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American public schools are growing increasingly diverse and are in need of refining practices to meet the needs of all students. Annually new groups of refugees are resettled in the United States and their children enroll in public schools. Educating refugees who may have experienced an adverse past such as war, trauma, oppression, persecution, loss and interrupted education presents many challenges for school officials. To better understand those challenges, the purpose of this research was to ascertain what some of the salient educational influences are that impact refugee transition into American schools.

The literature speaks in general terms both about the refugee experience before resettlement and the educational experience after resettlement. There is minimal research that examines these experiences from the perspectives of refugees themselves. In this study a forum was created inviting a purposeful sample of refugees to be heard. Refugees' perspectives informed school officials about how to meet their educational and socio-cultural needs. As a result, participants were recognized as meaningful and valued stakeholders in the American schooling process.

An ethnographic interview-based methodology was the primary research method used to gather information. Thirteen refugees shared their stories of transition. Half of the participants were enrolled in a public high school whereas the others had already attended public schools and were either working in careers or attending universities. Participants completed a demographic survey and shared artifacts relevant to their story.

These participants' stories inform the reader about the interconnectedness of the different aspects of the refugee experience, which creates a deeper understanding of their condition. Participants recounted the specific episodes of the traumatic past they endured as well as the issues related to their school transition. They did not simply report about these events— they invited the reader to experience them through storytelling. Consequently, transitional issues were not viewed in abstract terms but as the reality of specific events that transpired in the lives of participants. Their input was explicit and more credible than a report from one who has not personally experienced these events firsthand.

While policy makers and school leaders focus heavily on academic outcomes for students, participants demonstrated that educating individuals is about far more than academic development alone. The whole person must be taken into consideration when creating educational policies and programs. Stories can speak for themselves where a deep listener is available to hear them. Advocates who have listened and understood those stories can be a voice for refugees in schools and with policy making bodies. The stories of this group of refugees demonstrate how this can be accomplished.

REFUGEE TRANSITION INTO AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS:  
AN EMERGENT STUDY OF MAJOR INFLUENCES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| LIST OF TABLES.....                                      | vii  |
| CHAPTER  |      |
| I. INTRODUCTION.....                                     | 1    |
| Rationale and Perspectives of the Researcher.....        | 4    |
| Problem Statement.....                                   | 6    |
| Purpose statement.....                                   | 6    |
| Overview of the Study.....                               | 7    |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....                               | 8    |
| Introduction.....  | 8    |
| Past Experiences of Refugees.....                        | 8    |
| Transitional Challenges Faced by Refugees.....           | 10   |
| Family Structure.....                                    | 11   |
| Psychological Issues.....                                | 11   |
| Cultural Identity.....                                   | 14   |
| Acculturation.....                                       | 14   |
| Assimilation.....  | 16   |
| Biculturalism.....                                       | 17   |
| Schooling and Refugee Issues.....                        | 19   |
| Transitional School Issues.....                          | 20   |
| Trust.....   | 20   |
| Educational gaps.....                                    | 21   |
| School culture.....                                      | 21   |
| Social background.....                                   | 22   |
| Dropout issues.....                                      | 22   |
| Parental involvement.....                                | 23   |
| School expectations.....                                 | 24   |
| Language Learning Targets.....                           | 25   |
| Academic Language.....                                   | 26   |
| Addressing the Literacy Issue.....                       | 28   |
| Literacy Needs.....                                      | 29   |
| Oral Language and Sight Word Development.....            | 30   |
| Word Attack Skills.....                                  | 31   |
| Balanced Literacy.....                                   | 31   |
| Literacy Research Models.....                            | 34   |
| Addressing Transitional Issues in Newcomer Programs..... | 34   |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Program Models.....                                    | 36 |
| Instruction.....                                       | 36 |
| Community Connections.....                             | 38 |
| Life Skills.....                                       | 39 |
| Self-Efficacy.....                                     | 39 |
| Summary and Significance to School Leaders.....        | 41 |
| III. METHODOLOGY.....                                  | 43 |
| Introduction and Research Questions.....               | 43 |
| Research Design.....                                   | 45 |
| Study Participants.....                                | 46 |
| Data Collection Techniques.....                        | 50 |
| Interviews.....  | 50 |
| Demographic Questionnaire.....                         | 51 |
| Document Analysis.....                                 | 52 |
| Data Collection, Management and Analysis.....          | 52 |
| Data Collection and Management.....                    | 52 |
| Data Analysis.....                                     | 53 |
| Academic, Professional, and Personal Perspectives..... | 54 |
| Subjectivity.....                                      | 55 |
| Reflexivity in My Research.....                        | 57 |
| Validity of Research Findings.....                     | 58 |
| Benefits and Risks of the Study.....                   | 59 |
| Limitations of the Study.....                          | 60 |
| Summary.....   | 61 |
| IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA.....                              | 62 |
| Introduction.....                                      | 62 |
| Organization of Data Analysis.....                     | 62 |
| Analysis of Data.....                                  | 64 |
| Past Trauma.....                                       | 64 |
| Previous Experience in Schools.....                    | 69 |
| Class size and materials.....                          | 70 |
| System of schooling.....                               | 71 |
| Discipline in previous schools.....                    | 72 |
| Academic rigor in previous schools.....                | 75 |
| Comparing the old to the new.....                      | 77 |
| The Transition: Experiences in American School.....    | 79 |
| The initial experience.....                            | 79 |
| Other students' behavior.....                          | 82 |
| Other students' affection.....                         | 85 |
| Difficulties Transitioning.....                        | 86 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Loss of loved ones.....                              | 88  |
| Loss of culture and devaluing of heritage.....       | 90  |
| Academic related difficulties.....                   | 95  |
| Hope (Success).....                                  | 98  |
| Reading.....   | 98  |
| Teachers.....  | 101 |
| Personal determination to succeed.....               | 106 |
| Advice.....  | 108 |
| Advice to teachers.....                              | 109 |
| Advice regarding heritage and culture.....           | 111 |
| Summary.....   | 112 |
| <br>   |     |
| V. INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS.....                   | 114 |
| <br>   |     |
| Introduction.....                                    | 114 |
| Why is this Research Important/Significant?.....     | 115 |
| What Can be Learned from this Research?.....         | 119 |
| A Rich Source of Information.....                    | 119 |
| Breadth of Culture Shock.....                        | 120 |
| Co-cultural Beings.....                              | 123 |
| Reading.....   | 124 |
| The Power of Relationships with Teachers.....        | 126 |
| Adaptability and Determination.....                  | 127 |
| Advice for School Officials.....                     | 128 |
| Implications of this Research.....                   | 129 |
| Understanding of Past.....                           | 129 |
| Special Programs.....                                | 130 |
| Reading.....   | 131 |
| Teacher Training.....                                | 132 |
| Diversity.....                                       | 133 |
| Mental Health Services.....                          | 134 |
| Future Research.....                                 | 134 |
| Conclusion.....                                      | 137 |
| <br>   |     |
| REFERENCES.....                                      | 139 |
| <br>   |     |
| APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....                 | 155 |
| <br>   |     |
| APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY.....                  | 157 |
| <br>   |     |
| APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT FORMS.....              | 159 |
| <br>   |     |
| APPENDIX D. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL..... | 164 |



## LIST OF TABLES

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| Table 1. Participant Information for Current Students..... | 48   |
| Table 2. Participant Information for Former Students.....  | 49   |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Worldwide there are approximately 9.9 million refugees, half of whom are under the age of 18 (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2007). According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (1999), a refugee is someone who

is outside his/her country of origin; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. (p. 9)

Kunz (1973) describes two groups of refugees: anticipatory refugees and acute refugees. Anticipatory refugees are those who foresee problems in the future for their homeland and are able to make preparations for fleeing. Preparations include learning the language of their new country, saving money, and setting up housing in the new country. Acute refugees are those who find themselves in immediate danger. This group has little or no time to make preparations for fleeing, are less educated, have minimal vocational skills and have experienced far more trauma. Since the 1990s most refugees have fled violence and belong to the acute category (McBrien, 2005). In this study, a purposeful sample of 13 acute refugees provided insight into their experience. It is easy to over generalize the refugee experience by forgetting that each person has a unique background. Narrowing

the number of participants was important for obtaining an in depth understanding of each individual's story.

Refugees endure a lengthy process of obtaining their refugee status. McBrien (2005) states:

People who flee their countries out of fear of persecution can apply for 'Convention refugee' status. Whenever possible, voluntary repatriation is the UNCHR's preference. However, political and civil turmoil in many countries may endure indefinitely. In these cases the UNCHR seeks to settle refugees in the country of first asylum, the country to which they fled. The last chosen solution is permanent resettlement in a third country. (p. 334)

Many will spend the rest of their lives in refugee camps, or they will wait several years before being resettled in a third country (Hones & Cha, 1999). Those who are resettled more than likely will not choose their new country (Coward & Coward, 2002). Most have little financial resources and will bring few possessions to their new home. Refugees are more likely to live in poverty than their American peers (Waggoner, 1999). The poverty rate among foreign born immigrants has tripled in the past three decades, greatly impacting the transitional experiences of these families in the United States (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). Most will possess minimal language skills of their new country which will make the transition difficult and could lead to alienation in their new culture (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1994; Nicassio, 1983; Zhou, 2001).

As refugee children are resettled in new countries, they carry emotional wounds of their past. Many are resettled having experienced high levels of trauma and have significant mental health needs. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression are common characteristics of refugee populations. Being exposed to trauma and forced

migration are significant risk factors influencing their development. Schooling and literacy development were not priorities when families were fleeing or settled in refugee camps (Crandall, Bernache, & Prager, 1998; Ellis, Lincoln, MacDonald, & Cabral, 2008; Kinzie, Sack, Angell Manson, & Rath, 1986).

US school accountability standards force refugees into classes with their American peers with the expectation that they will learn and achieve in all classes at the same rate as American students. Federal legislation, particularly the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires high school students to meet graduation standards on time (in 4 years) and all age groups to achieve on state-mandated tests at the same level as native English speaking peers (US Federal Government, 2002). Little consideration is given to the language barrier or social challenges refugees face. They have limited time to overcome considerable barriers.

The literature has much to say about the learning needs of students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) relative to their educational background (Boyson & Short, 2003; Calderón, August, Slavin, Duran, Madden, & Cheung, 2005; Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Hakuta, 1986; Helman, & Burns, 2008). ELLs represent a diverse group of students with a variety of needs. Some are immigrants, some are refugees, and others were born in the US but live in non-English speaking homes. Students from each of these categories may share similar characteristics. For example, an immigrant from an impoverished nation may have experienced similar levels of oppression and violence as a refugee. In other cases the experiences can vary greatly. When studying the experiences of ELLs one must be

cautious to avoid over generalizing their needs. The participants in this study represent a small group of ELLs with distinct needs.

As a result of over generalization of ELL needs, minimal research speaks to how past trauma of experiencing war, death of loved ones, and living in exile impact the day-to-day learning process of refugee students (Kindler, 2002). Further, there is a significant gap in the research that enables refugees to share their story. Their voices are silent in the literature and policies that inform educators about their social and academic needs in school. Abu-Rabia and Feuerverger (1996) state, “Our personal or social story has an implicit influence on all aspects of our lives, including what happens in school” (p. 367). It is not enough to only gauge the literacy levels or academic background students have experienced when designing instruction and implementing programs for newly arrived refugee students. School leaders must take into account the past and current socio-cultural factors as well. Students’ past is the broader context that school leaders must understand when designing school structures and learning conditions for refugees. As Feuerverger (1998) points out, “Peace comes not from the absence of conflict in life, but from the ability to cope with it” (p. 695). If refugee students are to have hope for a brighter tomorrow in their new home, school leaders must work to understand how those past and present experiences are impacting their ability to cope and transition into the American school setting.

#### Rationale and Perspectives of the Researcher

I am the principal of a school in North Carolina serving students from over 40 countries in third through twelfth grade who have recently arrived in the US.

Approximately two-thirds of the students are refugees. Many of these students moved to the US after facing years of war, loss of loved ones, deplorable living conditions, limited schooling, and little hope for their future. However, they are survivors. In spite of the many challenges they have faced in life, the students in our school are extremely grateful for the opportunity to learn and begin a new life.

As I have built relationships with our students, they have shared how they have never been given an opportunity to speak freely. They have been silenced and exiled often times not understanding why their oppressors hate them. Consequently, this study grew out of my desire for their stories to be heard within the education profession.

In addition to providing a forum for their voices to be heard, I know that our students likely would not do well in the traditional school setting if we do not implement new approaches to helping them succeed academically and socially. Test data from North Carolina show that English Language Learners are lagging well behind their American peers in all categories (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007). The resiliency of our students, in addition to their determination and overall gratitude for an opportunity to learn, have compelled me personally learn more about how to best serve them. They have embraced new hope in their education, and have inspired me.

Due to the nature of my line of work as the principal of a school for refugee students, it is important for me to understand and disclose my positionality from the outset of the study. In my position as principal I have been touched by the stories of our students. Getting to know them and their families has driven me to want to learn more about how to best create an environment that enables them to learn and grow as

individuals. My overall goal is not just to collaboratively create a great school. The focus must always be on the individual needs of students and finding the best means to support them. I believe the benefits of what I learned far outweigh the risk of my being too closely involved emotionally or otherwise.

#### Problem Statement

Test results and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data have shed light on an increasing population of students who are struggling in our schools. Refugees face a number of challenges when they transition into American public schools. These challenges include past trauma, language barriers, and interrupted education. The body of research focusing on how to develop literacy and language skills in refugees (and all English Language Learners) who have experienced interrupted education is growing. However, little research exists dealing with how to help refugees overcome the emotional and social challenges of their past and those they presently face while adjusting to their new lives and schools in the US. In addition, there is limited research allowing refugees themselves to voice the significant influences that impacted their transitioning into American schools. While focusing on academic needs is important, more research is needed about other significant factors influencing this transition from the perspective of refugees themselves.

#### Purpose Statement

Consequently, the purpose of this study is two-fold. First, I aim to ascertain what some of the salient education influences are that impact refugee transition into American schools. In addition, through the shared experiences of refugees, school leaders will gain

insight into what they should be doing to help these students transition into American public schools.

### Overview of the Study

To better understand the issues outlined in the purpose statement, I engaged in an ethnographic, interview-based study involving refugees. First I engaged in a review of the relevant literature regarding the refugee experience, refugee transition into American public schools, and second language acquisition. Next, I engaged in the storytelling portion of the study. Through interviews and the sharing of relevant artifacts, I invited refugees who are students in American public schools, and those who have already attended and exited the school system, to share their stories of transition. I analyzed their stories and artifacts looking for themes to emerge that would inform school leaders about the influences which impacted their transition. Once commonalities were identified, I compiled their quotes by themes. In short, I provided a forum in which refugees could be heard through their storytelling. Finally, I interpreted the information shared by participants and I communicated my insight into the stories shared. This enabled me to participate in the meaning-making process that was in fact already started by the participants themselves.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The review of professional literature that follows is intended to serve several purposes. First, it is important to provide background knowledge to the reader regarding the salient influences that impact the refugee transition into American public schools. Second, the review demonstrates how varied and complex the factors are that influence the refugee experience. Third, important terms are defined so the reader can understand them individually as well as how they relate to one another. Fourth, the review of literature sheds light on the fact that the majority of work conducted on this topic does not share the perspectives of refugees themselves nor take into account their personal experiences. Finally, this review demonstrates to school leaders the significance of studying the refugee experience and its impact on their educational success.

#### Past Experiences of Refugees

Many refugee children experience trauma in a number of ways. This trauma impacts their adjustment to school life in the US. The refugee experience disrupts their entire lives. Family separation occurs when fleeing persecution. This could occur by fleeing alone or by separation during flight. At various stages of the refugee experience, children are at risk for being raped, abducted, and forced to be child soldiers. Girls are oftentimes forced to marry men from rival tribes. Many experience death of loved ones,

including parents. This often results in children becoming the head of households when parents or other adult caretakers die. Death is experienced in many forms as well, namely murder, war, malnutrition, and even illness (Boyden, de Berry, Feeny, & Hart, 2004). The horrific experiences of refugee children are numerous. Some have been forced to stand by and watch their parents being butchered or raped. Others have experienced prolonged periods of time apart from their parents or siblings when they seemed to disappear. These periods of absence could last days, weeks or even months. Children have had to live through periods of anxiety wondering if their loved ones were dead, alive or would ever return. They may have been taken to prisons to watch their parents being tortured, or they may have been beaten themselves. The children of parents who have been killed may still be suffering from shock and tend to struggle to find safety so they can begin to mourn. The anxiety is compounded for children who have lost parents without knowing what happened to them. They tend to be full of fear and anxiety as they ponder and imagine what may have occurred. Without their parents they often have no one to rely on for emotional support or to whom they can express their feelings (Blackwell & Melzak, 2001). Refugee children have lost any semblance of emotional or social stability, and they often have been denied access to schooling (Boyden, et al., 2004; Tollefson, 1989).

While similarities exist between most immigrants and refugees, aspects of their journey to the US make them distinct. Most notably, refugees do not leave their native countries by choice (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2000). Violent circumstances such as war and persecution force many refugees from their homeland.

Many have lost their home, friends, and way of life. Their journey from harm is full of frightening turns, fear, chaos, confusion, and uncertainty about whether or not they will survive. Wandering families often find residency in a refugee camp in a neighboring country. Illness is a major issue in the refugee camps as the conditions are far from sanitary. The quality of life in camps is poor. There is not adequate shelter, food, or medical care. This often leads to chronic health issues such as tuberculosis, liver damage, kidney damage, malaria, and hepatitis (Blackwell & Melzak, 2001; Cowart & Cowart, 1993; Huyck and Fields, 1981; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Westermeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996).

In addition to physical ailments, many refugees suffer from mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is understandable due to the fact that many have experienced rape, torture, witnessed killings, and brutal murdering of family and loved ones (Hones & Cha, 1999). The children find these feelings overwhelming and turn to their parents for guidance. Oftentimes they follow the example of their parents and do their best to repress these feelings and carry on as if nothing had happened. This act of ignoring their past also causes them to ignore present feelings they experience, such as depression, sadness, inability to cope, and anger. (Blackwell & Melzak, 2001).

#### Transitional Challenges Faced by Refugees

A variety of factors make the transition to a new culture challenging for refugees. For example, the family unit becomes strained as children assume new roles. Because children are in school, they acquire basic interpersonal skills in English at quicker rates than their parents (Zhou, 2001). Consequently, they often serve as the family interpreter

at school, banks, or doctor appointments. The parents become dependent on their children, and this puts undue stress on the family structure. Children will even write checks for major family payments. Zhou and Bankston (2000) point out that role reversal within the family unit can create identity confusion and conflict between adult caretakers and children.

### *Family Structure*

In addition to the confusing role reversal at home, many refugee children are confused about trusting their parents' ability to protect and lead them. They have witnessed their parents being terrified and full of uncertainty throughout their experience. Everything changes in the new setting; parents are no longer who they once were in their home country. They have a hard time finding work, they are recipients of charity, and need assistance with even the simplest of activities. They may also be dealing with shock to the point that they are unable to assist their children in processing and dealing with the horrors they have experienced. This comes at a time when children are most in need of adults to guide them through a difficult period. The people children are the most dependent on to sort through these feelings are in just as much need as the children themselves. As a result, children become protective of parents and do not discuss these issues during transition. The problems resurface later after the initial culture shock of being in a new environment wears off (Blackwell and Melzak, 2001).

### *Psychological Issues*

Untreated psychological needs could pose long-term challenges for refugee students. Stein (1980) reports that after five years of being in the US 80% of the

participants in his study still had concerns about family members from whom they had been separated. Almost 70% still had stressful memories about war and their flight from their home-country. Almost 60% were homesick, wanted to return home and still worried about communicating with friends and family in their home country. Asher (1985), in his study of Southeast Asian refugees, found that other factors impacted their psyche. These factors included the shame of rape, war trauma, and gender roles being changed upon arrival to the US. The psychological stress of parents having to accept jobs in the US that are low skill compared to a prestigious position they may have held in their home country is also a blow to the already fragile psyche of many refugee adults and their children (Fernández-Kelly & Curran, 2001). When parents are anxious and under stress they are unable to provide the emotional support needed by their children to succeed in school.

The effects of psychological trauma manifest themselves in a number of ways. Blackwell and Melzak (2000) have outlined some of the most common responses refugee students may demonstrate in the classroom. For example, some students may explode into an angry fit at the slightest provocation. Their anger may seem to be out of proportion to whatever it is they are reacting to. This is due in large part to the fact that much violence has occurred to them in their past. If refugee students are struggling with authority, they may be dealing with the effects of being let down multiple times by adults in their past. In their minds, parents have failed to protect them and their political and governmental leaders may have persecuted or neglected them in their time of need. School leaders need to help students rebuild their trust and hope in adults, because they still need them. The minds of refugee children often wonder back to their past and their

present worries. This could result in poor work or engaging in disruptive behavior. In spite of a teacher's best efforts there will be times when nothing will be able to help students remain focused. If a child has experienced chaotic experiences, he or she may feel out of control themselves. Their testing of boundaries could be an effort to see if they exist. Boundaries reinforce security. If refugee students find their misbehavior is not met with firm limits they are likely to escalate it. Sometimes the pain of the past and the stress of the present are simply too much to bear for students. In that case they retreat to isolation and withdraw. Some students can put forth all of the right signs on the outside. They may be friendly, cooperative, and sociable. However they may not make much progress in their learning due to limited past educational experience or the emotional wounds of trauma. Children demonstrating this behavior will at times seem grown up and responsible, and at other times immature. Their horrors of the past may have occurred at a young age forcing them to grow up fast. They may have missed out on being a child so they may revert back to reclaiming their childhood while at school.

The behaviors previously mentioned are based on observations of students performed by school officials. Students were not consulted or questioned about the behaviors to determine if they perceived the same behaviors in themselves. Nor were they questioned about why those behaviors manifest themselves, what triggers them, and how students feel after demonstrating them. For example, are they uncontrollable impulses, do students feel sorry after demonstrating them, or do they even care at all? More input on these issues is needed from the students themselves.

### *Cultural Identity*

Other transitional challenges impacting family life have to do with cultural identity. Children who are confused and uncertain about their own identity may identify with other minority groups with whom they may find similarities, or they may abandon their own culture in favor of their host culture. Likewise, the majority culture could also impose identity confusion on refugee children. For example, Black Africans have cultural differences from African Americans, however White Americans often times perceive them to be in the same cultural group. In addition, a large number of refugees from Africa and the Middle East are Muslim. This poses a significant challenge since many Americans have come to fear Islam, associating it with violence and terrorism (Carter, 1999; McMurtrie, Bollag, Brender, del Castillo, Cheng, & Overland, 2001; Wingfield & Karaman, 2001).

### *Acculturation*

Acculturation is the change that occurs when individuals (or groups) have contact with a cultural group different from their own (Berry, 1998; McBrien, 2005). Berry (1980) describes acculturation as a process that flows from contact between a dominant and non-dominant group to conflict or crises that arise between those groups, which result in adaptation by one or both of the conflicting groups. Often the non-dominant group is influenced by the dominant group to take on the values, norms, and behaviors of the dominant group. Other macro-level effects include change in economic factors, social structure, and political activity. In addition to broad group changes, acculturation affects the individual experience as well. Stress associated with acculturation is related to the

anxiety or depression those from the non-dominant group may feel as they adapt to the new culture (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002).

In general, there are two main theoretical frameworks for understanding acculturation, assimilation, and alternation theory (or biculturalism) (Lafromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Regardless of which framework one uses to understand acculturation, theorists agree it has two main criteria: (a) whether or not the individual or group maintains cultural identity, and (b) whether or not a positive relationship with the dominant society is established (Berry, 1998).

