. "I took my [academic award] home to my mom and said, 'You see? This is why I stay up until midnight every night.' I have to work hard to be someone." The sentiment of "being someone" was shared by many students in other group interviews as well. A 6th grade girl named Amari stated, "I am getting an education, but after-school is helping me be somebody. It's helping me be successful." Sentiments like this are common among the students

and by other immigrant youth. A future orientation mindset has been associated with helping youth cope with past trauma and loss; it encourages them to focus on mapping their future and hope rather than focusing on the past (Bates et al. 2013). However, a future-orientation can also create a sense of "cruel optimism" among youth, where students carry the weight of expectations against the structural barriers present in their lives (Bartlett, Oliveira, and Ungmah 2018). Due to the economic precarity of resettlement, refugee families are typically low income and under resourced (Li 2013). For many refugee families, they see their children's financial success in the future as the key to breaking cyclical poverty and building a better life. However, barriers of language, no social contacts, and lack of academic opportunity can leave refugee youth in a situation where they feel immense pressure to succeed, but they have little to no resources to do so. For refugee youth in the Building Tomorrow program, their structural barriers are lessened. Youth in the program have access to English language assistance, social networks, academic opportunity, and more.

While students attribute the after-school program to their success, leaders offered differing observations. They implied that the program can often build on the strengths the students already have. One example was a student named Simon. The leaders tried in vain to help Simon with behavioral and academic issues. "We tried for the whole year to help him, but I was honestly starting to wonder is he just a bad kid?" Sanaz, stated. What the leaders did not know was that while Simon was acting out in school, he was also at home, reading a copious number of books. "He won an award for reading the most books and we were all shocked. When did he do this?" For Simon, it was his own motivation that allowed him to discover his motivation towards academic success, not the lessons specifically of the program. Simon, like many other youths in the program, are not deficient or lacking. They are simply youth who have

significant structural barriers placed on their path. Simon's story is not the rule, but rather an exception to the rule. Most students in the program will face significant hurdles with motivation and planning for the future due to their past trauma, home life, or socioeconomic struggles (Li 2013). Sanaz's focus on Simon's success was her way of promoting the abilities each student has within themselves. Her way of conveying that each individual is fully capable of success and the program simply offers resources to help those who want it.

4.5 Self-Sufficiency and Resilience

"I think anytime there's a visible improvement in students, it's definitely not just because of the program. It's actually the kids. They work so hard it's crazy."

– Kaia, AmeriCorps Volunteer

The concept of self-sufficiency is widely supported among resettlement agencies as a high priority for refugees in the US (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). However, in research it has been critiqued as being a myopic goal that overlooks the structural barriers that exist for refugees (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; Ahearn 2000b). The common definition of self-sufficiency centers on an individualistic ideal of taking care of oneself without assistance from any outside services (Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). For this resettlement agency, self-sufficiency is listed as a key tenant of the organizational objectives. However, refugee youth often face structural and social barriers which make it necessary for services like Building Tomorrow to be available to them. In order to reconcile the agency's goal and the barriers in place, the program focuses on self-regulation, or the capacity for an individual to motivate oneself and control emotional responses (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). Students in the program have overwhelmingly demonstrated motivation and hunger for learning and social connection. When discussing in interviews ideas like motivation

to do homework and wanting to do well in school, students overwhelmingly shared the sentiment that Building Tomorrow was helping them stay motivated and pave their path for the future.

"I was sad, you know, heartbroken. I didn't have anyone there for me and I was having bad thoughts." Shared Deva. I asked her what exactly that meant. She told me that she thought about hurting herself, thought that no one really liked her, and had even run away from home. Deva has been with the program for five years, starting in the elementary school section.[4] She has experienced trouble at home with her father, but did not want to tell me every detail. She said that she was in a bad place, the place one's mind goes when they feel like no one cares or they have no one to rely on for help. When I asked her what changed she responded, "Miss Lynn and Mr. Steve saved my life."

