

Running Head: CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUNG ADULT AFRICAN STUDENTS

**CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUNG ADULT AFRICAN STUDENTS WITH REFUGEE  
STATUS IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS**

by

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores the common challenges faced by African young adult refugee students in regard to their academic achievement in Ontario secondary schools. It also considers, using the participants' ideas and narratives, how educators and school administrators can help students overcome these challenges. Guided by narrative design, interviews were conducted with three African individuals who entered Canada with refugee status and were placed in Ontario high schools. During the interviews, participants described their experiences, highlights, and challenges, as well as posed ideas for improvements at the secondary school level.

The research revealed five main themes: subsequent language learning, differing academic cultures and expectations, culturally relevant education, support, and discrimination. In particular, subsequent language learning, differing academic cultures and expectations, and support were aspects which impacted participants' schooling experiences in significant ways. Discussions surrounding these five main themes also focused on the participants' perceived importance and need for peer mentors and a school-wide effort in supporting African young adult refugee students.

This study supports educational research into the experiences of involuntary immigrant students, particularly African refugee students. By exploring the experiences of this cohort of refugees at the secondary school level, this study advocates the need for educators and school administrators to consider varying educational, cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds when developing and implementing curriculum and programming at the secondary school level.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background to the Research Problem**

The number of refugees entering Western countries has been on the rise in recent years. Specifically, the number of African refugees has been drastically increasing in western countries such as Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Anders, 2012; Dooley, 2009; Kanu, 2008). While estimates tend to differ slightly amongst organizations, Canada accepted and resettled between 104,505 and 112,135 refugees between 2002 and 2011 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013; Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Services Agencies of BC, 2013). Also in this timeframe of 2002-2011, at least one African country has been on the list of Top 10 Source Countries every year, according to AMSSA (2013). In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2011) lists Somalia, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Burundi in their Top 10 Refugee Origins between 2008-2011. Of the percentage of refugee arrivals to Canada in 2011, 57% were resettled in Ontario (AMSSA, 2013). Not only does Canada, and Ontario in particular, take in large numbers of refugees each year, but the Canadian government has also pledged to increase the number of refugees and asylum seekers each year by 20%. This means that by 2013, Canada will resettle up to 14,500 refugees and asylum seekers every year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013). These numbers are quite significant, and they indicate that refugee students are becoming more common in our schools and our classrooms. In fact, Simbandumwe (2007) reports that in the province of Manitoba, 69% of recent immigrants from African countries have come as refugees. However, while the numbers of such students are increasing, school programming and curricula have not adapted to be able to effectively meet the needs of this group (Cassity & Gow, 2005;

DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Naidoo, 2009; Onsando & Billett, 2009; Tangen, 2009).

Refugee students may face many challenges that are not commonly experienced by non-refugee students, such as a lack of social capital, a lack of English proficiency, a lack of family and/or community support, and/or backgrounds that include little, no, or interrupted formal educational experiences. However, although refugee students tend to vary greatly in terms of their backgrounds and experiences, the literature tends to group immigrants and refugees as one homogenous group (Davies, 2008; Matthews, 2008; Segal & Mayadas, 2005; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). This means that significant differences between these two groups of students are largely overlooked, leading to refugee students often being underserved by curriculums and school systems. In particular, Davies (2008) points out that “African groups have been virtually excluded from research on immigrant issues” (p. 363). While voluntary immigrants arrive in Canada often with strong educational backgrounds and financial resources, refugee young adults may arrive having never been to school, with little or no financial resources, and with few or no family or community connections in Canada (McBrien, 2005; Mickan et al., 2007; Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012). Because of this, it is necessary for schools to provide young adult refugee students with the skills and knowledge needed for future success in Canada, particularly in their employment in Canada (Naidoo, 2009). Not only will students be able to achieve academic success, but they will better improve their life chances after completing school.

In addition to having varied educational and personal backgrounds and experiences, the fact that most African refugee students come from non-English speaking backgrounds put them at a further disadvantage in the Canadian education system. In fact, it has been shown that high school graduation continues to be difficult to attain for many ESL students (Cummins, 2011;



Early & Marshall, 2008). Rong and Preissle (1998) report that based on 1990 United States census data, 18% of 17-year old immigrants and 26% of 18-year old immigrants had dropped out of high school.

Because high school graduation remains an elusive goal for many ESL students and many refugee students, educators and educational administrators need to gain a better understanding of what factors affect the academic achievement and success of refugee students, as well as which supports and methods tend to lead to better academic achievement results.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to uncover some of the common challenges experienced by African young adult refugee students in their quest for academic success. Because these experiences are shared in the participants' own narratives, it is the hope that teachers, school administrators, and community support services will benefit from the results of the study and thus, be able to modify their services to better accommodate and include students of all linguistic, ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds.

### **Research Questions**

This research study explored the experiences of young adult African refugee students in attaining academic achievement at the secondary school level in Ontario, with an emphasis on common challenges experienced as they transitioned into a new culture and academic culture.

In particular, this research study looked at the following questions:

1. What are some of the common challenges faced by African young adult refugee students in regard to their academic achievement?

2. What can educators and school administrators at the secondary school level do to help these students overcome challenges?

### **Definition of Terms**

Berg (1995) claims that the operationalization of terms is necessary “to ensure that everyone is working with the same definition and mental image” so that readers understand “the intended meaning of a concept in relation to a particular study” (p. 23). In keeping with this, there are a few terms which need to be operationally defined in the context of this research study.

**Refugee .** UNHCR (2013) defines a refugee as someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (p. 1).

**Young Adult.** The term *young adult* is used to refer to those between the ages of 13 and 21. In this research study, participants interviewed were over the age of 18, but entered Canada with refugee status as a young adult.

**Subsequent Language Acquisition (SLA) and English as a Subsequent Language (ESL).** The majority of literature in the field of subsequent language acquisition tends to employ the word “second” (e.g. Second Language Acquisition, English as a Second Language). However, the reality is that many students are learning English as their third, fourth, or fifth language, especially when students are coming from areas with many dialects. In that regard, I

have chosen to use the terms *Subsequent* Language Acquisition (SLA) and English as a *Subsequent* Language (ESL) to better represent these students (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

The word *subsequent* does not mean that students are not learning their second language, it simply means following a first language; therefore, these terms better encompass all of the young adults that I interacted with throughout the course of this study.

Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003) define SLA as “how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process” (p. 1). This is the definition that is used to explain SLA in the current study. As well, ESL is used to refer to the use or the study of the English language by non-native speakers in an English-speaking environment, as opposed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) which refers to the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers in a non-English-speaking context (e.g. learning English as a subsequent language in Sudan).

**Culturally Responsive Education.** This study relied on Ladson-Billings’ (1994) definition of culturally responsive education, which describes it as a framework that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning. Ladson-Billings (1994) also lists eight principles that culturally responsive educators should possess, which are as follows:

1. Communication of high expectations
2. Active teaching methods
3. Practitioner as facilitator
4. Inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse students
5. Cultural sensitivity
6. Reshaping the curriculum or delivery

7. Student-controlled discourse
8. Small group instruction

When implemented, Ladson-Billings (1994) claims that these principles will lead to stronger connections between educators and students, as well as between students and curriculum content and knowledge. This is because students become more involved in the learning process and feel that their experiences, and ways of learning, are both acknowledged and respected. For example, if educators are reshaping the curriculum or delivery, they are acknowledging and respecting that students in their classrooms have different learning styles and educational backgrounds.

Ladson-Billings' (1994) definition and guiding principles were employed in discussions surrounding culturally responsive education in this study.

**Little, No, or Severely Interrupted Formal Education.** In this research study, *no formal education* refers to students who have never been enrolled in formal education and/or have never attended school prior to their arrival in Canada. For example, in Cassity and Gow's (2005) study of adolescent refugee students, they interviewed Bok, a 19-year old male from Sudan, who has never set foot inside of a classroom. Bok would be categorized as a student with no formal education.

Apart from having no formal education, many refugee students are described as having little or interrupted formal education. In the literature, *little and severely interrupted formal education* is used to refer to students who come from a country in which English is not the primarily spoken language and:

- Entered a Canadian school after second grade

- Have at least 2 years less schooling than their peers
- Function at least 2 years below the expected grade level in reading and mathematics
- May be pre-literate in their first language

(Advocates for Children of New York, 2010)

### **Rationale for the Study**

My personal background and field of work have added to my interest in this topic. First of all, I have spent the past three years working as an ESL teacher at the secondary, post-secondary, and private school levels. In these roles, I have become increasingly aware of the challenges faced by children, youth, and adults who are arriving in Canada with low English proficiency. In reading the literature on ESL student populations in current journals, I noticed that the vast majority of the literature focuses on immigrant youth, but there is not extensive research done with refugee youth, who face a number of additional challenges that immigrant youth may not (McBrien, 2005; Tangen, 2009). In addition to my own experiences, I have many close friends teaching in the public school system in metropolitan areas, and these friends have expressed many instances in which refugee children and youth tend to be underserved by schools because teachers and administrators do not know how to best support them in any area – academically, linguistically, socially, emotionally, or psychologically. The lack of sound research in the area of refugee students in the public school system has fuelled my desire to add to this field.

I chose to focus specifically on African young adults with refugee status for a number of reasons. First of all, young adults in secondary school in general are at a higher risk of leaving school before graduation, regardless of the demographic, for a number of reasons. With young

adult refugees in general, regardless of country of origin, students must often take on adult roles and obligations that most other young adult students are not required to take on. For example, in Kanu's (2008) study of refugee students in Manitoba secondary schools revealed that many young adult refugees are employed, and often full-time. In this particular study, Kanu (2008) interviewed 40 participants and more than half of them reported working full-time jobs in order to support themselves and their families. Employment that is necessary for survival can have a negative impact on schooling because it drastically decreases the amount of time available for both attending school and completing schoolwork.

I chose to focus on young adult refugees from African countries because this population has been increasing in recent years in Canada and particularly in Ontario. As well, I have more of a background in African politics and history than in any other global area, which allowed me to both connect with participants and gain a better understanding of participants' backgrounds. In addition, I spent a summer teaching in a small Ghanaian village in 2005. In my second grade classroom, I was responsible for teaching approximately 30 students, five of whom were over the age of 15. These students had begun school much later than normal due to various reasons. However, I learned that in many African countries, the age that one begins school does not affect one's grade placement. If attending school for the first time at age 15, one is placed in grade one, and starts from the beginning. This is extremely different from the ways in which refugee students with little, no, or interrupted formal education are placed once they arrive in Canada, because in Canada, students are placed mainly according to age (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Dooley, 2009). Therefore, a student may be 15 years old attending school for the first time in his or her life, but will most likely be placed in the tenth grade or perhaps in ninth grade, but the school system would never place a 15 year old student in a first grade classroom, even if the student

lacks the educational skills, knowledge, and background to succeed in tenth grade. These are the experiences, issues, and discontinuities that have peaked my interest in and dedication to researching young adult African refugee students in Canadian school systems, particularly in Ontario school systems.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This literature review formed the basis for my methodology, data collection, and data analysis. Literature was chosen based on the relevance to this study's central phenomenon which is the experiences and challenges of refugee students in Canada who do not speak English as a first language and who may have little, no, or severely interrupted education. The literature search was not limited to only African refugee students, partly due to the fact that there is a dearth of literature on this particular cohort.

In reviewing the literature, seven main themes that directed the course of the study emerged. The themes were: little, no, or severely interrupted education; subsequent language learning; culturally responsive education; differing academic culture and expectations; trauma, loss, and obligations outside of school; the importance of school-community partnerships; and discrimination. These seven themes are discussed in the literature as factors that correlate both with students' academic achievement and feelings regarding their educational experiences.

This chapter will first posit the study within a theoretical framework and discuss the literature pertaining to the seven themes. The chapter ends with a summary of the literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the theoretical concept of equity. Equity, in general, is the idea, or the quality, of being fair and impartial. When translated into the field of education, equity is reconstructed to represent fairness and impartiality in schooling. Havighurst (1974) claims that "education should provide opportunity for the individual to enhance himself in life satisfaction, physical and mental health, economic adequacy, and options available among desirable alternatives in life style" (p. 102). Similarly, Fiske and Ladd (2004) describe educational equity



as blending equal treatment, equal educational opportunity, and educational adequacy. In this way, educational equity can be described as the effectiveness of education in creating fairness, in creating the chance of getting what we want out of life, and in equalizing how our chance for success in all aspects of life compared with others. In terms of this research study, the concept of educational equity is relevant in ensuring that young adults with refugee status receive equitable and equal treatment in the education system, thus, allowing them to achieve academic success, and later, success and equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives. Since “higher levels of education are associated with almost every positive life outcome” (Education & Training Policy Division Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003, p. 5), it is critical that equity in education exists in our education systems to benefit both refugees and society (Opoku-Dapaah, 1992).

It should be mentioned briefly that equity and excellence tend to be two competing concepts about the direction of education. While equity states that students should have equal opportunities by ensuring fairness and inclusion, excellence tends to focus on individual achievement and performance (OECD, 2008; Robbins, 2007). Many question whether we are sacrificing educational excellence for equity (Robbins, 2007), but equity and excellence are not in fact contradictory if the goal of education is excellence, and the means to achieve excellence is equity.

### **Review of the Literature**

**Little, No, or Severely Interrupted Education.** One of the common characteristics of this new cohort of African refugee students is their varied educational backgrounds. It is not unusual for African young adults to arrive having had little, no, or severely interrupted schooling

(Dooley, 2009; Kanu, 2008; Keddie, 2012; Naidoo, 2009; Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008; Olliff & Couch, 2005). Obviously, these varied educational backgrounds present refugee students with many challenges. As well, because little, no, or severely interrupted educational experiences distinguish African refugee students from previous refugee groups, educators and administrators are also faced with new challenges in supporting them (Dooley, 2009; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Woods, 2009).

Coleman et al. (1966) claim that “schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and social context” (p. 325). If this statement is interpreted to include refugee students, it becomes clear that these students will have to make great strides in order to achieve academic success. One of the largest obstacles facing students with little, no, or severely interrupted schooling is the academic gaps that have occurred during their educational careers (Kanu, 2008; Naidoo, 2009; Olliff & Couch, 2005). Not only do these students often lack the literacy skills needed to engage in the academic content (Naidoo, 2009), but they also have gaps in content-area knowledge due to differences in countries’ curriculums and limited resources in prior schools or camps (Dooley, 2009). These obstacles become further exacerbated when students arrive at their new schools only to discover that there are often age caps and time frames that do not take into account their educational histories. For example, Kanu (2008) quotes a student participant in her study that discusses being out of school for five years while fleeing Sudan, only to come to Canada and to be placed in grade 11 because she was 17 years old. If placed in an ESL program prior to moving onto mainstream classes, new students often have only one or two years to complete the ESL programming (Mickan et al., 2007; Pugh et al., 2012). Olliff and Couch (2005) describe these time frames as “grossly inadequate” for students who may never have attended school or may not be literate in any language. If the

students are placed directly into mainstream classes, they still may only have 1-2 years to complete secondary school, given the age cap of 21. Thomas and Collier (1997) suggest that students with backgrounds that include low literacy, interrupted schooling, and/or traumatic experiences may take 10 years or more to catch up to average levels of cognitive and academic language. With such estimations, it is clear that one to two year language programs or placing age caps on educational programming is simply not appropriate for refugee students, especially those with limited, no, or severely interrupted schooling.

Cassity and Gow's (2005) study included a 19-year old Sudanese student, Bok, who indicated that he had never been in a classroom before relocating to Australia. As has been previously mentioned, refugee students who are coming to western countries with no academic records are often placed in classes according to age, not knowledge base (Derwing et al., 1999; Naidoo, 2009). This means that students are often placed in grades that they are unequipped to succeed in; for example, even though Bok had never attended school, he was placed in Year 10 because it would be socially inappropriate in Australia to place him in primary years (Cassity & Gow, 2005). This is drastically different from what many African students are used to, as is exemplified in Dooley (2009):

They go to the other places [high schools], to the class according to their age and that is something, literally, it is a shock to many of them because in Africa, it is not a problem, there we can go, for example, you might be 15 and you may be in Year 6. No problem. And there still, you can, you're considered a child. But here it is different. So that is the big challenge. (p. 11)

Based on many students' experiences, changes are needed if more refugee and ESL students are to achieve their academic goals (Arnot et al., 2009; Derwing et al., 1999). Not only are students

required to learn language, literacy, and content-area knowledge, but they are also required to learn how to “do” school (Dooley, 2009; Keddie, 2012; Magro, 2009).

Literature in this section has characterized students with little, no, or interrupted formal schooling by identifying features among them and particular challenges that they are likely to face with regard to their education. The following section provides detail on the extent and nature of academic culture and expectations, which are especially difficult in students with little, no, or severely interrupted educational backgrounds.