When identifying how groups or individuals are progressing through the acculturation process, Berry (2003) uses the following descriptions to shed light on the difference between those who are assimilating and those who are bicultural. Those who develop a positive relationship to the dominant culture, adopting its values and practices while discarding their own cultural identity are assimilating. Those who maintain their cultural identity while developing a positive relationship with the new culture are considered bicultural. Acculturation is not a one time event. It is an ongoing process that continues throughout the individual's or group's entire experience with the new culture.

One could be experiencing characteristics of both assimilation and biculturalism simultaneously. This must be understood as a process. For example, one can hold fast to their cultural identity and not develop a positive relationship with the new culture. Those experiencing this phenomenon would be considered low acculturated. Likewise, others struggle to identify with their culture of heritage and the new culture. They feel marginalized by both. To declare that all refugees will fall into either the assimilation



description or the bicultural description would be an overstatement. However, these definitions provide a good foundation for understanding how refugees (and all immigrants) may react when confronted with a new and different American culture.

*Assimilation.* Many disagree about which model is best for acculturation. Those who are proponents of the assimilation model often describe the metaphor of a “melting pot”. In plain terms they understand assimilation as the giving up of their former culture in exchange for the new culture of their new home (McBrien, 2005). Assimilation proponents see value in shedding the former culture to adopt the values, beliefs, and perceptions of the new culture (Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003). This model views acculturation as a linear and continuous change that is non-reversible (Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez, Orozco, 2001). The person slowly becomes like the new culture while shedding his or her former way of life over the course of assimilating. Proponents argue that the more one becomes like the dominant culture the easier it will be to gain access to services, heal emotionally, and find security in work and play. The resilient first generation of refugees tend to focus on an increased standard of living which makes them thankful for their new found opportunities. Dream perceptions of what the American life is like could push refugees to disassociate with their former way of life in favor of their new opportunities (Burnam, Kamo, Escobar, & Telles, 1987).

Assimilation can be caused by pressure brought upon refugees by the dominant culture. Rogler, Cortes, and Malgady (1994) explain that perceptions of discrimination by the dominant culture results in self-deprecation, feelings of animosity toward ethnic

heritage, and a weakened ego. Individuals experiencing these feelings may shed their heritage not by choice but to avoid further discrimination.

*Biculturalism.* Some question whether assimilation is in the best interest of individuals. They dispute the value of shedding one's own culture to blend in with the dominant culture. These critics argue instead for a bicultural approach (also known as additive assimilation or transculturalism). This model maintains cultural heritage while still forming a positive relationship with the new culture (de Anda, 1984; Feliciano, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Trimble, 2003). Feliciano (2001) asserts the value in groups and individuals maintaining their own cultural heritage while acclimating the new culture. Others argue that assimilation may have worked for European immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries whose cultures did not vary much from American culture at that time. However, for new immigrant groups from Central and South America, Africa and Asia a different approach is favorable. They argue for an approach that enables individuals to navigate between both cultures depending on the context (de Anda, 1984; Laframboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). This perspective supports the integration of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of both cultures. It may result in bilingualism, code-switching, and differing behaviors. For example, at home one would behave according to the traditions of Montagnard culture, but at school the child's behavior may appear to be that of a typical "American" student (Dolby, 2000; Trueba, 2002).

Many have discovered advantages when implementing bicultural approaches to helping refugee students adapt to their new surroundings. Gil, Vega, and Dimas (1994)

found that bicultural youth experienced lower levels of stress associated with acculturation and reported maintaining a strong sense of pride in their families. Miranda, Estrada, and Firpo-Jimenez (2000) found that bicultural families enjoyed lower levels of conflict and displayed high levels of commitment and support among family members. In addition, individuals who are bicultural benefit from the ability to adapt to changing situational contexts. This ability enables individuals to thrive in a variety of cultural situations with relative ease (Harritatos & Benet-Martinez, 2002). Finally, being bicultural appears to be linked with language abilities. Studies have demonstrated that students who are fluent in their native language and English display higher academic achievement than those who speak only one language (Feliciano, 2001; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Eisenbruch (1998) found that students grieve for more than just what they left behind personally. They also grieve for leaving their culture behind. Leaving one's home culture and having to adjust to a new way of life can greatly affect one's sense of self. He advises school leaders to respect the cultures of refugee students while being patient and allowing new arrivals plenty of time to learn the new language and cultural nuances. If one is forced to assimilate to a new culture without having ample time to grieve over their many losses long term negative effects can result.

In each of the studies previously mentioned, immigrants and refugees were not invited to comment on what would be helpful in the acculturation process. The literature is consistent in this area. Evidence of data collection related to the experiences of refugees exists. However, the researcher alone analyzes the participants' needs. It would

be worthwhile to learn if overlap can be found between what participants say they need and what researchers are advising they need. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to learn if refugees are able or willing to advise others on what their acculturation needs are, or what caused them to move in an assimilation or bicultural path.

### Schooling and Refugee Issues

The UNCHR (2000) stated that education is a fundamental human right and an essential component in the rehabilitation of refugee children. Constructing programs and curriculum for refugee children is a task of grave importance for educators. Not only do refugees need to overcome academic gaps due to their interrupted education, but they also need to begin healing emotionally. Education is important for repairing social and emotional wounds from their past (Eisenbruch, 1988; Huyk & Fields, 1981; Sinclair, 2001). This means that the people working in schools as well as the environment they create are crucial in helping students navigate the acculturation process.

Training for educators working with refugee students is also important. Educators must understand the difficulties and experiences of refugee children so they do not misinterpret behaviors like those mentioned in the preceding section. When teachers understand the backgrounds of students, they become more passionate about meeting their needs, and they are more willing to find strategies to meet their needs (Hones, 2002). When educators are not trained to understand the needs of their students, especially refugee students, they risk behaving in ways that could embarrass or shame students (Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, 1991). This could lead to confusion, mistrust, and despair on the part of students. Educators must never generalize what the needs of any

group of students are. Research pertaining to the past experiences of refugees from their perspective will provide a context from which educators can begin to learn the individual needs of each of their students.

### *Transitional School Issues*

Researchers illuminated many issues that hinder the refugee transition to traditional American schools. Following is a summary of some of those issues as found in the literature. While the literature does provide a base of guidance, more inquiry is needed from the perspective of those who have made the transition themselves.

*Trust.* Trauma experienced by children hinders their ability to learn (Sinclair, 2001). Trauma at all phases in the refugee experience (flight, refugee camp, resettlement) causes many refugee children to distrust those in authority including teachers (Igoa, 1995). From the perspective of refugee children, they have been failed by a range of adults in authority—their government officials, immigration officials, even their own parents who may not have protected them or may have emotionally abandoned them due to their own grief. Schooling is a difficult experience for refugee children who are learning to trust adults. This is especially true for those who have never attended school due to war or those who come from rural areas where literacy was scarce even among the adult population. On the other end of the spectrum are those who have attended school in their home country but are used to a much more strict system of governance by teachers. In retrospect students may look back on that experience as a safe place, where boundaries were clearly drawn and enforced. The more liberal approach to schooling in the US could feel out of control and unsafe for these students (Blackwell & Melzak, 2001).

*Educational gaps.* A large number of refugee students arrive to the US with significant gaps in their educational background. These gaps could be due to a variety of factors such as war or other military conflict in their native country, lack of access to quality teachers in rural settings, a transient existence moving from location to location for work, safety, or agricultural reasons. Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) discovered that 12% of ELL students in middle schools and 20% of ELL students in high schools had missed two or more years of schooling since age six. Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez, and White (1999) discovered a difference of more than one year between what was considered to be age-appropriate grade placement and the number of years of schooling students had completed. Most of the students in their study could not read or write in their native language and they were more than three years below grade level in mathematics. What is lacking in the study is how those gaps impacted the self-efficacy of the participants. Did the participants realize they were that far below grade level or did they perceive themselves to be on the same academic level as their American peers?

*School culture.* In addition to their academic needs, refugees need assistance to become acclimated to their new community as well as American school culture. Students feel isolated and often times confused in their new schools not just upon arrival, but well into their educational experience (Cheng, 1999; Dufrense & Hall, 1997; Gonzalez, 1994; Moran, Stobbe, Tinajero & Tinajero, 1993; Olsen, 2000, Olsen et al., 1999, Te, 1997). They are isolated linguistically because they do not yet speak the language and they may or may not have friends or teachers who speak their native language. In addition, the customs of American schools with which they are not familiar isolate them (cheering at

sporting events, class changes, cafeteria procedures, dances, clubs, and changing clothes for PE class). Olsen (2000) reports that ELL students are often feel ridiculed by English speaking peers because of their lack of English skills. This leads to the ELL student shunning his or her native language, which results in a loss of bilingual abilities.

*Social background.* Much of evidence exists that speaks to the learning needs of ELLs relative to their educational background. However, minimal information is available linking their level of success in the American school system with their social background. In other words, gaps in the research exist relative to how past trauma of experiencing war, death of loved ones and living in exile impact the day-to-day learning process of refugee students (Kindler, 2002).

*Dropout issues.* The limited formal schooling experienced by refugee students coupled with weak literacy skills places them at great risk for failure and dropout. This is due in part to the low literacy skills refugees possess in their native language, the lack of English skills and background in specific content areas, as well as the time it takes to become accustomed to school routines and expectations in the US. The challenge is overwhelming since refugees are entering American schools with weak backgrounds during an unprecedented time of rigorous standards-based curriculum and high stakes testing (Short & Boyson, 2003). Recent refugees are confronted with policies focused on expecting them to learn English as quickly as possible with few supports (Gibson, 1998). Often, students consider dropping out and going to work to be a better alternative than staying in school and struggling.

One isolated factor usually does not cause refugees to drop out, rather many build over time. Among the reasons are self-perception and academic ability (House, 2001). Some students are involved in anti-social behavior and are rejected by their American peers (French & Conrad, 2001). Others face obstacles related to a lack of academic preparation before entering American schools. Many students are not psychologically prepared for what they will face in US schools (Rong & Preissle, 1998). Many students also arrive to the US with little vision for their future and no goals. Even in cases where they have high expectations for their education, unsafe school conditions, poverty, and hostile social environments contribute to the dropout issue (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This is a critical issue facing school leaders. The dropout rate among immigrant students is considerably higher than their American peers (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Waggoner, 1999). Eighteen percent of 17 year old immigrants and 26% of 18 year old immigrants drop out of high school (Rong & Preissle, 1998). If students are to be successful in a world that is increasingly becoming more and more dependent on technology, academic skills are essential (Shanahan, Mortimer, & Kruger, 2002).

*Parental involvement.* Parental involvement in schools is not something that comes easy for refugee families for many reasons. Most families are entering the US with scarce funds. Parents are busy in those first few years working, learning their new environment and trying to make ends meet. The concept of parent-teacher conferences (something that typical Americans see as routine) can be confusing and incomprehensible for certain groups who have no frame of reference (Timm, 1994; Blakely, 1983). Many parents view teachers as the experts and turn over responsibility for educating their



children to school officials. They do not expect to be involved in the learning process or school based decisions (Eisenbruch, 1998). Not only do many refugee parents not expect to be involved, but they are emotionally unable to. The trauma of their past can be overwhelming to them, and they may not have the emotional stamina to support the educational efforts of their children or the school. Slow language acquisition for the parents relative to the rate their children are learning can also discourage parents from wanting to get involved at the school or help with homework (Asher, 1985).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) reported that refugee students are positively impacted when their parents are interested in their education and support them at home, even though this support may not necessarily take the form of parental involvement in the school itself. Parental involvement also is a factor that contributes to keeping refugee youth from participating in negative subcultures such as gangs (Bankston & Zhou, 1997).

*School expectations.* School leaders must also gauge the expectations of staff members. Lee (2002) reported that content teachers in a high school in Wisconsin believed that immigrant students were not their responsibility. They believed that the ESL teacher was responsible for meeting the non-English speaking students' needs. Further some even viewed the refugee students in their school as being inferior to their typical American peers. They did not take the time learn about the culture of their refugee students. In fact, some even criticized the cultural practices and heritage of the students in their school. Along those same lines, Smith-Hefner (1999) found that many educators believed that refugee families do not value education. School leaders would serve their students well to ensure that all teachers in their buildings not only value and honor the

heritage of their students, but that they hold high expectations for the learning of refugee students as well. If expectations are important, more research needs to be done to ascertain what refugee students perceive to be teacher expectations of them. The research does not tell us if there is a correlation between refugee academic progress and high teacher expectations. Nor does it provide guidance about the affective impact of high expectations. In other words, are refugee students more motivated to learn if their teachers have high expectations for their academic success?

### *Language Learning Targets*

What are the expectations for English Language Learners in the traditional school setting? How should we define success and how long should we expect that success to take before it becomes reality? If refugee students are to adapt and thrive in their new American setting, they must be proficient in English. In general three broad areas influence second language learning. These include the level of proficiency in the native language (this includes academic background), the type of second language input, and social factors (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998). Thomas and Collier (1997) define success for English learners as, “Reaching eventual full educational parity with native-English speakers in all content subjects (not just in English proficiency) after a period of at least 5-6 years” (p. 7). The period of 5 to 6 years is not a hard and fast rule as further research will point out, however it is a starting point.

The period of acquisition is impacted by numerous factors. Thomas and Collier (2001) point out that the strongest influence on the level of achievement students will attain in a second language is directly correlated to the level of formal schooling they

have received in their native language. They demonstrate that students who have experienced four to five years of schooling on grade level out perform their peers with no primary language schooling. This correlates to refugee success (or lack thereof) in that most refugees have had minimal if any formal schooling at all. Further, the gap for success widens for students who arrive illiterate in their native language, as most refugee students are (Perkins-Gough, 2007). One does not learn to read twice. One transfers literacy skills from his or her native language to the new language as he or she acquires vocabulary (Thomas and Collier, 2001). For many refugee students who are unable to read in their native language, they face the double challenge of second language development and learning basic literacy skills simultaneously (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

### *Academic Language*

The time students need to acquire English is influenced by their exposure to academic content in previous schools (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998). It is not only easier to master a second language if one is literate in their primary language, but acquisition occurs at a faster rate if one has had exposure to academic content in his or her previous educational experience. Cummins (1989) describes the difference between acquiring basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The BICS are what is necessary to interact in social settings whereas the CALP is the more complex cognitive and academic language one needs to succeed in academic contexts. The eventual goal for refugee students is mastery of academic language. However, most refugees arrive to the US

having had little exposure to academic content in their past. Thomas and Collier (1997) claim that the level of schooling in the native language is the most important variable when determining how long it will take for students to master CALP. According to their findings students aged 8 to 11 with two to five years of formal schooling in their home country took five to seven years to master CALP. By contrast their counterparts who had little or no schooling before arriving in the US took seven to 10 years to master CALP. The implications for students older than age eight are that they will run out of time to completely master CALP before it is time to graduate. Hakuta (1986) believes the greatest obstacle refugee students face in acquiring a second language is that they did not master all of their native language (e.g., literacy, academic content) by puberty. They believe anyone can learn a second language at any age if they have already mastered one or more languages. This poses a significant challenge to refugee students who may have BICS level proficiency in several languages, but mastery of none.

In addition to BICs and CALP one must also consider the impact that common underlying proficiency (CUP) has on the language acquisition process. CUP refers to the academic and cognitive proficiency that underlies academic performance in both languages. The brain does not have separate areas for processing different languages. Rather, languages are stored together and the knowledge is linked and can interact. On the surface it appears that the languages are separate because one uses them to read, write, speak or listen. However the cognitive process under the surface is the same. CUP points to the importance of mother language development in second language acquisition. When both languages are developed bilingualism results in addition to enhanced

linguistic, cognitive, and academic development (Cummins, 2000). Consequently, native language instruction can assist reading development in the second language (Fitzgerald, 1995).

Many school-related issues impact the refugee experience. These issues can be any combination of social, cultural, or academic in nature. One cannot predict how many of the factors will influence each child, however school officials should be advised to consider how these social issues, academic gaps, and language barriers could impede progress. Especially in the area of language acquisition and mastering academic vocabulary, school officials need to be patient with students and have realistic expectations regarding the time it will take for them to master academic concepts.

#### Addressing the Literacy Issue

While the preceding section focused in a general sense on schooling issues, a major issue looms that all refugees must face in the current era of American schooling. Literacy skills are essential to a student's success in the current culture of standardized test accountability. If one cannot read, she or he will not meet graduation standards. Schools have varied approaches to addressing the literacy challenge posed by refugee students. The research speaks in generalities of literacy concepts but does not provide adequate information about the specifics of programs implemented by schools and their effectiveness. While it is general, this literature is worthwhile to investigate because when educators are addressing the literacy issue, whether a student is a newcomer or has been in the US for a prolonged period of time, many of the strategies will be the same. Refugees have additional needs, and those needs are addressed. However, this section

focuses on what the literature says about factors educators should consider when designing English literacy instruction for students with limited academic background and low literacy skills in their native language, such as refugees.

Boyson and Short's (2003) survey of the 115 newcomer programs across the US in 2003 revealed that many newcomer students become literate for the first time in American schools. This is in spite of the fact that they are often times well beyond the expected age of initial literacy. Boyson and Short also point out that instructors in those programs use a wide variety of strategies such as sheltered instruction, cooperative learning, scaffolding, modeling, hands-on activities, visual aids, graphic organizers and real objects. They add:

programs incorporate computer technology to teach reading and writing, basic reading approaches (e.g. phonics instruction) with low-level high interest reading selections, instruction in the writing process, oral skills through conversation, role plays, drama, and presentations; the whole language approach; and the language experience approach to teach literacy. (p. 15)

Boyson and Short's study stops short of examining the effectiveness of such approaches, or of the programs themselves.

### *Literacy Needs*

Since the research is limited regarding specifics schools are implementing to address the literacy issue for refugees, one must turn to the literature addressing the literacy needs of ELLs in general. Connections can be drawn between the specific needs of refugees and the general literacy needs of all ELLs. Educators must accept that a single literacy program that fits the needs of all students does not exist. This adds to the

challenge of addressing the needs of students who are not only learning English, but learning to read at the same time. Language development and literacy skill development must occur simultaneously. Language teachers must become reading teachers, and reading teachers must become language teachers. Language and reading can and should support one another in the acquisition process.

This can be unsettling for ESL teachers who are accustomed to teaching language skills and perhaps mixing in a few comprehension strategies during an aural or modeled reading activity. Comprehension of text is related to the level of decoding skills a student possesses. One is proficient in reading when one can automatically decode words on a page. This enables a reader to place his or her mental energy on comprehension of the text rather than figuring out each word (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Johnston (2000), claims that students who develop a large word bank from which they can easily draw upon will find reading texts easier and more meaningful. One way to do this is through focused work on developing a sight word vocabulary.

#### *Oral Language and Sight Word Development*

Developing a sight word vocabulary poses a challenge to transitioning refugees because they are less familiar with English vocabulary, syntax, and phonology (Calderón, August, Slavin, Duran, Madden & Cheung, 2005). One way to alleviate this challenge is to focus on building oral language while simultaneously building sight word vocabulary and word-attack skills (phonics and phonemic awareness). Helman and Burns (2008) conducted a recent study in which they discovered the following:

Students with the lowest oral English proficiency had the lowest rate for acquiring sight words in a single setting (about three words), and the group of ELLs with the highest oral language proficiency had the highest mean acquisition rate (seven words). (p. 16)

This study indicates the rate at which educators can expect new arrivals to progress in their literacy development. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the need for educators to connect overall language development and literacy development.

#### *Word Attack Skills*

August and Shanahan (2006) have demonstrated that ELLs develop word-reading skills in a similar manner to native speakers. One of the many factors influencing second language acquisition is word-reading skills. These skills include phonemic awareness, phonics, and letter knowledge (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Lesaux, Koda, Siegel, & Shanahan, 2006). For low English proficient refugees with low academic background, language development combined with reading skill development could be a productive use of instructional time. Oral language proficiency supports reading development. This is due to the fact that if a student possesses a word in their oral vocabulary, he or she will have an anchor for word-reading development (Helman & Burns, 2008).

#### *Balanced Literacy*

A panacea program that addresses all of the literacy issues for refugees (and ELLs in general) is not available. Therefore, educators should consider a balanced approach that is geared to the individual needs of students. This will allow teachers to provide support to individual students on the skills they need when they need them. To do this, teachers must not only know their students' reading proficiency levels but also their



English language proficiency levels (Helman & Bear, 2007). Learners must be able to show what they can do with English (Mansoor, 2000). A balanced approach takes into account the individual level of each student. In addition, balanced literacy considers the type of text to be used as well as multiple aspects of literacy and language development such as oral language, reading skills (comprehension and word/sound level skills), as well as writing.

For example, refugees who are just beginning to learn to read will be developing letter-sound recognition and phonemic awareness. Oral vocabulary development is crucial at this point because

The more words students know in English, the larger the pool of sounds they can work with and the more examples of letter-sound relationships they will have to draw from. Using picture sorts of words that compare beginning or ending sounds supports vocabulary learning, phonemic awareness, and phonics (Helman & Burns, 2008, p. 16).

Oral language can be further advanced at these early levels of reading skill instruction (phonics/phonemic awareness) through discussion about word meanings and creating sentences using them.

While comprehension skills are difficult to teach to students who are just beginning to read due to the nature of the low proficiency books, teachers can reinforce these skills through modeled and shared reading times. These strategies provide opportunities for students to be exposed to a variety of vocabulary through read-alouds. In addition, they provide teachers with the opportunity to model and teach comprehension skills using grade level text (Clay, 1991).

In addition to the modeled and shared reading opportunities, Clay also recommends that teachers provide time everyday for students to read at their independent and instructional level. The reading conducted at the students' instructional level should occur with teacher support. Some refer to this as guided reading. The instructional level text should be slightly higher than what students could read independently but supports such as scaffolding allow the text to be comprehensible. Clay recommends that the independent reading occur using a text students can read with 95% accuracy. Independent reading is crucial for vocabulary development because in order for specific words to become a part of ones sight word vocabulary, they must be read dozens of times (Hargis, Terhaar-Yonkers, Williams, & Reed, 1988).

This raises the question of what type of texts teachers should use when working with students who have low proficiency in English and reading. Teachers should seek decodable texts that use repetition, high frequency words and words that follow a regular phonetic pattern. Texts that have words of high interest to students including those representing familiar concepts and images with a small number of unfamiliar words would also be useful (Heibert, Brown, Taitague, Fisher, & Adler, 2004). Teachers and students could also create a collection of personal readers. These would include a collection of memorized poems, stories, songs, or chants that students could read and re-read (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008). This promotes confidence in reading, and allows students to make connections between the oral language memorized and the print language on the page. Repeated reading increases fluency and aids in the automaticity of sight word recognition (NICHD, 2000).

### *Literacy Research Models*

The body of research explaining the literacy needs and quality of interventions used by schools focuses primarily on quantitative approaches to inquiry. These studies are important and should be considered when developing effective programs. However, input from students or former students about the strategies that are most beneficial to them is also important. Students provide a depth of insight into why certain approaches work well for them and why others do not. They should be empowered to provide that information and help shape the instructional programs they will participate in. For example, if oral language development and word-attack skills taught simultaneously are effective, it would be helpful to know from students why. Their perceptions on how these methods work together (or do not work together) would only serve to strengthen data provided in the quantitative approaches to inquiry. To compliment the quantitative studies, qualitative research approaches seeking refugee input is needed.

### *Addressing Transitional Issues in Newcomer Programs*

Since the researcher in this study seeks to understand the salient influences which impact the refugee transition into American public schools, it was important to examine what the literature says about the initial phase of transition. The first experience refugees have in their new schools creates the foundation on which all of their learning experiences in the US are built. Consequently, it is important to have an understanding of what schools are currently doing to acclimate and transition newcomer students to their new setting.

