

Issues in Language Instruction

A Journal for Practicing and Interpreting Teaching English as an Additional Language

Supporting the Inclusion and Identities of African Refugee Students in U.S. Higher Education

Samuel Dernas Habtemariam, Ph.D.
University of Kansas

Abstract. This paper seeks to understand how African refugee students in U.S. higher education construct their social and schooling identities while they negotiate the challenges they face. Although existing literature addresses identity formation among refugee students in the post resettlement period, little is known about how African adult college refugee students maintain their identities once settled in the United States. Framed as a qualitative case study, findings assert that African refugee college students face both linguistic and academic challenges as students enrolled in higher education in the U.S.; however, the magnitude of the linguistic challenges varies based on the status of English language as a medium of instruction in the country of the refugees' first asylum. The two challenges—linguistic and academic challenge—become intertwined once refugees pursue post-secondary opportunities in the U.S. Findings highlight the juxtaposition of maintenance of previous schooling and cultural values while learning and negotiating a new culture of post-secondary schooling in the U.S.

Keywords: *Education for refugees, postsecondary education, refugees, inclusion, African refugees*

Introduction

The United States has been a welcoming country to refugees from different countries and continents and has been described as one of the largest refugee recipients in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2018). Since 1975, over 3 million refugees have had an opportunity to be resettled in the U.S. (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Nevertheless, the admission of refugees to the U.S. has dropped significantly since 2016 due to political reasons, and in 2018 alone, 45,000 refugees were planned to be resettled in the U.S., the lowest admission when compared to prior 2016 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). Despite this drop, a significant number of refugees are believed to go to school upon arrival in the U.S., and some to a university or college. There are no clear data that specify refugees' enrollment rate in colleges and universities in the U.S. Yi & Kiyama (2018) state:

Missing from literature on refugee populations is specific data on the numbers of refugee students attending postsecondary institutions in the U.S. Due to varying methods of classifying immigrant students and significant differences in when refugee students resettle in the U.S., and subsequently enter U.S. education systems, no clear data exists that accurately captures refugee students in higher education (p. 10).

Previous literature has focused on refugee students' schooling experiences. For example, Dryden-Peterson (2016) and Erden (2017) explored the schooling experiences of refugees in the refugee camps in Africa and Syrian refugee students' challenges in Turkey, respectively. While Bash and Zezlina-Phillips (2006) studied identity formation among refugee school children, Uptin (2013) investigated refugee students' engagement in constructing and reconstructing

their cultural identities in Australia to be part of a new society. However, little is known about how refugee college students, as adults, construct their social and schooling identities while attending school in the United States.

Studying Refugees' Schooling Experiences in the United States

The schooling experiences of refugees who come to the United States often vary dependent on the age of the refugees when settling in the United States. Some refugees either go to school themselves or send their children to school in the U.S. A majority of these refugees went to school in refugee camps before they were settled and had unpleasant schooling experiences. As Dryden-Peterson (2016) wrote, "for refugee children, disruption of education by protracted conflict and exile is more the norm than the exception, and it is often a precursor of educational experiences outside of the national education system of a country of origin" (p.134). It may be due to these traumatic experiences that a large body of literature (e.g., Kira, Lewandowski, Ashby, Somers, Chiodo, & Odenat, 2014; Bryant, et al., 2018) has focused on investigating the psychological issues, particularly the traumas these refugees have faced in the refugee camps and the strategies the schools follow to prepare them for future life in the US (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

There are some recent studies that focus on refugee students' identity formation. Erden (2017) investigated the schooling experiences of Syrian refugee students in Turkey and found that despite the challenges they face such as linguistic deficiency, lack of refugee education policy, and a cultural gap, refugees aim to build their sense of identity by learning skills to lead their day-to-day lives. In a similar vein, Saleh (2018) discovered the challenges refugee students face in terms of literacy skills and learning a new language and culture and suggested that schools should consider the students' cultural background, personal identities, and native language or funds of knowledge to help them succeed at school. In addition, Dryden-Peterson (2016) studied the educational experiences of refugee students in their first asylum countries and reported three issues in relation to linguistic problems, teaching strategies, and social segregation in the schools. Additionally, Uptin's (2013) study focused on how refugee students in Australia engaged in formulating and reformulating their cultural identities to be part of a new society, stressing the ways that refugees build their learning but resist a *homogenized identity*.