**Differing Academic Culture and Expectations.** Not only do little, no, or severely interrupted educational experiences impede students’ opportunities for academic achievement, but their lack of experience with academic culture and expectations can cause great stress. First of all, Anders (2012) points out that “with only some primary education and no previous experiences with the regimentation present in their new classrooms, U.S. school culture disoriented and discouraged the children” in her study (p. 101). Similarly, Mickan, Lucas, Davies, and Lim (2007) describe how the orientation to what is significant and to the meanings in unfamiliar cultures are determined by past experiences, particularly when people first arrive in a new culture. This disorientation and confusion can become very frustrating for students and can ultimately lead to their decision to begin skipping classes or to leave school altogether. As a teacher in Olliff and Couch’s (2005) study expresses, “if you haven’t got the skills to cope in the classroom, you’re not going to feel good about yourself. And that’s what happens... You see it happen a million times. Kids start skipping school, they meet kids outside at the Internet café, and they’re easy fodder” (p. 44). In this way, the teacher is not only referring to students leaving school, but also students leaving school to become involved in illegal activities, such as gangs or

drugs. Because many refugee students are unfamiliar with the regimentation and routines of schools (Windle & Miller, 2012), especially schools in western countries, they need to not only learn academic content and subjects, but also how to act in and ‘do’ school (Comber & Hill, 2000; Woods, 2009). Students may experience a culture conflict when, for example, they are used to different student-teacher relationships than they now find themselves in (Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Naidoo, 2009). For example, refugee students in some studies describe their new schools in the West as lax compared to the authoritarian systems that they were familiar with (McBrien, 2005; Opoku-Dapaah, 1992).

Part of learning to ‘do’ school is learning about what behaviours and responses are both valued and encouraged in their new school system. For example, a veteran teacher in Ander’s (2012) study states, “They cried. They, they couldn’t do anything. The little ones were behaviour terrors. I mean, they were running. They were screaming. They were scared to death... It was just a terror, terrorizing experience for them trying to come in” (p. 101). While in this study Anders looked at refugees who were young children, young adult refugees may also exhibit behaviours such as crying, fear, and acting out. Some behaviours, such as violence, tend to be universally unacceptable, but many behaviours and ‘appropriate’ expressions of feelings are idiosyncratic to Canada and will need to be learned by students. Students must also become familiar with the idea that schools in Canada focus more on the individual, especially in terms of assessment, even if groupwork and collaboration is part of the school routine (Agbo, 2012; DeCapua & Marshall, 2011).

According to Beckett et al. (2004, p. 164), newcomers need to “function in the discourse acceptable for the community” in order to obtain and maintain membership in that community. In secondary school, as in primary and middle school, refugee students must learn what

behaviours and responses are appropriate and beneficial in the context of the classroom.

However, new students at the secondary level have the additional challenge of having multiple teachers and multiple classrooms in their daily schedules. This means that possibly “movement from one class community to another [brings] different expectations, management procedures, and control measures, eliciting different student responses” (Mickan et al., 2007, p. 20).

Literature in this section described some of the challenges that refugee students may face in regards to differing academic cultures and expectations, particularly when they come from backgrounds of little, no, or severely interrupted education. The following section addresses the potential effects of trauma, loss, and obligations outside of school and introduces the concept of unaccompanied minors.

**Trauma, Loss, and Obligations Outside of School.** Most often, refugees enter countries of asylum having experienced extreme trauma and loss, as well as a loss of social networks and support systems (Christie & Sidhu, 2004; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Kanu, 2008; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Olliff & Couch, 2005). McBrien (2005) reports that after five years in their new countries, nearly 70% of refugees still had stressful memories of the war and their displacement and 80% revealed serious concerns about family separation. These experiences and concerns affect a person’s sense of safety, security, and trust, specifically in regards to authority (Olliff & Couch, 2005). In addition, the effects of trauma and loss are intensified by the fact that refugees then have to readjust to life in an unfamiliar culture and language (Fazel & Stein, 2002). These factors can have a debilitating effect on refugee children and youth in their schooling experiences as well.

Richman (1998a) says that “educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent” (as cited in Matthews, 2008, p. 41). This is an extremely important relationship in the lives of refugee students, as it has been found that traumatic experiences and situations of war can impact memory and learning in both youth and adults (Magro, 2009; Anders, 2012; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Magro, 2009; McBrien, 2005; Onsando & Billett, 2009; Rousseau, Drapeau, & Corin, 1996; Sinclair, 2001). Because of this, students may need more time to concentrate on, and complete, school work and assignments (Anders, 2012). For instance, a refugee student from Burundi revealed that “even if I go to school, I will still have to mind that a lot of my colleagues are not in a good condition. I may pretend that I am in class, but I am not doing anything – my mind is thinking about this problem – it affects a lot” (Onsando & Billett, 2009, p. 8).

Upon arrival in their new countries, refugees are faced with numerous hardships in regard to economic resources and family support. Kanu (2008) cites a lack of economic resources one of the most oppressive challenges for refugees and their families, reporting that of the 40 adolescent refugee students in her study, more than half of them claimed to work full-time jobs. While some educators may think that refugee students do not have to work (Kanu, 2008), many have little to no income without employment, especially those who are unaccompanied minors (Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa, 2009; Magro, 2009; Tshabangu-Soko & Caron, 2011). Citizenship and Immigration Canada defines an unaccompanied minor as “an individual under the age of 18, who is without both parents or an adult who is legally responsible for them” (Parliament of Canada, 2007, p. 1). According to Fazel and Stein (2002) the numbers of unaccompanied minors in any given refugee population tends to be between 2-5%. It has been reported that upwards of 300 unaccompanied minors pursuing refugee status enter Canada each year; the average age of these unaccompanied minors is estimated to be between 10 years of age (Charles, 2013) and 15

years of age (Wouk, Yu, Roach, Thomson, & Harris, 2006). Other reports estimate that the number of unaccompanied minors entering Canada is as high as 1,000 to 2,000 per year (Wouk et al., 2006). In addition, data show that Ontario received over 69% of refugee claims made by unaccompanied minors between 1999-2002 (Ali, 2003). These estimates differ because it is often difficult to distinguish between unaccompanied minors and separated minors that are claiming refugee status (Parliament of Canada, 2007). However, regardless of the definitive numbers, it is a reality that unaccompanied minors exist in our school systems and such characteristics need to be taken into consideration.

In the cases of both unaccompanied minors and of accompanied minors, having to combine education with family and work responsibilities and obligations can be an extremely daunting and difficult task, especially for those who may have no prior schooling experiences. Students in both Kanu's (2008) and Tshabangu-Soko and Caron's (2011) studies describe the challenges they face having to complete school while working full-time. One student states that,

I am always tired.. I get home every night past midnight, after the cinema where I work closes and I have to catch two buses. I have no time or energy to study or do my homework.. and I have to get up at 6am to be in school for 8:30am. No, I am not getting good grades. (Kanu, 2008, p. 930)

This quote demonstrates the challenges that some students face in trying to complete their schooling, and achieve good grades, while still having to work. These are challenges that educators and school administrators may not fully understand. For example, in Derwing et al. (1999) some of the teachers interviewed describe how many students want to skip foundational courses and just 'get on with it.' However, these attitudes may be misinterpreted by teachers who do not fully understand the family and employment pressures that students face. Similarly, many



scholars in the field outline after-school academic support programs designed to assist refugee students (Davies, 2008; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Kanu, 2008; Naidoo, 2011), but Kanu (2008) points out that these are programs which most African refugee students need, but cannot utilize because of their work schedules. To counter this reality of many students, Naidoo (2011) presents The Refugee Action Support (RAS) Program which combines school, university, and community members to create a program of best practice. In RAS, tutors are provided to refugee students both in and outside of class. As well, the tutors are also responsible for creating teaching and learning resources to better guide students (Naidoo, 2011). These examples demonstrate that not only do educators need to better understand their students and their students' day-to-day lives, but they must also try to come up with ways in which these challenges can somehow be balanced or overcome in order for many young adult refugee students to succeed, as in the case of Naidoo's (2011) RAS Program.

The literature in this section provided some insight into the realities of trauma, loss, and obligations outside of school for many refugee students, factors which can impact their academic achievement and motivation in many ways. The following section will describe the importance of various supports both inside and outside of the school for refugee students.

**Support.** If students are lacking support at home, it is imperative that they receive support from outside sources. According to Graca Machel (1996), "education gives shape and structure to children's lives. When everything around is chaos, schools can be a haven of security that is vital to the well-being of war-affected children and their communities" (p. 31). Given the numerous and commonly misunderstood challenges faced by refugee students, especially young adults at the secondary level, it is suggested that because the school is such a support system for

students, there needs to be a school-wide effort in helping them achieve their goals, instead of placing the onus on one teacher or one principal (Opoku-Dapaah, 1992; Virtue, 2009). Kanu (2008) reports teachers of refugee students who would open their classrooms before and after school hours, as well as provide drop-in hours during lunch breaks, in hopes of assisting students with their academics and being a safe place that students can depend on. However, when only one teacher is responsible for such an effort, they can easily burn out. A school-wide effort will mean that all teachers and staff members coordinate, cooperate, and plan together, and that professional development opportunities are made available and encouraged for teachers (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Tangen, 2009). An example of a school-wide effort may include an after-school or during-school tutoring program (Davies, 2008; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Naidoo, 2009), foundations classes and programs to teach academic skills such as handwriting (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011), or mentorship programs in which veteran students are paired with new students to help them adjust to the new school culture and expectations (Whiteman, 2005).

Furthermore, schools need to build meaningful partnerships and relationships with community organizations that are also able to assist refugee students and families (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Uptin et al., 2013; Virtue, 2009). These community organizations can help provide services that educators and schools may not be capable of, such as additional literacy and academic support, counselling, and family reunification services (Magro, 2009; Matthews, 2008). As Naidoo (2011) states, “the link between refugee education and programs and wider society is particularly powerful for refugee communities” (p. 88). While such partnerships are essential, these community organizations and programs also need to be aware of the implications that they can have for different cultures (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). For

example, Szente, Hoot, & Taylor (2006) offer the idea that parents and families may be uncomfortable with counselling services, since these services are often uncommon and misunderstood in their home cultures. When providing support to refugee students both inside and outside of the classroom and the school, those involved need to be aware of possible cultural dissonance; however, these challenges can be surmounted with input from refugees and their communities. Community connections and services are important in the lives of these students because it is a means of building social capital, which is dependent on “the size of the network of connections” that an individual has to their benefit (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). These connections act as extremely important networks of support that can drastically change the lives of students who have lost most of their social networks.

This section has described the importance of and examples of support that may be beneficial to refugee students. The following section will review some of the challenges of subsequent language acquisition for all students, but in particular where applicable, for young adult students African students with refugee status.

**Subsequent Language Acquisition.** Cummins (2011) cites a lack of English proficiency as the most influential disadvantage among learners. As well, according to Tangen (2009), “complexities in learning are compounded when students who have ESL are also refugees” (p. 151). The two most significant reasons for this are because refugees may arrive being pre-literate even in their first language (Cassity & Gow, 2005), and/or they may need to make the transition from orality to text-based learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Because many African refugee students have backgrounds of no, little, or severely interrupted schooling, it becomes even more likely that they will face significant difficulties in learning English. This means that the arrival of

new African refugee cohorts means that teachers are faced with the challenge of finding new ways of working with students (Dooley, 2009).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2004) defines literacy as,

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society. (p. 13)

In this way, literacy is inextricably linked to social justice and educational equity, in that it is seen as imperative for success and participation in society, as well as for gaining power and influence in society (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012). When entering secondary school in Canada with little to no English proficiency, perhaps with no literacy skills in any language, and perhaps with little, no, or severely interrupted educational backgrounds, it becomes clear that refugee students can face serious challenges in both ESL courses and mainstream academic discipline courses. In addition, without literacy skills, students are less able to understand the implications of authority in empowering or oppressing them (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012).

The literature recommends multiple ways of assisting students from African backgrounds in SLA. For example, Dooley and Thangaperumal (2011)'s study with low-literate Somali adults recommends that teachers use bottom-up pedagogical processes in reading, while using top-down processes in other areas. In the bottom-up approach, teachers start with the big picture or concept and break things down into individual segments inductively. On the other hand, the top-

down approach uses deductive reasoning, which begins with a generalizing and ends with a logical conclusion. They also found that direct instruction and interactive and dialogic pedagogies all have a place in provision for low-literate adolescents of African origins in western schools (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). In using these pedagogies, educators should be aware that collaborative groupwork and use of the student's first language (L1) have been shown to contribute to students' literacy and English proficiency growth (Condelli & Wrigley, 2004; Early & Marshall, 2008; Tshabangu-Soko & Caron, 2011). Use of their L1 also allows students to maintain membership in their L1 communities (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and allows them to navigate their own social identity (Norton Peirce, 1995). However, students may not be at liberty to use their first language for clarification or increased understanding if there are no teachers or students who share their L1. In any case, "for meaningful and effective learning to take place, an atmosphere of sincere caring for the student and of respect and acceptance of his/her background must be present" (Magro, 2009, p. 22). This means that students' funds of knowledge, as described by Moll (1994), which are often different from what is valued and tested in western education systems, need to be given respect and credence as well (Meyer, 2000).

Much of a student's success in SLA depends on a socially just curriculum which teaches language that is authentic, practical, and applicable in students' everyday lives (Kubota, 1998; Magro, 2009). In the case of students, this authentic language means language that allows them to succeed in academic discipline courses and in their lives outside of the school. This idea will be further discussed in the following section which addresses the importance of pedagogies and a curriculum that are culturally relevant and responsive to students.

This section on SLA has outlined some of the common difficulties and practices in teaching and learning a subsequent language. The following section will discuss the importance of culturally relevant education and how it can be applied to SLA and beyond.

**Culturally Responsive Education.** Culture and learning are inextricably linked (Agbo, 2001; Agbo, 2004; Early & Marshall, 2008; Mickan et al., 2007). Therefore, it is essential that students are able to see themselves, and their experiences, in their education and learning. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally responsive education as a framework that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. When discussing the cultural responsiveness of Aboriginal education, Agbo (2012) quotes a teacher who states that, "The textbooks don't reflect any aspect of 'Nativeness,' and sometimes children don't know what the books are saying when they talk about subway stations or skyscrapers" (p. 348). This is a strong example that shows how things that western students and teachers take for granted as common knowledge can be quite culturally irrelevant, not to mention confusing, for students of other cultural and educational backgrounds.

Agbo (2004) writes that it is important for teachers to ensure that students are as actively involved as possible in their educational experiences. One of the biggest misunderstandings of culturally responsive education is that it demands that teachers need to know all of the intricacies and backgrounds of all of the cultures represented in their classrooms (Irvine & Armento, 2001). Instead of being required to know all of this information, teachers need to be aware of which cultures are being represented, misrepresented, and unrepresented in their teaching. As well, they need to be open to and encourage students in questioning resources and ideas. For example, Dooley and Thangaperumal (2011) recommend that African refugee students be encouraged to

share their knowledge and skills; the fact that it may be different from traditional western knowledge and skills can be of benefit for both the African refugee students and the other students in the classroom. Demonstrating this, Banks et al. (2001) write that,

to forge a common destiny, educators must respect and build upon the cultural strengths and characteristics that students from diverse groups bring to school... Cultural, ethnic, and language diversity provide the nation and the schools with rich opportunities to incorporate diverse perspectives, issues, and characteristics into the nation and the schools in order to strengthen both. (p. 5)

This would represent some of Ladson-Billings' (1994) eight guiding principles of culturally responsive education, in particular, cultural sensitivity, reshaping the curriculum and delivery, and student-controlled discourse. Students need to understand and feel that their experiences, values, and cultures are respected and valued in the classroom in order to truly feel connected to and benefited by the educational system. In discussing how Aboriginal students are underserved by current curricula, Agbo (2002) cites the Hawthorn Report, writing that "it is difficult to imagine how an Indian child attending an ordinary public school could develop anything but a negative self-image. First, there is nothing from his culture represented in the school or valued by it" (p. 16). The same feelings could be experienced by all students from non-European, minority backgrounds. Again, it is not imperative that teachers understand the inner workings of all cultures in their classrooms, but they need to be aware of how the curriculum is affecting different groups of students. Failure or underachievement is not always because of student motivation issues or learning difficulties, but can be strongly linked to pedagogy, learning styles, and cultural orientation (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010, 2011; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Holbrook, 2011). This is where it becomes very apparent that in order to provide educational equity, schools need to change to better serve students of all backgrounds. As Lingard, Mills, and

Hayes (2000) state, “those students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are most dependent on schooling for their life chances, are usually those most likely not to be the recipients of intellectually demanding pedagogical practices” (p. 104). For refugee students to improve their chances in all areas of life, it is important that students feel that they are both represented and respected in the curriculum, and that they feel hopeful about their future in Canada (Lingard et al., 2000; Magro, 2009).