Schools have responded to the needs of newcomer refugee students in a variety of ways. One such model employs a transitional newcomers program. While there is great diversity in the make-up of these models, they all serve to assist students in their initial experience in American schools. Short and Boyson (2003) researched several of these programs and discovered that traditional ESL programs and bilingual programs are not designed to meet the specific needs of newcomers. This is due in part to the fact that at the secondary level curriculum and resources take for granted that all students have literacy skills and understand the cultural expectations of American schools. The newcomer program model was developed to bridge the gap between newcomers' needs and the regular ESL programs found in the traditional school setting. While great variety among the newcomer programs throughout the US exists, these programs share certain characteristics. Overall, Short and Boyson came to the conclusion that four specific considerations and beliefs influenced the decision to establish such programs:

- The literacy needs of English language learners can be addressed more effectively in newcomer classes than in a classroom that includes both literate and non-literate students.
- A welcoming and nurturing environment is beneficial to older immigrant students (i.e., those of secondary school age, generally 12-21 years old) who may have limited prior experience with schooling.
- Gaps in the educational backgrounds of middle and high school immigrant students can be filled more readily, and learning of core academic skills and knowledge can be accelerated in the newcomer program.
- The chances of educational success for newcomer students are enhanced when connections between the school and students' families and communities are established and reinforced. (p. 15)

### *Program Models*

Short and Boyson (2003) described three types of newcomer program models that school systems are implementing: program within a school, separate site, whole school. In the first and most common of these models, program within a school, students receive services in their attendance zone school. They have the opportunity to interact in the mainstream setting for a portion of the day while spending the remainder of the day in the newcomer program. These programs generally last one year.

In the second model students are served in a separate location, usually at a central office building, rented space in the community or a former school. Intensive English classes are offered as well as orientation to US schools. Students are served either full day or half-day and remain at these sites for a short period of time, anywhere from 4 weeks to 18 weeks. These sites often double as intake centers for all newcomer students for enrollment purposes.

The final model, and least common, is the whole school model. This model is generally used to serve high school students and is often times a four year program that leads to graduation. This setting is typically popular in areas serving high numbers of refugee students who have experienced interrupted schooling or who lack formal education.

### *Instruction*

While the program models offer differing characteristics, certain aspects remain consistent to assist in the refugee transition. Newcomer programs (as well as traditional ESL) programs generally provide English language development courses in addition to

content area courses using sheltered language strategies to make the information comprehensible to students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). This is an essential strategy to overcome the years of interrupted education and academic gaps that exist in the majority of refugee student backgrounds. Traditionally students were assigned to classes that focused on language development for a portion of the day, and other classes offered access to the content areas. The focus in the content classes would solely be the content (e.g., biology, algebra, chemistry) with no attention to language development. In classes such as these, newcomers are unable to access the content due to the language barrier. Effective programs and teachers of newcomer refugee students, whether in content course or language courses, understand the need to include language development into their teaching at all times (Mohan, 1986). This is easier to do in a newcomer program, because all staff (regardless of area of certification) are trained and are sensitive to the linguistic needs of their students. Newcomer programs emphasize language development throughout the curriculum (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Short, 1991). The marriage of content and language development is crucial to overcome the standards based curriculum and high stakes testing requirements newcomer refugee students are faced with. Hertzberg (1998) states, “If language minority students are to graduate from high school and reach cognitive levels similar to their American-born peers (or better), they cannot be denied content” (p. 58).

Consequently, content and linguistic needs of refugee students are met through the implementation of sound instructional strategies that make language comprehensible for students. Oral and written language are not the sole source of conveying information

to students in these programs. Teachers build in more diverse media and learning activities such as visual material, dramatization, hands-on activities, graphic organizers, cooperative learning groups, scaffolding, modeling, realia, and even native language support when needed. In addition, effective programs incorporate computer programs for reading and writing; basic reading strategies, instruction in the writing process, oral language skills through conversations, role plays and presentations (Hertzberg, 1998; Short & Boyson, 2003). All of these strategies employed by schools to reach newcomers instructional needs (such as diverse media and hands-on activities embedded in new material within a context) serve to make the new material more comprehensible (Cummins, 2001).

#### *Community Connections*

In addition to meeting the instructional needs of students, newcomer programs are reaching out to meet the social, cultural, and health needs of refugees as well. These connections include partnerships with local agencies (governmental, universities, businesses, and religious organizations) as well as families of students. Family events connect the entire family unit to the school and social agencies in the community offering transition assistance. These services include physical health, mental health, legal referrals, post-traumatic stress counseling, substance abuse prevention, migrant education, technology training, adult literacy/English classes, after school clubs, parenting programs, internships, translation and interpreting services, GED courses, citizenship courses, and employment services. (Short & Boyson, 2003).

Connecting families to these services is often an outgrowth of the dedication of teachers and other staff members of the Newcomer programs. Staff members often escort students to medical check-ups, immunizations, and to excursions in the community that are not officially sponsored by the school system (Shur, 1999).

### *Life skills*

The high dropout rate among refugee newcomers is due in part to their age. Many students enter the public school system between 17 and 21. These students are not able to complete the required coursework before turning 21 and therefore will not graduate (McCall-Perez & White, 1999).

Consequently, school leaders must be creative in finding solutions to address the learning and acculturation needs of these students. In response, schools offer life skills courses and programs within in the overall newcomers program. These strategies include teaching business classes in addition to the regular curriculum of language development and content courses. The business curriculum includes topics such as business awareness: how to read a want ad, how to prepare for an interview, how to look for an apartment, speak on the phone properly, and apply for a driver's license (Shur, 1999). Most programs strive for a basic foundation in language and content development, acculturation to US schools and culture, with the overall goal focused on students thriving in the traditional school setting, post-secondary educational settings, or in the workforce (Short & Boyson, 2003).



### *Self-Efficacy*

The linguistic and academic needs of refugee students are only part of the overall picture. They arrive needing support to overcome the social and emotional scars they bear from past experiences. In addition, they are learning to negotiate an entirely new and foreign culture. One strategy employed by school officials to overcome this challenge is to offer a holistic approach to addressing these needs through critical pedagogy:

Many immigrant and refugee students in nations such as Australia and the US have experienced war and economic devastation, and face daily the negotiation of their languages and cultures in a new society. For their teachers, critical pedagogy offers a pathway to engage these students, honoring their linguistic and cultural abilities, acknowledging their many struggles, and encouraging their academic and social progress through a transformative educational process. Importantly, educators who employ critical pedagogy can pursue what Gruenwald (2003) refers to as the twin goals of *reinhabitation* and *decolonization*: teaching youth how to live well in their total environments while challenging and changing ways of thinking that injure and exploit. (Hones, 2007, p. 2)

The environment of a newcomer program offers a buffer period for newcomer refugees to acclimate to their new surroundings, and grow in their sense of empowerment and faith in self. Feinberg (2000) states, “How students feel about themselves as learners can have an important impact on their success in school” (p. 223). Focusing on self-development and building self-efficacy in students is an important strategy schools are currently employing to assist refugees as they transition. In all of the studies of newcomer programs, not one included feedback from the students. The studies focused more on what the programs looked like as opposed to how effective they are. No information was provided about whether the dropout rate was reduced, no information demonstrated the

long term benefits (or lack thereof) of the programs, and none discussed how students felt about them.

### Summary and Significance to School Leaders

One consistent gap has emerged throughout the review of current literature related to refugee transitional issues. More information is needed from refugees themselves about their personal transitional experience. Rather than talking about refugees, more research is needed empowering refugees to speak for themselves. They are critical stakeholders in the educational process and their voices remain unheard. This silence is the most powerful argument for the need of a qualitative study such as this to ascertain the issues surrounding the refugee transition. Their stories are just as important as data collected by quantitative measures related to their literacy or academic level. Educators must take their perspective into account, and must create learning structures based on that feedback.

Why is this significant to school leaders? Sinclair (2001) reports on the importance of a sound education to help youngsters overcome much of the psychological trauma they have experienced. A quality educational experience promotes social healing because it restores a sense of normalcy and hope to refugee students. According to her, students are in need of a sense of safety, self, and a period of adjustment to their new cultural surroundings. This must all occur while maintaining connections to their cultural heritage. One cannot underestimate the importance of providing a quality learning environment and experience for refugee students.

Upon arrival to the US, refugee students are thrust into the public school system. They are expected to achieve at the same levels of their typical American peers in a short amount of time. Little consideration is given to the language barrier or social challenges these students face. The pressure of standards based achievement pushes aside the question of how past experiences impact the day-to-day learning process of refugee students (Kindler, 2002). It is not enough to simply gauge the literacy levels or level of academic background students have experienced when designing instruction and implementing programs for newly arrived refugees. It is not enough to simply mainstream them into regular classrooms to provide “access.” School leaders must take into account the past and current socio-cultural factors as well. Then they will be equipped to design instructional programs that address those factors. This is the broader context that school leaders must understand when designing just school structures and learning conditions for refugees.

If refugee students are to have hope for a brighter tomorrow in their new home, school leaders must work to understand how those past and present experiences are impacting their ability to transition into the American school setting. For this to happen, school leaders must stop and learn from the stories of refugee students. Then they must work in conjunction with their students to address those needs to promote a healthy and meaningful transition:

No longer can we view schooling and education as processes by which we assimilate students; we must view them instead as processes by which students and parents contribute to the evolution of systems and programs responsive to their needs, interests, and aspirations, respectful of their differences, and able to accommodate their rights and freedoms. (James, 2004, p. 45)

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction and Research Questions

An emergent, multi-site, ethnographic study was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the salient educational issues faced by refugee students within American public schools. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, more research is needed regarding the transition from the perspective of refugees themselves. For this reason, an ethnographic interview-based approach was necessary to ensure that refugees were providing insight on the issues they face and how to best overcome them. The main goal of this methodology was to hear their stories. Glesne (2006) describes ethnographic research as a practice that seeks “to interpret people’s constructions of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behaviors” (p. 9). This is precisely what I aimed to do. The study also needed to be emergent because participants’ insights could not be known at the outset. I reserved flexibility in the event that perspectives participants shared warranted analysis in other areas. I was more concerned with finding patterns and meaning in their stories than controlling the parameters of their input. To that end I addressed the following two research questions:

1. From the perspective of refugees, what are some of the salient educational influences that possibly impact refugee acculturation into the American public school setting?

2. With regard to the perspectives and stories shared by refugees, what should school leaders be doing to ensure their adaptation to the American schooling process?

The first question is the result of reading studies that separate the refugee experience into various categories. The implication is that these categories are not linked, whereas I believe they cannot be separated. Certain studies focus on the lack of literacy skills possessed by refugees (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Others speak to the traumatic experiences they faced due to war and oppression (Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, & Rath 1986). Others discuss the lack of schooling and how that relates to a gap in academic vocabulary (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen 1998; Thomas & Collier, 2001). Still others discuss the need for helping students maintain their identity and value their heritage (Hones, 2007). Minimal focus is given to how all of these variables interact, such as how refugees navigate the changing of identity when they are thrust in a new culture. It was my intention with the first question that I listen to refugees share the sum of their experience rather than isolating the various parts. Because this was an emergent study, I allowed the stories of the participants to speak for themselves and looked for connections and themes within their stories. With both questions there was no expectation of finding one defining solution. With narrative inquiry the focus was to search for answers that are meaningful to the participants and their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The second question served as an opportunity for school leaders to learn from the participants about their needs. It was my goal to enable participants to speak to the

instructional strategies, programs, and structures that were in place in their schools. I aimed to have them advise on the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of such strategies, programs, and structures based on their personal experience. In addition, I aimed to have participants advise school leaders on what is now lacking in our schools so we can implement change to benefit other students facing the same issues.

### Research Design

Multiple perspectives influenced the methodology of this study. Glesne (2006) states, “Typically, qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is situated within theoretical perspectives” (p. 29). Due to the ethnographic nature of the study, I conducted interviews to gain access to multiple perspectives. Rapport certainly was a consideration that I had to take seriously. It would have been inappropriate to cross the line between rapport and friendship, as discussed by Glesne (2006). However, I did build a level of rapport between the participants and myself. This was particularly important for refugees who have had past experiences that limit the trust they have for others, especially those they feel are in a position of authority (James, 2004).

I also aimed to identify various themes and patterns of the refugee experience within schools. While interviews were the primary method of data collection, I employed other methods as well. Triangulation is “the use of multiple data-collection methods, data sources, analysts, or theories as corroborative evidence for the validity of qualitative research findings” (Gall, Borg & Gall, 2003, p. 574). Triangulation not only provided deeper insight into research questions, but it augmented validity and minimized biases of

my findings (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). I had the opportunity to compare, contrast and analyze the information collected from the various data sources.

I employed the following methods to gather data: interviews, demographic questionnaires, artifact review, and follow-up interviews when necessary. Each method provided a different perspective to the overall topic of the refugee experience in American schools. I built upon what I learned from each source which pushed me to search for richer data throughout the process. Each participant and source enabled me to understand the refugee experience from different lenses, thereby causing me to self-check against subjectivity.

### Study Participants

I conducted individual interviews with refugees who entered the American public school system upon their arrival to the US. Participants were divided into two different categories: adults who are former students and current students. The first group consisted of adult (over 18) refugees in a central North Carolina county who arrived to the US when they were under the age of 18, enrolled in US public schools, and have attended an American public high school. The group consisted of six participants. In order to have perspectives from a variety of cultures this group of participants represented six different countries in Africa and Asia. Not all of the participants graduated high school. Some dropped out but obtained their GED. All six were either attending college or working in a profession. I recruited this group of participants through a process of snowball sampling. Local agencies serving immigrants and refugees assisted me in identifying three of the

participants. Those three participants identified others who were interested in the study as well.

The second group consisted of refugee students who were enrolled in high school in a central North Carolina School System. These students were in their second academic year of schooling in the US. The group consisted of seven participants representing six different countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Teachers in the school system assisted me in identifying this group of participants.

All of the participants arrived to the US as refugees and did not speak English fluently prior to arriving. Some had minimal English instruction before coming to the US, but they were all at the novice level of proficiency. All but one student experienced interrupted education. Her education was not interrupted because she was too young to attend school in her home country. She began kindergarten in the US. The lack of prior schooling presented challenges to the extent that participants arrived to their new schools below grade level and unfamiliar with much of the new content being discussed.

It is important to bear in mind that participants were never viewed as being one dimensional in the sharing of their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, both groups did share some common characteristics. All members of both interview groups had to possess a level of proficiency in English that enabled the entire session to occur in English without the need of interpreters. They also had to be able to read English at least a fourth grade level in order to understand the assent/consent forms and demographic surveys they completed.



I included participants who were enrolled in school and those who are former students because both groups provided a richer source of data about the various stages of transition for a refugee student. The inclusion of both groups was not a strategy for comparing and contrasting their experiences. The purpose was to hear perspectives at various points in the experience to draw from a deeper pool of knowledge.

This study did not include the school at which I am employed. This was to protect against biases that could have resulted from perceived coercion to participate on the part participants.

Table 1

*Participant Information for Current Students*

| Participant Alias | Years of School Missed | School Entry Grade | Region of Origin     | Gender | Age | Current Grade    |
|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------|-----|------------------|
| Eve               | 3                      | 9 <sup>th</sup>    | Africa<br>(Burundi)  | F      | 15  | 10 <sup>th</sup> |
| Julius            | 2                      | 10 <sup>th</sup>   | Africa<br>(Tanzania) | M      | 17  | 11 <sup>th</sup> |
| Sa Sa             | 2                      | 9 <sup>th</sup>    | Asia<br>(Burma)      | F      | 20  | 10 <sup>th</sup> |
| Mahmud            | 6                      | 9 <sup>th</sup>    | Africa<br>(Somalia)  | M      | 17  | 10 <sup>th</sup> |

|          |   |                 |                       |   |    |                  |
|----------|---|-----------------|-----------------------|---|----|------------------|
| Ali      | 3 | 9 <sup>th</sup> | Middle East<br>(Iraq) | M | 17 | 10 <sup>th</sup> |
| Nuk      | 2 | 8 <sup>th</sup> | Asia<br>(Vietnam)     | F | 14 | 9 <sup>th</sup>  |
| Mohammed | 6 | 9 <sup>th</sup> | Africa<br>(Djibouti)  | M | 18 | 10 <sup>th</sup> |

Table 2

*Participant Information for Former Students*

| Participant<br>Alias | Years of<br>School<br>Missed | School<br>Entry<br>Grade | Region of<br>Origin | Gender | Age | Current<br>Status    |
|----------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------|-----|----------------------|
| Mloa                 | 2                            | 9 <sup>th</sup>          | Asia<br>(Vietnam)   | F      | 24  | Interpreter          |
| Nung                 | 3                            | 6 <sup>th</sup>          | Asia<br>(Vietnam)   | F      | 25  | Interpreter          |
| H Dek                | 1                            | 3 <sup>rd</sup>          | Asia<br>(Loas)      | F      | 36  | Program<br>Assistant |
| Kin                  | 0                            | K                        | Asia<br>(Thailand)  | F      | 23  | College<br>Student   |
| Miriam               | 6                            | 5 <sup>th</sup>          | Africa              | F      | 18  | College              |

|      |   |     |                    |   |    |         |
|------|---|-----|--------------------|---|----|---------|
|      |   |     | (Somalia)          |   |    | Student |
| Yung | 3 | 3rd | Asia<br>(Cambodia) | M | 37 | Welder  |

### Data Collection Techniques

#### *Interviews*

The goal of the interviews was to allow the participants to share their stories. The format allowed me to obtain perceptions on the refugee transition in an open-ended and non-threatening environment (Krueger, 2000). Interviewing had several advantages, such as being effective at providing access to a depth of data due to the one-to-one nature of the session. This enhanced data quality. Interviews also tend to be enjoyable to participants because they enable voices to be heard from individuals who may have never before been invited to provide input (Kruger & Casey, 2000; Patton, 2002). Interviews can also provide an opportunity for the researcher to explore the topic and determine a line of questions for follow-up interviews (Glesne, 2006). The purpose of the initial interviews was to gather data relative to the experience participants had as refugees in American schools. I crafted questions that triggered memories and encouraged participants to be vocal about their experiences. During the interview sessions and analysis of responses I was able to see overlapping themes emerge from each of their individual stories. Follow-up interviews were used if I felt I needed clarification from participants on issues or needed further information on a topic. I conducted follow-up

interviews with nine of the participants. Initial interviews lasted approximately one and half to two hours. Follow-up interviews lasted about an hour.

In the first interview, I guided the discussion and fostered dialogue with the participants through pre-made prompts and questions. I created a list of questions and employed a process similar to that used in semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions (appendix A). Based upon their responses, I probed more deeply to obtain additional information (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The impromptu follow-up questions also assisted me in clarifying participant responses thereby ensuring that data collected were reliable (Seidman, 1998). Having structured prompts in advance was important because I was able to keep participants focused thereby increasing the probability of collecting meaningful data (Patton, 2002). Interviews took place in a location chosen by the participants.

#### *Demographic Questionnaire*

Prior to the interviews, participants responded to a brief demographic questionnaire (appendix B). This instrument was used to gather important information including age, gender, ethnicity, years of schooling in the US, years of schooling prior to arriving in the US, reason for fleeing one's home country, and experiences as a refugee. I also invited participants to share input related to their experience as a student in the American school system. I had hoped this instrument would enable me to have background knowledge about the participants to guide the creation of questions or direction of probes during the interview session. Participants filled in the demographic

information but did not respond in depth about their experience as a student in an American school. I was not able to draw meaningful data from that part of the tool.

### *Document Analysis*

Although interviewing was my primary method of data collection, I asked participants to share artifacts with me that could help tell their story. These could have included any photos, drawings, or writings school projects/assignments, or yearbooks. This was important because sometimes there is more to the story than just what can be shared verbally. Not all participants shared items. Some shared journal writings, or transcripts from their previous school. Others shared photos during the session that had to be returned, and one shared a yearbook from his first American school.

## Data Collection, Management and Analysis

### *Data Collection and Management*

Demographic questionnaires, interviews, and analysis of artifacts relevant to the refugees' stories were used to collect data. Follow-up interviews with select participants were also used when responses during the initial interview required further clarification or indicated a richer data source. As data were collected I looked for common themes to emerge from among the data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim by me. This ensured that everything said in these sessions was preserved for reliability purposes (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). In addition, I took notes during the interviews to assist with data collection regarding non-verbal communication not captured by audio-

recording devices. This served as an additional component of quality control to ensure the data I collected were extensive and reliable (Patton, 2002).

Using a semi-structured interview approach with participants enabled me to collect pre-determined categories of data while also providing me the flexibility to access a greater depth of information as opportunities arose (Patton, 2002). The follow-up questions that I posed enabled me to gain further clarification while also providing deeper insights and a better understanding of the participants' responses (Merriam, 1998).

### *Data Analysis*

After collecting the data, I began the analysis. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state, "Reading, reading and reading once more through the data forces the researcher to become familiar with those data in intimate ways" (p. 153). This process was employed several times in order to gain further acquaintance with the data. Data analysis provided structure and assisted with the interpretation of the large quantity of collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Since I used an ethnographic approach to data collection, my analysis enabled me to search for patterns and meaning. After the interview sessions, I coded the transcriptions, artifacts offered by participants, as well as their questionnaires. Coding is a process of sorting and defining data that are meaningful to the research topic. By putting similar pieces together an organizational framework was created (Glesne, 2006; Karlsson & Ahlstrom, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During my multiple readings of each transcript, questionnaire, or artifact I looked for specific key words or ideas and coded them to identify the emerging themes. The process of coding provided further familiarity with the data and generated meaning (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

### Academic, Professional and Personal Perspectives

Due to the nature of my line of work as the principal of a school for refugee students, it was important for me to understand and disclose my positionality from the outset of the study. As mentioned previously, the following is an explanation of my experiences and perspectives relative to the study.

In my position as the principal of a school for refugees and immigrants, I have been touched by the stories of our students. Getting to know them and their families has driven me to want to learn more about how to best create an environment that enables them to learn and grow as individuals. Knowing how closely I am connected emotionally to the needs of the students and the school, I must disclose this important perspective. However, with consistent self monitoring for this perspective, I believe the benefits of what I have learned far outweigh the risk of me being too closely involved emotionally or otherwise.

A number of theoretical perspectives played a role in my study. Glesne (2006) states, “typically, qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is situated within theoretical perspectives” (p. 29). Rapport certainly is a consideration that I had to take seriously considering how closely connected I was to the research participants. Some were former students and others were members of the community with whom I work closely. In my role as principal it would have been inappropriate to cross the line between rapport and friendship discussed by Glesne (2006). However, I worked to build a level of rapport with my former students and the other participants. This rapport centered on trustworthiness, care, and concern for their overall being. This was important to the

extent that participants were comfortable opening up to me and sharing about their past as well as their needs. Their willingness to do so made it easier for me to collect data.

The balance of rapport between researcher and researched was no different than the balance I walk between administrator and student. Collins (2003) states “the ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions and empathy are central to the validation process. One of the three interrelated components comprising the ethic of caring is the emphasis placed on individual uniqueness” (p. 62). It is through the validation and understanding of the uniqueness of each participant’s experience and personality that they understood I care. Consequently, they were comfortable sharing information and there was an altering of “the traditional relationship between the researcher and the researched such that the research subjects’ voices, problems, and concerns become the focus of research” (Hyttén, 2004, p. 101).

### *Subjectivity*

My subjectivity certainly played a role in my research. Glesne (2006) states, “subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research and subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research” (p.119). It is through continuous self-examination that I was able to use my subjectivity to my advantage rather than a hindrance. I performed periodic self-checks through journaling and discussing my perspectives with colleagues. Consequently, my passion for the people involved in the study served as a motivator rather than clouding my judgment.

I chose to approach this task from the perspective of a critical researcher. While I want to see social transformation, I had to bear in mind that I do not have all the answers.



