The Transition of Refugee Youth to Mainstream Education in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Research on the transition of Sudanese refugee youth into mainstream schooling has been ongoing in Australia. However, most of the previous studies focus on Sudanese refugee youth who have migrated to Australia in their late teens with little or no English, and the social and psychological challenges they face in their transition into Australian mainstream schooling.

This study incorporated the experiences of seven South Sudanese refugee youth between the ages of 14 (early to late teens) and 20, and of three teachers with a professional responsibility for refugees' transition to mainstream schooling. It aimed to explore students' and teachers' perspectives with the objectives of: 1) understanding the realities of refugees' transition into mainstream schooling in the Australian State of Victoria; and 2) suggesting strategies to improve the transition process.

Participants were recruited through the 'homework club' at Spectrum MRC (Migrant Resources Centre) Victoria. Participating students were originally from South Sudan. Five were in middle school, one in high school and one at university. All three participating teachers were from Victorian high schools.

A qualitative phenomenological approach informed by post-colonial and neo-liberal theories was used to explore the students' and teachers' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method. Content and thematic analyses were used to analyse the interview data.

The students highlighted the notion that the transitioning process can be less challenging if it is based on a more holistic approach in which all stakeholders engage with, and fully participate in it. While highlighting similar challenges to transitioning into mainstream schooling in Australia as those already identified in previous studies, participants in this research stressed that they were able to participate fully in a supportive learning environment by being proactive. They stressed the importance of not sitting passively but grabbing every opportunity provided to them by engaging in their learning and transitioning. Their attitude demonstrates resilience and resourcefulness.

The teachers highlighted language barriers, parental attitudes, parental education levels, and parent, student and school expectations as issues affecting refugee

youth transition into mainstream education in Victoria's schools. They also suggested the need for better training of teachers to provide the supportive learning environment required to assist refugee youth to transition more smoothly.

While these findings provide an interesting comparison with previous research, they cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. Further research is warranted to explore the findings with other refugee youth groups and teachers in Australia.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Signature

14/04/2015

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Date

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

Youth	"Youth" refers to people between the ages of 12-25. "Youth" is often interpreted differently across cultures in relation to life stages, family roles and social expectations (Francis and Cornfoot, 2007).
Refugee or Forced Migrant	The United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines refugees as those who are "outside their country of nationality or their usual country of residence; and are unable or unwilling to return or to seek the protection of that country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, 2010). In 2010-11, the Australian Government granted 13,799 Humanitarian visas to refugees from around the world (DIAC, 2011).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband John and children Beryl, Beale and Daniel. I could not have done this without their unflinching support and encouragement during the time of writing. A special thanks to my supervisor Dr Mubarak for his useful comments and remarks. You inspired me when I was ready to give up. I am also grateful to the Sudanese families and teachers who participated in this research. I would also like to thank my friend Joselynn Baltra–Ulloa for believing in me and her encouragement that “You can do it Amira”.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter provides: a brief background to the study; an overview of Sudan and the challenges faced by Sudanese refugees post-migration to Australia; a brief critical review of programs in place for refugees transitioning into mainstream schooling in Australia; an explanation of the Post-colonial and Neo-liberal theoretical framework used in the study; the study's aims and objectives; the study's relevance to social work practice; and an outline of the chapters in this thesis. The research question under investigation was: "How do South Sudanese refugees perceive their transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria"?

Background to the Study

Refugees have been arriving in Australia for many decades. It has been reported that between 1996 and 2007, a total of 121,740 Humanitarian refugees entered Australia, of whom 35,931 were resettled in Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2011, p. 15). Most of those who settled in Victoria were from Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Former Yugoslavia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Burma and Iran. They consisted mainly of children and young people under 19 years of age (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2011, p. 15). This population tends to live in the metropolitan areas of Melbourne rather than in regional areas (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2011, p. 2).