In order to succeed in a new education system, perhaps for the first time, school curricula need to not only interest students, but resonate with their lived experiences (Carlile, 2012; Cummins, 2011). For example, Dooley (2009) suggests giving students opportunities for students to discuss their ideas to develop vocabulary and grammar before they have to write. Discussions also allow students to build connections between their experiences and the knowledge being presented in the classroom (Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; McBrien, 2005). As well, DeCapua and Marshall (2011) have introduced the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP), which allows students from other countries and cultural orientations, particularly collectivistic cultures, to combine unfamiliar learning processes with processes that are more familiar to them. In addition, teachers need to be sure to encourage refugee students and provide them with opportunities to share and discuss their knowledge and skills (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Finally, Dooley (2009) suggests that if schools want to best serve refugee students, they need to include foundations classes and programs that teach academic skills that may be taken for granted (e.g. handwriting, active listening). It may also be beneficial to provide mentoring programs, such as that discussed in Whiteman (2005), in which new students are paired with another student in the class to help guide them in the new academic culture and processes. Regardless of the intervention or program that is implemented, it is



important that new students are closely monitored in terms of adjustment and progress (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Whiteman, 2005).

Assessment is one of the most difficult areas when it comes to refugee students. Keddie (2012) claims that means of assessment can be ‘quite distressing’ for students and parents “because they narrowly define student performance – they do not account for refugee students’ limited schooling experience and they do not accurately reflect student effort” (p. 1305). While many schools are focused on academic performance and standardized testing (Keddie, 2012), all students, especially refugee students with varied educational backgrounds, require assessment tools that monitor progress, such as portfolios, instead of summative achievement (Davies, 2008; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Matthews, 2008).

The previous section provided some examples of, and explained the importance of, culturally relevant education and pedagogy, especially in terms of refugee students from varying educational, personal, and linguistic backgrounds. The final section of the literature review will discuss discrimination and its influences on academic achievement and success.

**Discrimination.** Finally, and closely related to culturally relevant pedagogy in some ways, is the idea that refugee students often face high levels of both implicit and explicit discrimination both inside and outside of the classroom. According to Baysu and Phalet (2012):

From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), direct or vicarious experiences of discrimination or negative stereotyping may induce identity threat in members of devalued minority groups. In school contexts, perceived identity threat was found to decrease the academic engagement and performance of minority group members. (p. 5)

Similarly, Kanu (2008) writes that different forms of discrimination may be related to striking school dropout rates and social alienation among secondary school students. Because cultural misunderstandings have the ability to result in discrimination (McBrien, 2005), and because discrimination is linked to lower levels of academic achievement and acculturation (Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Kanu, 2008; Matthews, 2008), it is important that all students feel respected and valued in the school and that their voices and experiences are both respected and regarded. Part of this can be achieved through culturally relevant curricula, as mentioned in the previous section, meaning that students find that what they are learning is both useful and valid in their daily lives, and that they are given opportunities to share their experiences and insights in a safe environment. Often, issues of curricula and pedagogy are forms of implicit or institutional discrimination; for example, McBrien (2005) writes that “not only attitudinal racism but also structural racism placed immigrant students on the margins, in spite of welcoming discourses in which students and administrators said they welcomed diversity”(p. 349). Because discrimination and racism tend to be seen as uncomfortable topics, schools often discuss celebrating and valuing diversity only, and racism continues to remain “invisible and inaudible” (Carlile, 2012). However, to ensure that minority students feel comfortable, safe, and respected in their classrooms, schools need to recognize that discrimination occurs both inside and outside of school walls and these issues need to be addressed, not ignored.

In fact, because most students spend such a large portion of their day at school, many of the instances of racism and discrimination that appear in the literature have occurred in classrooms or on school playgrounds. For example, Norton and Toohey (2011) report that teachers’ attempts to get refugee students to participate in classroom discussions had unclear results. By this, Norton and Toohey (2011) are referring to the fact that while refugee students

were given opportunities to practice their English language skills, oftentimes students were laughed at or mocked because of their accents or pronunciation inaccuracies. Having other students laugh at them for speaking ‘differently’ was something that came up frequently in the literature search (Davies, 2008; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Refugee students in the literature have also reported much more malicious cases of discrimination in which students refuse to work with them in a collaborative setting. While Kanu (2008) notes that in her observations, interactions between African refugee students and non-African peers usually only occurred during groupwork activities, Uptin, Wright, and Harwood (2013) describe instances of students literally moving their desks away and forcing a student in their group to work in isolation. Similarly, Onsando and Billett (2009) share a statement from a Sudanese student who said that, “if you are given team work... they run away from you” (p. 6). Not only do such experiences create environments in which students prefer to remain silent, but they also quickly begin to feel socially isolated and rejected (McBrien, 2005). The adversity that students face in the classroom with regards to their peers is only compounded by their existing learning challenges (Onsando & Billett, 2009). These feelings of rejection and isolation have been linked to lower levels of motivation and higher dropout rates among young adults from refugee backgrounds (Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Kanu, 2008; Onsando & Billett, 2009).

This section on discrimination was placed as the last category in the review of the literature because it transcends nearly all of the previously discussed categories. Discrimination, or perceived discrimination, is a factor that can impact African refugee students’ lives in terms of academic culture and expectations, support; obligations outside of school, and culturally relevant education.

**Summary of the Literature**

The literature review presented seven main categories: little, no, or severely interrupted education; subsequent language acquisition; culturally responsive education; differing academic culture and expectations; trauma, loss, and obligations outside of school; support networks; and discrimination. The review informed us that there are challenges faced by refugee students who are African young adults that are different from those challenges faced by immigrant students and SLA learners. It has also shown that some of the factors discussed, particularly prior educational backgrounds, SLA, culturally relevant education, and discrimination can and do impact refugee students' chances of and motivations in graduating secondary school.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology and Research Design**

To recap, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of young adult African refugees in the Ontario education system. Specifically, I asked:

1. What are some of the common challenges faced by young adult African refugee students in completing secondary school?
2. What can educators and educational administrators do to help these students overcome challenges?

#### **Methodology**

**Qualitative Paradigm.** Creswell (2012) describes the applicability of using qualitative research methods when the “literature might yield little information about the phenomenon of study, and you need to learn more from participants through exploration” (p. 16). I chose to employ qualitative research methods for this reason – not only is there little information regarding the experiences and challenges of refugees in the Canadian education system, but with the exception of a few studies (Kanu, 2008; Magro, 2009; Mickan et al., 2007), there is relatively no information on the experiences and challenges of young adult African refugees in the Canadian education system. Because of this, it is important that more is gained from my participants through exploration.

Additionally, qualitative methods ensure that the researcher “looks at settings and people holistically” and that people “are not reduced to variables” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 6). Taylor and Bogdan (1984) go on to say that qualitative methods are humanistic and that “we get to know them [the participants] personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society” (p. 7). While I obviously did not expect to literally experience what young

adult African refugee students experience in their daily lives, I did expect to shed more light on the particular challenges that they may face in trying to achieve their educational goals in the Ontario education system. Since I was interested in exploring the experiences that are specific to this cohort of refugee students, it was important that participants' voices, thoughts, feelings, and ideas are heard and made visible in the research. For this reason, I decided that qualitative research, and in particular, narrative research, best suited my area of interest, as well as my participants and their experiences.

**Personal and Cultural Background.** In researching such a group as young adult African refugees in Canada, I find it crucial to provide information on my own personal and cultural background. I was born in Brantford, Ontario, Canada. I am not a member of a visible minority group nor do I have any personal refugee background. My husband immigrated to Canada from Tanzania, East Africa. Neither he nor anyone in my family has had refugee experience. My point of entry into this research stems from my own experiences teaching ESL, both in Ontario and abroad in Ghana, West Africa. I have always been a supporter of, and advocate for, educational equity and changing highly Euro-centric curricula and pedagogy to better encompass all of the students represented in Ontario and Canadian schools. That being said, these professional experiences, not personal experiences, form the basis for my research interests

**Narrative Research Design.** Narrative research allows for researchers to rely on and analyze the written or spoken stories of individuals and how these stories are represented (Lichtman, 2013; Sandelowski, 1991). Narrative research depends on the experiences of lived

and expressed stories (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), hence this type of research is beneficial for investigating real world problems using real world approaches (Lichtman, 2013). In the case of this research study, narrative research was useful in exploring the real world challenges faced by young adult African refugee students in their own words and by expressing their own feelings and interpretations. Creswell (2012) states, “for educators looking for personal experiences in actual school settings, narrative research offers practical, specific insights” (p. 502). It is these insights into the challenges of this particular group of students that this research is interested in uncovering, for the benefit of both students and society.

In narrative research, importance is placed on personal experiences, as well as on collaboration between the researcher and the participants. Researchers in the field discuss narrative research as a collaborative endeavor in which the participants and the researcher interact dynamically to learn and produce purposeful and meaningful stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Since narrative research relies upon this collaboration and interaction, both the researcher and participant may ask questions and provide answers in the research process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Sandelowski (1991) describes narrative research as descriptive and explanatory. Using this approach, the researcher may look to provide:

- a) Individual and group narratives of life stories or particular life episodes;
  - b) The conditions under which one storyline, or emplotment and signification of events, prevails over, coheres with, or conflicts with other storylines;
  - c) The relationship between individual stories and the available cultural stock of stories; and,
  - d) The function that certain life episodes serve in individuals’ emplotment of their lives.
- (p. 163)

While there are many types of narrative research forms, I decided that the best form for this research study will be personal experience stories, which are studies of the experiences of individuals “found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore” (Creswell, 2012, p. 504). These experiences were discussed with and retold by participants in the interview process. It should be noted that the study was approved by REB as a narrative study; however, due to the proximity of narrative research techniques and critical analysis techniques, a certain degree of cross-border pollination was inevitable.

## **Methods**

**Interviews.** Weiss (1994) describes interviews in a powerful way that I believe is highly relevant to this topic of study. Weiss writes that,

Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they live their lives. We can learn also, through interviewing, about people’s interior experiences. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition. (p. 1)

Not only do interviews allow researchers to access people’s experiences and the meanings they make of those experiences, but participants are able to share their stories, and stories are one way of knowing (Seidman, 1991). In the past, interviews tended to be face-to-face, verbal interactions between two people or in a focus group. Today, telephone interviews and email conversations are also considered to be types of interviews. Interviews can be structured, unstructured, or semi-structured; however, qualitative research most often employs unstructured or semi-structured because interviewing is meant to be conversational and flexible (Creswell, 1994).



I conducted three semi-structured interviews with young adults of African origin who entered Canada with refugee status. I did receive two more responses, but these participants did not fit the criteria, as they had entered Canada with refugee status as young children, not as young adults. I believe that my interviewing a small number of participants allowed for a greater degree of exploration (Glesne, 2006). Participants were recruited by placing recruitment posters in the main offices of organizations serving refugees and by sending mass emails. All of these interviews were conducted face-to-face, were 40-50 minutes in length, and were audio-recorded and transcribed to allow for a more thorough examination of what participants shared. Since the interviews were semi-structured, I had an interview guide consisting of a list of questions to be covered (Appendix A), but the participants were able to decide the direction that the answering of these questions and the discussion of other topics took. These questions were both open- and closed-ended, so as to allow participants to clearly relate them to their life experiences (Elliott, 2005). The questions and the atmosphere of the interview remained open-ended to allow for conversations about feelings and experiences. In keeping with narrative research design, the interview became more of a collaboration. In order to better prepare participants, I provided them with a copy of the interview guide prior to our scheduled interview to give them a chance to reflect on their experiences and answers. Due to the nature of the interview and questions, participants were required to be proficient in English. Participants were also provided the opportunity to review the transcripts, by meeting in person or by email, to ensure that their experiences and voices were being appropriately and accurately captured. Interviews followed standard ethics protocols, as per the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB).

### **Data Analysis**

Adams, Khan, Raeside, and White (2007) outline various techniques that are often employed in the analysis of qualitative data. I used the following techniques in my own data analysis:

1. Documentation of the data and the process of data collection;
2. Organization/categorization of the data into concepts;
3. Connection of the data to show how one concept may influence another;
4. Corroboration/legitimization, by evaluating alternative explanations, disconfirming evidence, and searching for negative cases; and,
5. Representing the account (reporting the findings). (p. 325)

In particular, the connection of the data to show how one concept may influence another was important in my analysis. As seen in the review of the literature, many of the themes or categories that are likely to emerge are interrelated (e.g. discrimination and culturally relevant curriculum). The themes that emerged in my analysis also indicated an overlap, as most influence each other, and this will be considered in the discussion of the study's findings.

In qualitative research, data analysis is a comprehensive and iterative process that occurs constantly and simultaneously during all stages of the research process – data collection, data interpretation, and writing (Creswell, 2012; Tesch, 1990). During the data collection process, I chose to use contact summary forms (Silverman, 2009) to allow me to summarize the main issues or themes that stood out in the interview and the information that was received, before transcribing the audio-taped interview.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim from the audio recordings, I read through each transcript at least three times while making a list of any words or phrases that seemed to be significant. I created a table from the text of the transcript using Microsoft Word. This allowed me to have a separate row for each new speaker, and it allowed me to analyze each speaking turn separately and as part of the larger discussion. This method of coding allowed me to see themes that emerged from the data. Beside each significant turn, I added a word or phrase that demonstrated the main idea or theme of that turn. Using these theme words, I constructed an initial list of 79 significant words and/or phrases. Because many of these theme words were closely related to one another, I created 10 overarching themes that contained various subthemes. In the end of my analysis, 5 major themes emerged from the data. Each of these major themes consisted of subthemes which will be outlined in the next chapter.

## **Ethics**

Prior to the recruitment of participants and data collection, formal approval for this study was obtained through the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB). Potential participants, or sites for participants, were approached through emails and posters in relevant community organizations (e.g. refugee support centres), as well as through word-of-mouth. Emails (Appendix B) and posters (Appendix C) included an introduction to the study, as well as contact information for myself and for Lakehead University REB.

After potential participants expressed interest in participation in the research study, they were sent a more comprehensive official letter explaining the study (Appendix D) and the appropriate consent form (Appendix E). The consent form was exchanged in person, and it informed potential participants that their participation in the study was voluntary and they might

withdraw from the study at any time. Once potential participants consented to participation, we scheduled a time and place of mutual convenience for an interview.

All data collected will remain confidential, and the identity of research participants is protected by the use of pseudonyms and the deletion of any unique identifying characteristics. There will be no physical harm or potential risk to the participants during the study; however, participants may experience potential psychological distress or discomfort due to the nature of the topic and questions. There was no deception involved in this research study. The findings of the study will be made available to participants upon request at the conclusion of the research project.

### **Chapter Four: Findings**

This chapter contains the major themes that emerged from the interviews with the three young adult African refugee participants. Pseudonyms were provided in order to protect the confidentiality of all participants and individuals mentioned in the findings. In addition, some identifying information, such as the name of high schools or cities, was modified or omitted, again to protect the confidentiality of participants and those mentioned in their interviews.

Five main themes emerged in the interviews giving context to some of the positive experiences and some of the challenges that students faced in transitioning to their new school and personal lives in Ontario. The five themes that emerged were: (1) subsequent language learning, (2) differing academic culture and expectations, (3) culturally relevant education, (4) support, and (5) discrimination. Subsequent language learning subsumed four code categories: level of confidence when speaking; understanding English; difficulty communicating; and working to improve English skills. Academic culture and expectations subsumed three code categories: different academic cultures; school expectations; and difficulty with these new expectations and cultures. Culturally relevant education subsumed four code categories: lack of extra academic support; lack of culturally relevant education; impact of work on school; and lack of teacher understanding. Support subsumed six code categories: lack of guidance; need for mentors; challenges adapting to Canada; extracurricular activities; personal discipline; and community support. Finally, discrimination subsumed three code categories: difficulty relating to peers; lack of Canadian friends; and becoming more comfortable.

Of course, many of these themes and the stories and experience within these themes overlapped in various ways. For example, culturally responsive education often overlapped with

the theme of support. This tendency of overlap is unsurprising because all of these themes are commonplace among young adult African refugee students and they are all related in some way.

### **Participant Biographies**

Given the methodology involved in this research study, I find it necessary to provide a brief biography of each of the three participants.

**Habimana.** Habimana arrived in Canada at age 20 by way of Kenya, and he was placed in grade 11. He is originally from Rwanda, where all of his schooling took place in French. Prior to his arrival in Canada, Habimana had spent five years in a refugee camp in Kenya. While in Kenya, Habimana did not attend public school, but did spend some time in night school learning English. Habimana arrived in Canada unaccompanied, and he was placed with a government-assigned foster family for his first full year in Canada. Habimana successfully completed his secondary school education in Ontario and is now enrolled at an Ontario university in the Accounting program.