In fact, I had limited knowledge about the emotional and socio-cultural needs of refugee students. I had to be willing to listen to and learn from the participants in the study.

Hyttén (2004) states, “this means that critical researchers need to give up the implicit assumption that they know how the world works and power operates, and the researched don’t” (p. 96). In my case, I had to understand that the participants in my study were the experts and I was the novice.

Information shared by participants was viewed through the constructivist paradigm. Their experiences are real and valid. They had to be taken seriously, “human beings construct their perceptions of the world, that no one perception is ‘right’ or more ‘real’ than another, and that these realities must be seen as wholes rather than divided into discrete variables that are analyzed separately” (Glesne, 2006, p. 7). This paradigm encourages the researcher to not find fault, nor to find “Truth” but to find the experience and how that experience has shaped the individual. Our thirst to critique often times overshadows our ability to accomplish this. While our motives may be pure, the results can be damaging. Especially in the case of those who have been the victims of oppression, such as refugees. Goodall (2000) warns, “True dialogue-which we teach as a communicative virtue- can seem virtually impossible. A culture of criticism thrives on finding fault with every person, every argument, every thing (including itself)” (p. 28). While it is good to always find ways to improve, I made it a priority to honor the story of the participant alone. I worked to avoid overly critiquing the participant or the nation the participant fled in the process. Collins (2003) speaks of the narrative method. She calls experience a “criterion of meaning” (p. 56). The experience of the participants was

validated not by being critiqued but as having real meaning to the one who experienced it. Their stories were told and not overly analyzed as if they were a form of quantifiable scientific data. The stories were trusted and valued.

### *Reflexivity in My Research*

Engaging in this form of research requires one to continuously monitor oneself as well as the process. Reflexivity was an important component to my research process. Glesne (2006) defines reflexivity as being “as concerned with the research process as you are with the data you are obtaining. You ask questions of the process all along the way, from creating your research statement to writing up your report” (p. 125). While I believe that this is an important component of reflexivity, I believe that one must also be asking questions of oneself. If we are to believe that subjectivity is a factor in our research, then we must continuously be gauging the impact that subjectivity is having on the data we gather, the rapport we are establishing with participants, and the methods we are employing in the process. An analysis of self must be ongoing. The data have an effect on the researcher. This certainly was the case in my project. Each story I heard affected me emotionally as well as in my role as the principal of a school for refugees.

Lincoln and Guba (2000) claim reflexivity “is a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as researcher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself” (p. 183). This paradigm exhorts the researcher to not simply reflect on the process but to reflect on the “I” throughout the process. Who am I becoming through this process or am I tainting the data by injecting my subjectivity without acknowledging its existence? Lincoln and Guba further state:

Reflexivity- as well as the post-structural and postmodern sensibilities concerning quality in qualitative research- demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our lives. (p. 183)

We are inextricably linked to our research and the approach we take to it.

### Validity of Research Findings

Creswell (1994) warns that it is important for qualitative researchers to understand their personal values, perspectives, assumptions and identity. Since personal perspectives can distort data-collection and analysis, one must create measures to keep this from happening. One example I implemented was member checks. I gave participants the opportunity to review interview transcripts, verifying that the data collected were consistent with their thoughts, feelings, and ideas (Glesne, 2006). I asked participants to review the transcripts, reflect on them and submit feedback to clarify meaning if needed. This helped me to ensure I was reflecting their perspectives accurately, and it provided deeper insight into their responses.

I also kept all transcriptions of interviews and demographic questions in a locked file in the event that my primary data sources were to be questioned. Copies of the same with my coding analysis are also being kept on file should the reasonableness of my analysis and conclusions be called into question.

Other strategies were employed in this study to ensure validity:

- triangulation of data— using multiple data sources and methods to corroborate patterns in findings.
- member checks— asking participants to review data to ensure the perspectives

reported are accurate reflections of participant viewpoints.

- peer/colleague examination— asking colleagues to comment on the findings and the process employed to discover those findings.
- researcher's biases/subjectivity— disclosing the researcher's experiences, assumptions and biases at the beginning of the study (Creswell 1998; Gall, Borg & Gall, 2003, Glesne 2006, and Merriam 1998).

### Benefits and Risks of the Study

One benefit of participating in this study is that participants had a chance to tell their story to someone who cared to listen and learn about their experiences. This served to empower them. Also, participant input has been written about and will be shared with school leaders so they might better understand the refugee experience.

To protect confidentiality and anonymity during the writing process (and throughout the study) I used pseudonyms for all participants. I also changed specific locations (cities/towns), proper names, and identifying details of participants. With their consent, I included the nation of origin for each participant. They felt that information was necessary to accurately represent their story. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed. All recordings were deleted from hard drives after transcription. Any notes I made on electronic devices are password protected to ensure I am the only one with access.

Another risk for participants was that it may have been emotionally difficult for them to remember and share hurtful experiences. This could also be true of sharing artifacts that may have deep sentimental value. I had a list of potential resources of

mental health support that participants could access if they were having difficulty dealing with the memories of their past. Furthermore, participants were free to refuse to participate and free to withdraw consent at any time during the process. There was no penalty or unfair treatment if someone decided not to participate or decided to drop out of the study. Assent and consent forms were written in English at a fourth grade reading level and were translated into the native language of the participants to ensure they comprehended the contents of each form (See informed consent form appendix C).

#### Limitations of the Study

Thousands of refugees reside throughout the US. Many have successfully transitioned to their new lives and schools, others have not. This study used a small sample population of current refugee students and older refugees who have completed studies in American schools. The participants all resided in central North Carolina. The results from this study cannot be overly generalized. Stake (1995) warns against making generalizations from a small sample group. However, patterns and themes of how refugees overcame and are overcoming their transitional challenges have been identified. Further limitations in this study are:

1. The possible conflict of my role as the principal of a school for newcomer refugees and researcher. Given my role and emotional attachment to my current students and their plight, there was a risk that I could have had difficulty with objectively analyzing the data. I continually reflected on my perspectives through journaling and discussion with peer-colleagues to guard against this.

2. Participants selected for the study had to meet the following criteria:

Group A- second year refugee student attending an American public school and proficiency level in English to be able to answer questionnaire and interview questions.

Group B- Adult refugee who came to the US as a child, attended an American public school, and possesses proficiency level in English to be able to answer questionnaire and interview questions.

#### Summary

This ethnographic study examines how 13 refugees have overcome and are overcoming the challenges of adapting to a new life and school experience in the US. With a focus on interviews, the researcher provided a forum in which current and former refugee students were given the opportunity to share their stories. This is valuable to educators because the current literature infrequently examines the perspectives of refugees themselves in the transition process. Although research has listed what schools are doing in the area of language acquisition and literacy, minimal information is available regarding how the students themselves feel about those practices, and what they believe schools should be doing to help them transition to their new setting. This study provides school leaders and policy makers with a perspective from the students they serve regarding how schools can be structured to support their needs.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### Introduction

This study aimed to answer two main research questions:

1. From the perspective of refugees, what are some of the salient educational influences that possibly impact refugee acculturation into the American public school setting?
2. With regard to the perspectives and stories shared by refugees, what should school leaders be doing to ensure their adaptation to the American schooling process?

In addition to answering those questions, I also set out to provide a forum in which refugees could be given an opportunity to provide their perspective. In so doing it was important to design a study that enabled refugees to share their story of transition into the American public school setting, and for their words to be heard. This chapter is organized in a manner that enables those voices to be heard with minimal commentary by me. Direct quotes from participants are categorized by themes that emerged through analysis of their artifacts and stories.

#### Organization of Data Analysis

The data in this chapter are organized by themes and patterns that emerged from the stories of the participants. The participants were not viewed in this section merely as

data producers. Rather each individual is the embodiment of his or her story. Consequently, much of the information shared in this section is shared from the perspective of the participant. Clearly defined conclusions to each research question were not drawn because lived experience cannot be disaggregated into neat and tidy data points. While I provided my own analysis at certain points in this section, it was not my goal to simply prescribe black and white applications. I aimed to allow the stories of the participants to speak for themselves enabling a space for the reader to create meaning and application (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Therefore, each section of this chapter provides feedback from participants around a general theme related to the research questions. The first portion of stories shared relate to the first research question. The second research question is answered in part as the reader creates meaning from the stories shared throughout the chapter. The majority of stories shared in this chapter provide insight into the salient influences that possibly impact refugee acculturation to American schools. The participants openly shared about those influences and how they impacted their unique transition to their new schools. The reader must bear in mind that no two experiences are the same, therefore a variety of conclusions can be drawn in relation to research question one. At the end of this chapter, participants shared direct advice to school officials relating to the second research question. They offered advice to school leaders based upon their own experiences. Consequently, some of that advice may not agree. I also added analysis to this section. My analysis and proposed application are interspersed in the text of the stories shared by the participants. This chapter cites direct quotes taken from participant



interviews or documents shared. It was important to maintain the stories in the words of the participants rather than summarizing. Since English is not the native language of all participants their responses may not always be grammatically correct. It was important to refrain from editing their words. This allowed for participants' voices to be heard, enabling their stories to speak for themselves.

### Analysis of Data

In the sections that follow participants speak to their experience of transitioning to American schools. Much effort was made to give the proper attention to the stories of each participant. Interspersed in their words are comments and analysis by me. However the commentary and analysis on my part was minimized to enable the reader space to interpret and make meaning of the stories shared by participants. In addition, effort was made to provide space for participants to tell the story of their life before arriving to the US. This was important because their story did not begin when they arrived in their American schools. Arrival to the US is only a chapter in a larger story that began in another land.

### *Past Trauma*

One's past is inextricably linked to his or her present and future. The experiences of participants before coming to the US had a direct impact on their transition to their new home. Each participant recounted what life was like for him or her in the home country or in a country to which one fled. Each recounted tales of trauma that weighed heavy on their minds and hearts as they settled into their new home. It is important to have knowledge of their past and the conditions they fled to be able to grasp how new

and different their life in the US is. Their past experiences and the emotional stress they endured certainly influenced their transition to their new setting.

Eve, a female refugee from Africa, recounted the animosity that occurred between rival Tutsi and Hutu tribes in her home country:

When we were in refugee camp many student and many teacher they were student from family Hutu. So if you were like Tutsi you couldn't say anything to them. Anything they tell you, you say yes. You can't say no. If you say no you can't pass the class. You can't have job. We have difficult life. We don't have good life because my mom and dad they say they are different. My dad they say he is Hutu, my mom they say she is Tutsi so we have difficult life.

Eve understood the alienation of being considered different by others. She also understood that this level of hatred among rival tribes could lead to denial of services like education, violence, or even death. The conflict between Hutus and Tutsis has ravaged many parts of Africa and has resulted in atrocities at national and local levels.

For others the trauma came at the hands of an oppressive government. This oppression resulted in a lack of trust for government officials or for those in positions of authority (such as teachers or principals). Mloa (Asian female) recalled:

In 1975 my dad was helping American soldier and after the American people came back to the US the communist put my dad in jail about 4 years...with the church we had problems with the government. We have to go to church at 1 in the morning and be over at 4 without them knowing. They did not allow us to have church or to worship. It was scary sometimes some village were in church and the communist come in and persecute the pastor or deacon of church. Some would be in jail. Sometimes they beat the pastors or deacon sometimes they close the church. If the communists saw you have a Bible they would take it.

Mloa shared that in Vietnam the government sanctions certain churches and versions of the Bible. She is a member of a minority ethnic group called Montagnards. There are various distinct Montagnard groups such as Jirai, Radai, and Hnong. Most Montagnard churches, like hers, are not sanctioned by the government and are targets for persecution.

The most common factor of trauma among participants was war. Tremendous loss was experienced by them. For example, Mohammed (African male) explained, “My mom has three sisters and three brothers. They all died in the war.”

The effects of war and mistrust of officials was more apparent when participants told stories of an oppressive government forcing families to flee, only to be harmed by civilians or officials in a neighboring country. Participants recounted tales of being taken advantage of at each point in their journey to freedom. H Dek’s (Asian female) story of flight and survival is one such example:

During the Vietnam war, while in Laos, when the Vietnamese soldiers were coming to the forest to kill everyone who lived in the forest...we were crossing a river and I was not older than 2. I can’t walk for long distance. Every now and then my dad had to carry me on his back. I remember I was on his back there was a guy coming from the right side have a knife this long holding to my dad’s throat, ready to cut his throat. Then my dad just hold on to me really tight. He told me to hold on. He know something will happen if he falls I will fall. It was a cliff so who knows if I fall with him what happens to me. Then my cousin who suddenly comes out of nowhere and kills the soldier before he kills me and my dad. I can’t remember where he was all I remember was his neck and he had a bag and something on top of bag then I saw the knife. It was so brave of him. My cousin coming out of nowhere and the soldier just fall down. I look down and I saw blood everywhere.

Then we moved after the Vietnam War. My dad didn’t want to move he wanted to stay where we were. We no longer could stay where we are because the communist coming to kill everyone in the village so we were able to move to Thailand. We were able to cross the Mekong river and go to Thailand. We were in some sort of group that they help people to cross the river and you pay them a certain amount of money per person. They help you build the boat. Then you get

off the boat they have some bad people. Thai people that were on the other side of the river. They rape children and young girls. I can still remember hearing their voices crying and yelling for help, and any man that would help them they would kill right away. I remember seeing them hitting this man who tried to help this girl. We were lucky my two sisters were still young like eleven or twelve and we were the last family to arrive to the other side of the river so they already get all the girls before that. They finally saw my sister-in-law who just got married to my brother. They came and took her. They hurt my brother and dad because they tried to stop them from taking her away. They finally got her took her maybe fifty yard away. We could see her clearly. My mom get down on her knees and pray and she said oh God please help us. Then suddenly everything just got black. You can't see anything and then everything went back to light. She was just in front of us. We ask her how she got there she can't remember. She said the last thing she remember was they were pulling her apart and then when everything went dark and she can't remember how she got where we are. Everything went completely dark. It was the middle of the night but there as moon light so you can see but everything went dark for a couple of second and when everything went back to light she was just in front of my mother. We went to where the rest of everybody was, but there was some girls that the Thai men left behind on the river. They could barely walk. They died there.

That night we were sleeping outside. This is when one of the Thai men got ready to kill me with a gun. I couldn't sleep because everything. I close my eyes, I was seven at the time, I close my eyes I could hear their voices, the little girls voices, so I opened my blanket and I saw this Thai guy who said go to sleep so I got scared and he pointed the gun right at me. I got scared and pulled the cover over my face and waited to see what happens. Nothing happens and I open the blanket and he was gone. So it was night and in the morning time they took us to the refugee camp. We were so scared to go outside. We stay in the house for 3 months because we think that if we leave the house something bad is going to happen. That was even in the camp. Little did we know that we were safe because everyone in the village was safe. Going shopping for grocery we were scared because vendors were Thai and we thought they were all bad people.

Persecution in home countries and flight to neighboring countries unfolded a series of traumatic events. Life in refugee camps was also harsh. Participants experienced a challenging life, never feeling they could trust anyone. Learning to trust officials in their new schools and home at the camps proved to be equally difficult. Julius (African male) recalled what life was like in his camp:

The difficult is you don't have opportunity to do anything. Only is to sit there. You don't have school. The school is so crowded. It's hard. You don't do nothing you just sit down sleep and go to your friend to the neighbor and you can't walk at night because the soldier they control everywhere. If you walk tonight you gonna have problems. It's too hard to live in refugee camps. It's small, many houses, small house, then some market. You gonna find many child in the road, people gonna see some people fighting too.

Eve recalled her fears in camps as well: "Sometimes if you were there, the robbers come to steal everything. Sometimes the soldiers because they have guns they come to steal.

Night, night when we was in my country they come at night." Sa Sa (Asian female)

remembered that fear well:

Sometimes in summer time Burmese soldier come in the camp. Before I come here we live in mountain. Mountain was like one side was low and one was high. The low side people come to high side of mountain to sleep and live over there because they are scared of Burmese soldier on other side of mountain, so they were scared like that. If they came like they fire or burn all the house or just throw the bomb.

The threat Sa Sa experienced also came from within the camp:

There fighting between people living in camp. That happen a lot teenager like that. They become a group of people and other group of people together fight like that. One time it's between the Muslim and the Karen. They fight each other, they really fight.

There are a variety of distinct ethnic groups persecuted for distinct reasons within Burma, of which Karen is one. Religious diversity is also common. One can be Karen by ethnicity and Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, or various other religions.

Ali (Middle Eastern male) never lived in a refugee camp but had experienced the horrors of war in his country:

Because you know the situation in my country it was like difficult to go into the streets in my country, go out with friends. I see like cars exploding, like people shooting. And I saw one car exploding but I was very far. I wasn't hurt. My teacher was there and he got hurt.

Mohammed (African male) also told of the horrific situation in his country created by rival tribes:

Some people came to our land to take it. When you have a land people are going to come and say they are there to take it. There is no law, so people do whatever they want. Certainly we had some land and some people came and they said we will take this land, so they took it. Simply, they are at war, tribe against tribe they are at war. Later, we had a house, my uncle's house. I lived with him. I was with him like that in his house. And it fell, how do you say it, it fell in the house... a bomb. It was the other tribe who fired at us. I was small. No one was hurt, it landed right next to the toilet... I will tell you in our country I was in a tribe you see. During the war the other tribe outnumbered us. So they would come into our homes and break down the door, and drag the men out and burn them. A 25 year old man was burned. I saw he was burned. It was a different tribe who came to do this, from another region. They killed and burned like that, many people. They killed many people like that. In my country there is the war. People are dying, dying in the war.

Fear and memories of dangerous circumstances were fresh in the minds of participants when they arrived to their new schools in America. These are not circumstances that one walks away from and forgets. Participants shared that they mentally relived the experiences often which hindered their ability to focus in the classroom.

#### *Previous Experience in Schools*

In order to understand the influences that possibly impact refugee acculturation into the American public school setting one must take into account the holistic background participants experienced before arriving to the US. To be more specific, it is

also important to understand what prior schooling was like for participants. Their expectations for schooling in America were based on what was familiar— their own experiences. In addition, they had heard stories about life in the US. This next section is an overview of what participants' prior schooling experiences were like and how that impacted their transition to American schools.

*Class size and materials.* Schools in the refugee camps, as well as the home countries of participants, varied. However, there was a consistent theme that emerged in each of their stories. While participants perceived they worked hard, their previous schools were not adequately equipped to meet their educational needs. Class sizes were large and materials were scarce. This resulted in students not learning at the same pace as most of their American peers. Therefore, they entered the American school system below grade level in many areas. Julius described the school he attended in a refugee camp:

There we use lap board but we don't have too much book. Only the teacher has book and student after the teacher write on whiteboard and then the student copy onto notebook then you go to study, just from the notebook. We have fifty students for one teacher. It's big.

Sa Sa described a similar situation at her camp, "Big class, one class has fifty students totally different than here. No book we just copy down." Mohammed described schools in his country in a similar manner, "You don't have chair and table you can sit together with your friends. We have to pay the money for books. We have to buy." Nuk (Asian female) described classes of "forty students and up, forty to fifty. We have long table one table can sit four students. We need to buy books for your own self. It was

expensive so we can share books with whoever don't have book." Mahmud (African male) told a similar tale:

If you want a book, you have to buy one, even in math. If you have no money you borrow the book of a friend and have it photocopied. It can be photocopied. You have to pay someone to do it for you. I had to copy books from friends. We do not have enough money.

Oversized classes and lack of materials conspired to create a substandard education for participants. The academic gaps they possessed impacted their ability to smoothly transition into an age appropriate grade level in American schools.

*System of schooling.* The overall system of schooling was different for participants than what they experienced when they first arrived in American schools. Unfamiliarity with how the American system works resulted in confusion and tension. Sa described the school in her refugee camp, "We have different teachers but the students stay in class all day long. Teacher comes in and teach one block then leave, teacher changes." Class changes were something completely new to her. Ali described a similar scenario from his country:

In Iraq we start as one class they take one class be like forever. I have two friends they're from first grade to ninth grade with me in the same class. All the classes we take the teacher comes to our class, we don't go to teacher's class. The teacher comes to us. We have a class when the class is finished the teacher goes and the other teacher comes. If we pass the years we be together for life for the twelve years.

Not only was changing classrooms each period a struggle for him, but he had to adjust to having a different group of peers in his classes as well.



Others described a scenario where education was not valued due to the circumstances of the country. Mohammed described:

There are people dying they can't support themselves. People can't find work. If you have a diploma if you leave school if you earn your diploma you will not find work. You will not find work. You will certainly find war. Why go to school? To eat there is business. To find money people buy bananas. Women sell bananas. They find money like that. People buy something like that. I started school at the age of 6. I stopped when I was...when I was 12 I quit. I went back but I quit for a while. In our country after middle school you take a big test. You wait a month for the results. If you don't do well you can't go on. You have to re-do the test. Me, I failed it twice. Yeah, four years I didn't go to school. I stayed home. I didn't want to go to school. I refused because life was too difficult, the war.

Miriam shared, "I never went to school. There were schools available but education there was not useful. It would be like graduate, you can't do anything with it, no government, no real jobs. So what's the point?" This perspective is in contrast to the cultural value and expectation in the US that all children will go to school and schooling is profitable. Miriam and Mohammed had to learn the value of education in order to understand why it was important for them to remain in school to be able to accomplish their goals in the US.

*Discipline in previous schools.* Participants were all surprised by what they perceived as a lack of discipline in the American schools. Student behavior in their new schools shocked many of them. This led to confusion about roles in schools and further complicated how participants interacted with those in authority. The level of discipline they experienced in their schools before coming to the US was more strict. Some of the practices which were normal in the eyes of participants are not practiced in American schools. When participants saw American students not listening to teachers or being

disrespectful, they were surprised and confused. These refugees not only had difficulty understanding the disrespect they witnessed but also the informal relationship between students and teachers. Mohammed described his previous school:

The teachers, when you speak in Africa in a school, they give you a dictation. If you don't know how to write something the teacher gives you a zero, and tell you, give me your hand, and he takes a stick and beats your hand. If you don't do your homework they take a big pipe and hit you. They take it and hit you. They're going to hit you on the hand or on the rear. When you talk they hit you. In middle school or high school they hit you or tell you to get out. The principal sometimes makes a student come sit next to the board, and then the one who spoke writes his name on the board. After that they hit you for talking in class.

Mloa described her experience, "The school was like so strict. When you go to school when they tell you stuff they don't care if they hurt your feeling they tell you straight. Sometimes you know you can get spanked by teacher."

Nung (Asian female) shared:

In school they're very strict how they dress, how we talk to teacher. We can never look teacher in the eye. When the teacher walk in room we stand up say good morning and sing national anthem. We wear uniform, black pants and white shirt dress shirt and a red tie which represents the flag of Vietnam. I guess if we don't wear that we be in trouble and we have to stand near the flag pole, it depends you can stay there half of the day or if you just leave off tie you can stay 30 minutes it depends. The teacher well very strict, you don't do your homework you get hit, and you cheat then you get hit also. Each of us have chores at school we have to plant garden. We break into groups and we have a team leader. Today this group do this and that group do this we all have chore to do erase the black board who would help the teacher. You carry her stuff home.

H Dek also recounted a strict school experience:

In Laos Hard punishment. If you were late you would get into trouble. If you were late three times they would take you outside and there was gravel there. You kneel down on gravel with pants or skirt up both hands out, one rock in each hand and one on head. If you drop any rock then you get to do that again the next day. You have to stay like that all day, no break.

Participants experienced harsh punishment for disobedience as well as for struggling academically. They were confused when they did not see this happening in their American schools. H Dek continued:

It's hard to get into school. If you don't appreciate school you don't take education seriously you leave, because there are too many students to fit in school. So you have to be your very best if the teacher is talking and you talk they have a yard stick and she will throw that across the room and hit you. If you don't do good on your test or if you don't listen to the instruction they will write on your hand really really hard. They would hit your hand with a ruler very hard. I remember clearly being hit two times, and I remember saying no more I don't want this no more. You receive harsh punishment. When I got older I would cry. I don't receive any punishment after that.