All of the studies noted above focused on young refugee learners and how they construct their new identities in a new country. There are, however, adult refugees who pursue educational experiences once arriving in the United States, and the social and schooling identities of these adult college refugee students have not been considered as a site to learn about adult refugee students.

This paper understands that one's identities are constructed socially. Hall and Du Gay's (1996) conceptualization of identity is drawn upon, as this conception of identity recognizes identity as a fluid and continuous process within a given context. Concerning identity construction, Hall and Du Gay stated, "In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (Hall & Du Gay, 1996, p. 2). The study on which this paper is premised is significant, for it can inform educators, policy makers, teachers, and other education stakeholders in the U.S. about the ways in which adult refugee students maintain their social and schooling identities in their social and academic engagements in the post-resettlement period. This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How do African adult refugee students construct their social and schooling identities while attending college in the U.S.?
2. What challenges do African adult refugee students face in their college academic and social interactions due to the cultural discrepancies they face in the U.S.?

By exploring African adult refugee students from Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo who are enrolled in post-secondary education, this paper creates a case study of how these individuals have negotiated their identities as college students.

Literature on College Refugee Students

Upon arrival in the country of first asylum and waiting for resettlement, refugee students may go to school in the refugee camps, but college students usually receive their education in cities. They are exposed to a second education system and cultural experiences in the country of first asylum, and after resettlement, they struggle to fit in a third education system and foreign culture, leaving most of them in culture shock (Joyce, Earnest, De Mori & Silvagni, 2010). Moreover, these refugee students encounter a number of challenges, as one percent of them eventually get access to higher education (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

One challenge often faced by refugee students is a lack of access to what may be considered *professional* advice. After resettlement, agencies that help them to resettle arrange different programs to help them get a job or go to school. However, according to Earnest et al. (2010), these programs are not led by experts in refugee issues but by social or case workers, and hence their assistance to the refugee students concerning successful navigation of institutions of higher education is limited. Thus, refugee students are often bewildered upon arrival at higher education institutions as resources do not seem to be targeted toward their unique needs (Anselme & Hands, 2010).

In their study of university refugee students in Australia, Joyce, De Mori, and Silvagni (2010) found that refugee students often entered education systems that are very different from what they have experienced; hence, the researchers described the university as a “culturally alienating place” (p. 169), as newcomers feel a greater sense of isolation and less belongingness within those institutions.

Another challenge, a lack of proficiency in English is described as the other major obstacle for refugee students in higher education (Joyce et al., 2010; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Some of these refugees went to school in the country of first asylum where the medium of instruction was English. However, refugee students may still have difficulty interacting with others in English because the English they were taught as a foreign language was more of an academic English, and this form of the language does not enable them to easily socialize and become part of the community. Stevenson and Baker (2018) stated:

Language proficiency is further complicated by settlement and education policies that also do not recognise the bespoke academic language and literacy needs of students who are non-native English speakers, and have had interrupted education. This is compounded by the fact that many refugees learn the forms of English which can help them navigate their new social milieu but the social milieu of HE [higher education] is radically different, containing as it does its own linguistic culture (p. 57).

Still another challenge for refugees relates to health issues. The majority of refugees encounter extreme challenges in refugee camps. They may have witnessed the death of their beloved ones, family members, relatives, neighbors, and friends (Habtemariam, 2017). Such traumatic experiences may distract refugee students from their studies, leading to more stress and even depression. Joyce et al. (2010) found that refugee students in Australia suffered from culture shock, depression, stress, and other underlying health conditions. These complex health issues usually appear to worsen as refugees do not get enough medical attention in the refugee camps. Thus, health issues can become an obstacle to refugee students' academic success.

Methodology

This study drew upon qualitative methods for data collection and analysis and employed a qualitative single case study methodology (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995), bounded by time and place, as a way to understand the lives and experiences of refugee college students. The single case study methodology was chosen because of its ability to address a specific case as a method for understanding the deeply complex issue of how refugees negotiate their identity once enrolled in U.S. higher education and how this relates to the college education system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The four participants in this study compose the “case” in the remainder of the paper.

Setting

The study is set in the United States, and specifically within a state in the Midwest. This state is one of the states in the U.S. that receives a great number of refugees in the country due to two particular reasons. The first reason is that there are refugee resettlement agencies based in the state that assist refugees in starting a new life. These resettlement agencies play a pivotal role not only in enabling refugees to get a national ID, a driver's license and food stamps, but also provide refugees with the opportunity to go to school, learn the English language, and lease an apartment. Thus, refugees depend on such agencies to begin their new lives in the U.S.