**Joseph.** Joseph came to Canada as a refugee from Rwanda. He was 19 years old when he arrived and was placed in grade 12, but was required to take a few grade 11 courses. Joseph attended primary school in Rwanda, where the language of instruction was French, and then attended an English secondary school in Rwanda before coming to Canada. He travelled to Canada with his older brother, and together they depended largely on the community and government assistance to live and to help them complete their education. Joseph received his

Ontario Secondary School Diploma and is now enrolled in a business administration program at an Ontario university.

**Abasi.** Abasi arrived in Canada as a refugee from Tanzania. In Tanzania, he had attended a school that had a large focus on English language learning, and thus, Abasi arrived with a high level of English proficiency. He did not experience any gaps in his education between Tanzania and his arrival in Canada. Upon arrival in Canada, Abasi was 15 years old, and he was placed in grade 9. Abasi arrived unaccompanied and lived on his own throughout his high school years. He has now successfully completed his secondary school education and is considering post-secondary options.

### **Theme One: Subsequent Language Learning**

With the exception of one participant, subsequent language learning was one of the most common topics of conversation; it was something that tended to become part of the answers to most questions, demonstrating that learning English and becoming comfortable with the language was one of the main challenges for two of the three participants. Although the level of English on arrival differed between participants, two seemed to refer to difficulties regarding communication in Canada quite frequently. For example, Abasi claimed that his level of English on arrival was average, saying:

I could understand and... I was afraid to speak a little bit, but I could clearly understand what people were saying. It's just that I couldn't speak.... I couldn't use my thoughts and then speak up because I was afraid I would say things differently, or I wouldn't say it right, and you know, in high school, and you don't know if somebody's going to laugh at you or whatever, so I was very cautious when it comes to speaking up.

Habimana differed in his description of the challenges. He also said that he would put himself at an intermediate level on arrival, but differently from Abasi, Habimana had more difficulty understanding English speakers. This was something that he attributed to both pronunciation and vocabulary, saying that there are large differences between African and Canadian English:

I wouldn't say it was good English. I would say maybe I was intermediate... I was uh... African English is totally different from the Canadian English or British English. Back home, we speak in English mixed with, you know, our mother tongue as well. So when I came back, when I came here to Canada, the English was totally different .. the English which was spoken here in Canada was different.

Some words, I couldn't hear them. Even whenever I speak, people, they couldn't hear what I'm saying. Vocabularies.. and names of things. Like 'waDer 'waTer.' Sometimes I ask people 'water?' and they say, "oh what are they saying?" Whenever they say 'waDer,' I'm like "what is it?" [J: Because it sounds like a D, yeah?] Yeah. So for me, it was a big change in English. So communication was a big part of a problem.

Both Abasi and Habimana had backgrounds in English learning before arriving in Canada, although neither spoke English as a mother tongue. Again, Abasi attended a school in Tanzania that had a large focus on English language learning, while Habimana attended all of his schooling in Rwanda solely in French. However, he attended night schooling while in Kenya to improve his English skills before coming to Canada. While both of them had some background in English and felt somewhat confident in their English ability entering Canada, that confidence seemed to fade as they entered their new high schools and began adapting to their new lives in Canada. For instance, when I asked if he found it easy to make new friends, Abasi recounted:

Not in the beginning. Again, the language thing, you know. It's like, I wanted to talk, but they talk too fast or too loud. It's not like, too loud, but because of the English, I don't understand English, so for me, it's like you're talking too loud or too fast. And I'm like hmmm... you know what I mean, I want it slow, like let's talk slowly. So I was friends with people who were the same. They weren't really that comfortable with English yet.



Similarly, Habimana, who entered grade 11 at 20 years old, made mention of the fact that it was not only the English level, but also his age that made making friends difficult. He says that being different in age by a few years, and also being from a different cultural background, meant that he often did not share the same interests as his peers, which made communication and building connections difficult. At the same time, he also said that, “I believe that they taught me big lessons which kept me pushing to go back to school because hanging out with them, really I... whatever English I’m speaking today, I believe I got from them.” In this way, Habimana was acknowledging the idea that while communication with peers was difficult, it helped in teaching him more conversational, colloquial, and slang English that may have not been learned in the academic classroom.

Joseph was the one participant who had very few difficulties with communicating in English. I was initially struck by his level of English proficiency, and when I inquired further about this after our interview, he told me that while he had attended primary school in French in Rwanda, he attended secondary school in English. He had self-taught himself English, and of course improved his proficiency throughout his secondary school years in Rwanda, but upon arrival in Canada, he was at an advanced level of English proficiency. In fact, when he first arrived in Ontario, he was placed in an English 3U class and was never required to take any ESL classes. Because of this, he had no language barriers or issues in adapting to his school life and personal life in Canada.

**Level of Confidence When Speaking.** Abasi spoke quite extensively about being afraid to speak, especially in the beginning. He talked about the importance of teachers in helping to improve his level of confidence and comfortability with speaking in the classroom:

Maybe the teachers can uh, persuade them a little bit more, maybe like once in a while just have conversations with the students after, especially if you feel like they're shy. That they're reserved. And especially if they're new and their English is not that great. Because it could be... you're just shy to speak up. Like I said, you know what I mean, you know things, you want to engage, but at the same time you're kind of like, "oh man, I'm not sure," so if you can get teachers to just kind of like just that little bit of spark or confidence, it could be a whole lot different in a way, right.

I would speak up more, maybe I would be more excited and look forward to going, but if they don't engage, I'm not going to be the one approaching in a way, because like I said I'm like new to the country, I'm young, I'm shy, because I don't know, it's a new country. Everything is new. And uh, so yeah, maybe just if the teachers, if they're aware that, you know, this person is new, you know, try to engage with them, see what they're afraid to do, like why don't they speak up more, encourage them to speak, you know. Have like one on one after classes. It will encourage the kids to be more comfortable and confident to come in class.

At the same time, Habimana pointed out that teachers need to be careful in *how* they encourage new students to speak in the classroom. In his experiences, some of his high school classes had participation marks, and this meant that teachers often simply called on students to speak. This caused Habimana a lot of stress because the students in his class listened very carefully, waiting for him to make a mistake, it seemed. He said:

My communication wasn't good and when I'm speaking, everybody is paying attention. Maybe that was a good thing... but to me, it was a little bit challenging because it everybody will be, you know, paying attention to me... and know that whatever I am speaking is interesting or is a fact, but... my communication, the way I am speaking with my English is not...

And sometimes, I used to think, maybe she's [the teacher] picking on me... why doesn't she ask so and so? The student who was sitting in the back?

When I asked more about how his classmates used to listen carefully to his speaking in class, particular if he made a mistake in speaking, Habimana responded:

Well then that would be a big issue then. Because when we are hanging out outside... you hear the kids bringing up the words which I was using in class... Some of them were trying to be funny, yes... I won't say they, none of them, I've never seen any mean [comments].

Some of them, they're gonna use them as a joke. By then, I didn't think it was funny.... By then, I thought this guy, they, you know, they're trying to make me miserable.

However, now that Habimana can reflect back on these experiences, he thought that perhaps cultural differences meant that his classmates were "bringing up the words" that he was using in class when he made a mistake as a way to welcome him into their peer group. At the time, he thought that his classmates were making fun of him, but looking back, he realized that this may have been a way in which his classmates tried to build a friendly relationship with him.

**Working to Improve English Skills.** Because English was not the first language of any of the participants, they discussed how much they had to work to improve their English skills.

Habimana, who came to Canada on his own at age 20, worked to help support himself while he was attending high school. Because there was no specific refugee or subsequent language learner programming at his high school, Habimana faced a huge challenge in keeping up in school and in improving his English language skills at the same time. He recalled this experience by saying:

Oh it was a massive workload because I had to spend, you know, besides going to work, I had to spend most of the time on the library, on running grammar and reading... the dictionary, you know, grammar books, and whatever book we were using at school. Cramming them, cramming words. And what words mean. Reading... because remember at that time, I could read a chapter and I could not understand a thing. So I had to check in a dictionary, you know, every single word in the chapter. So for me to understand it, go in my exam, and take my exam and pass exam, wasn't easy.

However, while having to work presented a challenge to Habimana, it also presented a useful way to help learn the language. At the grocery store, where he worked stocking shelves, Habimana talked about how he frequently had to converse with customers who were looking for specific items in the grocery store. He said that these interactions helped him, especially in

learning the names of new items. It also helped him in learning more conversational English, as opposed to the more academic language learned in the classroom: “There’s a difference because at the school, they teach you theory. Some of them you may never see them in your life after you leave the school. But at work, it’s everyday life.”

While Abasi did not face the same challenges as Habimana did when it came to reading, listening, and writing skills, he did have challenges when it came to speaking. Abasi did not have a job throughout the school year, so he had to rely on other activities, specifically soccer, to help him improve his English language skills by meeting new friends:

That’s how it all started with the sports. Because again, my friends were basically from school. I didn’t know any people from outside of school. And then, when I heard about soccer, which I’m crazy about, and that’s when I started meeting people, and I was very into it. I was the captain of the team for a couple of years, and I even organized intramurals. I started becoming more comfortable that way, you know?

I started opening up more and then that changed me a little bit, in a way, to be more comfortable. And, from then on, then I started getting, you know, that’s when I started meeting new Canadians and stuff, once I started playing soccer with them. I started becoming more comfortable talking to them because you can say something to them after that, right?

Abasi talked about soccer as a useful way to practice speaking English because playing with Canadians and other non-Canadians meant that he was forced to speak English. He was also more comfortable in such a setting because as he put it, “In sports, it’s just one language.”

### **Theme Two: Differing Academic Cultures and Expectations**

Another theme that came up often in discussions with all three participants about their experiences in high school was the differing academic cultures and expectations in Canadian schools and in their schools in their country of origin. Interestingly, something that was frequently described by all participants was the idea that, with the exception of having to communicate in English, schooling in Canada was actually much easier. When asked what the least challenging thing was in adapting to his new Canadian school, Abasi said:

School. Uh, the syllabus or whatever they call it. Like it seemed like it I didn't put too much work into it, but it was so doable. It wasn't hard... and like, I was surprised when they gave us a math test and it had formulas on the side. I was like 'Whaaaaaat? I think you did this by accident.' [laughs] And I give it back and they're like, 'No no, you can use that.' And I'm like, 'Really?! What is the reason for this then?' [laughs] I'm not going to fail.

Joseph also echoed these statements, saying that "when I came here, it was easier for me academic wise... when I came here, everything was basically, kind of like summarized, so it was so easy for me and I was getting high grades because I was like 'Pfft, this is so easy,' you know?" Joseph made this comment with specific regard to the amount of information that students are given in Rwanda compared to in Canada. He said that in Rwanda, you are always writing notes, but in Canada, he found that the information was summarized and that, "it's not like I have to climb through a lot of information to find what I need, so I find that the system here is a lot easier."

Similarly, Habimana, making specific reference to various multimedia teaching resources, expressed that:

Here in Canada, when I, when I came to high school in Canada, compared to back in Rwanda, high school is totally different because here the, you know, they made it easier... from people for, you know, kids to understand the material. And they have much resources

that you can use ... Textbooks... videos... and online. Even the professor will, you know, give you the material that may help you, especially the, like... course outline. Then we can know what is going on, which chapter you are going to read, and deal with. But back home, the teacher will come up with whatever they want. There's no schedule that we are following.

**Different Academic Cultures.** All of the participants made reference to many differences between the schooling systems and academic cultures in their schools in Ontario and their schools in Africa. They all concluded that the academic cultures are vastly different, and this often took some getting used to. However, they seemed to have found the Canadian academic culture much more inviting, positive, and productive. Abasi said that:

The teaching methods there [in Tanzania]... it's like you're a robot basically. They just want to jam things into your head and you don't really study things, you memorize things, which is useless in my opinion. You don't.... I'm not learning. I'm not studying something to learn. I'm studying something so I'm thinking, 'If I fail, the teacher's coming in with a big stick and is going to whipping me with it.' So I'm thinking, 'I have to memorize, I have to memorize.' Like after the exam, I probably don't remember anything. It's useless to me. Here, it's different. You study things and teachers will tell you, 'Make mark of this because it might be in the test.' Not like a whole book, you know, like... so it was, you study the most important things. And that, I like that system. It was much better that way, makes it so much easier.

This was something that was also echoed in Joseph's interview. When describing the differences between teaching methods in Rwanda and Canada, he stated,

School in Rwanda is more difficult than here I would say, because it's less practical and it's like, they give you notes, like a lot of notes. We took a lot of notes, a lot of writing. But we lacked practical, like we didn't have labs as we did here, so it was really more like they give you a lot of information and you have to go on your own and figure out what information's important to you, sort of. So it's a lot different from here. While here, it's everything is practical. Like for example chemistry, we took our chemistry classes in labs. Everything was there. Back home in Rwanda, it was in a classroom, so it was just writing and drawings. We didn't really see the actual apparatus, is that how you call it? [J: Yeah] Yeah. So yeah, yeah it was different.

Throughout Habimana's interview, he talked about the difficulties he faced in completing some of his assignments on time, or at all. These specific assignments will be discussed further in presenting the findings on culturally relevant education. However, when I asked Habimana if he ever asked for any extensions or further help with his work, he said, "No, I always make sure that... submit my... but I remember there was a time I couldn't submit anything and I still get a zero. But I never thought about asking... In Rwanda in high school, there's no special treatment."

All of the participants also talked about how relationships and/or interaction between students and teachers were something that differed greatly between Canada and their home countries. For example, Habimana stated that:

In Rwanda, the students will find they don't have any relationship... the teacher, they call them professor in high school, they call them professor, so they're in the high position... me, there's not any communication with... besides showing up in class, teach, give you an exam, is really the business.

That's what I thought when I came to high school [here]. I thought that's what the same things, but even when I went to college, because by then I was already kind of used to the environment... I found it's different. They, you know, communicate, approach them. Tell them whatever you want. Whatever's in your mind and they decide whether it's legit or not.

In this way, Habimana made reference to the fact that teachers in Canada were more open, inviting, and approachable than they were in Rwanda. However, he was unsure about this at first, and because of his uncertainty, did not like to approach teachers for help, or for conversation.

Joseph also talked about how while he was able to approach and speak with his teachers in Rwanda, it was something that still was not done very often. In Ontario, Joseph found that teachers were much more welcoming and "easier to talk to than the teachers back home."

Specifically, he was struck by the fact that "the teacher's like one of us," in that the teachers were interacting with the students and chatting about "random things even not class-related... and

we're laughing together." This was something that Joseph particularly enjoyed about his high school experiences in Ontario, not something that disoriented or scared him.

At the same time, Joseph talked about this being vastly different than what he was used to in Rwanda, where you learn to fear your teachers. He said,

Back in Rwanda, you fear your teachers. You were afraid of them. Like, you don't say anything unless they ask you, or it's basically um... but here, students are, they're outspoken, you know, they chat with their teachers about anything. You can ask questions and all that. We also could ask questions but we actually feared our teachers because they could, you know, give you spanks and all that stuff. Regardless, even in high school, we could still get spanked, so... [laughing] It was, it's a lot different, yeah.

Similarly, Abasi described his schooling experiences in Tanzania as much stricter than what he experienced in his Ontario high school, saying that in Tanzania, the emphasis was on "being on time, grades. We used to get punished if you didn't get the grade basically. So if you're not that smart and you fail all your subjects, your butt is gonna hurt." He also talked about his relationships and interactions with teachers in Ontario being different than in Tanzania.

Interestingly, although Abasi went to high school in a large city in Ontario, he claimed that the teachers he connected with, and who showed the most interest in getting to know him, were teachers that were immigrants themselves. In particular, there was one male teacher who was an immigrant himself, who was a large support for Abasi in his first few years in Canada. In fact, he still keeps in touch with this teacher, even though he has graduated and left the high school.

One thing that stood out to Abasi with regards to relationships between teachers and other students was what he saw as a shocking amount of disrespect shown towards teachers. He said,

Honestly, the first thing that surprised me the most of the beating [seen in Tanzania], like we didn't have beatings in here, but the thing is how students spoke to teachers and how disrespectful people were towards the teachers. We did not do that. And you know, so that was an eye opener for me of how people reacted and how disrespectful people could be.



There [in Tanzania], it keeps you on your feet a little too much and here it's too easy and too comfortable that you can afford to skip, you can afford to do whatever you want, you can yell at and tell the teacher whatever and then walk away and nothing happens, right?

These comments made by Abasi related to those made by Habimana, specifically when he talked about the level of respect shown to teachers at the high school level in Rwanda. He said that in Rwandan secondary schools, teachers are referred to as 'professor' and are not disrespected. This stands in stark contrast to the types of things that Abasi referred to in describing his Canadian high school experiences. As well, the more inviting approach from teachers described by Joseph could sometimes blur the lines between teachers being authority figures and being friends. It is easy to see why such a difference in communication with teachers and academic cultures could provide some stress and surprise to new students.