Mloa stated:

They did help us learn a lot, over there if you don't wear uniform or be late you gonna be kicked out. If we don't do homework we will be kicked out. If teacher give you assignment you have to do it. It have to be done before you come to school or else you get spanked. On Mondays we have special thing for flag ceremony for people who don't do work for the whole month we have to stand in front of whole school and stand outside in front of school, and if we don't follow rule we stand in front of whole school. It's embarrassing. So the teacher like make you embarrass to make you focus in school so you don't want to stay over there where people look at you so you will do your best.

Eve described what happened when one did not understand a lesson in her home school, "If you don't understand they beat you, in high school if you don't understand they beat you." Participants had experienced schools where harsh punishment was received for not completing class work. They did not find the same level of enforcement in their US schools.

*Academic rigor in previous schools.* Participants were also struck by what they perceived to be a lack of academic rigor in American schools compared to their schooling in their home country. Although they may have experienced limited years of schooling or had scarce materials, most perceived that they were required to work harder and study more topics in their home country. Much of the learning they experienced was rote in nature. They were required to memorize numerous facts and little time was made for group work, self exploration, or analysis. They were surprised to be working on assignments that did not require memorization or copying of notes. Progressive methodology employed by teachers in American schools was unfamiliar to these refugees. The new teaching methods represented an additional adjustment to consider. Further, participants described a major adjustment to the course offerings in their new schools. They were surprised to be taking only four or six classes at a time. They provided a contrasting view of what the academic rigor was like in their home country.

Julius described school as difficult because he had to take 10 subjects at once and had to pass all of them in order to advance to the next grade level. At one time he was taking French, mathematics, biology, geography, civics, morale, physical education, and more. Ali believed school in Iraq was more demanding than in the US:

It's like we go to school from 7:30 to 12:30, and we take eleven classes a year and six classes a day. And it's difficult, the class is short and you don't have time. Like the teacher don't have time to explain to us the whole thing so like we have to go to our house, like if our parents know the stuff they sit down and we do it. They help us, but if people don't have good parents like educated parents they fail the classes. They don't get good education. It's a lot of homework.

Nuk explained:

In the whole year we have like eleven subjects, algebra, geometry, art, history. I forgot others. Eleven subjects in one year and homework a lot! Every subject we do four or five pages at night. You get zero if you don't do homework. It was difficult there more than here. When you go to school the teacher give you homework to do and you need to study all the homework and the next day come to school and have five minutes at the beginning of the class. He will call you and if he call your name you need to come there and he will give you the question. If you don't say it he give you a zero.

Eve stated:

American school is not difficult like Tanzania because we have four subjects in semester, but in Tanzania we have thirteen subjects and they are different. You have to pass all of those classes but you have to pass here too. But it's not too many. Four classes is easy to pass thirteen classes is difficult to pass. Here there is not many homework like in Tanzania, only in math class. But other class we don't have homework. Like in English I want homework because I want to know English.

Julius shared, "Maybe friends in Tanzania they gonna laugh because in my school in Tanzania we have 14 subjects in year, but here we have only eight subjects for year. School in US is easier."

Perceived lack of rigor in US schools (due to less workload and memorization) was only part of the adjustment for participants. Nung was also confused by the American system's use of age appropriate grade placement. In her country students advanced to the next level only if they mastered the content:

The grade and age compared to here is different it doesn't matter how old you are there are people sixteen years old still in fourth or fifth grade. We have summer school but most kids don't pass summer school so they retain them until you pass the test then you can go on to next level it's very strict. It's not like here the

school over there is very strict. Then we have to say multiplication every day. If you don't know it by end of week you have to stay after class and memorize that and poems. They have special poems by end of day you must remember poem if you don't you can't go home and sometimes you get spanked.

H Dek was the only participant who arrived to her new school above grade level in one area. Mathematics was a strength for her although she could not read or write in her native language. She shared:

So my expectation coming here we thought the course would be higher than what we had in Thailand. But what I didn't know was the math level skill was lower than the Thai and Laos country math level. They put me in third grade because of my English but because my math level was so much I was in seventh grade level math. The third grade students were still learning multiplication and division, so they didn't know what to do with me.

Each individual had a different experience in their previous school. Their former schooling experience seemed to them to be more rigorous and strict than in their US school. Adjusting to the expectations of their American schools was an additional issue impacting their transition.

*Comparing the old to the new.* Participants naturally drew comparisons when talking about their new schools and their previous schools. Some of these comparisons were shared in the previous section even if not directly stated by participants. In this section, participants explicitly shed light on how their school experience was different than what they experienced upon transitioning to their American school. These differences were so striking to participants that they shared them with little prompting from me.

Julius pointed out the difference between teachers in his country and in his new school:

In my country they are not friendly. If you don't have money not friendly. But if you have money you will have many friendly from teacher. Here if you don't have money they still love you. Then I can tell them if you don't understand the subject the teacher he gonna stay after school to help you. But in my country he don't stay after school. If you have money the teacher gonna stay after school, if you don't you gonna go home. The government pay the money to the teacher but the teacher they still ask your parent to pay them money to pass the school.

H Dek discovered cultural differences in the US compared to her country. They had to do with schooling and marriage:

During recess we did not play. We each had a garden bed. And we were supposed to plant vegetables, all kinds. We had to determine how long it would take to grow. I made several vegetables, one line beans and lettuce and all kinds of fruit... In our culture girls are not allowed to go to school. Once you educate girl she will get married and benefit husband family not your family. Naturally they don't let girls go to school.

Nuk explained that eating at school was new to her. She said that everyone went home to eat lunch in her country but in her new school everyone ate in the cafeteria. The impact of eating at school may seem subtle but it was a major issue that affected H Dek:

Something I had to get used to one thing I will never understand is eating in school. I remember because in our culture we never say no to food. So when someone comes to ask for food because food is only valuable thing we have in our family in our culture, if someone ask for food you say yes. A lot of kids ask do you want that pizza I say no, they say can I have your pizza or can I have your food, I say yes. So for three months I give away all my food. I wasn't eating and I would be so tired and a teacher send a note to my brother saying does this child speak? And he ask me what is wrong at school do you not speak? I say I don't speak because I was so hungry because I gave all my food away. He wrote back to teacher and explain situation so after that the teacher tell the students not to ask

for food anymore and then I did much better. I had to learn how to say no. At first it was really hard. Then the teacher told me that you don't have to give away your food you just say no it's OK to say no. After I said no it was really hard.

Whether the differences were cultural in nature or relational, they made an impression on participants. Navigating cultural change is a stressful experience. Participants felt the impact of trying to understand their new environment daily.

#### *The Transition: Experiences in American Schools*

Understanding the past of participants assists in understanding their initial impressions of schools in the US. They all had expectations of what their new life would be like. In many instances those expectations were not true. Expectations were based on stories they had heard or ideas that life in America would be like a dream come true. They encountered many differences culturally and had to learn how to navigate a new system of culture and schooling. Kin (Asian female) provided an example of a dashed dream:

You hear stories that in US people sit around and wait for check to come. That's myth. American people do what they want. They don't do anything they just sit and wait for a check to come. That's all they have to do. The lands are free all is free. Not true. I remember the story about waiting for a check to come and that's how you live. I think that's why a lot of people came.

The sections that follow highlight some of the main themes that influenced this group of refugees' transition into American schools.

*The initial experience.* The initial experience of transitioning was stressful for most of the participants. They all recalled feeling scared and anxious. Julius described that feeling:



I was scared because I think I'm gonna find new teacher. The student they maybe they not talk to me because I don't speak English like them. I scared of subjects because if you don't study hard at new school you won't pass anything. I was worried. I was worried because the first day I came here I didn't know the language. The cafeteria we don't know the number for classes, but it's too hard maybe they tell you the room number but maybe it take long time to go to room. Or you find you are outside because you don't know where to go. I go outside for two days because I don't know the number for the room. And very crowded here. If the bell rings you go to class and its very crowded. This is a problem because I have to go to my class and you have to go to your class. Also, at the first day I come here I see almost seven people fighting. I was worried. Then I finish my lunch. I go somewhere because I was scared.

Sa Sa was also nervous:

Start school here I think is very nervous. I didn't speak just stay alone. I didn't talk to the friends too much like, and then sometimes afraid to talk to teachers sometimes to ask other questions. Because this is a new culture and different language not normal language you speak everyday so nervous. I was lonely because I don't talk to friends. I was lonely after that I would say that in my experience it was fine later. Just that first time I was nervous.

Mohammed remembered feeling scared as well: "I was scared before I came here I didn't speak English and then I say you go to American school you gonna feel scared. I can't go to American school I tell my sister. The culture is different."

Ali remembered having difficulty understanding other student's behavior, "When I came here I didn't know people. I don't want to say bad word because people say them I didn't know what saying so I got confused." Nuk was ready to leave school after her first day:

I am scared. I am confused and nervous because the people talk English and they talk very fast. I get some words and I don't understand. I feel like I want to go back home. I very scared because I go to every class and everybody like when the teacher open the door, everybody look at me like. I was scared. When I at middle

school every day I want to say why everybody look at me every day. I don't know why. I be confused because when the teacher asking me I didn't understand. Like nervous when the teacher asking me questions. I don't understand them. I say I don't know English. I felt like I am crazy.

Mloa's first experience was also difficult as she tried to fit in with other students:

I feeling really hurt. You try really hard you want to achieve you want to be like them. You really want to communicate with others and understand what others are going to say, and plus I want to do good in my grade. The first time the school look way different, way way different from the school I attend in Vietnam. You can dress anyway you want to, some student they have attitude with teacher. If that happen in my country we will kneel down whole day in the classroom.

Nung was also surprised on her first day:

I think, oh my God, they have big school and I have to go to different classes. Back home you don't go to different classes the teacher move. Here I go many classes. I get lost many times. I go to wrong class at wrong time because I had no clue. We go to school by bus, but home we don't do that. I feel weird on the bus. Am I going to be lost? Am I going to get home? I wish someone would have told me that. The rules the policies, for transportation and stuff like that.

Yung (Asian male) remembered, "They didn't have help for us back then. We were on our own, nobody helped that first day. I was like really scared. I didn't understand nothing." For example, Kin had had a bad experience in the cafeteria:

I didn't speak the language. I remember being in the cafeteria that day. I must have love for food. I sat there and ate and didn't realize my class left. To me it felt like the school was really big. My uncle had to come get me because I cried the whole time. Seeing sister during the break was the best thing. I always stuck really close to her.

Mahmud also struggled during his initial experience:

It was confusing. It was scary. Nobody gave clear directions. We came to school and I didn't know how to pick up a pencil or how to write. The teacher writes in cursive and I couldn't understand that. I was with these kids who had been in school all their life. It was really hard. It was frustrating and challenging.

The initial anxiety experienced by participants was felt in a number of areas. Some expressed angst about their interactions with American peers, others were overwhelmed by how the size of the new school and the lack of help, others were in school for the first time and did not even know how to hold a pencil. Regardless of the individual experience, those first few days in school for participants were difficult.

*Other students' behavior.* In addition to feeling scared and nervous on that initial day, participants expressed being surprised by the behavior and attitudes of their American peers. They witnessed behavior that was completely shocking to them considering the strictness of the schools they had previously attended.

Eve could not believe what she saw happening in her classes. While giggling, she uttered:

When the teacher is teaching the students sleep. They don't care about the teacher, they just talking. Sometimes this will happen in math class because many students in math class they just talking. Sometimes the teacher call police and we feel scared because we want to be in class, because we don't know math. Other people they don't care. They say if I have F I will come back in summer school and I will pass this class. The police they take the students outside. When the police come in the kids say you can call the police or principal they don't care anybody. They say that to the teacher.

Sa Sa told this story:

The classes sometime some friend like just talking or some stuff like that so we cannot learn from teacher very well. English 10 class teacher teaching but the

students are really noisy and they talk across the class. My friends and me we sit and listen to them like that. Yes it's hard to learn. I feel like we have to learn too much. We have to learn all of this but they don't teach. They don't study, so we cannot go very fast or we cannot go what is our goal.

Mahmud claimed that the biggest obstacle in his learning was not the language barrier. He said disruptive students hindered his learning, "They sometimes they get up and then they say bad things. Do this don't do that, I can't learn." In a dialogue with Ali about this topic he wondered out loud, "People don't want to learn why they come to school? They make the school worse."

Not only did participants describe witnessing disrespect by students shown to teachers, but they also told stories of how they felt disrespected by their new peers. Julius understood this feeling:

The things they are doing, the other students, sometimes when I come in math class and the students they don't like us. We pay attention and because we try to do everything the teacher asks us to do. If we do what teacher tell us they tease. They say bad things to the teacher. Sometimes we don't ask the teacher if we miss something because if we say something they begin shouting us. Teacher says if she watch they not gonna do it, but if the teacher doesn't watch they still gonna do it.

Mohammed was not happy in his new school because his peers mistreated him:

I can't say anything about this school. It's not a good school. Most teachers are good but these students are not good. Then there is fighting, then they do something bad to you. You cannot do your work. Not all the days but sometimes they fighting and they gonna say something bad at the locker or in PE. They gonna throw something. One day I open my locker and they took something, food and they throw. It hit me. I say who throw something. They say I don't know. They throw again. It hit my head. I say who throw something on me. I say forget it. I take and put in trashcan.

Mahmud shared similar struggles with his new peers:

They say things all the time, then do something kind of things. The most difficult part of this school is the other students who are here. If you come the first time they gonna do something. They gonna do something or throw something to you. They laugh and say shut up. I don't want them laughing at me.

Yung lashed out against the students who confronted him, "Man I got into a lot of trouble ... a lot of fights. I didn't want to take what the other kids were saying to me so I just fought all the time. I didn't know the rules." Nuk has also felt the pain of others laughing at her:

Like in Vietnam I did learn English at school. Still but the teacher was Vietnamese and he talk English but not like here. When I come here everybody laughing at me. When I first come here in the middle school and people just ask me what your name and where you from and they laugh. I don't understand why. They laugh at me but I don't care I want to say something but I don't want to say in English because they laugh at me. So I just don't worry about it.

Kin has also experienced bullies:

Also kids are bullies. You have to accept that not everyone is willing to accept you or differences. That's OK. There are people out there who are not willing to accept you and be a part of that. You gonna be OK. There's gonna be bad things. Kids are gonna pick on you and say mean things, and you look funny. But is gonna be OK.

Miriam (African female) recalled her experience with her new peers:

Some were I guess mean and aggressive, but I didn't care because I didn't understand what they were saying. I just shook my head yes or no. I didn't know what I was agreeing to and they left me alone. In those classes I would just stay quiet in those classes. I never paid attention to them, to the teacher, not to the students. I developed that habit at a young age. If students bothered me I would

ignore them. Over the years I learned to not make it an issue, just ignore it. I think my least favorite classes were when most of the students were rowdy and it would take me a while to understand what the teacher was saying.

Many of the participants expressed a concern over the number of fights they witnessed in their new schools. “When I come here I was scared. If you go to your class you’re gonna see fight there. If you come to school you see people fight” (Julius). “Many times they are kidding each other and they become a fight. For girl too not just between the boys” (Sa Sa). “Beware because the friends in here like they all in groups and like always fighting” (Nuk). The violence they witnessed made them feel frightened and insecure. Many expressed disappointment because they thought they had left violent behavior behind in their home country.

*Other students’ affection.* Participants were amazed and even embarrassed by the affection they saw taking place between boys and girls in school. This was a major cultural difference they did not expect to see, and one they could not understand.

Julius told about his initial perspective:

I gonna talk about the new culture I found here, about the school...about the people who live here in America...about the girl friend and boy friend. In my country we don’t have anything like that. If you are child you have girlfriend here. The girl you like too much. But in my country we don’t ever do anything like that. Here, they kiss each other like that sometimes. I don’t watch them I’m scared. I don’t know why they kiss each other because in my culture we don’t do that things we don’t do those things. They don’t kiss the women only if they married.

Ali was also surprised by the display of affection between boys and girls in American schools:

I don't have girlfriend but in America, like you can have girlfriend. The schools is boys and girls, so they together. It's very different. I see them kissing. That not happen in Iraq because we don't have the chance to do that. In Iraq if the parents of the girl find out they gonna ground her and maybe hit her. They gonna go to the other parents of the boy and tell them for their boy to not come to the girl again to see her. But the boy is not like, the boy is special. The boy they don't hit him only the girl.

H Dek explained how different this was from what she was used to:

Then I had to deal with the boyfriend girlfriend stage. I remember American culture was so upfront. I remember one boy in fifth grade liked me so he followed me everywhere I go and he carried my books. It was something I didn't want to be bothered with. In my culture you would never let anyone know you like this person. You supposed to keep that secret. You talked to many boys at one time. In your mind you have particular one you like, but that one you like you would never share to anyone. But in American culture the one you like is the one you want the whole world to know. I think that's a huge difference right there. We never say directly I like you, you want to be my girlfriend. Here they do that. It's shame for us if people know she like him. We want that to be secret. American they want the whole world to know. In our culture hold hands is not allowed. No touching no hugging. You are allowed to like the person but you like him in your heart but not be so obvious. That will show the other people that you don't have respect for the other person. It's a way to show respect.

The affection participants witnessed was odd to them considering the cultural norms with which they were familiar. Touching and hugging, especially between males and females, made them uncomfortable. Their body language expressed discomfort or they giggled while telling these stories.

### *Difficulties Transitioning*

Participants cited a number of issues that made transitioning to American schools and culture difficult. The language barrier was an obvious issue that all participants raised. Laughing Eve said, "It is too difficult because I don't speak English. I don't speak

good English. When I speak English it's difficult and we don't know anything about here." Eve is not the only participant who found the language to be difficult. Mahmud explained:

In America if you don't speak English is going to be difficult for you. If you don't speak English you can't do anything. It's been difficult for me. I speak a little English that's why it is difficult for me. I can learn it if I go to job. You have to learn English to have a job.

Nuk shared, "I don't understand the language, and almost everything I don't understand here. The language is most difficult." Sa Sa said language was her only difficulty, "for me it's not really difficult but for one reason. It's we can't speak English. It's language." Mloa remembered those first language barriers:

The bad parts were that sometimes in class there were words I didn't understand. They were like deep words. I tell you truth I had to carry a dictionary everywhere I went. When it comes to words you don't know you get frustrated without knowing that word you didn't know what to do.

Difficulty finding work was another struggle cited by many of the participants.

Mohammed described his situation:

It's tough to speak to people in English, I don't know anyone, so if you don't know English you won't have money. It can be tough. My mom says it's difficult for her in the US because she has nothing, no car to go to the supermarket. We left our country our city. She has nothing. It's tough. She wants to leave. She said I don't want to stay here. My mom she came here to have more money, she has no work.

Julius stated, "It's difficult because my mom she gotta have job, is the problem.

Maybe one day we gonna make job." Sa Sa also cited the job market, "Another problem



is job. Parents have really difficult to get a job. If they didn't have education, didn't know English so they cannot get a job.”

In addition to the language barrier and job situation other common themes emerged from conversations with participants. The comments that follow demonstrate further challenges participants faced when they transitioned to the US.

*Loss of loved ones.* Participants experienced much loss, not just through the circumstances of their flight but also in choosing to come to the US. It is true their families left behind the harsh life of the refugee camps or hostile circumstances in their home country. Families did this in order to pursue new opportunities and safety in a new country. However, as participants shared their stories I learned that for each new opportunity they gained by coming to America, they experienced a loss. The loss was felt in losing their culture, their language, or even loved ones who could not make the journey with them. The emotional strain of experiencing loss and grief certainly influenced their transition to American schools. Nuk recalled her last day in Vietnam:

My family were coming to my house. All my grandmother, aunt, neighbor, they come to my house and they cry. Everybody were crying. It was hard because I leave where I was born and I come to another country and I'm not sure if this new country is difficult for me. I miss them. Because my grandma is there, all my friends are there. Yeah, it's difficult being away from friends here. I thought friends would be good here but it's not...I feel sad. I miss them but they send emails to me and I send back.

Ali remembered the day he left Iraq, “When we cross the borders it was like difficult. Because like you were leaving your country and you go cross it and say bye Iraq never come back again, maybe. I cry, a little, inside.” Ali further described the friends he

missed. He stared off into space and said, “In Iraq we start as one class they take one class forever. I have two friends they’re from first grade to seventh grade with me in the same class. In the same class, yes I miss them.”

Mahmud also missed his loved ones and longed to be reunited with them. He had created a plan to be with them again:

I miss my friends too and all my cousins. They stay in Africa so now my cousin and his family they went to refugee camp in Ethiopia. They will come here, but not yet. I’m not sure when they are going to apply. I get upset and then I think about them. What’s going on? Are they going to eat? I mean they live in Somalia then they call here and they say I can’t live in Somalia there is fighting. So they want to go to Djibouti I say go there when you go there you have to stay with my grandfather and he is not my grandfather, just tribe member. And then I say go with him. They stay one month, then they go to Ethiopia and stay and then they may come to USA.

Eve had to leave her father and brother behind when she came to the US. She said she cries often missing them:

It is difficult. My dad and big brother are in Africa. It is very difficult, when we think about it we cry. It’s very difficult because sometimes we think how they were coming. Always when we was in refugee camp we have 5 groups come. Then the government of Tanzania say that we have to leave. They take to refugee camp and after three month they say you have to go back in. That’s what it’s like for them in refugee camp. They moved 3 times in one year always to different camps. It’s difficult to communicate. Sometimes they email us and they call us through phone Saturday or Sunday. It is a very short conversation.

The tone of the conversations turned solemn when participants shared about leaving home and those they loved. These wounds were still affecting them. They longed for those they left behind.

*Loss of culture and devaluing of heritage.* Participants also described the difficulty with cultural confusion and losing touch with their heritage as they transitioned into a new country. This proved to be more challenging than anticipated. Culture at its simplest definition is how we do things. Culture is what tells us how to live. It defines how we should greet our teachers or friends. It tells us how close to stand to one another when we speak and whether we should look one another in the eye. It even tells us what we should eat for breakfast. Culture defines values, and you learn it by living it. Consequently, culture is always evolving and can be quite different even among people living in the same country. Culture is something that can and does change, especially when one lives in a new culture (Jenista, 1996).

Heritage is similar to culture in that it defines aspects of life however, heritage is different. Heritage is what one possesses as a result of birth. These are things that one cannot change. It is genetic background, how one looks, and one's ethnicity. It also includes the history of the people with whom one shares those physical traits. Many people know little about their heritage but none the less it belongs to them. If one were to classify people just by their heritage one would be stereotyping (Jenista, 1996). One can possess a certain heritage but share none of the cultural traits that people living in that country possess. Several participants reported about cultural and heritage struggles as they transitioned to their new home and school. There seemed to be an overall sense that their peers and teachers did not much care about their backgrounds. Eve reported, "Sometimes they care about my culture. But mostly nobody care. Just I am different."