This midwestern state is enlisted in the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program and receives funding from the federal government to assist refugees in resettling in the state. In 2016 alone, this state received over 1000 refugees that came from different countries, including Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Syria, Central African Republic, Iraq, Burma, South Sudan and Uganda (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2018). The midwestern state featured in this paper was selected for this study based on purposive sampling, which allowed the researchers to select participants based on the particular purpose related to addressing the research questions (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Purposive sampling also provided ground for in-depth and relevant data to be collected to meet the objectives of the study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

The case in this paper focuses on African refugees due to the great numbers of African refugees being resettled in this state. Additionally, as an African refugee, I was able to correspond with the participants featured in the paper, sometimes in the native language of the participants. My positionality allowed for more in-depth correspondence with the research participants.

Participants

As previously mentioned, the participants in the study were African refugees who have been resettled in a midwestern state through the UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Program. Prior to their arrival in the U.S., all of them were granted refugee status by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the first host countries. For the purpose of the study, four participants were recruited from Higher Education Institutions. The parameters that governed the selection of participants included: 1) participants had been in the U.S. for more than one year, 2) participants were refugees from the countries of Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and 3) all participants were current college students (enrolled in courses at a post-secondary institution in the U.S.).

All participants were recommended by one of the resettlement agencies. The agency was involved in the recruitment process because of its connection with the college-aged refugee students. The business relationship between the resettlement agency and the refugee students has continued over the course of the students' time in the U.S. because the refugees depend on the agency to file for green card status and because the resettlement agency also provides advice on other legal issues.

Two participants who participated in the study are Eritreans who came to the U.S. in 2015. Gebreslassie (all names of participants and specific places are pseudonyms) stayed in Ethiopia as a refugee for five years and went to school there before he came to the U.S. He lived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia with his mother and sister. While in Ethiopia, he had the challenge of learning Amharic, the official language of the country and of communicating with the teachers who were Amharic speakers. The other Eritrean refugee student is Haylom, who fled to Sudan and stayed in the refugee camp for a long time with his parents. He went to school there and learned Arabic, which is an official language and medium of instruction in schools. His first language is Bilen, one of the nine languages spoken in Eritrea.

The other two participants in the study, David and Solomon, are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They managed to escape to South Africa with their parents and lived in Johannesburg for more than ten years. David and Solomon both spoke Swahili as their first language; they went to school in South Africa and did not have a problem learning English, an official language and medium of instruction in the country. They arrived in the U.S. in 2016. Thus, the participants featured in this paper represent different languages and cultures and are from two African countries.

Data Collection

The study employed semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each participant was interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes twice in March 2020 and twice in May 2020. While the March interviews were conducted in person, the

May interviews became phone interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The social distancing mandates due to COVID-19 impacted the refugee students and due to their limited resources (limited access and use of computers), the final interviews were conducted by phone rather than via Zoom or other videoconferencing platforms. The Human Subjects Research Committee at the institution of higher education where the author is affiliated approved this research study.

The rationale for using semi-structured interviews throughout the study was that this format contained open-ended questions and allowed the participants to tell stories as part of the interview process without being restricted to just responding to interview questions. In addition, I memorized the questions so that the participants would not feel intimidated by an artificial interview procedure (Maxwell, 2013). All interactions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis procedures. Analysis began by creating broad, deductive categories for the data derived from the theoretical framework, research questions, literature review, and interview protocols. Categories included, for example, school culture, home culture, schooling identities, social identities, academic challenges, identity construction, and values. After reading the transcribed data, text was highlighted, ranging from a single line to a full paragraph, and ascribed to these broad categories. After this, a code list was generated to analyze the chunks of text placed in each broad category. Text was also coded in an inductive manner, seeking themes within the data. Coding allowed me to consider the intersections of the theoretical framework, the research questions that were asked about refugee students' construction of social and schooling identities, and the academic challenges that the refugee students faced. The transcribed data were shared with the research participants, which provided an opportunity of checking whether the analysis had captured participants' perspectives accurately (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings and Discussion

The paper next presents four categories: linguistic challenges, academic challenges, constructing African social identity, and maintaining schooling identity. These categories are essential to understanding how the participants in the study confronted the challenges and opportunities they experienced as postsecondary refugee students.