**School Expectations.** Like the challenges that a new academic culture presented to the participants, they also experienced challenges when it came to new and unfamiliar school expectations. This particular code category or subtheme tends to overlap with another theme, that of support, but will be discussed in the findings of both themes.

First of all, Abasi talked about differing expectations and the fact that the onus was placed on the student, regardless of whether or not they really understood what they were doing. For example, Abasi met many challenges when it came to picking the courses that he needed for graduation and later, for post-secondary programs. From the level that he was in when he left Tanzania, he had had no choice in what courses to take. However, this changed dramatically when he arrived in Canada:

As a person that's new to a country, that doesn't know... and young especially, you don't know much about the schooling system and you're clueless basically. You would expect

somebody to kind of open up your eyes and tell you, “This is what you need to do.” And until today, I tell my friends and everybody that when I was in high school, I thought all I needed was 30 credits and 30 hours of community work, and I can take whatever course I want to do if I want to go to college... and then they tell me, “Oh no no no, you need to pick grade 12 this and that and that” and I had to go take this course and I’m like, “Well how come I’ve never been told about this?” You know what I mean? Like nobody ever... and I’ve seen guidance counsellor countless times trying to find out where to go, but like, I never caught on to that. Nobody said anything to me, so what I did was, if I could pick gym to my 30 credits, I love sports, I did gym... And then, “No no no, you need this.” And so I had to do extra classes basically later on because there was no guidance.

In this way, Abasi was unaware of the expectations placed on high school students with regards to choosing their own courses and ensuring that they have what they need to graduate and to possibly apply to post-secondary programs later on. Because he was used to having his classes simply given to him in Tanzania, this was something that caused Abasi some stress. He was even required to take additional credits to graduate because he made some mistakes in his course selection.

Joseph had more positive experiences with these differences in academic expectations. Instead of being stunned, or confused, by the differences, he embraced them because he was happy to have more freedom and independence. For example, he talked specifically about how he liked that you could choose courses based on your interests and future goals. In Rwanda, Joseph said,

I was in uh.. ‘cause we after O level, which is like ordinary level, you pick a section. So you can pick math and physics, or biology and chemistry. But even though you were in math and physics, you’re still obligated to study chemistry and biology. You don’t pick and choose courses. You study everything. So when I got here, they were like, “What were you studying at home?” I give them my reports, they’re like, “Really, you study all these things?” They’re like... I’m like, “Yes, we had to study everything.” So they’re like, “Ok, here you have to choose what you want to study.” So I decided that I wasn’t going to study biology anymore [laughing] cuz I hate biology, so... I was happy that I had to choose actually, but back there, you have to do everything. Even if it’s not your major or your section, but you do it as a course, as a class.

I had a counsellor [in Canada] who was really good to me and so, I had to choose, so I decided that I was going to do sciences. So I liked math and physics because that was my section back home, so I went ahead chemistry, physics, math, and I didn't have to take biology anymore, while back home I was taking math, physics, but I was also obligated to do biology, chemistry, geography, French, English, history, all of those things that are not related to math and physics.

Joseph also talked about how part of school 'being easier,' meant that the expectations for the amount of studying required were different, which was also a positive thing. He talked about how in Rwanda, students have to work extremely hard to pass and they are always studying. He claimed that,

You have to pass in order to continue in a government school. And there's a national exam that everyone in your level takes and you have to pass. So we used to stay up til like two in the morning, go to sleep for like two hours and wake up like five in the morning, while we have class at 8am. So... we called it 'winter.' Waking up in the morning, we called it 'winter' basically, because it was so cold and we have to get up at like 4 or 3 in the morning to go study. So that, those were the kind of things we had to do. But when I got here, I never had to do all that stuff.

Habimana spoke about vastly different expectations of students between Canadian high schools and Rwandan high schools, in particular what is required and expected of students in the classroom. For example, he talked at length of the expectation that teachers had that students should be typing all of the assignments that were to be handed in, when in fact, Habimana had never seen a computer before arriving in Canada. As well, he talked quite a bit about the expectation of students' writing abilities:

For me, at the beginning, it was... the challenge was, as I said, communication, language. Because for me to come to level of sitting down and write an essay... it takes me a long, long time to even figure out how to write an essay. That's the... maybe it will deal with my past education background, because back home, I hadn't to write essays maybe. They didn't train us as here in Canada. You find [here] they get trained how to write an essay, because the guys when we were together in the class, for them you could tell... in forty minutes, he has a full page of essay.

These expectations of students placed more stress upon the participants because they had to not only learn how to navigate the system, in most cases without a lot of additional support or guidance, but they also had to catch up to the level of their classmates, since that was what was expected of them at that level. Habimana talked of just being placed in a grade 11 classroom with all English-speaking students and how “it was up to me to catch up or not.” In general, the expectations of all students of that grade were placed on the participants without considering their prior educational or cultural backgrounds.

**Theme Three: Culturally Responsive Education**

Culturally responsive education, or in particular, a lack thereof, was another theme that emerged from interviews with both Abasi and Habimana, and this may have had a lot to do with their level of English proficiency being lower than Joseph's. In many ways, this theme was closely related to the previous theme of different academic cultures and expectations. Because Habimana experienced a significant gap in his educational years between Rwanda, Kenya, and Canada, his experiences especially demonstrated a lack of culturally responsive education methods or considerations. Perhaps the most poignant example came when he described that he had never even seen a computer before arriving in Canada. However, most of his teachers required students to type and print their assignments to submit, while a math teacher even required students to use a special software program to complete assignments. Habimana recounted these experiences:

Computer for me, it was my first time to use a computer. For them [the other students], it was, you know, quick. They know whatever is going on. To me, even typing... the teachers in high school, they expect me to hand in typed material, and I don't know how to type. And again, consider that I don't know how to use any computer. I'm learning how to use a computer and how to turn on a computer, I'm learning how to use Excel... or Access, or um, Microsoft Word.

Like I remember this math class which they... the teacher, she expected us to use computer to do... I had no clue whatsoever, and she gave me a zero. For my entire... my entire... marks. I solved it on the paper. But she didn't want paper. She wanted something printed out from computer.... In that situation, because she didn't know that I'm computer illiterate... If she could have accessed, even introduced me to that software, I would use it. But even today, I don't know how to use it. But all the other guys in high school, they were there, they knew, because they had it in their previous years. It was something that they were taught maybe at grade 11, no grade 9, grade 10... so....

If I was to go back, I could ask her [the teacher], "Ok, can you teach me how to use this program?" or "Can I get help somewhere else?" If she knew that I didn't know how to use it, probably she could have done something... but because of me, I was afraid of asking her... or telling her, informing her that I don't know how to use the program.... And when I

wanted to hand in the handwriting, she won't take that, and she don't want to know why. She should've asked "Why didn't you use computer?" But she didn't ... wanna know.

This was an extremely telling example of the ways in which Habimana was failed by his school and his teachers, who instead of getting to know and understand his prior background, assumed that he had the knowledge and skills of other Canadian students in the same classroom. In particular, this example demonstrates how teachers failed to meet the requirements of culturally relevant pedagogy that contend that students must experience academic success and that students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence. By simply awarding Habimana a grade of zero and not inquiring as to why he had not used the computer software, this teacher impaired Habimana's chances of academic success.

Joseph described a similar lack of resources back home in Rwanda that impacted his schooling here in Canada, though not as significantly as in Habimana's case. For example, Joseph said that chemistry classes were taught in the classroom, whereas in Canada, students have access to labs and materials to better teach chemistry concepts. In addition, Joseph said that they relied mainly on textbooks and rarely had access to a computer at school. He said, "We went to labs like once a month 'cause we had to take turns. We barely did experiments. It was like one experiment each month." While Joseph did not face the same difficulties as Habimana, and specifically did not describe these differences as challenges, these statements show the importance of teachers recognizing the various backgrounds and experiences of students in assigning tasks and especially in using new technologies or methods in the classroom.

Abasi did not describe such specific examples, but he also referred to a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly when it came to teachers helping him feel more comfortable in the classroom and in the school. He said,

Because I'm not the one that's gonna open up and speak to them, like, you know what I mean, I'm not sure. And I'm sure if the teachers engaged a little bit more, I would have been able to like make more relationships with them and maybe they could've transferred me to like, make me meet other students. And after class maybe talk to them and make me feel comfortable. And another thing is, I don't think they were unaware because the first time, yeah, you'll be unaware. But then once you see me in class and in the whole semester, you're gonna know that I'm new right away. Like two days, like "yeah, I know he's new." But he's kind of shy and.. but like, there was nothing different basically, right. For me, I would've been like "ok, now let me try to get him out of the shell" or try to just to talk to him, get to know a little bit of you, you know what I mean? There was not much of that. Except for that one teacher that I'm still in touch with. He was just always so connected that way, like you know... but yeah, they could be more... a little bit more um engaging to the students. That will definitely help a whole lot.

At the same time, Abasi also claimed that "I can say that there might have been a little bit of a difference between how they would deal with me and how they would deal with somebody else," but went on to say that although he never got into trouble at school, he assumed that if he was a trouble-maker, the school would have responded to him in the same way as they responded to all other students.

**Extra Academic Support.** Neither Habimana nor Abasi were aware of any extra academic support, whether during school hours or outside of school hours. In addition, Habimana said, "There at the school, there's nothing about refugees. We are all students in the classroom." When asked about a focus on extra support for subsequent language learners, he had a similar response, saying: "I didn't see anything concentration toward that, second language learners, no..." Instead, it was up to Habimana and his foster parents to find that extra academic support themselves. For example, his foster parents enlisted the help of a family friend, who was a professor at an Ontario university, to help Habimana with his essay writing. Instead of his school providing extra academic support or providing information on where students may

possibly find that support in the community, Habimana said, “They ignored it because they thought that everybody who is in that level should be... They didn’t consider any special circumstances.” When asked of any recommendations for educators who have refugee students in their classrooms, Habimana replied,

Consider the situation that this student... this guy, his communication is not... that’s part of it. So probably they can have another test on the kids and see which level he is, that’s what they should do, and from there, they have to... they have their another service which will help them to catch up.

Joseph did mention that his school offered an academic support program that took place outside of school hours. He said that there was an after-school program where you could go to get help with homework. This program was not specifically for refugee students, but for the entire school and students of all grades. Joseph said that this program was useful because even though schools in Canada give a lot of homework, “there’s enough resources that can help with it. You can see the teachers after school, there’s tutors and all that. But back there [Rwanda], once they give you homework, you’re on your own.” This statement shows that even if schools provide academic support programming, such as tutoring, they also need to ensure that such programs are made known and promoted to refugee students, as they may have no experiences or background with the availability of such programming or support.



**Theme Four: Support**

Two of the participants, Abasi and Habimana, arrived in Canada unaccompanied by any family members. Abasi was 15 years old when he arrived in Toronto, and while he travelled with a Tanzanian relocation agent who helped him in getting here and initially adjusting to his new life here, this agent did not remain in Canada for long. Habimana, at age 20, also arrived in Canada without any family members; his mother, brothers, and sisters remain in Rwanda. For his first year in Canada, Habimana was placed with a government-approved foster family who provided him a place to live and also taught him some valuable lessons in his adjustment to Canadian society and his new school. He fondly remembered how his foster parents “showed me how to get the bus, how to make a phone call...” For Habimana, his foster parents were a great support in his first year in Canada, but after that year, he had to move out of their house and into an apartment of his own. While those foster parents still regularly checked up on him, visited him, and helped him out in certain situations, Habimana said “it was a little bit challenging in the beginning because... to find everything by myself again. But by then, I, after a year, I was getting used to some stuff...” Arriving in Canada alone as young adults meant that both Abasi and Habimana had to navigate many of the new systems, both in school and in the community, alone or had to find support networks that they were comfortable with.

Joseph arrived in Canada at age 19, and he was accompanied by his older brother. For their first few months in Canada, Joseph said that they survived solely on welfare, because they were in school. Part way through the school year, Joseph moved in with a new friend and his parents in order to be able to finish high school. Not only was Joseph supported by friends and his older brother, but he talked about how the school was a huge support system for him in all aspects, academically, socially, and even financially. He recounted,

Every single person, students or teachers or principal, vice principals, they all wanted to basically know that I was doing well and fitting in. So anyone who would walk past me, they would ask me, “How do you find things?” “If you ever need anything, here’s my office.” So everyone really was welcoming and they all tried... especially the guidance counsellors and the teachers. They made sure that I was actually catching on and keeping up with the rest of the students so....

The school helped me a lot because made a way for me for things that I didn’t know how to do, such as finding me people that could help me outside the school. They helped me with uniforms ‘cause I was just new here. I couldn’t afford the uniforms, ‘cause we had to buy uniforms and all that stuff. So the school helped me. They paid for my trips, so the school really did a lot for me, to accommodate me.

This differed greatly from some of the experiences that Habimana and Abasi had in their high schools. It was also one indication that Joseph’s school had a more defined and developed program for supporting and integrating refugee students.

**Community Support and a Need for Mentors.** Joseph and Habimana spoke to some extent about community involvement or community support networks outside of the school.

Habimana referred to one particular experience in which he had to enlist the help of some members of the church that he and his foster family were a part of during his first few months in Canada. He recounted:

When I was in high school, in the beginning was a challenge because the school board wouldn’t allow me to use the school bus. Because I was older... But the church member where I belonged to the Anglican church, they had to go to the school board. So me, I had to go to the church member and explain to them that... whatever, at the time, the place I was living, there was no bus system besides school bus. So I had to go there to school in another way, but they won’t let me use the bus.

So it was the church member, and they went to the school board and ok, like, “He’s harmless. He’s harmless. He won’t harm the kids.” So they... after two to three months, they approved to me that I have to use the school bus. I had to use my bike [in the meantime], so most of the time I was late.

This particular experience demonstrated some of the challenges that students can face when navigating a new school system and a school or school board that may not understand their challenges. Were it not for the character references from Habimana's foster parents and church members, he may have never been approved for the school bus, and would have had to continue to rely on his bicycle as his only means of transportation to school.

Habimana was also a part of WUSC, the World University Service of Canada, who were involved with his sponsorship in bringing him to Canada. He spoke of being involved in their organization, but not until he had graduated high school and entered college. He said, "That's all I ... am involved in. I didn't involve much... because I didn't know where to begin from."

Joseph participated in activities and clubs at the school, but not much in the community. However, after a few months in Canada, Joseph became a motivational speaker after being approached by his friend's mother about speaking to his fellow schoolmates. He said,

I was actually a motivational speaker in my high school. I went to speak to other schools, not just my school. Like if they had pilgrimages, I would go and just talk to them, basically about life experiences growing up in Africa and that's something that you know, I was even in the paper for that, because they found it amazing how things are so different on the other side, because they realize that there are so many things that they have here that they take for granted. That other people there don't have, and they don't actually even realize that, so that was something that really blew their mind and caught their attention and I went to a few schools and talked to them, basically just about life experience and...

We had a multicultural day where I attended high school, and they suggest that if I wanted to maybe give a speech about, you know, my background and what life is like. I was like, "Sure, I've never spoken in front of a lot of people before." But I was like, alright, I will try it. I did it and kids seemed to be touched by the speech and ... yeah, so it just went on from there. But after some time, I just decided to stop and say that I got to do my own things too.

For Joseph, this participation in the community was very positive because he felt that he was able to teach students and community members about refugee experiences and life in Africa, things that he said many people do not understand and are sometimes "ignorant" about.

However, speaking in the community was something that he left behind once he graduated high school and began university.

Abasi was not a part of any community support networks. However, he did share a similar position as Habimana, saying, “I didn’t.... I didn’t, but I wish I did.” He claims that he probably would have become more involved both in the school and outside of the school if he had been told about different programming and organizations that may have benefited him. Abasi attributed his lack of knowledge about these support networks to the fact that there was no one to inform him, a young student who was new to Canada, about these things. He spoke of wishing that the school had provided or enlisted the help of mentors from the community:

Say you have new immigrants. You have somebody that’s, let’s say me for example, later on, maybe I should go to that school and speak to those new people and then... in a similar position that I was, and say, “Let me talk to those kids.” Just round them up for me. You know, let me talk to them. Let me give them my advice. Let me give them how I did things and how I would have done differently, and maybe they should try to do things differently, and maybe they’ll benefit from it. Maybe not. But like, give them a different perspective basically, from someone that has been in the position from before.

He also talked at length about how these mentors from the community can help refugee and subsequent language learning students to build their confidence, by sharing their experiences and letting them know that they were also once in that position and are now thriving in the community:

Let them come out and speak to these kids and say, “Hey, listen,” you know, “I was in the same shoes, like you are, and this is what I did.” And just... open up, speak your mind. Don’t worry about it, you know what I mean? There’s these little voices in your head that will tell you, “Don’t speak up because somebody might laugh.” But who cares if somebody laughs? Somebody just tell them, just do it. Don’t worry about it. They know you’re new. People are going to expect... Canada is full of immigrants. So everybody expects everybody to have accents anyways. And this is what I tell people. I see anyone new now, I’m like, “Listen, don’t be afraid that you’re going to say something wrong.” I look at you, I’m not expecting you to speak perfect English. I don’t expect you to speak perfect English. You don’t look like you’re British, basically, if you’re not. So like, why you want

to speak 100% perfect English? So just speak up. Don't worry about it and nobody's going to laugh; people will correct you, if anything. And you're going to benefit from that. You keep it quiet, you're never going to know what you're saying wrong or right.