According to Deva, Lynn and Steve helped track her down when she tried to run away from home, helped her one-on-one with schoolwork, and made sure to always lend an ear to help her understand and handle her emotions. I asked Deva if she thought other kids went through the same thing, and she explained, "So many kids are hurting. You know, teenage problems and stuff. I know some kids who have done stupid stuff like hurt themselves because they don't know what to do." I asked her why she thinks she was different and what helped her. "I got help from Miss Lynn. Not everyone is going to be that lucky because she can't help everyone like that." Deva then went on to mention that the program sometimes felt like "free therapy," and that everyone could use more of that.

Deva is what many would consider a model student. Her grades are exemplary, she is kind and respectful to her peers and teachers, and she says she is happy. "I got help and now I know what I can do if I feel that way again," she said, referring to the many ways Steve and

[4] The elementary school is run by a separate department.

Lynn taught her to handle her emotions and stress. Deva's experience is a key example of how the program helps instill students with the tools and supports they need to express resilience. The emotional support and social learning that the resettlement agency provides gives students the experience and resources they need to solve their problems head on and bounce forward. Resilience simply means the ability to persist and move forward in the face of adversity (Goldstein and Brooks 2005). Some research refers to resilience as an acquired trait, one that hides the very real effects of oppressive policies and structural barriers and attributes one's ability to overcome adversity to "hard work" or "pull yourself up by the bootstraps." Resilience is present in every person, but it is more readily expressed when structural barriers are mitigated, and resources are made available. Deva did not overcome her hardship alone. She relied on the support and resources of the staff at the after-school program to help her bounce back from her personal challenges. Additionally, Deva's story reflects on the youth's ability to learn from their own experiences and advocate for programmatic changes to help their peers. Deva, and many of her peers mentioned in this work, know exactly what kind of tools and resources have helped them navigate and negotiate life in the US.

4.5.1 "We Just Want to be Free"

"We're still learning and growing. We're still establishing our boundaries."

-Sanga, 8th grade

When I conducted the free listing exercise and interview workshop with the 8th grade class, there were many groans of discontent. The students were not exactly enthusiastic about participating in another lesson. When I explained to them that the activity was completely optional and not a lesson, many responded with disbelief and shock. "You mean I don't have to do this?" one student questioned. When I asked why he was surprised, he said he felt as though

everything was required, and that he did not know he could just do his homework instead. Sentiments like this were echoed whenever I explained consent for group interviews as well. In my time in the field, there was an overwhelming sentiment of students desiring agency or freedom to make their own choices. The after-school program has an extremely well-structured model of social, emotional, and academic enrichment as well as parent support. However, with this structure comes a rigidity many of the students voiced concerns about. As Nyla stated in a group interview, “Here it is like everyone is setting a rule for us- we have to do this, we have to do that. But in the future, we have to set the rules for us. It’s just us.” Nyla’s peers shared this concern and discussed that while they understood rules were needed, they just wish their voices were heard. In free listing exercises, students explicitly mentioned adding more “freedom” or “choices” to the program as a high-priority improvement. (See table 3.)

The students’ desire for agency and freedom went beyond their speech and was expressed in their habits as well. During observations, I saw students actively seek out spaces where they were free from rules, even if only for a moment. At the end of homework and lesson time, students were often asked to return utility carts containing school supplies to a supply closet down the hall. Students would argue over who got to take the cart and were extremely excited to return it. When I questioned why the students were so excited, a leader responded that the students just like to be involved. The next week I was volunteering in the room adjacent to the supply closet, so I walked in and asked the students why they enjoyed returning the carts so much. A student named Mun-Hee responded that the closet was quiet and a place to escape. Participants in group interviews also discussed “escape” spaces or spaces where students could “be free.” Many students discussed outside time as their favorite time of the program because they had full agency. “It gives us the freedom we want. People leave us alone and we just do

[what we want],” said Sanga. The desire to be free or experience more freedom is not unique to the Building Tomorrow program. Guerrero and Tinkler (2010) claim that other refugees and immigrant youth use freedom as a self-empowerment tool. Refugee and immigrant youth use advocating for freedom and agency as a way to see themselves as more than victimized refugees (Guerrero and Tinkler 2010).