Linguistic Challenges

Participants in the study explained that the language barrier they experienced was their major challenge in the country of resettlement. In part, this obstacle traces back to the countries of first asylum that have mother tongue education policy at the elementary level and English as a medium of instruction at the secondary and university levels. For example, the participants who were in Ethiopia attended their elementary education, until 8th grade, in Amharic. Their high school education, however, was in English. Similarly, those who were in Sudan went to a school run by UNHCR where Tigrigna and Arabic are the medium of instruction at the elementary level, up until 6th grade, but English and Arabic were the languages of instruction at the secondary level and above. These differences in language of instruction at elementary and secondary levels account for insufficient proficiency in English when the refugee students entered high school. Further, the use of English in high school may not be sufficient for refugee students to carry out academic activities and socialize in English.

Thus, refugee students who were in Ethiopia and Sudan were severely affected by the linguistic barrier as experienced within their college education in the U.S. The two refugee students who were in South Africa, however, were educated in English; hence, these participants were in a position to communicate better and to perform their academic duties in English, though they still faced barriers while interacting with native speakers of American English in the U.S. These two participants felt as though their accent stopped them from being understood by their peers and teachers. As a result, in the country of resettlement, the English language became an obstacle for the refugee students to be able to socialize and communicate as needed with their professors, and they often felt isolated socially and culturally. Gebreslassie said:

While I was in the U.S. at school, my English was not good enough. In a sense, I was able to listen, but I could not communicate in English here and I felt isolated. I did not have a lot of friends here and the culture was completely different. I do not think the people in the U.S. were as communicative as the people in Addis Ababa..... My high school fear of not communicating properly with teachers and students could be repeated here in the college, I thought. But, it is fine because at least I can communicate with people though I don't socialize as much as I used to when I was in Addis Ababa.

Gebreslassie continued to explain how his poor English put him in a stressful situation due to lack of proper communication and socialization.

I read about it before. In order to understand my problems and the stress as well as the deep depression I had. I was trying to google to find out the cause of my problems. The reason the depression started was when I went to school in the U.S., I was not able to communicate properly with the students and teachers. I could not socialize and make jokes or play with my classmates due to my poor English. Moreover, I did not have any friends and could not find people who could understand me. So, it was very stressful time.

Gebreslassie also found that people's attitude towards his English put him in an odd situation. He noted that some students made fun of his accent in English, and this obliged him to search for friends who spoke English like him and whose cultures were similar to his. In line with Gebreslassie, Haylom stated:

Yes, sometimes, it feels strange or different when they laugh at my English accent. But the African students do not laugh at my English, and I feel like I am with my people and home. They welcome you and the way we speak is the same.

This finding resonates with Stevenson and Baker's (2018) explanation that refugee students do not feel part of the wider university community due to their unique accent and "bespoke academic language" (p. 57). Linguistic challenges were often intertwined with broader academic challenges, the next theme discussed.

Academic Challenges

Participants' understanding of the different education systems, between the country of first asylum and the United States was often highlighted. All participants spoke of how college courses in the U.S. demanded that students participate actively. The participants expressed that they had difficulty fulfilling this mandate due to their upbringing, stating that they were raised to be good listeners, to keep their voice down, and not to speak up before their elders or teachers, as it is considered offensive. Participants also noted that there is part of the African culture that says that younger children should look humble by keeping their head down, should not question their elders' ideas but accept them, and should respect authority. These cultural values impacted the academic engagement of the refugee students in the U.S. classroom. Gebreslassie explained this by saying:

I am not an active participant in class, and I think this is because of my cultural background. In my culture, parents tell us not speak before teachers/elders as a sign of respect and to remain silent and patient so that you learn a lot from others.

Another difference in education systems was also noted. The refugee students explained that the teaching and linguistic styles of their teachers in the U.S. were different from what they were used to. The teaching style in the U.S. emphasizes assignments and independent learning, unlike in Africa, where the refugee students had to do all the academic work under strict supervision of their teachers, not independently, as explained by Solomon:

I mean, it's different. Schooling in Africa's different, like the teachers are more intense, like the teachers push you, like they want you to do your work stuff like and it's much more harder compared to the schools in America... I would say that teachers do not put pressure on you. They don't pressure the students as much, compared to, like back in Africa where they want you to do the work. In America, as long as the teacher teaches the subject, she's done with it. She doesn't push you or anything like that.