So yeah... have mentors come in and can encourage more, have clubs, you can have people meet up, like say, half Canadian and half new immigrants. The Canadians that are willing to open up. Give them their experience, talk about, let's say, their normal typical daily life to a new person that's coming into Canada. So what should I expect? So here, you tell them, "Oh this is what I do when I go to school...", how I go play piano lessons. I'll be like, "Piano lessons? That sounds interesting." Maybe I'll look into that as well. "Hey, can you bring me one day?" That will blend people in I think, more. And definitely the other kids will benefit from it.

While Abasi expressed a strong desire for the availability of mentors in high school, Joseph's school actually did provide these mentors, and they were a great support to him. Joseph said that immediately after he began school, his guidance counsellor reached out to him and became a strong support. The guidance counsellor also paired Joseph up with students in the school who were either also refugee students or were immigrant students, and these peer mentors showed him how things are done in Canada, both in school and in the community. He also said that these students helped encourage him to get involved in extracurricular activities, such as a Pro-Life group, that they were also involved with. This was one of the reasons that Abasi said he wished he had peer mentors, to teach him about the benefits of different extracurriculars and to get involved in things to meet new friends.

**Personal Discipline.** Because all three participants were young and unaccompanied by parents when attending high school in Canada, they had to rely heavily on their own personal discipline and future goals to push them to attend, complete, and do well in school. For example, Abasi spoke of a lack of structure and guidance, particularly when it came to interacting with

teachers and choosing courses. I asked him, “If there was more of a lack of structure here [in Canada], did that change you as a student?” Abasi responded:

No, as a person, for me, it was my choice to either go to high school or not. At the time, even though I was younger, I did not have anybody that was pushing me to go to school. So yeah, there’s some classes I failed in the morning because I didn’t feel... I’m bad in the morning, so I feel like, “Oh I’m tired, I’m late, I’ll sleep in,” but I had to complete my high school because I wanted to myself, it’s not like anybody pushed me. But if the structure was a little bit, a little bit more strict and a little bit more, than maybe I would’ve taken less time, you know what I mean? I would’ve been more serious ‘cause again I was a 16 year old guy that came, you know, that did have a choice basically. I can go, I cannot go. But, yeah, so that’s what I did.

Similarly, Habimana, who worked part-time at the grocery store while also attending his high school classes, said that his employment had a big impact on his schooling. He said, “When I went back to school, I had to do my assignments... So by going to school and going to work, sometimes I didn’t have time to do my assignments.” While Habimana described the challenges between meeting work and school demands, he also said that he wished there was extra academic support at the school to help him, especially with essay writing. I asked if the school had offered something like an essay writing workshop outside of class hours, would he have gone or would he have gone to work? He responded that, “schooling for me back then, it was more important than work.” He went on to say:

I’m pretty sure I would have gone to essay writing. Because back then, my mind was “how can I get a degree?” “How can I go to university?” “How can I go to....college?” [J: And high school was that step?] So yeah, and the high school was that step. So I’m pretty sure I could have, you know, find time for it if it was that important... Because for me, it was important. I used to find time to go to that friend of my foster parent... She could explain to me, ok yeah, this is how they write an essay. Because at the beginning, the time they told us to write an essay, I didn’t know where to start from... writing an essay in English.

This friend that Habimana was referring to was the professor that was friends with his foster parents. She was a great support to him throughout his high school academics, particularly when it came to writing.

As far as academics go, Abasi also believed that doing well in school came down to the student and their personal discipline. However, when I asked him whether he felt comfortable asking for additional help from teachers, his response placed the responsibility on both the student and the teacher. He said,

In that case, it... yeah. I think that's all down to the student. The teachers will always be willing to like open up and give you that extra help, but that's uh, that's down to the student, I think. Maybe the teachers can persuade them a little bit more, maybe like once in a while just have conversations with the students after, especially if you feel like they're shy. That they're reserved. And especially if they're new and their English is not that great. Because it could be... you're just shy to speak up. Like I said, you know what I mean, you know things, you want to engage, but at the same time you're kind of like, "oh man, I'm not sure," so if you can get teachers to just kind of like just that little bit of spark or confidence, it could be a whole lot different in a way, right.

In this response, Abasi began by saying that he believed that asking for help, or success in school, depends on the student themselves. Yet, he went on to indicate that part of the responsibility also lies with the teacher, especially with students who are generally shy and reserved in class. Because Abasi and Habimana did not have family members to assist them with their schoolwork outside of school, they had to rely mainly on themselves to either learn the material or find people in the community, such as that professor, who could help them.

**Extracurricular Activities.** One participant, Abasi, spent a significant amount of time speaking about the impact and influence of sports, particularly soccer, in his adjustment to life in Canada. He said that it was especially helpful in meeting new people in his school, both

Canadian and non-Canadian born. He said that he focused on playing soccer because it was something that he knew and loved, but that he wishes he had had the opportunity to participate in other extracurricular activities, such as music or drama. He claimed that the reason for not becoming involved in these activities was that they were new and not “sold to him enough,” meaning that his school did not promote these extracurriculars enough and did not describe the benefits of such activities. Abasi said,

Later on, I’m thinking, why didn’t I do music or why didn’t I try music? But it wasn’t sold enough to us. Especially for the new kids. It’s there for the Canadians, they know, but for us, it’s completely new. Yeah, I don’t know what drama was. I don’t know.. I would have loved to have tried drama. It wasn’t sold to me, yeah. I could have been very interested in those things, but it wasn’t really told, like, “You should try this, it’s gonna be good.” Like, you know, just try it, or whatever it is, like I think they need to like sell those important things, especially the music side or the drama.... um, what else? I could have played volleyball, whatever it is, but like I said, it wasn’t really sold to me as much, you know? I would have loved to try everything, but I was just into soccer because that’s where I could meet the most people that are mostly new to the country... volleyball was more Canadians. Music, it’s like all Canadians. And drama, the same thing. Like in the speaking. But if I was encouraged to do it, I would have loved to do it. I used to do debating back home, and I loved it, but here I was like, okay, but I’m not comfortable speaking yet, right? So yeah, that was something.... that’s something they should really try to get those people involved in.

This was an interesting reflection because while Abasi did not understand the benefits of extracurricular activities like drama or music a few years ago, he now wishes that he had had the opportunity to participate in such activities. To have participated, Abasi pointed out that he, as well as many other new students, needed that extra push from teachers, mentors, or fellow students to get involved in new things. When I asked what would have encouraged him to participate, he answered:

Get them to just get a taste of it. So like, make a video presentation of all the classes or something, you know what I mean? Like, this is what you’re going to benefit from. Do you like this stuff? Maybe you should try this, you know what I mean? Not just like in the paper. Like you tell me drama, but I’m thinking, “okay, what’s drama?” Like I don’t know. But I’m not looking at something because it’s going to interest me more. But down the



road it's a good thing to have and it would have been nice for me to like do the acting or whatever. It would have been something fun as well, right?

And the music as well, like for us, where we come from, like where I come from, music.... is very rare. We don't have the equipments, we didn't have the time... we just, music doesn't exist, well, where I come from, right? So the only thing that I could afford to do at the time was to play soccer. It's very easy. We make our own balls, we can play in bare feet, you know what I'm saying? So it's like... no I don't know what this is. But if I heard like, ok, you know, you can learn how to do... like, you can play guitar. Just come out to our class and we'll teach you. And like in three months, you'll know how to play guitar. I would have been like, "Whoa, okay. Maybe I should try that," you know what I mean? But uh, it wasn't sold enough. That's all I can say. They should have sold it more to the new students. Maybe have like a new student meet-up or something every week or every month. Let them talk to each other. Get leaders from different backgrounds, like in the school, people who could come in and speak to these new kids, you know? And say, "Listen, don't be afraid to try things out."

This was a particularly strong example that demonstrated how refugee students may not understand the benefits of many of the extracurricular activities that are offered to them. For students who have never had access to musical equipment or computers, it may be difficult for them to have a desire to participate in these new activities, especially when they are outside of school hours. For example, when talking about extracurriculars that he was a part of, I asked Joseph if he participated in new activities like drama or music. He replied, "I was never in drama or music. I can't seem to play an instrument so... [*laughing*] I didn't even try." However, Joseph did become involved in activities that his peer mentors were also involved in, such as the Pro-Life group and basketball intramurals. This demonstrates that peer mentors are not only helpful in helping students adapt to new academic cultures and expectations, but also in understanding the importance of being involved in the community and in extracurriculars, as well as in meeting new friends.

As Habimana pointed out previously, refugee students who do not speak English as a first language have to work extremely hard to complete their readings and assignments on time. This

leaves less time for participating in extracurricular activities, especially when students may not view them as necessary or beneficial. Here, Abasi pointed out that again, mentors who have been in similar position would have been helpful in promoting such activities to new students. These mentors would have been particularly helpful because Abasi pointed out that many of his friends at school were also new Canadians who also did not understand the reasons for participating in drama or music clubs outside of school hours. He claimed that he tended to be “a little but more closed-minded at the time” and that because “nobody really gave me a different insight,” he tended to avoid new experiences, which he now regrets.

**Theme Five: Discrimination**

The discrimination described by Habimana, Abasi, and Joseph in their interviews was based on cultural, racial, or language background, and was often based on misunderstandings. Interestingly, the participants described similar experiences of discrimination despite their different locations in Ontario. Abasi lived in a large metropolitan city where there were many immigrants and students of color, while Habimana and Joseph lived in smaller, more rural communities that were approximately 60 minutes from the same metropolitan city. It should also be pointed out that two of the participants were Black African while the other participant is Arab African, as this may have had some effect on their experiences with peers and teachers. When describing incidents of discrimination, participants referred only to examples in the school, not in the local community. It should be noted that Joseph did not refer to any explicit experiences with discrimination, and overall had very positive things to say about his interactions with members of the school. However, he did talk about some difficulties fitting in when he first arrived, which will be discussed further.

**Difficulty Relating to Peers.** As was pointed out earlier, when Habimana arrived in Canada and was placed in grade 11, he was 20 years old. He thought that this age difference between himself and his peers had a negative impact on his ability to relate to his peers, who were often 16-17 years old. He said, “My classmates were much younger than me. So it wasn’t easy for me to have you know, friends who can hang out and can speak the same language.” By referring to ‘the same language,’ Habimana was not only talking about how his first language was not English, but was also referring to the fact that he did not share the same interests and

same colloquial language as his peers; this made it difficult for him to relate. Regardless of this difficulty, Habimana persisted in trying to communicate with and make new Canadian friends.

Along the same lines, Joseph talked about how he found it difficult to relate to peers when he first arrived because of their differences. He said,

When you first get here, because you don't understand certain things, it's kind of hard to fit in, so I would say maybe my first week, I was nervous and paranoid. I'm like "How can I possibly relate to these kids?" because their whole life, this is what they know, but me, this is new to me, so... but as time went on, I was getting along with kids. I was really, I was making Canadian friends... I would say a couple of weeks after I started...

Because we didn't watch the same TV shows, we didn't eat the same food, we didn't ... dress the same, so those things really... but then after some time, as time went on, the things start to change. So I would say social wise, that's what might have been difficult for me. But that was only also for a few weeks, because later on I just start feeling, you know, free and I'm gonna be here, why not you know, try and do what other people are doing and see how it's like and that's pretty much...

Different from Abasi and Joseph who went to schools with many new Canadians, refugee and non-refugee, of various racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, Habimana attended a school where he was not only the only African student, but the only black student. This meant that many of his classmates were very interested in him, but this was something that he saw as positive, not detrimental. He recounted that "in my school, there was just so many kids who would show up anywhere I am standing and kids have much interest in me." He also said that his classmates would often invite him to their parties on the weekends, but he never attended. He saw this interest in him as a positive thing because he was able to become more comfortable around his peers and he never experienced any negative attitudes from these classmates. Joseph also had similar experiences that he also described as positive, as it helped him meet new students and make new friends. He said that despite some "ignorant questions here and there,"

they seem to be open, wanting to know more about me and where I come from. Basically wanting to know, you know, how it's like where I come from, so it wasn't really that hard

for me [to meet new people] because most kids were really interested in knowing basically what it's like where I come from.

While Habimana had positive experiences within his own classroom, he described his experiences on the school bus much more negatively. Most students relied on the school bus to attend this particular school, and there were many students who had never met Habimana in the classroom. This seemed to make students nervous around him. He remembered that while these students on the bus never said anything mean or negative to him, they did go out of their way to avoid him.

[They] Just avoid me and they could tell that... ok, it makes sense because I was 20 years old. Those kids were, if they were high school, kids of 17, 18, usually 15, 16... so to see a 20 years old sitting in the bus was kind of strange. And plus he was a black boy who doesn't speak much English... So that's the negative thing maybe I could say for the high school.

Habimana tried to explain the avoidance instead of indicating that these students on the bus were unfriendly. On the other hand, when I asked Abasi if students in his school were friendly to him, he said:

If people were friendly to me, then I would have been friends. But people weren't. Like, the Canadians, people that could speak English, that were here for a while, they have their own kind of crew, in a way, and so like, there was no approaching or trying to help. They were just doing their own thing, so basically, you find people that you have common things with, and then you start doing things with them.

This was an interesting quote that demonstrated the fact that if students have difficulty relating to their new peers, they tend to gravitate towards those most like themselves. In Abasi's case, those most like him at his school were also refugee students, students new to Canada, and/or subsequent language learner students. Also similarly, Joseph said that he "made friends with people who were from different backgrounds. Actually my group, we used to call it the United

Nations, because [laughing] I had kids from Poland, from Eritrea, from Haiti, from, me from Rwanda, so we had almost five different countries in my group of kids that I hung out with.”

Interestingly, Abasi briefly commented on the fact that some teachers also tended to gravitate towards students who were most like them. It was mentioned earlier that Abasi found it easier to connect with teachers who were immigrants themselves, many of whom he said still had accents. At the same time, he said that Canadian teachers “would kind of ignore... like if there was another Canadian, they’d hang out with the Canadian students.”

**Becoming More Comfortable.** Habimana and Abasi, while recounting instances of being avoided or ignored, also mentioned that some of that may have been because of them, in that they did not make as much of an effort as they could have because they were uncomfortable with their new peers. Again, Abasi talked of becoming more comfortable by playing soccer and meeting new friends, both Canadian and non-Canadian. Eventually, soccer put him in more of a leadership role when he decided to organize intramurals. He said,

I started opening up more and then that changed me a little bit, you know, in a way to be more comfortable. And uh, from then on, then I started getting, you know, that’s when I started meeting new Canadians and stuff, you know, once I started playing soccer with them, I started becoming more comfortable talking to them because you can say something to them after that, right?

Joseph was also an avid soccer player who described how participating in sports allowed him to make new friends and better adapt to the culture here.

Habimana also suggested that perhaps there was a lack of comfort on the teacher’s part, meaning that teachers may have been afraid of speaking to him about certain things. For example, when referring again to the math class in which the teacher required that students use

the computer to complete their assignment, Habimana said that the teacher should have asked him why he completed the assignment on paper instead of on the computer. He went on to say, “And plus, it’s a sensitive case. Because the other kids... sitting there in the classroom... if she could’ve come to me asking me a bunch of questions, some people they could see it as a racist or something... but to her, it’s probably because she didn’t want to get involved in that sensitive cases.”

### **Chapter Five: Discussion**

In this final chapter, I review the five main themes that emerged from the interviews. In discussing each theme, I make connections between themes in the interviews and with the literature that was reviewed as part of the second chapter. Also in this chapter, I return to the research questions, discuss limitations and next steps for further research, and provide a conclusion.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study was an exploration of the challenges that young adult African refugee students face in Ontario high schools and improvements that could be made in an effort to ease their transition and promote academic success. The study was directed by two research questions:

1. What are some of the common challenges faced by African young adult refugee students in regard to their academic achievement?
2. What can educators and educational administrators at the secondary school level do to help these students overcome challenges?

This research came about due to my professional experiences in working in the English as a Subsequent Language (ESL) field. Working in this field has allowed me to see firsthand the challenges that newcomers with low English proficiency face when transitioning to their new schools and lives in Canada. However, the literature tends to focus almost entirely on voluntary immigrants when it comes to challenges that newcomers face. Given that involuntary immigrants, such as refugees, face a number of unique challenges, I wanted to see how their



experiences differ. In particular, I wanted to examine the challenges that these students face in their pursuit of completing their secondary education. I also wanted to examine students' suggestions for improvements that they would like to see at the secondary school level, particularly in helping them adjust and succeed in their new schooling environment.