Students frequently voiced these concerns with leaders, but their sentiments were often received as complaints. In a conversation with Kaia, I asked how she though students viewed the program. She responded that students often speak about negative aspects of the program or things they do not like, “but they’re just letting out their frustrations. They do not really mean those things.” During my group interviews, I made it a point to probe further on each complaint that students voiced. Beyond disliking certain tasks, students also had genuine reasons to dislike the task and they often had proposals as to how after-school program could fix the problems. Students in the Building Tomorrow after-school program are not only seeking agency, but also seeking a way to voice their concerns. Through this ethnographic program evaluation, youth were empowered to display their agency by expressing their concerns for the program.

Building Tomorrow offers a safe place for students to learn and grow as they navigate a very precarious time in their lives. Students are consistently given the life skills they need to thrive not only in the United States school system, but also to help them develop into healthy and content adults. Refugee youth face a multitude of barriers and hurdles in their lives at home and in the world. Programs like this one give them helpful coping strategies and the support to overcome those obstacles. Additionally, these programs encourage the youth to look inward and recognize their own abilities and their own self-worth, valuing the complex nature of their identity as an asset, rather than a problem. In this project, the students’ voices were the main

concern. While they expressed their opinions of aspects of the program that are helpful and good, they also outlined several aspects of the program which they felt they needed more attention. Though the free listing exercise solicited many suggestions, ultimately the interviews and participant observation informed the recommendations below.

4.6 Program Recommendations

This section outlines several recommended changes that could be made to the program based on my ethnographic analysis of the input from the students supported by the literature. The students actively expressed their love and admiration for many of the leaders of the program. They look up to them and follow their advice. However, there are some adult leaders who view the position more strictly than others. Students in interviews discussed that that they do not want leaders to stop the rules, but that they simply want more of a mentor relationship with the leaders. This suggestion will help students by giving them a consistent adult role model.

Next, students discussed that there are hurdles to homework and lessons, and that they find assignments boring or difficult to work on during the after-school program. Students have a trove of resources socially in this program and the program should encourage collaboration as well as social connection. Here I propose sharing circles, peer-to-peer-tutoring, and group lessons to encourage that. Lastly, the students had other concerns that are less structural and more menial. These included things like the food and how many movies and field trips they get to go on. While these are valid and deserve to be addressed, they are likely to change based on the year and the students. For my final suggestion I propose giving the youth a platform to voice these concerns and any other concerns fully.

4.6.1 Establish Leaders as Mentors

Research on acculturation, adaptation, and development in youth indicates that effective youth programs often prioritize caring, respectful, and trusting relationships with adults (Goldstein and Brooks 2005; Wright and Masten 2005; Losoncz 2016). Based on data collected from the field, students expressed a desire for program leaders who establish a connection with them based in respect, care, and trust. However, they also expressed concerns over the varied approaches to leadership in the program. Students widely favor leaders who were willing to negotiate rules and remain calm with students through a mutually respectful relationship, recognizing the students as choice-makers and independent thinkers. To help cultivate strong social and emotional relationships between students and leaders, student data and research recommend a mentorship model of leadership, based in mutual respect and trust.

The mentorship model would assist in creating more consistent messaging for students of support and care, something students stated was a priority for them. It would also mean that adult leaders would respect and trust youth. Mentorship has many different meanings, so it would be necessary for the program manager to establish exactly what that definition is for the program with input from the students. As I discussed with Kaia, many of the leaders already have a mentor relationship with the students. However, not every leader does, and not every leader has that kind of relationship with all the students. Additionally, with such a high turnover of volunteer leaders, the program leaders would benefit from clear expectations of how to handle conflicts, rules, and build connections with students in a uniform, care-based manner.

4.6.2 Cultivate Peer Connection Through Collaborative Projects and Sharing Circles

Since the youth of Building Tomorrow demonstrated clear social and emotional connections with one another, the program has several areas that could be enhanced by the

students' willingness to collaborate. Students demonstrated a desire to assist peers with homework since there was a limited number of staff. Peer-to-peer tutoring has demonstrated effectiveness in many capacities, particularly among English language learning students (Helseth and Frazier 2018; Reyes and Ervin-Tripp 2010). Additionally, peer-to-peer learning has been shown to help students retain information and stay engaged in lessons (Helseth and Frazier 2018). Allowing students to tutor one another or simply help each other with their homework could help foster other confidence-building social relationships. Additionally, it would help reduce the need for more homework assistance in classrooms. The only significant challenge to this would be having to monitor the students to prevent cheating or copying one another's work.