From 2004 to 2010, around 43% of all Humanitarian arrivals in Australia were under the age of 18 (DIAC, 2011). The largest intake was from Sudan, followed by Iraq, Burma and Afghanistan. While most young people have shown enormous resilience through their life experiences, others have faced immense challenges in their transition into schooling in Australia (Olliff, 2010). This study focuses on refugee Sudanese youth because other research shows that this cohort usually has higher complex needs, for example low levels of literacy in their first language, lower levels and knowledge of the English language, and often no experience of any formal schooling (Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2006). Research also shows that African Humanitarian entrants' parents are usually happy that their children can benefit from the Australian educational system because most of the parents did not have access to adequate education (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2004). O'Sullivan (2006) stated that most parents of refugee youth, after fleeing their home country, risked everything to come to Australia for the sake

of their children and the hope that their children would get a better education. Table 1 outlines the top five countries of origin for Humanitarian entrants to Australia between 2006 and 2012.

Table 1: Top five countries of origin for Humanitarian entrants by visa stream 2006 to 2012

Visa class	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Refugee	Burma Burundi Dr Congo Iraq Sudan	Burma Iraq Afghanistan Dr Congo Burundi	Burma Iraq Bhutan DR Congo Somalia	Burma Bhutan Iraq Dr Congo Ethiopia	Burma Iraq Bhutan Dr Congo Afghanistan	Burma Iraq Bhutan Afghanistan DR Congo
Special Humanitarian	Sudan Afghanistan Iraq Burma Sierra Leone	Iraq Sudan Afghanistan Burma Liberia	Iraq Afghanistan Sudan Sierra Leone Liberia	Iraq Afghanistan Sierra Leone Sudan Liberia	Iraq Afghanistan Sri Lanka Sudan Iran	Afghanistan Iraq Ethiopia Iran Somalia
Onshore Protection	China Sri Lanka Iraq Iran Pakistan	Sri Lanka China Iraq Pakistan Iran	China Sri Lanka Afghanistan Zimbabwe Iraq	Afghanistan Sri Lanka China Iraq	Afghanistan Iran Stateless Sri Lanka	Afghanistan Iran Stateless Iraq Sri Lanka

Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program 2013-14: National and global statistics (Refugee Council of Australia, 2014)

The researcher developed a research interest in the transition of Sudanese refugee youth to the Australian education system because of her refugee background and witnessing some of the frustrations and stress youths and their parents face when engaging with it, especially those youths who migrate in their late teens. Olliff (2010) indicated that because schools in Australia are regulated by students' chronological age rather than their abilities, refugees who migrate in their teens are usually placed in middle or secondary schools, even when their education level may be of a primary standard. Olliff (2010, p. 7) reported that it can be challenging placing students who migrate in their teens with no formal schooling because placing them in a skill-appropriate level could adversely affect their social and developmental needs. Moore et al. (2008, p. 47) also reported that too often children who migrate in their teens find it difficult to keep up with their peers and drop out of school, frustrated by their lack of progress.

The Commonwealth of Australia (2003, pp. 322-3) stated that without early intervention, there is a risk that the initial disadvantages newly arrived Humanitarian entrants face may become entrenched with a combination of interrelated problems. These problems include unemployment, continuing reliance on income support, health issues and social isolation, which can accumulate to increase social and economic exclusion from mainstream Australian society. There are considerable social justice issues, which focus on equal distribution of resources to meet individual needs and achieve human potential (AASW, 2010).

As a social worker, the researcher integrates social justice into her practice. In this study, the focus was on discovering, understanding and seeking ways to address the individual needs of Sudanese youth and encourage them to meet their full potential as they transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria. It sought to explore the experiences of Sudanese refugee youth and add their voices to the ongoing debate about the transition process for refugees in the Victorian education system. Most research on Sudanese refugees transitioning into mainstream schooling in Australia has focused on social and psychological barriers. It has not given any prominence to refugee youth's resilience and resourcefulness (Olliff, 2010; Dooley, 2009; Francis and Cornfoot, 2007).This study, in contrast, sought to provide evidence of their resilience and resourcefulness.

Sudan and Sudanese Refugees in Australia

Sudan is a diverse state with more than 400 different ethnic groups. It has a diverse

range of cultures, languages and religions (Matthews, 2008). The South Sudan is comprised mainly of the Dinka, Azande, Bari and Shilluk, and the official language is Arabic (VFST, 2005). The Southern Sudanese people are mainly subsistence farmers and Christians, whereas those from the north are mainly Arabic-speaking Muslims (Brown et al., 2006). Most Sudanese refugees arriving in Australia are from South Sudan. They speak mainly their tribal languages and currently represent the highest number of African Humanitarian arrivals in Australia. Most Sudanese youth have lived for a long time in refugee camps in countries neighbouring Sudan, have experienced significant trauma and have had interrupted schooling due to displacement prior to their arrival in Australia (Brown, Miller and Mitchel, 2006). This has resulted in little or no literacy prior to their arrival in Australia (Brown et al., 2006).