The research used qualitative and narrative inquiry methods. Three participants were purposefully selected by meeting the following criteria: 1) they had arrived from an African country holding refugee status; 2) they were placed in a high school classroom upon arrival in Canada; 3) they had not been out of high school for more than 3 years; and 4) they were proficient enough in English to participate in the interview process.

Five major themes emerged from the research: subsequent language learning; different academic cultures and expectations; culturally responsive education; support; and discrimination. All of these themes had links and overlaps because they all tend to influence one another.

### **Subsequent Language Learning**

Cummins (2011) names a lack of English proficiency as the most influential disadvantage among learners. This was perhaps the most significant theme to emerge from the interviews with two participants, and interestingly, Joseph was a very highly proficient English speaker and also reported the most positive experiences in high school. One has to question whether this is related, at least in part, to his language proficiency.

Although Abasi and Habimana arrived in Canada with quite different academic and English backgrounds, they both spoke of English proficiency as being one of the largest obstacles facing them in their new lives in Canada. While Cassity and Gow (2005) point out that the most significant reason for this struggle among refugees is because they are often pre-literate

in their first language, these participants showed us that refugees arriving proficient in their first language and even having low proficiency in English still face multiple challenges. Both Abasi and Habimana did well in secondary school in their home countries and had some background in English language learning before arriving in Canada; they both identified themselves as “intermediate” upon arrival in Ontario. However, they still identified English proficiency and confidence in speaking as their most influential disadvantage. For example, when I asked Abasi to name his second biggest challenge in high school, besides the English language challenges, he said, “The next most challenging thing... [long pause]. I don’t think I can think of anything, really. Honestly, I think I would be lying. I don’t think there was anything challenging besides the language. I think it’s all down to the language.” Although refugees who are preliterate in their first language and/or English undoubtedly face immense challenges, we cannot ignore that these challenges also exist for many refugee students who are literate. At the same time, in keeping with Cummins’ (2011) statement that English proficiency acts as the most influential barrier, Joseph actually works to support this idea. The fact that he was an advanced level English student may have largely contributed to his positive adaption to school and life in Canada, as well as his overall positive experiences in high school.

Abasi spoke about a need for mentors from the community who have been in similar positions. He strongly believed that hearing about the experiences of others would have helped him gain confidence in his English use. Abasi said he needed that push and for someone to say, “Listen, don’t be afraid that you’re going to say something wrong... so just speak up. Don’t worry about it and nobody’s going to laugh. People will correct you, if anything. And you’re going to benefit from that.”

Part of the challenge facing Abasi and Habimana was related to the academic expectations placed upon them by teachers. Students' confidence levels in speaking up, asking questions, and requesting help may have exacerbated these challenges. Magro (2009) states, "for meaningful and effective learning to take place, an atmosphere of sincere caring for the student and of respect and acceptance of his/her background must be present" (p. 22). This is also a descriptor of CRE, and it was something that appeared to be missing from the high school backgrounds of both participants. For example, both Abasi and Habimana claimed that there was no specific programming for refugee students or for subsequent language learning students. This meant that they were expected to simply "catch up" to the level of their peers, even though they were faced with the added challenge of improving their English language skills while continuing to complete and succeed in their academic courses.

In addition, Habimana referred to academic cultural practices that were quite upsetting for him during his high school years, such as being singled out by the teacher to speak. Because some of his classes had participation marks, the teacher would simply call on students to give answers, causing a lot of stress to Habimana. He spoke of wondering why the teacher did not call on the students in the back, who were not focused on the task or discussion at hand. He felt that the teacher was trying to make him "miserable." These types of experiences demonstrated that Habimana's teacher did not show "an atmosphere of sincere caring for the student" (Magro, 2009, p. 22). Instead of recognizing Habimana's background, or lower English proficiency, the teacher treated him like any other native-speaking student. While Habimana now sees this as a positive, at the time he was distraught. Perhaps fostering a sense of acceptance and respect in the classroom as a whole would have made Habimana more comfortable speaking. For example, he talked of his classmates listening very carefully to his answers and joking around with him if he

made a mistake while speaking. Without these added pressures, Habimana might not have been so uncomfortable being called on in the classroom. In addition, the teacher could have spoken with Habimana outside of classroom hours to ensure that he understood the classroom practice and the benefits of such practice. Instead of recognizing possible academic culture differences, the teacher assumed this was common practice and neglected to acknowledge that singling out students to speak may not be understood by all students, especially students of different cultural and educational backgrounds.

Finally, research indicates that student success in subsequent language acquisition depends largely on a socially just curriculum that teaches authentic, practical language that is applicable in students' everyday lives (Kubota, 1998; Magro, 2009). In many ways, the language taught in school is academic in nature, not conversational, which many refugee and subsequent language learning students also require. For example, Habimana discussed the differences between the language that he learned and was able to practice at school versus at work in his part-time job. Specifically, he said that "at school they teach you theory. Things which you... some of them you may never see them in your life after you leave the school. But at work, it's everyday life." When further discussing this topic, Habimana talked about how interacting with customers at his place of employment allowed him to learn the everyday vocabulary and colloquialisms that English speakers often use. While he did not say that this was more helpful than what he learned at school, he did imply that it was of equal importance. If schools do not provide specific programming for students, they need to strongly consider ways in which to teach more conversational English, even if it means adding more collaborative group activities to their lesson plans. Such changes will also keep with Ladson-Billings' (1994) description and outline of culturally relevant education and pedagogy.

### **Differing Academic Cultures and Expectations**

Another major theme that emerged in the interviews and correlates strongly with the literature in the field was that of differing academic cultures and expectations. Abasi, Joseph, and Habimana arrived in Canada to educational experiences that differed greatly from what they encountered in their home countries of Rwanda and Tanzania. Interestingly, while Windle and Miller (2007) claim that many refugee students are unfamiliar with the regimentation and routines of schools, all three of the participants felt the opposite. Instead of feeling surprised at the regimentation and routines that Windle and Miller (2007) describe, participants actually referred to being surprised at how easy school was in Canada. When describing school as ‘easy,’ they were not necessarily referring to the fact that the content and expectations were easier, but that school was more lax than what they were accustomed to. These descriptions more closely aligned with authors in the literature that state that refugees in some studies describe their new schools in the west as lax compared to the more authoritarian systems they were used to (McBrien, 2005; Opoku-Dapaah, 1992). For instance, all three participants talked of being physically disciplined by teachers in their home countries, even being physically disciplined when they did not receive the expected grades. In addition, Abasi spoke at length about his surprise at the disrespect shown to teachers in Canadian high schools. He said, “you can yell at and tell the teacher whatever and then walk away and nothing happens.” This was a dramatic change from the authoritarian system in which students rarely approached teachers to speak to them, even to ask for help, as the participants described.

Differing expectations of student independence and responsibility also caused the students to feel some stress. Relating to this idea that things are easier here in school in Canada, this concepts presents the researcher with an interesting dichotomy in that while academics in the

participants' homeland may be more rigorous academically, the Ontario education system provides them with the challenges of having a choice in their educational endeavors. For example, when Abasi realized that he could choose his own classes, it at first seemed to provide a sense of freedom and choice that he enjoyed. However, a lack of guidance and support in making sure that he met graduation requirements meant that Abasi had to take additional courses to finish high school. Interestingly, Joseph spoke of being able to choose his classes as a positive experience that made him feel free. However, Joseph also had a level of support from the school, and particularly from guidance counsellors, that Abasi did not. While this difference in opinion cannot be solely attributed to the support available, it does seem that the level of support, from guidance counsellors especially, played a significant role in these participants' experiences. Proactive leadership on the part of school guidance counsellors and administration and/or access to mentors can provide the much-needed support in such cases.

Similar to the lack of structure and discipline in schools, these participants also had to learn how to 'do' or how to act in school, in addition to learning academic content (Comber & Hill, 2000; Woods, 2009). In particular, Habimana spoke of his difficulty approaching teachers and asking for help or extensions when it came to class work and assignments. In Rwanda, Habimana said that "there's no special treatment. It's due today, it's due today. If you didn't submit it exactly the same time, the same, immediately they said it, you have a zero." Because of these experiences in Rwanda, Habimana did not know that teachers in Canada may be more willing to give him extra help or perhaps extend a deadline in some cases. This meant that he sometimes received a grade of zero on assignments that he could not complete; for example, the teacher that required students to use a computer software program to complete their assignment did not understand that Habimana had never used a computer before. Also in Joseph's case, he

referred to rarely having access to science labs, science apparatus, or computers to assist in the learning process. This means that he was not only unfamiliar with such materials, but also the requirement that these materials be used in completing and/or submitting assignments. Teachers need to be aware of the differing student-teacher relationships that students in their classrooms may be accustomed to. If students are coming from backgrounds where they generally “fear” their teachers, as put by Joseph, it may be very difficult for these students to approach their teachers for assistance. Teachers need to be aware of the backgrounds of their students in order to best help them in such situations. If they are aware of knowledge and/or skills gaps, they may need to reshape curriculum delivery in order to be more culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This active inquiry on the part of teachers or school administration would also show a level of cultural sensitivity that is necessary for culturally responsive education.

Refugee students also need to learn what behaviours and responses are beneficial, appropriate, and rewarded in their new academic cultures. During the interviews in this study, both participants referred in particular to learning what behaviours were beneficial to them. For example, Habimana now recognizes in hindsight that he should have been more communicative with his teachers, specifically regarding his background and previous experiences. Abasi also talked extensively about not understanding the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities, not only for social and personal benefits, but also communication benefits. This is where additional support, perhaps in the form of mentors, may have been useful and appreciated.

### **Culturally Responsive Education**

Because cultural and learning are inextricably linked, it is crucial that all students can see themselves and their experiences in their education and learning processes (Agbo, 2001; Agbo,

2004; Early & Marshall, 2008; Mickan et al., 2007). Neither Abasi nor Habimana went to schools that had specific programming for refugee students or second language learning students. While Joseph's school did provide additional academic support, this support was not directed solely towards refugee students. However, Joseph's school did provide peer mentors to refugee students and to students new to Canada.

Teachers take for granted what is common knowledge. For example, the vast majority of students in high school in Canada nowadays have always had access to science labs, computers and internet, whether at school, home, or both. Such a topic can be taken for granted by teachers who may be unaware of students' educational and cultural backgrounds. This can cause undue stress and confusion in some students, particularly African refugee students. Teachers need to ensure not only that students understand requirements, but are familiar with and able to utilize certain skills and knowledge. For example, if Habimana's math teacher was aware of the fact that he had never used a computer, she could have perhaps provided extra support or even reshaped the delivery of that math unit. This would not only acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds, but also respect them, and help students in the academic identity development in Canada.

Agbo (2004) talks about the importance of teachers ensuring that students are as actively involved as possible in their learning experiences. When referring back to different academic cultures and expectations, it is clear that especially when students do not understand or are not comfortable with new academic cultures, they may not be actively involved in their education. Abasi and Habimana both describe being passive students because they were uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the ways in which their new schools and classrooms were run. Because of this, they both described being nervous to speak out in class or to participate in extracurricular



activities. Habimana also talked specifically about being uncomfortable and singled out when ‘forced’ to speak in class. Joseph felt much more positively about the different ways of doing things in the classroom and the school in Canada compared to in Rwanda. Because he was supported and felt welcomed and accepted, he was even encouraged to become a motivational speaker and share his experiences with schoolmates and community members. While Joseph’s level of English proficiency on arrival was more advanced than Habimana’s and Abasi’s, a large part of his comfortability in speaking and sharing his life experiences had to do with the fact that he felt fully supported by his school – teachers, principals, and peers.

Dooley (2009) suggests giving students, particularly subsequent language learning students, opportunities to discuss their ideas to develop vocabulary and grammar before they have to write. While Joseph’s school provided a homework club with teachers and tutors to assist with these steps, both Abasi and Habimana said that their high schools did not provide additional academic support inside or outside of the classroom; this meant that they had to seek out that help on their own or go without. Habimana had the support of his foster family and their extended support network. Because Habimana was not receiving the additional academic support that he needed at school, he and his foster family enlisted the help of a family friend, who happened to be a university professor. Habimana talked about how he struggled greatly with essay writing specifically. He mentioned that while his classmates could “in forty minutes [have] a full page of essay,” he had no idea where to even begin, because essay writing was something that he had not learned in depth in Rwanda. Again, because his teachers took this knowledge for granted in Canada, Habimana received extra support from this family friend who taught him everything, from brainstorming to essay structure to grammar and punctuation. Part of a culturally relevant education includes relationships, interaction, and classroom atmospheres that

are caring (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). In order to feel cared about in the classroom, additional support in the writing process from teachers and/or the school would have benefitted Habimana. It would have respected his educational and cultural backgrounds, been more developmentally appropriate, and fostered a sense of empowerment in his academic writing skills. Instead, with these factors missing, Habimana was forced to look outside of the school for help and feel that his background experiences were not recognized, understood, or valued.

### **Support**

Support was an interesting theme that emerged throughout each interview. With refugee students, the school is thought to be an extremely important support system. The importance, and often reliance, on this school system means that there needs to be a school-wide effort in supporting these students and helping them achieve their goals (Opoku-Dapaah, 1992; Tangen, 2009; Virtue, 2009). This school-wide effort was apparent at Joseph's school, and he benefitted greatly from such a support system, which was extremely important to him. It was apparent that Joseph's school provided an orchestrated, school-wide effort to help him because he gave examples of various levels of the school providing support. For example, when Joseph and his brother first arrived in Canada, their sole income came from welfare. This meant that he could not afford his school uniforms or class trips, for example, but these things were paid for by the school, indicated a school-wide effort even at the administration level. The school was also aware of his refugee background, and all teachers, guidance counsellors, principals, and vice-principals regularly went out of their way to ensure that he was fitting in and supported. Joseph's guidance counsellor also involved fellow students and former refugee students in helping Joseph adapt to school life and life in Canada. This very closely aligned with Whiteman's (2005)

suggestion that veteran students be partnered up with new students in order to help them in their adjustment to the new academic culture and expectations. In fact, this guidance counsellor was such a support that Joseph says they are still in contact. Finally, the school provided the opportunity for Joseph to educate not only his schoolmates, but also his community members and members of other schools, about his life experiences. By encouraging Joseph to educate others, the school was also attempting to educate the community and other schools in the area about the experiences and lives of refugee students. This was an excellent example of a school-wide effort that even expanded into the community.

Despite Joseph's positive experiences and descriptions of a school-wide effort at his particular school, most of the time the literature indicates that the onus is placed on one teacher or one principal (Opoku-Dapaah, 1992; Virtue, 2009). This was also seen in the interviews with Abasi and Habimana. First of all, Habimana claimed that he was originally placed in grade 11 upon his arrival to Canada mainly due to his English proficiency level, but also because of his inability to use a computer. When I asked if the school knew his background, and specifically the fact that he had never used a computer before coming to Canada, he said that, "Yeah, because that's the reason they put me in grade 11, and they know I couldn't." However, while the principal was aware of his background since he was responsible for the testing, he did not inform Habimana's individual teachers of this situation. His teacher was unaware of this and required students to use the software. When you add this lack of communication to the differing academic cultures and expectations factor, it becomes clear that Habimana required, and would have benefited strongly from, a school-wide effort in promoting his academic transition and ultimately, his academic success.

Instead of a school-wide effort at his school, Abasi also spoke of the onus being placed on one teacher. He specifically described how as a student from a refugee background, he connected much more strongly with teachers at his school who were immigrants and/or who spoke English as a subsequent language. To illustrate, Abasi spoke of one male teacher, an immigrant himself, who went out of his way to connect with him. Abasi said that many Canadian teachers would “hang out with the Canadian students,” but this particular teacher acted as a strong support system for Abasi, especially with regards to improving his confidence level when speaking English. The lack of support from other teachers was demonstrated when Abasi said that because this one teacher was so influential and helpful to him, he took classes with this teacher simply to be in his class, even though “some classes I really didn’t care for.” Instead of choosing classes of interest, Abasi chose classes when he could with the only strong support system that he knew within the school. In fact, choosing courses was another specific area that Abasi indicated he needed more support because he was not used to these expectations being placed on students.

Abasi also spoke thoroughly about the need for mentors in the school, especially when it comes to students with a refugee background and subsequent language learning background. This is also something that is echoed and strongly supported in the literature. It is also something that is echoed by Ladson-Billings (1994) criteria of CRE that includes culturally and linguistically diverse students. Again, Whiteman (2005) describes the importance of mentorship programs in which veteran students are paired with new students to help them adjust to the new school culture and expectations, as well as build their confidence in their English language skills. Interestingly, this was something that was repeated very closely by Abasi, without any prompting on my part. In fact, a discussion of a need for mentors was something woven

throughout the entire interview. Abasi mentioned that both Canadian and former refugee students would be important mentors, which was something that I found intriguing. He talked about how Canadian student mentors would help with refugee students' adjustment to Canada, while former refugee students could offer a more personal and understanding mentoring relationship given that they have been through a similar situation. Especially when it comes to improving their English proficiency and having the confidence to speak and to get involved in the school, Abasi thinks that former refugee student mentors would be extremely valuable.