The variety of English was also a factor. Since the accent and the English the teachers used in the U.S. are different from their previous teachers, the refugee students found it difficult to understand and follow instructions. In addition, the students did not have access to programs in the U.S., where they could use their first language as an aid to understand concepts. Haylom put it this way:

But until 6th grade, the medium of instruction was Tigrigna and Arabic, which means we learned these subjects in Tigrigna and Arabic. After 6th grade, however, we learned the subjects in English and Arabic. As I said, still English was difficult for me. I took English as a subject in the refugee camp in Sudan, but I did not pay much attention to the language, and it was a bit different from the English I am experiencing in the U.S.

The different teaching style, with emphasis on autonomous learning and assignments, as well as the use of American English by teachers who are native speakers, became an obstacle for the refugee students' academic success. Additionally, an expectation of the role of *active learner* was challenging for the students, a finding in line with Lambrecht's (2020) study.

Constructing African Social Identity

All participants said that they desired to preserve their African identity. These refugee students left their countries when they were young; some were born in the country of first asylum, but due to the efforts and desire of their parents, the participants wanted to keep up their African identity. The actions that identified them as Africans, in their perspective, included being respectful to elders and teachers, not staying out late at night for a drink, not having tattoos or piercings, not having a girlfriend until graduation, standing out academically, sharing the burdens of the family, and depending on the decisions of parents or consulting parents before making any decision related to school or life. These named values from the participants were attributed to their African identity because the refugee students had these shared values and characteristics in common. The four participants were united in showing allegiance to those values, a point discussed in Hall & Du Gay (1996).

What was described as *values* by the African refugee students was frequently viewed in contrast to the values of their American peers. The refugee students' perceptions of American college students included claims that they saw young American college students as wanting to enjoy their freedom of being a young adult, often an age when Americans desire to make decisions for themselves rather than having parents decide for them. Also, the participants in the study perceived that American college students were prepared and willing to argue with teachers, if necessary, fight for their rights until the end, address their teachers by their names without using a formal title such as Dr. or Professor. Other contrasts they witnessed between the values they held and those the American students seemed to have included the normalcy of tattoos, girlfriends/ boyfriends, and piercings. The participants noted that all of these things made them feel different from their American peers.

The refugee students did not hide their feelings about holding values they deemed *African* in nature; they recognized that such values made them different from the rest of the student population. In some cases, the African refugee students explained to their American peers that they had different values and attempted to reflect them at school, though they were not always successful in convincing them. Thus, the cultural mismatch, noted earlier by Ogbu (1982), between the refugee students' home culture and school culture was evident, leading refugee students to some identity confusion. David stated:

Even though you say you are African and you say this won't affect your life, you still want to fit in. You still want to be seen as normal, as one of them. So, you sometimes forget and you start blending in with them [American students], and you start blending in. If you move away, you like, you forget. You say, hey, this is not me. It's like, stay on track... You got to remember. You are African. This is not your culture.

In addition, Gebreslassie explained how he saw himself as a different student culturally because of the absence of the common values and subjects to talk about.

I don't think I have a common ground to discuss matters with my American classmates. I believe if there were students from Eritrea or Ethiopia, I would have a common ground to raise common subjects to discuss. Also, I would understand their cultural cues, all the verbal and non-verbal signs which make my communication easy. But here, since I cannot even speak English properly, it is difficult to see myself as an American student.

Students commented about how they thought more about their individual lives, rather than the communal life, since arriving in the United States. The *individual life* can be thought about as doing things independently and progressing financially for oneself, whereas communal life refers to sharing your income with family members, and hence progressing financially together and sharing any burden, pain, and labor with family members. Being in a foreign land, though it is difficult to preserve their African identity, refugee college students attempted to do so by using Swahili, Tigrigna and Arabic/Bilen languages at home when discussing cultural issues with their parents and siblings, by cooking and eating African foods at home, and by respecting authority like the police and teachers. The participants noted that they were proud of their values and African identities and suggested that other African refugee students keep up their African culture. Solomon commented this way:

No, I think they should not forget their culture. I think they should be proud of where they came from because that is a privilege. Most Americans want to go back to Africa, like most black Americans want to go back to Africa to find about their roots.