Nuk missed her familiar holidays, “Here when it’s a holiday it’s just a normal day. But in Vietnam we have no school. I go to different place with my friend. Here I just stay home. We have no car. If you have car you know where to go on Vietnam Holiday.” She also missed her language, “I sit in class and I remember when I was in school in Vietnam. We like, I miss talking in my language. The other students they laugh at me at my desk when I talk.” She also experienced loss in adapting to the food of her new school, “Because pizza, first time I come I didn’t know how eat. I say why do they eat the food? And have a lot of sugar. People drink Coke a lot. But my family like Vietnamese food and water.” She also experienced confusion about what to do when she was sick, “In my country when I am sick they can make medicine for you by vegetable or fruit. But here you need to go to hospital. When you sick you confused, don’t know where to go.” These are examples of cultural issues that typical Americans take for granted in their daily routine. However, they proved to be problematic for this group of refugees. Mloa recalled the difference in her faith now that she is in the US:

Most people when they in Vietnam their faith is really strong because they know they are under persecution by government. They want to get away from that so their faith is really strong. But here with the freedom their faith has become weak. Because they always ask God to help them to get, you know, escape from the government from persecution. But over here when they already have freedom I see less of them come to the church. Sometimes before I used to work in community outreach with the church and we been helping with refugees who escaped from Vietnam. Over I think it’s over 2,000 montagnard people who came in 2002, but it’s for religious reasons...freedom. My faith, I think it’s like kind of like get weaker. I think it’s due sometimes personal stuff. Like back there we usually work in our own time. We do anything we wanted. We worship on weekday not always Sunday or Saturday. Sometimes Wednesday or Monday. We control our time. But here time is just the time. Here our faith get weaker.

For Nung, she missed playing with friends and holidays:

We go to movie, play games with my friends, play video games, and festivals. They have festival. We go to festivals on certain days. There is this festival in Vietnam. It's called, it has something to do with the moon being full we hang out there. I miss that.

H Dek and Kin described what it is like to be caught between two cultures. The transition created a cultural identity crisis as they attempted to hold onto the past while embracing a new life.

Now the problem we have is your parents want you to learn English be good and successful. So you learn English and they forget about the old culture. So here I am. I speak English everyday but I can't communicate with parents at home. So teachers should tell kids to practice their language at home. You don't want to forget your own language. (H Dek)

For some culture if you lost your elder you gonna lose culture. It might become a full blown American culture because a lot of us are losing a part of that little by little. I'm losing it and I like to think I'm pretty well educated about that. But still I feel I lose it. (Kin)

Miriam described her inner struggle with heritage and cultural identity especially as it related to family expectations:

I would say coming here at a young age I'm glad I did because it gave me advantage...most people from my culture think I have become American. They say I'm losing my heritage. They don't understand it's the way I want to dress. Once I understand the concept of what the world is about through English, through people around me, you don't have to do something because someone said so. Because culture is what people make up, the rules and stuff. Someone made up once. You do your own stuff, you know, it's like you gotta know yourself. And I think that most people would be offended because I dress a certain way because to them I losing my culture. But I say why does the culture have to be tied to my clothes? Like religion, most people believe that if you cover your face it's a sign

of respect. I say a piece of cloth should not show people how much faith you have in God. It's about you and your God, so I think I'm a political person...yeah.

Nung described what it was like in a school setting trying to balance the values and expectations of two different cultures:

Teachers think they need to get your student to be talkative all the time. They don't understand that in some culture for female it's not OK to be outspoken. If you push them to talk so much it's gonna have them question their culture. To have them talk, talk, talk, participate in everything, when you push them and they already lower that is problem. They already have in mind what they should do in their home life and it so different from here. When you get them to change so fast and quick into American mainstream culture I don't know how they handle that. I had luxury of being young coming here and slowly assimilate myself into culture. If a student doesn't want to talk you can't always get them to participate. Be more aware that even if they are in this classroom they are not fully here. There is a part that you won't understand until you really know that culture. Some Middle East girls may not always be open to sitting next to boy because in their mind they should be separate. Western culture is about yourself, the individual. Non-western is about sticking with family and friends. I see girls in high school who have been here a long time and they're still quiet and shy. You can't force them to be active all the time, not because they don't want to because they don't know what to do. At home that's what they do. You come to school it's different. We were told every time you walk in front of person you bow down. People used to say what are you doing? There was nothing wrong with me it was just a sign of respect. Eventually I see that my classmates weren't doing that so I stop. It's good to help them along the way but when you just push them too much it's bad.

Kin also described the tension she felt between becoming too Americanized while also trying to maintain her roots to meet family expectations:

Coming here wasn't that easy for my parents because when there were school dances, prom, ROTC, and when we had the military ball my mom didn't want me to go one time. It was so horrible. It's at night and there will be other people there and she sees at dance just kids together no teacher. Some things she didn't understand. I didn't play sports. I didn't go to any games. They are so afraid and they always tell us think about what you do doesn't reflect on you it reflects on them. They got that embedded in us so bad.

My parents worked second and third shift. When my sister was at college in small town you can do whatever. I didn't want to do anything I was so scared. I worked hard back then getting A was best thing. If you get that then my family was known for having good kids. No drinking, no smoking, no drama. My parents said that and we always try to maintain that. It was frustrating. There were certain things I wanted to say but I didn't because they are my parents. I shouldn't say that they think I was different anyway. Even now there are certain things my sister and I, my parents don't really know what we do in our personal life. It's sad. We still try to maintain that image. We don't have boyfriend. We aren't married. We don't have kids. Even now my family still known to have two good daughters. It's hard.

Especially for me I am potential artist. I want to do research with military men to try to explain that to parents they wouldn't understand that. I was psychology major. First to explain I want to study people they don't get that. To them good job is doctor or nurse. You have to have a purpose to do things. That's how my culture is. Just to do things they don't get that. Even now I'm starting to lose some of my translation to certain words in Loas. I don't know how to say like concept of getting master degree. I don't know how to explain that to parents. There isn't a word for that. There probably is but I don't know that. I know I'm starting to lose some of that as I get older. Being away from parents we don't really get to go to ceremony in Temple because we work all the time. So I don't know it is fearful. I gonna lost that especially if some of the old people pass away. There are important ceremonies: married, first kid, bless first house. We don't know what will happen when my generation gets older. We starting to lose some of that really.

When I probed Kin for a solution to that problem she responded:

I don't know because me personally I don't really know. I don't see myself as the typical housewife. Typical Asian women when you go to the temple you cook and clean like that. At the same time my parents think that when I go home we gonna teach like that. I think there is so much more and you still want to maintain your culture. If I stay here I don't know, even now one foot out and in the door. Some of my American friends don't understand some of the things I do in my personal life. There are certain things the way they are and we don't question that. I hope my parents will be more understanding. How do you tell your parents I gonna leave when I graduate and do something else...become more Americanized?

Caught between two worlds, their former culture and their new culture,

participants struggled to discover their place in the US. Nung, Miriam, H Dek and Kin

have been here for more than ten years. They are all now adults yet they still struggle with who they are and how they fit into their families, into their heritage group, and into American society. Sadly, they do not know the answer, nor do they know where to begin in finding a solution.

*Academic related difficulties.* All of the issues raised thus far have impacted this group of refugees' transition to American schools in some manner. In certain instances, participants specifically spoke to academic issues that directly affected their new school experience. One such issue was the sense of being lost in class and the feeling of hopelessness that created. Their stories demonstrated that teachers were doing little to support them at their language and academic level. Little modifying of content or strategies was employed to help students access the content. Kin recalled her experience:

The only time I hated it was when we had to write. Gosh I hated that. And the teacher, I remember we had to write a paragraph and I didn't get the concept that the paragraph doesn't run all the way through. I didn't write well because I didn't understand the English language concept.

Nung told a similar story of struggling with the language and receiving little to no modifications in the regular classroom:

If teacher talk to me I just have blank look on my face. I don't have a clue. Only after two years when I read the story I can actually understand the story and able to answer the questions. They had a really good program in ESL class. But like, I remember my language arts class. You know, you go into regular class, then we go into ESL class, and then back into regular class. The language difficult, especially language arts we have to do a lot of reading and writing. Those, I struggle a lot. Eventhough I can speak the language for two years it still hard. When I speak the language after two years I still struggle with the big words. I can't answer the questions because I struggle with big words. My math class, I remember this teacher, she give us work but she didn't really explain it to us



clearly. My learning is different. I cannot learn by just listening because of language problems. I have to write things down and see it. She was doing the problems very fast and I couldn't catch up with it.

Mohammed also struggled:

The teacher says if you don't do in class do at home. All of this is difficult because they speak fast. I say I don't understand I don't write anything I just give her the paper. You can ask if she speak fast you can ask her I don't understand. If you don't understand anything and you ask her, then she gonna stop. Then she gonna talk to you and explain. If you no understand and you ask her again then she say the students they gonna laugh at you. She gonna say take it home and do at home. I just say I don't understand. Then she explain again and I don't understand. The other guys they are laughing at me they say he have a problem. I think I say forget it. Don't help me I gonna do by myself at home. One day I decide to not go to school. I gonna stay home all the days I just say I don't want to go to school. I no learn anything. I just sit on the table on the chair and I look at time. When its 2:45 I go home. I just wake up in the morning I learn nothing.

Mloa faced similar struggles with what she perceived was little to no support:

I hate the most going to class and doing work and I don't understand a thing. I try to say something to the teacher and it seemed like the teacher did not understand me. You know how they put you in homeroom there was no one who could help me. I was very frustrated and in my math class I didn't have any Asian student in there at all so I was having problem. In Language arts I struggled in there because I had to do a lot of work and didn't know how to do that.

Eve recalled a time when she was able to complete the math assignment using a method she learned in her country; however, the teacher told her it was not correct and made her do it again:

Every main thing we do in math class I finish in my country. When I do like in my country sometimes they say it's wrong. The answer is same, but because of English I forget one thing so I do like in my country, so the teacher says it's wrong. Sometimes she say I have to follow the way she teaches.

Nuk recalled time when the teacher did not know what to do with her:

When I was in middle school that is when in English class everybody just come to class and sit and the teacher sit and come to class and work. The teacher knows that I don't understand and she don't give me the work so I sit there a long time and do nothing.

Not only was the workload difficult for participants, but the student behavior posed a challenge. H Dek remembered the pressure she felt from her American peers:

All the other kids who have money or have so many things they make the refugee and immigrant children feel they are less. They even put pressure on us and we don't have courage to do better because we think I have nothing I can't do better so I give up.

Julius witnessed many fights among students in his school. This brought back painful memories of home:

Many time in day they fighting. I scared. I am scared because I don't want people fighting. I remember the day some students they like they don't like people from other countries. I with my friend from Sudan and we have to go home they tell us. We have to go home. They wrote a letter and they put the flag on it, and they write. They said they don't want the people from other country. I scared because when we was in my country and the student they do like that, the other student they writing, and the other student they die. At school they fight at school and die. They use the knife and gun. They fight because the student they are Hutu and Tutsi.

Participants recounted stories of struggling to keep pace with their American peers with little support from school officials. Immediately holding them to the same learning expectations in all classes is unrealistic. They cannot be expected to achieve at

the same rates unless modifications or supports are put into place. Participants were exasperated by the challenge, yet they did not give up.

### *Hope (Success)*

While participants described many struggles associated with transitioning to schools in the US, they also shared that one can be hopeful. In spite of all of the challenges, they recounted great stories of success and the reasons for that success. The academic and social success stories were due to many factors, but once again certain themes emerged as each participant told their story.

*Reading.* Literacy is a major issue for many refugees arriving to schools in the US. All participants except for one had experienced years of missed schooling. Kin was the only participant who did not experienced interrupted education because she began school in the US as a kindergartener. They all reported being below grade level in reading and most reported they were not literate in their native language. Mloa said:

I have never learned to read and write in my own language so now I have to I guess I kind of look through Bible that's how I pick up language. Other than that I have never had formal training or study in my own language. I just read Bible and learn I guess.

Miriam shared, "US was first time learning to read." Academic success hinges on one's ability to read *and* understand the content of text. This is a double challenge for those who not only are learning a new language, but simultaneously are learning how to read and write for the first time. Mahmud shared, "The reading is easy but to understand the question is not. I can read but I don't understand. So if I read I can't understand the question, so how am I going to do work?" The challenge is especially difficult for those

who begin the literacy process at an older age. When H Dek arrived to the US she was placed into third grade and had missed foundational instruction in how to read:

Spelling was such a challenge because English speaking is hard enough already then you need to comprehend how to spell and read. So that's really more trouble and adds another pressure. Then I think that to go to kindergarten and first grade they teach you the sounds. I never got to learn the sounds. I'm thinking, oh they could teach me that so maybe it would not hurt for someone who has not been learning the sounds. When they first come teach them all the sounds I think that will help and that will help with remembering how to spell and how to write and read that.

When one cannot read text a feeling of despair occurs and learning is greatly hindered. In spite of that, this group of refugees shared stories of success by overcoming this challenge. The participants who were high school students were still experiencing the struggle and could not comment on which strategies were helping them to become stronger readers. However, each of the adult participants were in careers or were students at universities requiring strong literacy skills in English. When I inquired about what helped them to overcome their literacy challenge they shared the following stories. Nung shared:

That came in eighth grade so after two year I can, when I read the story I can actually understand the story and able to answer the questions...I liked my ESL class because my teacher would read story about student from different country when I can't read. I can relate and then they tell story of how they become successful. That inspire me a lot. That make me want to read. They had a really good program when if you are in ESL. You go to regular class then we go into ESL class. In the language especially language arts we have to do a lot of reading and writing and nobody tell me how. Those, I struggle a lot. Eventhough I can speak the language for two year. The ESL teacher write words on board before the story and teach us what they mean. Then she read the story to us and then we read with her. Then we can read by ourselves. She help us sound out word and understand what they mean with picture or sentence or dictionary.

Nung needed vocabulary instruction in advance of the reading. She also found that reading stories related to her interests was meaningful and inspired her to want to learn more. In addition, her teacher taught her how to find meaning herself through context clues, pictures and using a dictionary. Explicit instruction about reading strategies such as these in addition to basic phonics (sounding out words) gave Nung the tools she needed to be successful. The other classes expected her to already be able read on grade level with no assistance. That is why she struggled with the reading and writing in those classes. The content was not modified to meet her needs.

Miriam never attended school in her home country. She was illiterate and began school for the first time in fifth grade in the US:

One of the main things that really did help me was to focus on reading. Nobody really sat down with me to show me how to do it. This is how you pronounce words, this is how you read. If it did happen I would remember. It takes a while to know to understand the concepts of reading, especially in another language. I think one day what happened was one day when I was in 6th grade I found a book and I just start reading it just for fun. But after I start reading it...random books...random books it helped me with more English more than the ESL classes. I remember one time thinking I will never get the hang of reading or writing. I think that was one big thing that helped me think about college. When you don't know what's going on, but in America all that you need is written right before you. All you have to do is read it. You have to know what its saying. I think I learned more in the past years that I've been here just for myself reading. That help me a lot, and that for me it worked. Maybe it won't work for others but it worked for me. I'm not the best student in the world but if I can read a book like a novel or something, that's how far I got just thinking I would never finish a chapter. I got the concept of how to read just from reading. I start thinking about college I start knowing what is that thing I always missing? Knowing where the world was and how to get what I wanted now I have that feeling...you know?

For Miriam, reading opened the door of possibility to her. She not only grew in her language skills but her personal confidence and dreams for the future changed.

Simply by beginning to read, even independently, she altered the path of her life. That was her inspiration to attend college.

H Dek told a similar story. Like Miriam she did not tell the tale of being explicitly encouraged to read by school officials. She began that process by accident:

I said, OK if I don't have any children I should go to school and maybe get my GED. So my cousin introduce me to romance novels. That summer she came to visit me and she brought me some books and within that summer I read 200 romance novel books. Before that I registered for GED class it was boring. They don't teach you like high school. They give you the book and you work on it. If you have questions you ask me. Then I had many questions to the point that I feel like maybe this is not for me. So I quit GED. Then after I read the books I came back and I gonna try again. I took the placement test and I had jumped from 20% to like 90% in reading comprehension. The teacher said H Dek what did you do over summer? I said all I did was read 200 romance novels. She said you should go try to take the test. So I went and I took the test and I passed the reading no problem. Then we did the English practice one so I took the English section." H Dek's attributes her story of growth to a love for reading she developed one summer. She continued her story by offering the following advice to school officials. "One suggestion is to encourage students to read. They cannot just read something that they cannot like to do. Somebody who does not have interest in history that won't help them. Let them read what interests them. What interests me is the romance novel, little did I know. If you read something that is of interest to you, you pay attention to it. So I got my GED went to college full time.

Learning to read was extremely important to the long-term success of participants. They did not simply become readers— they became lovers of reading. Their choice of reading material was not important. The simple act of reading caused their language proficiency to blossom. The more they read the more they learned, and the more empowered they became to take control of their future.

*Teachers.* Many of the stories shared to this point have demonstrated challenges faced by participants in the school setting. These challenges ranged from the newness of

the system, the poor treatment they receive at the hands of their peers, and the lack of differentiated attention they received in class from teachers. Though school was difficult, participants shared many positive experiences as well. When talking about the successes of being in their new schools, they overwhelmingly described one critical element. That critical piece involved a teacher who took special interest in the participant or inspired him or her in some manner. This special connection was demonstrated in two areas. First they described a teacher who went above and beyond to help students as often as they needed help and in as many ways as possible. They described a teacher who persevered until participants learned a concept no matter how many times they had to re-explain something or find an alternative strategy until they understood. The other aspect, which is related to the first, was the relationship a teacher formed with the student. Participants expressing this factor talked about feeling loved and cared for. A sense of nurturing was a critical factor leading to their success and overcoming the myriad of obstacles in their path.

What follows are stories shared by participants which highlight how a particular teacher or school official went out of his or her way to ensure learning happened. I believe the power of these stories speak for themselves and need little analysis. They are presented as a continuous string of stories with no analysis to visually demonstrate the power they convey.

If I don't understand ask teacher. I don't speak English. I mean in my school they put in class and you can't learn like American people. Language is too difficult. One class was with other refugee students, we learn together. The teacher there gonna help you. You don't understand, she gonna help you. She ask all time do

you understand? Do you understand what I say? She do this all the time. I learn in that class. (Mahmud)

Whatever I try to say the teacher try understand me. She's really helpful. Whenever I ask a question she is patient and she explain to me that. For me like I don't have any other thing but I just have difficult with the language. So when I didn't understand I ask to her and she just explain to me every time I ask to her. I think that's it. She really helpful. (Sa Sa)

Most classes not give extra help. But English class she explain a lot. I learn in that class. She help a lot, explain to me a lot. Like me, the way she teach, she use different ways to teach so if I don't understand she use different way so I understand different way. (Ali)

She like, everytime that I do a quiz and I don't have a really good grade she gonna help me and tell me stay after school and give me another book to read so I can do better. Which I did. I had A plus in her class. She really sweet and always try to help me. (Mloa)

In computer when we are going to computer class we are first student and if you have a homework it's computer but that teacher say if you have any homework you don't understand I will help you. Always he helps us...he help us. Is very important for me because he is one who helps me in everything I have. If I have some problem for school or at home or at wrestling team he's one who help me, and then if I have some problem about something they ask for at school but I don't have I told him and he help me for many things. He comes to home to visit us, then he helps us. He help my mom find a job. He gonna help my sister to look for a job... he told us the good way we can be, how we can go to college, what we can do at school. He told us how can behave and how can be good at school and at home. (Julius)

Sometimes she use body language. Yes, too she use the dictionary English and my language, use body language and she talk slow. When I speak a little English I tell her and she try to help me. If I have problem with other class and I tell her she can fix it for me. I ask her for extra time on my work and if I don't understand I can ask her and she can explain more. She most like give attention at me. I ask question in class but she pay a lot of attention to me. If I need help she will come and help me...all the time. (Nuk)



There were a few teachers who really really helped me. One was my 5th grade teacher. She really wanted me to be successful in school. One came along when I was in middle school. The ESL teacher and she helped me. She break it down for me, how to write stuff. Like when I write, I like to get into detail. It was specific. She was the first person to say you have potential in writing. (Miriam)

I remember high school because that's when they learn how to write essay because in college you have to write many essay. One of my teacher share the most patience ever. I remember my grammar is horrible. It's funny because they try to put me in ESL but still I was taking all advanced AP English. I understood English but for me to write it out was difficult. If I read a book I can understand it. They say she gets it but the writing is hard so she sit me down and help me with that. She may have saw something in me that I was good at this but I cannot write. In high school she do more for me to learn language. Maybe that's why now I don't remember doing much writing even in middle school. They just use red pen. I hate red pen. In high school she help me she don't use red pen. I don't think I gonna use red pen when I am the teacher. (Kin)

The vice principal said I'm going to make this work. I never forget her. During recess she would get me and I would go to her office and she would teach me English. I would learn English through her. Then, there was no ESL class but after three months my level was already up to third grade level. But because my math was so much higher than third grade they decided that they should pair me with someone in 5th grade and then my English was still not good. At recess she said if you want to stay I will help you instead of you going to play so we work together. Then the vice principal would tell me colors and words and adjectives. So I did get special treatment. But that helps a lot. I think too because my teacher paid attention to me. She would say if we had to do exercise she explain to whole group then she come to me one on one and she would explain to me how to do it. We did couple example together. She come back and check on me. I think she explain it on a one on one and explain it to the whole group that helped a lot. Even now I am taking college courses and it is hard. My English is so much better than 20 years ago but sometimes when they put it into words it can mean so many different ways. They sound the same but they really don't. So explaining one on one separately like she did really helps. It helps when they pay more attention to you at the beginning. We have to have caring teachers. I was at a low point. I will forever remember my vice principal and teacher. Because of them I am here today. Because one on one they focused on me. (H Dek)

One can conclude that teachers putting forth time and effort certainly care about their students. While that fact was not mentioned explicitly in the preceding stories, participants described the importance of that connection in the stories that follow.

The first day I came here I did not speak English. I went to high school and met my ESL teacher. I like her a lot. She is a caring person she helped me learn a lot and she gave me books to help me study hard to achieve my goal. So when I was with her she was a really good teacher and my counselor at the same time. She really sweet and caring person. I remember the first time I started at high school she took me everywhere because I didn't know which way to go, to cafeteria to bus. But the other students, the teachers didn't do that. But to me I was like her child you know. But you know, the first time you don't know anything it was not embarrassing when she do that. (Mloa)

From beginning one teacher praise me for my art work. I remember I did a drawing of this girl when I was little. It was in the library. Teacher praise me for that. That was nice. That was really nice. They encourage that. They pull me out of class to do some drawing, to do that some more. They have faith in me. I never have that before. (Kin)

It was the fact that you could tell she really cared and she wanted you to do well. No matter what she did, if you could speak English or not you knew she would help you in class. She would help you learn English. She never really got mad or anything. She tell us how to do the basics of how to write, how to read, how to speak. So you know, she cared about me. The most effective teachers are those who formed a relationship with me. (Miriam)

Special connections between teachers who gave of their own time to ensure participants felt cared for and understood the content made a major difference in their ability to succeed. The extra help came in the form of additional explanations or supports in the classroom, home visits, after school tutoring, or conversations of encouragement. The power of this one inspiring relationship was enough to help overcome many of the challenges participants faced in their transition.

*Personal determination to succeed.* The final theme related to why several of these refugees were able to overcome the challenges of transition into American schools was their personal determination to succeed, “Being a student here you have to try harder than an American kid because of the language” (Sa Sa). I was inspired by their personal drive and ambition. Their source of motivation was sometimes encouraged by family members, sometimes encouraged by poor treatment from peers, and other times it simply came from within. Regardless of the source, they were compelled to succeed. Once again, the power of these stories speak for themselves and need little analysis. They are also presented in a continuous string to visually demonstrate the power they convey.