Joseph had access to these peer mentors who had experienced similar backgrounds and had already adapted to life in Canadian schools and society. He talked of how these mentors helped him fit into his school, encouraged him to become involved in some extracurricular clubs and activities, and also provided his first friends in Canada. Notably, while Abasi talked about how it may be helpful to have former refugee student mentors who are now immersed in the community, Joseph thought that peer mentors were better than community mentors. He said,

I think it's better a student because you can relate to them. If they bring you someone older from the community, you won't feel comfortable talking to them about certain things, so someone your age, maybe your gender as well... That would be perfect because you kind of are in the same, you have the same mindset except maybe you might have different backgrounds, but you pretty much are on the same level of, you know, knowledge and all other things... because you can relate to them.

While Abasi's and Joseph's opinions may differ on exactly *who* to have as mentors, the overarching theme was that mentors are extremely important components of refugee student adaptation to school life and life in Canada. Not only do they provide the students with friends, but also valuable contacts and connections within the school and the community.

A school-wide effort does not only include a concerted effort between teachers and administration, or the provision of peer mentors, but may also include academic help (Davies,

2008; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Naidoo, 2009) and teaching academic skills such as handwriting (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). As previously mentioned, Joseph's school was the only one of the three participants that did provide additional academic help outside of classroom hours. As for teaching skills, Habimana in particular would have benefitted from additional support in teaching academic writing skills and general computer and typing skills. In addition, Joseph mentioned that cultural orientation classes, perhaps as soon as he arrived, would have been very useful in helping him adjust to life in Canada. While these classes would not be academic in nature, they would be part of a school-wide effort that looks to support refugee students in all aspects of their new lives, in an overall attempt to increase their chances of success at school.

### **Discrimination**

Kanu (2008) writes that different forms of discrimination may be related to high school dropout rates and social alienation amongst African refugee students. Fortunately, in this study, all of the participants were able to complete their programs and receive their Ontario secondary school diplomas. When it came to discussions of potential discrimination, Joseph said that he was not socially alienated, but said that he actually benefitted from students wanting to talk to him because he was 'different.' He described students as friendly and open. As well, Joseph never described incidences of discrimination from peers, teachers, or school administration; perhaps this was a result of the school-wide effort put forth to welcome and support him. Abasi and Habimana both described different instances of discrimination from peers and teachers based on their race, cultural background, and/or language background.

In terms of their language ability, Abasi and Habimana each had negative experiences with their peers. For example, Habimana described having his classmates listening very carefully when he spoke out in class, as if waiting for him to make a mistake. If a mistake was made, Habimana said, “Well that would be a big issue then because when we are hanging out outside... you hear the kids bringing up the words which I was using in the class...” While he admitted that he thought that these classmates were trying to be funny and to connect with him, especially in hindsight, at the time, he found these experiences uncomfortable and wondered whether they were being done maliciously. These experiences correlate closely with descriptions in the literature of refugee students often being laughed at or mocked because of their accents or inaccuracies in their pronunciation (Davies, 2008; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Abasi described similar circumstances in which he connected more closely with other refugee, immigrant, and/or subsequent language learning students because the Canadian students were not as warm and welcoming to him. When I asked Abasi if Canadian students were friendly to him, he said, “If people were friendly to me, then I would have been friends. But people weren’t.” Again, perhaps because of language proficiency, Joseph did not experience such things. He did, however, talk about difficulty in relating to and connecting to peers in the beginning, but attributed these challenges mainly to cultural differences (i.e. different TV shows, different foods, different interest), not to students not wanting to be friendly with him or get to know him.

Refugee students in the literature have also talked about more malicious cases of discrimination, especially in collaborative settings (Kanu, 2008; Onsando & Billett, 2009; Uptin et al., 2013). Notably, it is these more malicious instances that seem to be associated with refugee students feeling socially isolated and rejected (McBrien, 2005). While Abasi did not

refer to any malicious occurrences, Habimana did have such experiences. Interestingly, Habimana talked about being quite welcomed in the classroom by the peers that were familiar with him. In this way, he did not experience any bad-natured cases in the classroom, such as students refusing to work with him, as is described in the literature (Kanu, 2008). Instead, he felt socially isolated and rejected by the students that took the school bus with him, students that were unfamiliar with him because the school bus was the only time that they saw one another. Habimana even tried to justify the students avoiding him on the bus, saying that “to see a 20 or 21 years old sitting in the bus was kind of strange... And plus, he was a black boy, who doesn’t speak much English... so to them, it was a completely strange-ish thing to see.” While the students on the bus were not saying nasty things to Habimana, they made it clear that they were uncomfortable around him by avoiding him, sitting far away from him, and giving him strange looks on the bus. This resulted in Habimana feeling rejected and eventually just accepting the fact that because he was different and older, he may have been ‘strange’ to other students.

Finally, it seemed that a lack of CRE also contributed to an overall sense of discrimination based on educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. If we briefly consider Habimana’s computer example again, such an experience acted as an instance of discrimination with particular regard to Habimana’s previous schooling experiences and cultural experiences. Again, a school-wide effort dedicated to educating staff and students on diversity and inclusion would be beneficial in decreasing rates of discrimination in many of these cases.

### **Significance of the Study**

I initially chose to undertake this research topic because of a lack of research in the field of refugee students’ experiences in their new schools. With the exception of Kanu’s (2008) study



of adolescent African refugee students in Manitoba and Anders' (2012) study of Burundian children with refugee status, very little research exists on this topic even though the numbers of refugee students entering North America have been consistently high. With such a specific group as young adult African students with refugee status, it can be difficult to locate candidates fit the necessary criteria, who understand the benefit of such research, and who are interested in and committed to participating. With that being said, further research in this field should expand upon the work that has already been done because adding to the numbers of refugee student voices being heard will allow educators and those in educational administration to examine and modify their academic curriculums and expectations in order to more fully meet the needs of such students.

It may also be more helpful in future research to connect with refugee students as soon as they arrive in Canada, perhaps through a partnership with school boards and/or particular schools. By connecting with these students upon arrival and maintaining a longitudinal relationship over months or perhaps years, researchers may be able to glean more in-depth information of experiences and challenges that may be forgotten as students progress through their high school years.

I embarked on this research study to learn and understand more about the challenges that young adult African refugee students face in Ontario high schools, as well as to suggest any improvements that could be made to the existing school systems to better support these students. While this particular cohort of students is very specified, it is an important group because students often arrive in their new schools and countries with experiences that are different from what happens in their host country, such as no, limited, or severely interrupted educational backgrounds.

There were significant individual differences between the present study's three participants; specifically, (1) their levels of English proficiency on arrival to Canada ranged from low-intermediate to advanced; (2) Abasi was Arab African, while Habimana and Joseph were black African; and (3) Habimana had spent some time outside of a formal schooling environment, while Abasi and Joseph had not. However, these individual differences did not have the impact that I thought they may have on their responses and stories. The participants in this study spoke of many of the same challenges, particularly when it came to English language proficiency, differing academic cultures and expectations, and a need for mentors. This was striking because it illustrates that often regardless of individual differences, young adult African refugee students face many of the same challenges in their Ontario high schools.

### **Limitations**

1. The sample size was affected by two factors: a) the paucity of refugees available to serve as participants, and b) the understandable reluctance of refugees to come forward and provide personal narratives. The small sample size reduces the generalizability of the results. Results may not apply to young adult African refugee students attending high school in other areas of the province.
2. It should be noted that all of the participants in this study were male. Therefore, the results may be influenced by a male gender bias. The experiences of female young adult African refugee students are not accounted for in this study.
3. The results of this study represent the experiences of successful young adult male African refugee students who completed their secondary school education in Ontario. The

educational experiences of the participants may not represent those of the wider young adult African refugee population.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in the present study indicated that some of the most serious challenges faced by African refugee students involved subsequent language learning and English proficiency, differing academic culture and expectations, and avenues of support, as are commonly outlined in the existing literature. Specifically, one aspect of the interviews that was quite meaningful was when it came to support systems. The findings indicated that some of the African refugee students migrate to Canada without any relatives. This meant that they had to rely on themselves more than most students of their ages, and they also had to maintain an increased level of personal discipline. The findings demonstrate that more specialized programming, and specifically programming that involved mentors that could help with their academics and/or their social confidence, is something that needs to be strongly considered for implementation at the secondary school level.

The experiences, challenges, and ideas shared in this study have significant implications for the Ministry of Education, school boards, teachers, and students. First of all, the Ministry of Education is responsible for important policies and guidelines for curriculum development and approved learning materials. In this way, the results and experiences of the participants may shed some light on ways in which education in Ontario high schools needs to become more culturally responsive to support the needs and experiences of African young adult refugee students. While individual principals and teachers may work to implement these practices in their classrooms, it is the Ministry of Education that will be able to ensure that culturally relevant education is seen

across all classrooms and school boards. The Ministry should make provisions for cross-cultural competence training of teachers and provide adequate resources and support systems to work with refugee students. The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) can also play a role, as they are involved in the accreditation of teachers. The OCT should consider making changes to teacher training programs that raise awareness of some of the challenges of young adult African refugee students and start dialogues related to increased inclusivity in classrooms.

Secondly, school boards, particularly those that frequently receive African refugee students, need to consider how their education programs are meeting the needs of these students. This can be done by ensuring that teachers have enough professional development in areas such as culturally responsive education, inclusiveness, and the fact that students may be coming from vastly different academic and cultural backgrounds. School boards may be able to ensure that their teachers are prepared to support African refugee high school students if they maintain direct and consistent contact with teachers and principals in schools where these students are placed. It is important that the lines of communication are open so that everyone is aware of what is working and what is challenging for these students.

When it comes to the individual school level, the findings in the present study call for the need for teachers and school staff to work together both within the school and in the community to best support young adult African refugee students. This school-wide effort should include extra academic support, culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching, professional development for teachers, and the provision of guidance counsellors and/or peer mentors. In addition, this school-wide effort should include diversity and sensitivity training not only for teachers and principals, but also for students. This type of effort would enable students to excel and overcome some of the most common challenges faced by young adult African refugee students. Without a concerted

and joint effort from the Ministry of Education, school boards, teachers, and students, African young adult refugee students may not be able to meet their full potential at the secondary school level.

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**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

1. How old are you?
2. How old were you when you arrived in Canada?
3. What grade were you placed in when you arrived in Canada?
4. Can you describe your schooling situation now? (i.e. Are you currently still in school? Graduated? Post-secondary?)
5. How much time did you spend working while you were in school? (probe re: shifts, hours)
6. Where did you arrive from?
7. Who, if anyone, travelled with you to Canada?
8. How would you rate your level of English when you first arrived in Canada?
9. Describe your schooling experiences before coming to Canada.
10. How is the education system in Ontario different from that in \_\_\_\_\_?
11. Describe your relationships with your teachers. African peers. Non-African peers.
12. What do you find easy, if anything, when it comes to making Canadian friends? What, if anything, is challenging?
13. Do you think that teachers and principals show awareness and sensitivity to the needs of refugee students? (probe re: curriculum, academic expectations)
14. Are you happy with your grades? Why or why not?
15. What do you find most challenging in school? Least challenging?
16. Does your school offer academic support outside of school hours? If so, have you ever used this? Why/Why not?
17. How would you describe your experiences at your high school? Can you suggest improvements?

**Appendix B: Recruitment Email**

Dear Potential Participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study exploring the challenges faced by young adult African students with refugee status. This study, entitled “Challenges Faced by Young Adult African Students with Refugee Status in Ontario Schools,” will be completed in partial fulfillment of my Master’s degree requirements at Lakehead University and will be supervised by Dr. Seth Agbo, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Your participation, knowledge, and experience are important elements in this research process.

Should you wish to participate, your commitment would involve one interview of approximately sixty (60) minutes in length. Interviews will take place in person or by phone/Skype. During this time, we will discuss your past and current educational experiences and your perceptions of the school’s response to refugee student needs. The interview would take place during the month of November or December 2013.

My research has been approved by Lakehead University’s Research Ethics Board and adheres to strict ethical guidelines to ensure confidentiality, safety, and anonymity. If you agree to participate, you may choose to not answer any question(s) or to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. More information will be provided to you in the official letter that you will receive if you are interested in participating.

If you are interested in being a part of this study, please respond to this email.

Thank you,

Jessica Msofe

**Appendix C: Recruitment Poster**

The Faculty of Education at Lakehead University

**Participants are needed for research in the Canadian educational experiences of African students with refugee status aged 18-21**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study of

**Challenges Faced by Young Adult African Students with Refugee Status in Ontario Schools**

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in 1 sixty (60) minute interview and a debriefing. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not need to answer any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. You have rights to confidentiality and you may withdraw from the process at any time, without consequence.

For more information about this study or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

**Jessica Msofe**  
(Faculty of Education, Lakehead University)

at

**289-929-4344** (voicemail) or  
**[jmcdowal@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jmcdowal@lakeheadu.ca)**

**This study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.**



### **Appendix D: Cover Letter to Participants**

#### **Title: Challenges Faced by African Young Adult Students with Refugee Status in the Ontario Education System**

Dear Potential Participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project studying the challenges facing African young adult students with refugee status in Ontario secondary schools. The research is conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Master of Education degree. The challenges faced by young adult refugee students of African origin are profoundly different than those of other refugee and non-refugee students. With your participation, the study will explore, understand, and seek ways to enhance the educational experiences of young adult African students with refugee status.

Should you wish to participate, your commitment would involve one interview of approximately sixty (60) minutes in length. Interviews will be conducted in person or by phone/Skype at a time of mutual convenience, and they will be audio-recorded with your permission. I will also provide you with a list of questions before the interview so that you have a chance to reflect on them.

To ensure your anonymity, data collected will be kept confidential and pseudonyms (a name different from your real name) will be used in my thesis and associated writing and presentations. While there is no foreseeable risk for you to be involved in this study, the nature of the topic may cause potential psychological distress. Following the interview, I will provide a counsellor's number should you wish to share any concerns. Your participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study or decline to answer any question at any point in the process. The data will only be accessed by myself and at times, by my supervisor, Dr. Seth Agbo. Data will remain stored at Lakehead University for five years and will then be destroyed.

The findings of this project will be made available to you at your request upon the completion of the study. The completed thesis will also be available at the Education Library at Lakehead University. In addition, results from this research study may be published in scholarly publications. If the results of the study are published, your identity will continue to remain confidential by the use of pseudonyms and the deletion of any unique identifying characteristics.

Please complete and sign the attached consent form. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 289-929-4344 or [jmcdowal@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jmcdowal@lakeheadu.ca), or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Seth Agbo at 807-343-8836 or [sagbo@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:sagbo@lakeheadu.ca). This research study has been approved by Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board who can also be contacted at 807-343-8283 or [research@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:research@lakeheadu.ca) if you have any concerns about the interview or about participating in the research.

Thank you,

Jessica Msofe

### Appendix E: Consent Form

#### CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUNG ADULT AFRICAN STUDENTS WITH REFUGEE STATUS IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understood the cover letter explaining the purpose and procedures of “Challenges Faced by Young Adult African Students with Refugee Status in Ontario Schools.” My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study by Jessica Msofe, and that I understand the following ethical considerations:

- I am a volunteer and I may withdraw my participation at any time
- I will be asked questions of a personal nature that may arouse feelings of discomfort or potential psychological distress. I am under no obligation to answer questions that I am uncomfortable answering. I will be provided with a counsellor’s phone number following the interview, should I wish to discuss any concerns.
- All information gathered about me will be kept confidential.
- My identity will be protected by the use of a pseudonym (alias, nickname) in any writing and presentations
- I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and that no one besides Jessica Msofe and Dr. Seth Agbo will have access to the recordings.
- The data, including the audio-recordings, will be securely stored at Lakehead University for five years before being destroyed.
- The findings of this project will be made available to me at my request upon completion of the project. The completed thesis will be made available at the Education Library at Lakehead University.

---

Signature of the Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of the Researcher

---

Date

Would you like to receive a summary of the results?      **Yes**    **No**

If so, please provide an email address and/or mailing address that the summary of results can be sent to:

**Email:**

**Mailing Address:**

Appendix F: Tri-Council Ethics Certificate of Completion

PANEL ON  
RESEARCH ETHICS  
Navigating the ethics of human research

**TCPS 2: CORE**

## ***Certificate of Completion***

*This document certifies that*

**Jessica Msofe**

*has completed the Tri -Council PoUcy Statement:  
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans  
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

Date of Issue: 18 September, 2013