In addition, participants tried to maintain their African identity by having friends from Africa at school, and by practicing their cultural values at home. To this effect, the students were proud of their origin and know where they are from in Africa, and they perceived this in contrast to African American students they met who wished to go back to Africa in search of their roots. David said:

Many African Americans are very active about wishing to know about Africa. You know, like they always want to know about their roots and they say, I wish I could go back to the motherland, motherland, but they don't really know Africa where they are from. But, you, as a refugee had a chance. You know where you from; you know what your grand great-great-grandfather is from. So, when you come here, don't try to erase that part of your life because it's still in you.

Maintaining Schooling Identity

The refugee students wanted to be identified as outstanding and hardworking; this kind of schooling identity was created due to the following reasons. Firstly, their parents believe that school is the only way to change the lives of their children and hence prepare them to be successful students at college. In addition, the participants explained that their parents deserved a better life because they went through much; the participants believed that they, as college-aged individuals, could play a pivotal role in transitioning their parents upward (economically and socially) if they were successful at school. This value applied not only to the refugee students but also to their siblings who were still young and to those who did not go to school. This seemed to be the source of the refugee students' schooling identity. Solomon articulated it as follows:

I think that this is unspoken because you have to continue your schooling. You are in America, but you have been through a lot and someone with the common sense would know I have to do better for my family. My parents have gone through a lot for me. I am sure about that. They don't have to say that but that's for sure. What would be a reason for me failing school? So, they [my parents] always tell me to do good. I want you to buy a house one day for me. So, you have to do good in school.

David supports this argument that refugee students should be successful to ensure upward mobility of themselves and their parents. David noted:

If you go to school, you definitely will be successful. That's what they [parents] think but it's not always like that. You can have a degree in mechanical engineering but obviously it's not just because you go to school, you are going to have a lot of money and knowing the history of your parents, like what they've been through and everything they have done for you, you want to please them. You want to pay them back somehow. So, it just puts a lot of pressure on you to do good, so you can repay them. Yeah, so like hey, if I am slack in school, I'm not going to be successful, not going to be able to provide for my family. So, you want to be able to provide your family. So, you do good in school. You push yourself because you know what you want from them.

Secondly, the refugee students reported that there are sufficient educational facilities to study in the U.S. They explained that they have to be outstanding because they have all the resources around them to facilitate their studies. With fewer educational facilities, they survived school in Africa, and now there is no reason not to use all the available resources like laptops, fast internet connections, and full-fledged libraries and e-books for their own advantage. Solomon explained:

I like it here, like school is much more; you got a lot of resources around you. You got the Internet; you got Wi-Fi; you got a laptop to do your homework. You got libraries. Schools are much better, compared to like Africa where you have to pay to go research or something. You got access to everything. It sounds like it is much better here.

Participants often asserted that they thought American peers took these opportunities for granted, whereas refugee students worked hard to effectively use the available opportunities. Thus, despite the academic and linguistic challenges mentioned above, the refugee students believed that resilience, hard work, and academic achievement are the features that shape their schooling identities. But, they admitted that they were less confident to speak up and challenge teachers and authorities and were hesitant to make their voices heard.

Conclusion

Linguistic and academic barriers were identified as major obstacles for the success of the refugee college students even though there are English language centers in many U.S. universities that help not only refugee students but also international students with limited English. Linguistic barriers were more challenging for refugee students who came from the countries of first asylum that had a mother tongue education policy and English as a medium of instruction at only the high school and university levels. Those who came from a country of first asylum, where the medium of instruction was English throughout kindergarten to the university, experienced a minimal linguistic barrier. Thus, the status of English language in the country of first asylum was a determining factor for the refugees' linguistic challenge, a finding which is not explored in depth in existing literature.

Academic challenges impacted the participants in this study due to encountering a different education system in the U.S. Unfortunately, few support systems for refugee students in post-secondary education existed beyond English language centers. Instead, support systems were primarily found in the resettlement agencies. One implication of this

finding is that there is additional need for support for refugee college students in post-secondary institutions. Instead of being grouped with international students, refugee students would benefit from a greater understanding from faculty who would benefit from knowing more about the history of schooling as it relates to refugee students. A similar finding was reported by Anselme and Hands (2010), who emphasized that refugee students need *special support* (p. 92). A greater support system within post-secondary education may include counseling, academic support, interaction with teachers and financial assistance.