I remember after the last episode in Thailand when my dad say we go to America. It's gonna be a safe place nobody can hurt you we will be protected. So you have high hope you are going to a better place and you don't see any of this anymore. So you come over here and you thinking this going to be great where I have the chance to be somebody that I can't be in my country. This is my chance so you don't have that fear anymore. Maybe every family is different. For me because my dad and my family always assured me I would be OK. You need constant support and love from your family to make sure that you are going to be fine. I'm sure they have hardship that they don't tell us about. I'm sure they have hard time with memories but they don't show because. They always say look we are so much better than we used to be. (H Dek)

My mom always tell me to do my best in school and plus my parents were not educated. They could not afford to pay the money to go to school. Back then really hard to get money to go to school. Plus the parents back then didn't allow my mom to go to school. She said that if girls go to school the people going to throw them to the sea. My dad was an orphan since he was six and his parents died when he was six and he had two sisters. I came from really poor family. My dad raised his sisters and he had to live with his uncle and his two little sisters. He drop out of school when he was in 2nd grade. He make sure we do well in school. (Mloa)

The first day I got here I saw kids going to school. I tell my dad I want to go to school now. I came in May but I had to wait until August. My brothers and my sister we were eager to go to school the moment we got here. My dad tells us we should stick to education. This country has better opportunity than Vietnam so I think education is very important. Once you graduate you can go to college, and once you go to college you have opportunity to go to many places and have many jobs. You have more opportunity here. I like it here a lot because the opportunity. My friends and family members back home they have doctorate degree but because they are minority or different ethnicity they still have stereotype that they're not good. They can't use their degree. (Nung)

All the students they speak too fast and everything. Always they say oh my gosh why you come here you don't speak English? We say it's OK, but now when we walk in class they get like F and we get C. They say wow. They say if you don't speak English you can't do what you want (laughter). I'm very happy because when I come here everybody they scare us. They come to talk to us. We say can you speak too slowly? They ask us where you come from? When we say Burundi they say where is that? And my brother say you will know that country when we have test. When we have test you will know that country. When we have test they have F and we have A. My brother say I think now you know Burundi (laughter). (Eve)

I remember one time in PE class that's the first year I attend school here in US. I didn't understand English or what the teacher was saying to me. So I took the PE class and the American people make fun of me. So I say I gonna try my best to learn English and I achieve my goal. I was out of ESL services one and a half years later. (Mloa)

You want to be the best. The challenge for me was reading and writing English. I remember if I could just improve this part I would be so much over here. You want to be the best. In our culture, level of education and fame and money are the top priority. They concentrate in math. You want to be the best there is no second best. I am aiming for first. Even if you aim for first you still may be three, four, or five. We always strive for the best, for the top. I think a lot of this depends on the parents and also the culture. Some parents they don't care what the children do. They sort of neglect their children. I can't get anything more than that. In my family my dad sees the potential in me. That had something to do with it. They always find the best in me. They want me to be the best. (H Dek)

I was just excited I was learning. Maybe it was because I was being denied the right to be educated from really young. I always wanted to go to school even if it was mosque to learn Koran but my family said you can't go because we don't have money. There was always some kind of excuse for not going, but I always wanted it. I didn't care how hard it would be as long as I was there. I was really excited when I first came here. I took it really seriously but I knew that education could take me far but I didn't know how to get there. Maybe it was because I was denied an education. I always questioned why I couldn't do this. Why? Why? Why? You gotta give me a reason, a reasonable answer. Some probably struggle with idea that I succeed. I always wonder why can't people who were born here just why can't they do it? Why can't they take advantage of it? I always wonder that. I came in and they have this advantage over me and I am at the same level as them or above. Some respect it. I always have a thirst for learning, even in math my least favorite. That effort I put in, that extra step I take to understand the problem that's what gets me close to my future. (Miriam)

Participants were motivated by a number of factors to be resilient and persevere in their new setting. Each story is a testament to their strength and will to achieve. This is further evidence that refugees are important sources of information regarding their own experience and have much to offer Americans and the American schooling system. Schools need to encourage their refugee students to be more active in sharing their stories and dreams so their peers and school officials can learn from their example.

#### *Advice*

For the second research question I sought possible solutions for school leaders to implement to ensure that refugees adapt to the American schooling process. Conclusions were drawn from the stories shared up to this point. In addition to what can be gleaned from those stories, participants explicitly shared advice with school leaders which can be grouped into two main categories: advice to teachers and advice about helping refugees navigate the cultural and heritage challenges. Their feedback follows.

*Advice to teachers.* Mohammed advised:

The first thing sometimes they need to be strict and sometimes they can laugh with you if something funny. They need explain to you. They need find a way, the way you understand. They must find out how you learn. They must ask you and speak to you. They must discuss with you. They should ask you something to know if you understand. They need speak to you and ask if you understand that. They will tell you something if you haven't understood. They will keep you if you didn't and they will explain things to you so you do understand.

Sa Sa also had advice to share:

They have to be patient because it's the main thing because the students we're not speaking English. Like we don't have no English like that so they have to be patient to explain it to the student. Then they have to teach them how to say that with patience because some student like they didn't got it when you said one time. Like when you teach one time one word you have to repeat so they have to be very patient.

Yung felt that concern for students was important:

You have to care about them, just do what you can for them. Even if that is hard for the teacher. They are scared and don't really know what's going on. They need special help, a special school or class that can help them learn about school here. That's what they need.

Ali wanted to teachers to understand that students need to talk:

Some people they keep it in they don't say it if they have like problems. They can't tell some of them. Some have problems and they need tell teachers how they feel. So it's like teachers need to talk to them. I would want to know like why he is angry.

Nuk advised on cultural understanding:

The first thing I think they need to know about the background and different culture and background. Some people their tradition is different. For me I don't mind. I respect the other people culture and traditions. For our teachers they need to know more about the students' background and to be tougher with them and in classroom they need to put the student in pair who came from different countries so they speak in English. If they stay in same group as their country they won't be able to learn English faster. I learn from experience myself, my teacher put us together all we do is talking in our language. We don't do our work. So you want to achieve and you have to get your work done.

Others wanted teachers to help students understand their new environment.

The first thing is to help the student get more involved with American school and American culture with their English skills as well. I think the teacher needs to put the students in different country pairs to force to speak in English and to do their work and achieve their goal and encourage them to stay more in school because most student don't feel like going to school. We need to encourage student to go to school and work hard and give something to study. (Mloa)

Parents in my culture, the mother is very reserved. Yes of course the mother lead everything the father follow, still she let the father take control maybe go to meetings. The father do that, mother do housework. Sometimes when it comes to having conference sometimes they (parents) feel like do I have to go? There are activities going on in school if I go I will be left out. I don't understand the language. The moment they see a person who speaks the language and helps them they feel comfortable. They need interpreter. When interpreter was in conference a teacher said the parent had suggestions and ideas to share. Before he was reserved. Asian parents don't feel like they should get involved in school. They have not made the transition. Even if they have been here for 20 years teachers need to help parents be more involved. (Nung)

If we have the family involved, then for students as much one on one that we can is important. Focus on the ones who are the most quiet, they are afraid of talking. Because if English is not good you feel ashamed of talking. Teachers need to focus on the ones who are more quiet. I want to earn the trust with children. If you build that trust they will come to you for anything. I want parents to feel that their children are at the right place. Teachers need to reach out to parents too, build that trust. (H Dek)

Some of the advice shared by participants relates to how teachers interact with students. Other advice relates to instructional strategies and classroom structure.

Participants also advised on how to involve parents. School officials must enable these important stakeholders to offer input regarding their schooling experience when making policy decisions.

*Advice regarding heritage and culture.* Participants also advised on how school officials can help them navigate the heritage and cultural issues they face. They shared insight regarding how educators can be more sensitive about honoring their backgrounds and celebrating who they are. Julius shared:

Call the teacher and make some law. We gonna have project in class to ask students how things are going in their country. They can discuss the cultures. Then we will get together with teachers and check with some people from the other countries and we will talk. We gonna show the good things from our country and learn the good things from other countries. We gonna take the students and the teachers together and learn.

Eve encouraged multicultural presentations:

We could have one student in all cultures who can talk to class. If you come from Tanzania you can choose one form Tanzania or Mexico to be the leader of the people who come from there and students can go to them and learn about their culture.

Miriam saw the benefit of getting students involved:

If you have someone from another country you don't know, do something about that country to let them know we do know something about your country and you can tell us more. That's always a good thing. Have them talk about their country. Maybe in an ideal world if you have a student who is not doing well, the teacher spend more time with them more one on one. You know, I don't see you as a



collective. I am still well aware of you as an individual, to not be ignored. Just give us a little attention and make us feel like OK she knows who I am. I'm not just a new student, not just that student in class.

Nung shared:

I would have the international day to get parents, principals, teachers to come. Invite principals from other school to come to our show to see how the differences diversity at my school. Say greeting in languages, do food tasting, pot luck stuff, dance from different country, you know like that. Maybe for each country I would make a slide show for each country to show where the country is, maybe get a little story from each student. The story can be how they get here, what reasons, and have slide show put some pictures on it. Let different people see how that country is what language they speak. You get the picture. I would offer anything to promote diversity because we are diverse. It's good for us to learn about each other.

The advice shared by participants gives school leaders much to consider. Nuk summed up the advice of all students in one phrase, "Tell the students everybody is equal and they can keep their culture." School officials would be wise to listen to her advice and allow it to inform their practice.

### Summary

This chapter provided a forum in which the stories of select refugees were heard. These refugees' stories spoke to the influences which impacted their acculturation into the American public school system. In addition, participants provided advice to school officials about helping other refugees adapt to American public schools. Their stories were based on individual lived experiences. Their stories were different depending on the circumstances they faced, and at times they shared themes. Consequently, one may not be able to draw black and white conclusions nor prescribe clear implications for practice

with all refugees. However, a dialogue has been started and needs to continue if schools are to best meet the needs of refugee students. Implications for practice is the topic of discussion in chapter five.

## CHAPTER V

### INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This final chapter focuses on the interpretation of the research as it relates to the research questions, “From the perspective of refugees, what are some of the salient educational influences that possibly impact refugee acculturation into the American public school setting?” “With regard to the perspectives and stories shared by refugees, what should school leaders be doing to ensure their adaptation to the American schooling process?” I interpreted the research findings from interviews, surveys and documents shared by thirteen refugees. I aimed to draw conclusions from the data by determining what it all means and what is to be made of it (Wolcott, 1994).

The data presented in Chapter IV provided a detailed description of the transitional experience into American schools for a group of refugees. The refugees outlined what life was like before arrival to the US, as well as what life was like in their new setting. There are many implications of this study not only for the education profession but also for me, the primary researcher. Those implications are discussed in this chapter in addition to making recommendations for further study. Concluding statements were made regarding the time I spent with each participant and what this research means to me.

### Why is This Research Important/Significant?

This project is significant because it enabled 13 refugees to share their stories. Extensive research exists reporting *about* the refugee experience in American schools, but a scarce amount empowers refugees to be the source of data. The absence of research from the perspective of refugees represents a large vacuum in the literature. This study provided a forum for the voices of refugees to be heard in addition to creating a space for the reader to create meaning from those stories. This is important for refugees because they have often been told their voice does not matter and they have nothing of value to offer. This mind set began in their home country where they had to flee for various reasons. It was reinforced throughout the process of obtaining refugee status and living in camps. These refugees had spent a large portion of their lives surviving and hoping to see the next day. This study provided a space for them to shed the demeaning perspectives others had held about them, and empowered them to be heard. Not only was their voice heard, but in this study the guidance shared with school officials consists of their voice alone. This demonstrates they are valued stakeholders in the educational process and their input is meaningful.

In addition, the literature speaks of the refugee experience in distinct categories such as trauma, learning, second language acquisition, and culture. One assumes from the research that these characteristics are independent of one another. This study is significant because refugees shared about the interconnectedness of the different aspects of their experience. Through their stories, one has a much deeper understanding of their condition. Whereas the literature speaks of trauma, war, and loss in general terms,

participants in this study provided and in depth understanding of the specific episodes of trauma they endured as well as how that affected them at the moment of trauma and later in their lives. The refugees did not simply report about these events, they invited the reader to experience them through storytelling. Consequently, trauma was not viewed in this study as an abstract term but as the reality of specific events that transpired in the lives of these refugees.

Likewise this research does not simply share about the possible schooling challenges refugees may face. Participants provided detailed insight into their real life experiences of being new in a school. They did not generalize what experiences may be like for refugees as the literature does. Rather, the refugees recounted specific instances of transition and shared the realities of their challenges as they experienced them. Their input was explicit, and more credible than a report from one who has not personally experienced the transition firsthand. The voices of refugees connected all of the variables that impacted their transition helping the reader to understand that one cannot segment these issues into independent categories. This line of thought is missing from the current literature.

In addition, I believe providing a forum for their stories to be heard is a significant step in fostering a greater dialogue between school officials and refugees. Dialogue should facilitate the creation of strategies and programs that are best suited to meet refugee needs. If school officials are to be informed about how to meet the educational and socio-cultural needs of this distinct population more forums are needed inviting their voices to be heard. To be recognized as meaningful and valued stakeholders in the

American schooling system, refugees must be invited to share their perspectives thereby participating in the creation of educational policy and programs relevant to their needs. This study provided such a forum to a group of refugees. They were viewed as a rich source of knowledge and experts regarding their transition whereas school officials were viewed as learners and co-creators of meaning. This is in opposition to the paradigm that views school officials as the experts on schooling empowering them to make top-down policy decisions regarding refugee learning. This study recognizes refugees as meaningful stakeholders in that process.

This research is also significant because school systems, nationwide, are experiencing difficulty in meeting the needs of refugees and other English language learners who have experienced interrupted education. Many misconceptions exist about reaching this group of students and their true cognitive abilities (Zehr, 2009). Some school systems are interpreting refugees' lack of literacy skills as a demonstration of low cognitive abilities. However, as I have learned in this project, the low literacy levels may not be an indication of low cognitive abilities. It could be caused by a lack of access to schooling or teachers inability to understand refugee students' needs, or any number of variables. As Kin shared, it could also be due to pushing students too quickly to respond and behave in class according to western norms of being outspoken. Possibly students are not participating or outspoken because silence is the cultural norm with which they are more familiar. Participants demonstrated that given the right circumstances they can overcome literacy deficiencies and begin to out-perform their American peers in the process. Progress may be slow at the beginning of the school experience due to the depth

of challenges refugees are working through. It is extremely important for school leaders to understand how deep and how wide these challenges are for refugees so they will provide the appropriate level of academic and social support.

This study is also significant because as the number of ELLs in American public schools increases, so does the accountability level schools will face relative to the No Child Left Behind standards. Due to the pressure schools face to make AYP, schools with a sub-group of Limited English Proficient students will need to identify strategies to help these students achieve on state mandated tests. School officials will need to tap into the feedback and perspectives of the students themselves in order to meet those needs. This study provides salient information for school officials to hear those voices and understand their needs.

This research is also significant because one of its purposes is to add to the knowledge base in the field of education, more specifically how educators can better assist refugees to transition successfully into American public schools. The audience for this study includes any school or community officials who have dealings with refugee students. This study was designed to examine the stories and experiences of newly arrived refugees who are current students and refugees who have already graduated from American public schools. Participants shared insight based on their lived experience about their transition to the US school experience. In addition, based on their first-hand experience, they also advised educators on what we can be doing to meet their perceived needs. I aimed not only to make a contribution to the literature regarding the refugee

school experience, but also to provide space for refugees in the US to have voice in the educational process.

Finally, this research is significant because an important aspect of US history is welcoming new groups into its borders and inviting them to enrich American society. Schools are working to promote diversity and tolerance of differences among students. The refugees shared salient information about how difficult it was for them to continue valuing their heritage and maintaining their culture while acclimating to their new way of life. Schools officials will learn from the stories and feedback shared by participants so they can foster the creation of inclusive and accepting climates in their schools that celebrate the contributions of all students, including refugees.

#### What Can be Learned from this Research?

##### *A Rich Source of Information*

This study has demonstrated that refugees were a meaningful source of information regarding their transitional needs. They should be consulted more often to understand their needs. It was important to ensure that as much data as possible came directly from the refugees themselves. They articulated their experiences, opinions, and perceptions regarding their transition in a clear and detailed manner. They proved to be insightful about the challenges and hopes involved in coming to a new country and acclimating to a new system of schooling. The longer interviews lasted, the more empowered participants became. At the beginning of the interviews participants shared brief answers and needed to be prompted by my questions. The longer the interview lasted their stories grew longer, their tone shifted and was more confident, and they



shared more personal opinion. Their comfort level with critiquing the US system also grew in the later stages of the interview or in the second round of interviews. In addition, participants needed little prompting by me in the latter stages of interviews. They offered stories and input before I could ask the questions. I learned that these refugees have wanted to share their insights for some time but had never been provided a forum. They were surprised that no one had asked them to share their story before and were happy to have this opportunity now.

In addition to refugees being a meaningful source of data for research on this topic in particular, I was struck by what educators have to learn from them in other areas. Who they are and what they have experienced represent a wealth of knowledge and wisdom from which school officials and others can learn. They have learned many lessons from oppressive circumstances in their home country, the trauma of flight, living in alternate locations such as refugee camps, and feeling isolated and different in each new location. These experiences have all contributed to an inspiring appreciation for life, diversity, and tolerance that many do not recognize in the US. These stories must be shared. Their insights are worth more than simply informing us about the research questions in this study. They carry wisdom and direction that inform on many aspects of life regarding what is truly important and how to appreciate what we have.

#### *Breadth of Culture Shock*

I was struck by the depth of culture shock the refugees experienced upon arrival to the US. This occurred as participants told stories of how dramatically different their lives were before coming the US. This was especially true for those who had spent a

prolonged period in refugee camps. The schooling experience alone was in sharp contrast to school here. That is only one of many cultural factors these refugees had to navigate. Their transition to an environment in which they were no longer escaping oppressive regimes, rival tribes, or others wishing to harm them was also compelling.

The more the refugees recounted about life before coming to the US, the more I understood how different life is here. I learned that as hard as we try to understand their past, unless one has experienced similar circumstances, one will never fully be able to empathize with the culture shock refugees face. H Dek's stories of near death encounters, rape, and murder by soldiers (and those who were claiming to help her family cross the Mekong River) were vastly different from the day to day happenings in her new home. The stories shared by Eve and Mahmud regarding the price people pay for belonging to a rival tribe are quite different than the ethnic and cultural divides experienced here. However, it is important to be mindful that the wounds of being considered different were still fresh. Several participants, including Nuk, Mohammed and Mahmud, told stories of being excluded and teased because they were different. Even though students were no longer facing the threat of being killed or tortured for their differences, they were hurt by the poor treatment and teasing they received at the hands of American peers.

The day-to-day life these refugees lived before coming to the US was also different. Julius told of much boredom in the camp where he lived due to a lack of work opportunities. Mloa and Nung told of going to school daily, but they also had much to do around the home to keep the family farms running. Miriam never went to school so her

days were occupied with looking after her younger siblings. The loss of the familiar pace of life proved to be a challenge for these refugees.

The greatest culture shock occurred in the schools. Participants told similar stories of surprise about how different the American schools were in contrast to the schools in their home country. The most striking of these differences was the level of discipline. If participants had attended school in their home country, the expectations for student behavior were much higher than here. The consequences for not meeting those expectations were also much more severe. The refugees could not understand why American school officials tolerated students not working hard, being disrespectful, or not following the rules. They did speak about student misbehavior in their home country; however, it was met with swift action (usually corporal punishment of some form) by the school officials. They had difficulty identifying consequences of any effectiveness in their American schools. Eve laughed as she told about the teacher calling the school police officer to her classroom. She said the students did not care about law enforcement or the principal. All participants told of the many fights they observe on a regular basis and how it did not take long before they were achieving at higher levels than their American peers.

In addition to the difference in how students behave in schools, these refugees had to understand a vastly different structure of course offerings, schedule, and workload. Since their previous school experience was based primarily on memorization and rote copying activities, they perceived their new schools to be less rigorous. They could not understand the small amount of homework they received compared to the lengthy

assignments of memorization that occurred in their home country. The school experience in the US was dramatically different than what they faced in their home country.

We also learned that participants had a sense of humor regarding the culture shock they experienced. Kin best demonstrated this humor when she described the myths of life in the US that were told in her home country. She was surprised to learn that Americans do not sit around in their “free” homes waiting for government checks to arrive in the mail. She was surprised to learn that her life in this country was not going to be easy and comfortable. The others smiled and giggled as they recounted the initial shock of seeing students show affection to one another, how they would get lost and not know where their classes were, or the first time they realized that many of their peers were not serious about studying.

### *Co-cultural Beings*

The refugees encountered identity struggles upon their arrival in a new culture. They described being co-cultural beings caught between the culture of their past and their new cultural context. This challenge manifested itself in relationships with family members and friends. These refugees spoke of adopting aspects of their new culture while clinging to their past practices. They were unsettled about which culture to call their own. This created conflict with American friends who did not understand the practices from their home culture. Conversely, this created conflict with elders in their family who were applying pressure on participants to maintain their home culture and not become too Americanized. Miriam shared the pressure she felt from elders wanting her to wear their cultural head dress for prayer when she felt she could have a relationship with

God without it. She also recounted the pressure she felt from Americans because her religion was not acceptable to them. Kin shared about her career aspirations and how they did not mesh with her family's cultural expectations. She also shared how her friends did not understand her cultural practice of attending temple for prayer.

The co-culture issue was also seen in the classroom and the hallways of school. Kin explained the strain that is placed on students who are used to being reserved and quiet in the classrooms of their home culture. Tension was created when American teachers were expecting her to be outspoken. She was torn between wanting to be respectful through silence as her cultural norms taught, and understanding that in her new school if she did not speak it would be viewed as a lack of understanding or unwillingness to participate. The tension of being bicultural created identity crises for these refugees that even as adults they were still striving to resolve. Schools need to establish supports that encourage dialogue in these areas so students have a forum to voice their concerns and encourage one another. This would also enable teachers and peers to understand certain behaviors of refugee students to avoid misinterpretations.

### *Reading*

The stories the refugees shared about the importance of reading and how that related to their overall success was compelling. I was struck by the level of urgency with which participants spoke regarding reading. Current students who were still learning to read such as Mahmud and Mohammed passionately expressed their level of despair and frustration with the process. In their responses, body language, and tone I sensed they felt like something was wrong with them because they were not understanding all of the

concepts as their American peers. This message was conveyed by their peers who ridiculed them and laughed at them. The frustration was also reinforced by teachers who did not stop to provide the necessary support. The sense of hopelessness they described when reading but not comprehending text was also shared by those who have mastered the skill. Former students such as Miriam, H Dek, Mloa, and Nung have not forgotten the sinking feeling of trying to understand text beyond their ability level. Their frustration became a motivator and eventually they became proficient readers.

The refugees described how they were able to leverage their backgrounds in reading to help them learn to read in English. Even the students who expressed reading struggles described their ability to call words by applying decoding skills they possessed from learning to read in their native language. While comprehension was still a struggle, they were using prior-knowledge to begin the reading process in English. Those who were not literate in their native language, such as Miriam, also employed their background as an asset. She leveraged her exclusion from school as motivation for wanting to read independently. H Dek leveraged her expertise in math to tutor her American peers in exchange for their help with reading. Participants used what they knew in their first language to impact second language learning.

I also learned that being able to read was the primary language learning vehicle for participants. Miriam and H Dek recounted how reading novels taught them more than any class they had ever taken. Likewise, thanks to romance novels H Dek was able to make enormous gains in her reading proficiency level in a short amount of time. The other former students who had learned to read in English grew in confidence as well.

Their descriptions of what school was like before they could read and how their experience changed once they could read demonstrated a higher value of self. They demonstrated this in their tone, the look on their faces as they described the transformation, improved grades, and the new vision they had to go to college or begin a career that they did not possess before.

As stories were shared on this topic I learned that refugees need and would appreciate particular focus in the area of reading, even at the most basic levels. Specific suggestions about what school officials could be doing are provided in the implications section of this chapter. However, one cannot underestimate the value these participants placed on the ability to read.

#### *The Power of Relationships with Teachers*

When the refugees described the successes they had enjoyed two main topics surfaced. The first was learning to read. The second was a special connection with a teacher. Even though the majority of the experiences they described with teachers had a negative connotation, they all recalled a particular teacher who went out of his or her way to reach them. The power of the relationship extended beyond simply teaching academic content, this teacher cared for the whole person.