Along with Peer-to-peer tutoring, research on group work or collaborative projects for youth has demonstrated effectiveness in engagement, cooperation, and building social connection (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). During interviews, students explained that lessons were not well received because they were repetitive and not engaging. Students expressed appreciation for group activities because they were a break from traditional learning. "We go to school all day. I don't want to do more school after it," stated Waan in a 7th grade group interview. "When we work in groups it's like I'm playing with my friends." In research with adolescent education, active learning and lessons were found to be ideal because they helped engage students more (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu 1998). By shifting more lessons toward group projects that are engaging and collaborative, students will benefit from activities that stimulate them not only intellectually but also socially. The major barrier to collaborative projects lies in the way the program's curriculum is formed. Every year, a new AmeriCorps member enters the 11-month volunteer position coordinating the curriculum. The individual in this role is typically not trained in education or curriculum planning, and often relies on previous years' worksheets

and lessons to carry out their job. The agency staff is over worked and under resourced already. Instead of reworking the whole program immediately, I propose transitioning a few lessons into collaborative projects at a time to ease the overall shift.

As another recommendation to cultivate peer connection as well as assisting youth in understanding self-regulation, I suggest the implementation of “sharing circles.” A form of informal talk therapy, sharing circles or community circles are set groups where individuals meet and take turns sharing their opinions, ideas, grievances, and more. There is no right or wrong way to conduct them; they are simply a place for sharing and listening (Cowan and Adams 2002). The sharing circles could have any name, such as a Friday meeting or team meeting and could take place once every week or so. These meetings would foster solidarity and empathy between students and give youth the opportunity to relate to each other and process their emotions in a healthy and safe space. Some challenges with the sharing circles are the limited number of volunteers per student as well as the inconsistency of student attendance. However, the sharing groups could be adjusted to fit the needs of the classroom. Alternatively, sharing circles could be created as a separate activity on station days where students choose their activities. Additionally, sharing circles may be an environment where sensitive information can be unveiled. In the event of sensitive or troubling information about a student or their home life, the agency leaders should rely on their agency-approved training for best practices to handle the situation. To mitigate this risk, leaders can have guided conversations in their sharing circles in which students do not feel pressured to reveal sensitive information.

4.6.3 Foster Youth Voice Representation

Students in this program expressed a clear desire for agency and for their opinions to be heard. In free listing, students suggested improvements like “more outside time” and “more

freedom." (See table 3.) Coupled with group interviews and research on development in middle childhood, establishing a way for youth to feel free and make choices is a high priority for students while they develop their intellectual capabilities and social identities (Rose-Krasnor and Denham 2009). While the resettlement agency collects data on student experience three times a year in the form of quantitative surveys, students still felt their concerns and opinions were going unnoticed. "They didn't think about what we would think about it," stated Helen, when discussing newly imposed rules. Research in refugee adaptation reveals that youth play an active role in assessing and navigating the many challenges and opportunities of adapting to a new culture (Goździak and Ensor 2016). Just as this study centers the voice of the youth as the authority of their own experience, so should the agency's data collection. The three annual surveys that are conducted should contain the opportunity for qualitative data to be included so that students can voice their own concerns.