This study highlights the need for bridging the cultural mismatches between the refugee students' home and school cultures. In some school courses, Africa may be portrayed as a war zone, where inter-ethnic conflicts take place. Though this is true in some instances, a positive image of Africa should also be incorporated into the curriculum. The values that the participants described in the study should be reflected in the curriculum as a way to demonstrate a balanced image of Africa, thus showing respect for the values of the newcomers. In addition, this study reiterated what Jack (2019) argued: "access is not inclusion" (p. 159). When university access is given to refugee students, we may need to work more to ensure better inclusion and diversity by incorporating refugee students' values and identities into the college curriculum. Moreover, college education should support refugee students in their efforts to maintain their African identity, which is consistent with the efforts and principles of universities to diversify their campus in the U.S. (Jack, 2019). Part of this support could be to broaden the scope of multicultural education to include the voices, identities, and values of the African refugee students to ensure the promotion of cultural competence (Gay, 2013).

References

- Anselme, L., & Hands, C. (2012). Access to secondary and tertiary education for all refugees: Steps and challenges to overcome. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2), 89-96. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.34725>.
- Bash, L. & Zezlina-Phillips, E. (2006). Identity, boundary and schooling: Perspectives on the experiences and perceptions of refugee children. *Intercultural Education*, 17(1), 113-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980500502123>
- Bernstein, H., & DuBois, N. (2018). *Bringing evidence to the refugee integration debate*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/bringing-evidence-refugee-integration-debate>
- Bryant, R., Edwards, B., Creamer, M., O'Donnell, M., Forbes, D., Felmingham, K., Silove, D., Steel, Z., Nickelson, A., McFarlane, A.C., Van Hooff, M. & Hadzi-Pavlovic, D. (2018). The effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on refugees' parenting and their children's mental health: A cohort study. *The Lancet Public Health*, 3(5), E249-E258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(18\)30051-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(18)30051-3)
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education in countries of first asylum: Breaking open the black box of pre-resettlement experiences. *Theory and Research in Education*, 14(2), 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878515622703>
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Refugee education: Education for an unknowable future. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 47(1), 14-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.125593>
- Erden, O. (2017). *Schooling experience of Syrian child refugees in Turkey*. PhD dissertation: Indiana University, accessed from ProQuest.
- Earnest, J., Joyce, A., De Mori, G., & Silvagni, G. (2010). Are universities responding to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds? *Australian Journal of Education*, 54(2), 155-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411005400204>
- Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48-70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>.
- Habtemariam, Samuel Dermas. (2017). Challenges of attending private higher education for African refugees: The case of Eritrean refugee medical college students. *15th International Conference on Private Higher Education in Africa*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Hall, S., & Du Gay, P. (1996). *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

- Jack, A. (2019). *The privileged poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Joyce, A., Earnest, J., De Mori, G., & Silvagni, G. (2010). The experiences of students from refugee backgrounds at universities in Australia: Reflections on the social, emotional and practical challenges. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(1), 82-97. doi: 10.1093/jrs/feq001
- Kira, I, Lewandowski, L, Ashby, J, Somers, C, Chiodo, L & Odenat, L. (2014). Does bullying victimization suppress IQ? The effects of bullying victimization on IQ in Iraqi and African American adolescents: A traumatology perspective. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 23(5), 431-453. doi: 10.1080/10926771.2014.904463.
- Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Miles, M.& Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Ogbu, J. (1982). Cultural discontinuities and schooling. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 13(4), 290-307. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1982.13.4.05x1505w>
- Ramsay, G., & Baker, S. (2019). Higher education and students from refugee backgrounds: A meta-scoping study. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 38(1), 55-82. doi: 10.1093/rsq/hdy018
- Saleh, A. (2018). *Who am I? refugee adolescents' transformation and negotiation of identities at the cultural borders*. PhD dissertation: Clemson University.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stevenson, J., & Baker, S. (2018). *Refugees in higher education: Debate, discourse and practice*. England: Emerald Publishing.
- Teddlie, C., & Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 77-100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806292430>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018). *Figures at a glance*. UNHCR. Retrieved February 16, 2020, from <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- United States Department of Homeland Security. (2019). *Yearbook of immigration statistics: 2018*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- United States Department of Homeland Security. (2018). *Yearbook of immigration statistics: 2016*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Uptin, J. (2013). *A search for a new identity: Examining the journey of former refugee youths living in Australia*. PhD dissertation: University of Wollongong. Accessed online January 20, 2020 from <http://ro.uow.edu.au/these/4017>
- Yi & Kiyama. (2018). Failed educational justice: refugee students' postsecondary realities in restrictive times. *ASHE-NITE Paper Series*. Retrieved January 30, 2020, from <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/504541>.
- Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.