I came to understand that the refugees' success was directly related to this teacher. It seemed that if it had not been for the extra time and concern the teacher had shown, participants would not have had the same degree of success. The relationship was important because it provided the academic support that participants desperately needed. They described teachers who modified instruction and content to make it comprehensible.

These were the teachers who met students at their levels and pushed them to grow. In addition to the academic support, these teachers made the students feel valued and cared for. Nung did not know what she would have done without her favorite teacher. Mloa remembered her teacher as being like a mother. Their transition experience was full of uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt. The refugees needed a place where they felt safe and valued. The special connection they made with a teacher represented the first step in achieving new goals in the US. After years of being told they were not valued, or of less worth than the majority population, or having learned that adults and officials cannot be trusted, the bond between that special teacher and the participant began to erode those feelings.

#### *Adaptability and Determination*

Considering all of the changes experienced by the refugees, educators can learn from this research that in order for them to successfully transition into American schools students will need to be adaptable and determined. Life in the US is vastly different than what they experienced previously. The refugees were forced to make important adaptations to their lifestyle, even if those changes did not come naturally. None of them complained about having to adapt— they simply spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. It seemed as if they had accepted this as their new reality and they had to adapt. Consequently, they readied themselves for that change. They spoke of how challenging change was, and all they had to overcome, but they did not speak about it in negative terms. It led me to wonder whether this group of refugees was naturally adaptable, if this was a trait they had learned from having experienced so much change and turmoil in their lives, or if it was a



fact of life they simply accepted now that they were in a new culture. Regardless of the reason, this research teaches how adaptable and resilient refugees must be in order to make a successful transition to the American public school system.

In addition to being adaptable, I also learned that the refugees possessed a strong sense of determination to be successful. They were highly driven to make a better life for themselves in the US. This was apparent in their willingness to persevere through the many challenges they faced in their new schools. They worked through mistreatment, feelings of inadequacy, language barriers, academic challenges, lack of acceptance, culture shock and more to come to school each day. They recognized that an education was a valid opportunity to help them achieve their goals and they made learning a priority in their lives. It was not clear if this inner determination was a result of their past or if they developed it once they arrived in the US. Whatever the cause, others should be inspired by their desire to learn and grow.

#### *Advice for School Officials*

Finally, we can learn from the direct advice that participants shared in chapter IV.

For teachers they advised the following:

1. Be patient.
2. Find a way to help students understand the language.
3. Explain things more than once and check if students understand.
4. Allow students to talk to you about their problems.
5. Get to know students' background (experiences, culture, heritage)
6. Push students to speak English
7. Involve the parents of refugees in the life of the school.
8. Give small group or one-to-one academic attention to refugee students.
9. Focus on helping refugees learn to read

Participants also advised school officials on helping students maintain and celebrate their culture and heritage:

1. Have students teach others about their culture and heritage.
2. Host international festivals celebrating various cultures and heritages.
3. Train all students that everybody is equal and they can be proud of their culture.

### Implications of this Research

The refugees shared a wealth of information about their transitional experiences in American public schools. This section provides practical suggestions for addressing the issues raised by participants.

#### *Understanding of Past*

The stories regarding the circumstances that brought the refugees to the US were almost too overwhelming for me to grasp. As the principal of a school serving a large number of refugees, I was even struck at the horrific past these refugees recounted. School officials must get to know, as best as they can, the stories of the refugees they serve. School officials cannot adequately respond to the needs of their students without a basic understanding of their past. Their stories are deep and full of experiences that could explain certain behaviors (social and academic) that students may display in their new setting. They are also key to creating a sense of empathy that could motivate officials to implement programs on their behalf. I am not advocating that we feel sorry for this population of students in a condescending manner. However, officials need to understand the struggles faced by refugees in order to help them overcome obstacles that could hinder their success in American schools.

### *Special Programs*

In light of how vast the challenges are that refugees face when entering the American school setting, the creation of special newcomer programs is advisable. These programs could provide focused intervention relative to refugees' unique needs. It should always be school officials' priority to ensure students have access to schooling in the least restrictive environment. However, this is an instance where I believe separate pull out programs are in order for those who need it and for those who choose it. Depending on the number of students impacted in a particular school or system, officials could craft a program that best suits their needs. These programs could take the form of a separate school where the entire student population consists of new arrivals to the US. For systems serving a smaller number of refugees a center for new arrivals placed within a school or central office location would also serve to benefit students. In the event that these are not possible, a separate program within a school (school within a school) would also be profitable to assist refugees in transitioning. These separate settings should only be temporary as participants demonstrated that after a couple of years of assistance they were able to achieve in a traditional setting with regular support from an ESL teacher.

A separate setting offers many benefits. First, it enables students a smaller environment in which to become acclimated to the different routines, expectations, and procedures of the American school system. This will help to alleviate the sense of being overwhelmed upon arrival. The shock of coming to the US is so great that a buffer period is needed before refugees are able to be independent in the traditional school setting. The smaller setting should also provide a smaller student-to-teacher ratio. This makes it

possible to create a small instructional setting in which teachers can focus on the specific academic needs of new arrivals. Small-group instruction was explained by several of the refugees as being crucial to their success. The smaller setting would also foster the development of a special bond between students and their teachers. This was also underlined by the refugees as being critical to their success. A smaller setting would enable teachers to get to know their students and understand how to best meet their needs.

This type of program could also serve to celebrate the cultures and heritages of students. In a separate setting, school officials could make it a priority to help students regain pride in their cultural and heritage identity that may have been lost through the trauma of flight and resettlement. Focused intervention could be provided that would enable students to regain self-esteem, while building pride in their culture and heritage. Consequently, when students face the social challenges and peer pressure of the traditional setting they will be better prepared to make decisions and value their personal identity.

### *Reading*

School officials in all settings should make meeting the reading needs of refugees a priority. The refugees shared inspiring stories of their own academic growth, increase in self-esteem, and independence in learning once they became readers. Conversely, those who were non-readers shared stories of frustration and despair. Reading is critical to their long-term academic growth and success in American schools. The refugees shared they needed help with all aspects of reading. They discussed needing help with comprehension as well as sounding words out. Consequently, reading programs should provide

instruction on foundational skills for students in the learning to read phase (e.g., basic phonics, phonemic awareness, sight words and spelling). Programs should also include skills for students who are in the reading to learn phase (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension skills, analysis, author's purpose). A panacea program meeting the needs of *all* refugee students does not exist. More research is certainly needed in this area. Therefore, the reading approach implemented by school officials should include an assessment component that identifies students' strengths and deficiencies so instruction can be tailored to meet the needs of that particular student. Regardless of the reading approach school officials take, they should provide an adequate supply of books at the reading levels of their students so they will be able to read with success, develop a love for reading, and grow in their literacy skills.

### *Teacher Training*

School officials should seek teachers with particular characteristics suited for this group of students. Based upon the descriptions provided by the refugees, those who instruct refugees need both professional skills and a personality that is willing to help them navigate the emotional challenges they face. This must be a dedicated teacher who is willing and able to empathize with them and challenge them at the same time. Those were the types of teachers who were the difference makers described in the participants' stories.

Special training should consist of cultural sensitivity as well as understanding the specific cultures and backgrounds of the students in the teacher's class. Pedagogical training should also be provided. Teachers of all content areas need to understand how to

modify their instruction to meet the linguistic needs of students. Language acquisition training, training in models of delivering content in a modified manner such as SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol), and how to teach reading are areas of need for teachers working with refugees.

### *Diversity*

School officials need to see refugees from the perspective of the additive model rather than the deficit model. Refugees are not empty vessels to be filled. They have a wealth of experience, culture, and heritage that will enrich the school they attend. Officials need to promote the diversity and backgrounds of their refugees and establish policies to protect them against discrimination. School officials must make it a priority to embed the appreciation of various cultures into the life of a school so all students can be instructed in the appropriate manner of interacting with people from different cultures. The shame, teasing, and poor treatment many of the refugees experienced at the hands of their peers must stop. Educational events that showcase the cultures and heritages of refugees is a powerful means to educate the staff and student body of a school about the value this group has to offer. Assemblies inviting speakers to share about the various cultures represented in schools are another means to promote appreciation of diversity. In classrooms on a day-to-day basis teachers should do small things promoting these differences. These can include references to various cultures in lessons, choosing resources that highlight aspects of different cultures, and promoting unity among classmates of different backgrounds in group activities.

### *Mental Health Services*

The refugees interviewed never explicitly stated a need for mental health services. In many cultures people who receive mental health services are frowned upon, therefore it is something to be avoided. However, considering the traumatic circumstances the refugees had faced, in addition to the overwhelming sense of loss upon arrival to the US, school officials should be prepared to offer a level of mental health services to their refugee students. This could take the form of sessions with the school counselor or other school personnel, or by creating partnerships with mental health agencies in the community. If needed, referrals to mental health agencies outside of school could help students overcome many of the emotional wounds they harbor.

### Future Research

In 2014, it would be relevant to interview the refugees who were still enrolled in school (after they had graduated) to see how their experience evolved. I would like to know more about their overall high school experience and how the remaining years they have in high school compared to their initial transitional experience. I would like to know if they graduated or dropped out. I would also like to know what the circumstances were that caused graduation or dropout to occur. It would be profitable to know if they were able to navigate the challenges they cited in their interviews. If so, I would like to know how they found the tools they needed to do so.

I also believe it would be beneficial to look specifically at certain groups of refugees to see if similarities in their transition experience can be found. The groups could be categorized by specific ethnicities, for example Karen refugees from Burma, or

could be more wide ranging such as refugees from Asia. I would like to know if there are issues impacting their transition to American schools that are more salient for certain groups of refugees than others. This could take the form of a study that compares two or more ethnic groups, or it could just concentrate on one distinct group to see if common traits in their transition can be found.

A similar study could also be conducted looking at resettlement locations within the US. It would be beneficial to research the transitional experience of refugees in two or more American cities to see if common issues have impacted their transition, or if certain issues are the result of conditions in a particular city where families are settled. I would like to compare the level of services provided to refugees in various parts of the country.

The transitional experience is not the same for all refugees. Just as individuals are different with characteristics unique to their own personality, each refugee experiences and interprets his or her own transition experience uniquely. I would like to research one refugee's transitional experience in depth. This would enable me to more intimately identify with the challenges, struggles, and triumphs of the entire experience. The researcher could follow the experience of a newly arrived refugee for one to two years from the time they arrive. Interviews throughout the process in addition to observations in school and at home would provide a more detailed view into the world of a refugee student adapting to schools and life in America. I do not believe that one would be able to draw sweeping conclusions that would be applicable to all refugees, however we all would benefit from understanding at greater depth what the transition experience is like.



I would also like to conduct research with refugees who transitioned into the American public school system but did not graduate. I would like to know, from their perspective, what conspired to create the circumstances in which a student dropped out of school. It would be important to hear the story from the perspective of the refugees. This would assist school officials in shedding their perspectives of why students drop out in order to better understand student needs.

Further research targeting instructional approaches would be potentially fertile as well. Many of the refugees interviewed voiced concern about reading. I would like to have a better understanding of the level of participants' reading proficiency in their native language before arriving to the US to see how that may or may not have impacted their reading proficiency in English. I would also like to know if their native language literacy level impacted the manner in which they learned to read in English. Were there certain concepts that transferred without having to be explicitly taught or did they learn to read English in the same manner they learned to read their native language?

I would also like to know more about approaches to helping older students with minimal or no reading ability in any language to acquire the skills necessary to be strong readers in English and their native language. Should educators start at the beginning of the reading continuum, teaching all of the skills one would acquire in kindergarten through second grade, or is there a different approach that would infuse those skills with higher level reading strategies? The refugees did indicate that instruction in the foundational reading skills is necessary, but to what extent should a teacher focus on those?

Finally, I would like to conduct research on what school systems are doing to assist refugees in making the transition to the American public school system. There are studies that provide a big picture overview of newcomer programs; however, more depth is needed that probes for specifics of curriculum and services provided at those sites. The same is true for systems welcoming newcomers without separate newcomer programs. Research is needed to know how those schools are assisting (or not assisting) newly arrived refugees adapt to their new setting.

### Conclusion

Each of the refugees interviewed experienced a unique transition to life in the US. In addition, they were all at different points in that process. Some have already completed school and were working in careers. Others were still in the initial phases of the transition and were navigating the school-based challenges. Each of them provided valuable insight into the research questions in this study. While their experiences are unique, collectively they serve to inform school officials how to improve services in schools.

On a personal note, when I began the process of collecting data for this study I did not realize how meaningful my time spent with participants would be. I thought I understood the need to hear their stories. And I thought I was doing that in my position as the principal of a school for newly arrived immigrants and refugees. However, I soon learned that I was not valuing the input from the people we serve to the extent possible. The refugees interviewed proved more insightful about the American school system and how they were learning to navigate it than I had expected. The process of this research has impacted me in an unexpected manner. I have learned that although I would step out

to hear their voices, I was not listening deeply. I have learned that stories can speak for themselves where a deep listener is available to hear them. In my practitioner role, I was listening and interpreting through my perspectives. I have learned that educators must first take the time to listen to refugees. Advocates who have listened and understood those stories can be a voice for refugees in schools and with policy making bodies. Those who care about the schooling experience and livelihood of refugees can represent them as advocates and policy makers. When important policy and program design decisions are made, this will ensure that the refugee voice is heard.

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## Appendix A. Interview Questions

### Questions for Current Students: Interview 1

#### Part 1

Please note: These interviews will be semi-structured. These questions below serve as guidelines; the complete set of questions will vary depending on the stories that participants share, particularly for the second interview which will be based, in part on the answers to the first interview.

Focus: life before coming to the United States

- 1) What were your life experiences like before coming to the US? Please describe a typical day?
- 2) I understand there is a lot of conflict in the places you lived. Suppose I was visiting you in one of those places? Tell me what I would see there- what would be going on? (probe for all places lived home- refugee camps- on the run- what would I see/experience)

#### Part 2

Focus: School Transition

- 3) Sometimes people who have never experienced life as a refugee don't understand what it is like. I am going to ask you what it is like for you to be a refugee and living in a new culture. Let's start with how this is difficult for you?
- 4) If I were to be a refugee who had the same experiences that you had...and then moved here and started school- tell me about what I would be feeling and experiencing at school. (Probe for specifics about what school is like)
- 5) If you were to write a letter to someone you knew back in (name country), telling them about your experience in school, what would you say?
- 6) Talk to me about a teacher here that you really like and why? (Probe for characteristics of the teacher and strategies s/he uses in class)
- 7) Talk to me about your least favorite class? (same probes as above)
- 8) There are many people who make decisions about how schools serve students. If you were in charge of a school that served many refugee students and I came to visit your school, describe what I would see. What would be going on in that school? (Probe for classes offered, extra services, what are the teachers like, curriculum, reading)
- 9) What do you wish you had known when you first got to school that no one told you?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

## Questions for Former Students: Interview 1

Please note: These interviews will be semi-structured. These questions below serve as guidelines; the complete set of questions will vary depending on the stories that participants share, particularly for the second interview which will be based, in part on the answers to the first interview.

Focus: School Transition

- 1) What were your life experiences like before coming to the US? Please describe a typical day?
- 2) Schools can be different or similar depending on where you live. Let's talk about what school was like for you when you first came to the United States. What was your day like? (Probe for quality of teacher, facilities, materials, workload, hours, calendar.)
- 3) When you first came to the US, what were your expectations for your education? (Probe to see if it was a priority).
- 4) If I were to be a refugee who had the same experiences that you had...and then moved here- tell me about what I would be feeling and experiencing in school. (Probe for specifics about what school is like)
- 5) Talk to me about a teacher here that you really liked and why? (Probe for characteristics of the teacher and strategies s/he uses in class)
- 6) Talk to me about your least favorite class? (same probes as above)
- 7) How did your experience in school guide the decisions you made about your career?
- 8) What would you like school staff to know so that they may better work with refugees, and others with similar backgrounds, and better serve their needs?
- 9) There are many people who make decisions about how schools serve students. If you were in charge of a school that served many refugee students and I came to visit your school, describe what I would see. What would be going on in that school? (Probe for classes offered, extra services, what are the teachers like, curriculum)
- 10) What do you wish you had known about American schools when you first arrived in this country that no one told you?
- 11) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Appendix B. Demographic Survey  
**Demographic Questionnaire- Current Students**

Please respond to the questions below and mail back to Jake Henry before our interview.  
Use the envelope provided to mail the form back.

Code\_(to be completed by researcher to ensure anonymity)\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_ Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_

What country were you born in? \_\_\_\_\_

What country are your parents from? \_\_\_\_\_

For how many years did you go to school before coming to the US? \_\_\_\_\_

Why did your family leave your home country?

What was life like for you as a refugee?

Describe what school is like for you in the US.

### **Demographic Questionnaire- Former Students**

Please respond to the questions below and mail back to Jake Henry before our interview.  
Use the envelope provided to mail the form back.

Code\_(to be completed by researcher to ensure anonymity)\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_ Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_

What country were you born in? \_\_\_\_\_

What country are your parents from? \_\_\_\_\_

For how many years did you go to school before coming to the US? \_\_\_\_\_

Why did your family leave your home country?

What was life like for you as a refugee?

Describe what school was like for you in the US.

## Appendix C. Informed Consent Forms

### *CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM ONE TO ONE INTERVIEWS*

Project Title: Refugee Transition into American Public Schools: An Emergent Study of Major Influences

Project Director: Jake Henry

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **What is the study about?**

The purpose of this study is to interview refugee students to learn about their experience in American schools. You child is being asked to share his experience.

#### **Why are you asking my child?**

I am asking your child because s/he is a current refugee student who can share valuable information about his/her experience.

#### **What will you ask my child to do if I agree to let him or her be in the study?**

If you agree, I will ask your child to participate in one or two interviews. Each interview will be no longer than 2 hours.

#### **Is there any audio/video recording of my child?**

If your child agrees, I would like to audiotape the interviews. I will either transcribe the tapes myself or hire someone to transcribe. Whoever is hired will be required to sign a confidentiality form, and I will request that she or he not share any information she or he hears. Because your child's voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, his/her confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below

#### **What are the dangers to my child?**

There are a few minimal risks. It might be emotionally hard for your child to remember and talk about hurtful experiences. S/he will not have to share anything s/he doesn't want to, and I will listen with care.

If you have any concerns about your child's rights or how you are being treated, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at (336) 256-1482. Questions about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Jake Henry who may be contacted at (336) 316-5883 or via email at henryj2@gcsnc.com.

#### **Are there any benefits to my child as a result of participation in this research study?**

Your child may benefit from telling his/her story to someone who wants to listen.

#### **Are there any benefits to society as a result of my child taking part in this research?**

I plan to write about your child's story, along with the stories of other people I am interviewing, and his/her story can be shared with teachers, principals, and other people who work in schools. Although his/her story is unique, what she shares might help people who work in schools better understand what some of the experiences might be like for refugee students.

#### **Will my child get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything for my kid to be in this study?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

#### **How will my child's information be kept confidential?**



I will do my best to protect your privacy. I will not tell anyone that your child is participating in my study. All the notes I take and anything that I record will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my work office for up to 3 years after the study. All audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. I won't use your real name or the real name of the school or even the city you live in. All information in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. If your child tells me stories about abuse happening now, I have to report that by law.

**What if my child wants to leave the study or I want him/her to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw him or her at any time, without penalty. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data which have been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you have read it or it has been read to you, You fully understand the contents of this document and consent to your child taking part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by Jake Henry.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Assent Form for Student Participants Under 18

Study Title: Refugee Transition into American Public Schools: An Emergent Study of Major Influences  
My name is Jake Henry

### **What is this about?**

I would like to talk to you about your life experiences before you came to this country and what school has been like since you got here. I want to learn about how you feel about school now.

### **Did my parents say it was ok?**

Your parent(s) said it was ok for you to be in this study and has signed a form like this one.

### **Why me?**

You have been picked for this study because we are especially interested in knowing the stories of people from (your country). There is little information written in English about people from (your country). We hope that the stories you tell can help us and the people who read about this research study to better understand the school experiences of people like you.

### **What if I want to stop?**

You do not have to say “yes”, if you do not want to take part. We will not punish you if you say “no”. Even if you say “yes” now and change your mind after you start doing this study, you can stop and no one will be mad at you.

### **What will I have to do?**

You will have to do 1 or 2 interviews with me. In an interview I will ask you some questions about your life. Each interview will be about 2 hours long.

### **Will anything bad happen to me?**

Nothing bad will happen to you, but difficult feelings like sadness and anger might come up as you remember and share stories from your past. You do not have to share anything you don't want to share.

### **Will anything good happen to me?**

You get to tell your story to someone who wants to listen. After I finish all my interviews, I am going to write stories about what you and others say, giving you a fake name. People who read about your stories, like teachers and principals, can learn how to better understand, work with, and help other students like you who come from (your country).

### **Do I get anything for being in this study?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

### **What if I have questions?**

You are free to ask questions at any time.

If you understand this study and want to be in it, please write your name below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of child                  Date

*CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM*

Project Title: Refugee Transition into American Public Schools: An Emergent Study of Major Influences

Project Director: Jake Henry

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the study about?**

The purpose of this study is to interview refugee students to learn about their experience in American schools.

**Why are you asking me?**

I am asking you because you are a refugee who has experienced transitioning to American schools. You can provide the perspective of one who has attended American schools and is now working in a career.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

If you agree, I will ask you to participate in one or two interviews. Each interview will be no longer than 2 hours.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

If you agree, I would like to audiotape the interviews. I will either transcribe the tapes myself or hire someone to transcribe. Whoever is hired will be required to sign a confidentiality form, and I will request that she or he not share any information she or he hears. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

**What are the dangers to me?**

There are a few minimal risks. It might be emotionally hard for your child to remember and talk about hurtful experiences. S/he will not have to share anything s/he doesn't want to, and I will listen with care.

If you have any concerns about your child's rights or how you are being treated, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at (336) 256-1482. Questions about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Jake Henry who may be contacted at (336) 316-5883 or via email at henryj2@gcsnc.com.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

You may benefit from telling his/her story to someone who wants to listen.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

I plan to write about your story, along with the stories of other people I am interviewing, and your story can be shared with teachers, principals, and other people who work in schools. Although your story is unique, what you share might help people who work in schools better understand what some of the experiences might be like for refugee students.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

I will do my best to protect your privacy. I will not tell anyone that you are participating in my study. All the notes I take and anything that I record will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my work office for up to 3 years after the study. All audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. I won't use your real name or the real name of the school or even the city you live in. All information in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which have been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Jake Henry.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D. Institutional Review Board Approval



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
**GREENSBORO**

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE**  
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore  
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.  
PO Box 26170  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
336.256.1482  
Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Carl Lashley  
Ed Ldrship  
239 Curry

**From:** UNCG IRB IRB

  
Authorized signature on behalf of IRB

**Approval Date:** 2/03/2009

**Expiration Date of Approval:** 2/02/2010

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Expedited Category:** 7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups,6.Voice/image research recordings

**Study #:** 09-0011

**Study Title:** Refugee Transition into American Public Schools: An Emergent Study of Major Influences

This submission has been approved by the above IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

### **Study Description:**

The purpose of this study is to determine what some of the important education influences are which possibly impact refugee transition into American schools.

### **Regulatory and other findings:**

This research, which involves children, meets criteria at 45 CFR 46.404 (research involving no greater than minimal risk). Permission of one parent or guardian is sufficient.

### **Investigator's Responsibilities**

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

When applicable, enclosed are stamped copies of approved consent documents and other recruitment materials. You must copy the stamped consent forms for use with subjects unless you have approval to do otherwise.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented (use the modification form at [ohre.unc.edu/forms](http://ohre.unc.edu/forms)). Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB using the adverse event form at the same web site.