To foster agency among the students and help them feel like they have a collective voice, a student led representation panel could prove helpful. The after-school program already hosts a leadership club every Wednesday, and the agency could allow the students to conduct surveys, write petitions, or propose changes to the program with the guidance of the club leader. Students have already demonstrated the competency to engage their peers and collect data through the interviewing workshop. Students who engage in this activity would gain leadership skills while also voicing the concerns of other students as a representative fostering empathy and social connection among peers (Bajaj, Canlas and Argenal 2017). Additionally, the youth advocating for their own needs and ideas encourages the use of their own voice. Self-advocacy is one way for immigrant and refugee youth to discover their own path on the journey of acculturation, and encourages youth to forge their own identity (Coello de la Rosa 2014). The youth of Building

Tomorrow have clearly demonstrated their knowledge of their own experiences, and they want to use the lessons they have learned to help other students and themselves by being active participants in the program's development.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The Building Tomorrow after-school program offers a safe, multicultural space for refugee students to access the resources and tools they need for psychosocial adaptation into American culture. This ethnographic program evaluation revealed a program that helps students find the support that they need as they struggle with social, academic, or emotional problems. The youth participants of this project expressed their appreciation for the program's ability to foster strong social connection among adult leaders and peers, help students focus on their future, and create a space in which they feel embraced and comfortable. Additionally, the youth discussed their challenges with emotional regulation; they want a way to voice their concerns and to have an active impact on the program's structure. Moreover, the youth of Building Tomorrow recognize that their lived experiences are valuable to the program's development. They are the experts of their needs for educational and social development and want to use their experiences to help shape the program for the benefit of other students, now and in the future.

This project was conducted in direct partnership with the program directors and a close relationship with the youth of the program. However, despite working closely with the community for a year, there are still areas and perspectives that are relatively underexplored in this analysis. Throughout this work, a youth perspective was always a priority, yet an analysis of parents' perspectives would have helped contextualize the youths' experiences. Furthermore, inclusion of additional information about students' personal histories and cultural backgrounds beyond the program would offer a broader understanding of the cultural duality refugee youth face. To expand this study, future research could be longitudinal, following students for multiple years and conducting multiple individual interviews with youth. Additionally, this study could be enriched by following the data-informed changes the program makes and re-evaluating the

program after their implementation. After the conclusion of my field research, Building Tomorrow implemented several changes including mentorship development, collaborative projects, and introducing mixed-methods evaluations; however, the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic limited my ability to evaluate these developments effectively.

Though every individual experience is different, refugee youth claimed in this study that the program was valuable and helped them learn how to cope with the social and emotional problems that they face in the US. However, students also revealed slight gaps in the curriculum which students felt needed more attention. Without qualitative, youth-focused research, students' requests for a way to convey their ideas and concerns as well as a desire for more peer engagement, more assistance with emotional regulation, and more support in navigating social relationships may have gone unnoticed or unaddressed. By employing a praxis paradigm, this project focused on empowering and engaging the youth to express their ideas and opinions to affect actions that will lead to more comprehensive programs. This study privileges refugee youth's expertise to make informed recommendations and contribute to the development of sustainable and culturally informed changes that will meet their needs more effectively. This project demonstrates that prioritizing youth's voices in sites of acculturation fosters cultural negotiation that is dynamic and encourages agency and decision-making in youth. In centering youth voices, this project revealed that the students desired a platform within the program to continually share their concerns for programmatic improvement. The youth of the Building Tomorrow program are navigating a precarious time in their life, grappling with personal identity and engaging in cultural negotiation. This study demonstrated that refugee youth want a space, not where they were told to fit into a specific mold or assimilate, but, rather, where they are free to discover for themselves who they wanted to be and become.

With such a large number of displaced individuals in the world today, this project demonstrates the importance of work that centers refugee youth and their experience as the reference point of ethnographic analysis and programmatic development. Additionally, this work serves as an example for conducting ethnographic research with other community-based programs that serve immigrant and refugee youth. Furthermore, it functions as an illustration of youth-centered research, an approach that recognizes youth as the experts of their own experiences. This project also demonstrates the necessity of community-based programs for refugees as a site of psychological development and social adaptation. It demonstrates how influential a short after-school program can be to personal development, and it demonstrates the vital role youth input plays in understanding and meeting the diverse needs of refugees who must navigate a new society. As Sanga said in an interview, “We are still learning and growing. We are still establishing our boundaries.” The youth of the Building Tomorrow program understand the complexity of their own journeys. They want the opportunity to advocate for what they want and need from the program designed to help them achieve sociocultural integration in the United States.

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