The newly arrived refugee population in Victoria is young. In the past five years, 6,068 or 30% of Victorian Humanitarian entrants were aged between 12 and 24 years, and a further 30% were younger than 12 years. In 2010, 1,078 Humanitarian entrants aged between 12 and 24 settled in Victoria (Centre for Multicultural Youth Policy Paper, 2014). These statistics illustrate that Victoria has a high intake of refugee youth in Australia. Therefore, Victoria's school system must have a high need for education programs to address the educational challenges that refugee students confront in Australia. The Multicultural Development Association of Queensland (2011, p. 7) has identified these challenges as historical, environmental, cultural and social factors that result in inequitable educational needs.

In this study, which focuses on Sudanese refugee Humanitarian entrant youth in the Victorian education system, all of the student participants were Christians from South Sudan and had lived in Victoria for between 8 and 10 years. Despite these similarities, individual factors such as socioeconomic status, educational attainment prior to coming to Australia and parents' encouragement for their children to participate in Australia's mainstream education system must be considered when drawing conclusions from the results. Comparison with other research findings is also necessary to avoid trying to use a "one size fits all" approach to assess this group's ability to integrate into mainstream schooling in Australia.

The Impact of Refugees' Experiences on Resettlement in a New Land

The Refugee Council of Australia (2013) reported that refugees resettling in a new country usually face challenging and stressful issues, such as acquiring a new language, finding suitable accommodation and trying to complete their education. They sometimes have to recover from traumatic experiences encountered in their refugee journey, which can impact on their settlement process, especially for those who have lived in refugee camps for a protracted period of time and those who have faced significant displacement.

Employment, Finances and Wellbeing

This is supported by Jupp (2003), who noted that refugees from Africa who resettle in Australia do not settle as easily as other immigrants and usually go through longer periods of unemployment, which impedes their resettlement process. If, as Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) stated in their study, a sense of belonging in the initial resettlement process is fundamental to the wellbeing of people from refugee backgrounds (O'Sullivan and Olliff, 2006), prolonged unemployment, which can make a person feel less like they belong, is detrimental to wellbeing. Additionally, many Humanitarian refugee entrants usually experience significant financial stress as a result of coping with their daily living expenses. More often than not, most refugees financially support other family members left in their country of origin. These financial pressures and the inability to obtain employment readily is known to affect the mental health of refugees in Australia (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2011).

Language and Educational Environment Issues

In Australia, 18.7% of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 speak a language other than English. In Victoria in 2011, however, 23.4% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 spoke a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of statistics [ABS], 2011). These statistics of young people, indicates that refugee youth may have issues with language competency because English is not their first language.

Furthermore, Sidhu and Taylor (2007) reported that there is a growing need for refugee youth who have specific and complex learning needs to be adequately catered for within Australia's education system. They highlighted a number of issues impacting the educational outcomes of this group of young people to which policy-

makers and educational institutions have not responded (Sidhu and Taylor 2007). Brown, et al. (2006) showed that students with interrupted schooling face a daunting task of transitioning into mainstream schooling after only a brief intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

A study conducted in Canada and the United States by Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000) found that the policy of providing one-year programs of sheltered English immersion were “wildly unrealistic”. Kirk and Cassity (2007) found that young people who have experienced interrupted schooling usually have complex needs. Chegwidden and Thompson (2008) and Cassity and Gow (2006b) found that some students with this experience may struggle with basic literacy and complicated curriculum in schools in Australia, while Burgoyne and Hull (2007) reported that students from refugee backgrounds, as a result of changes in school settings from their country of origin to their host country, sometimes lack insight into schools’ expectations and norms.

It is important to recognise that language is the greatest stressor in the refugee resettlement process (Beiser and Hou, 2001). Cassity and Gow (2005) found that students from refugee backgrounds in Australia reported the transition from intensive English class to mainstream education as the most difficult transition they had made since arriving in Australia. This shows that despite a number of targeted initiatives to support this type of transition, it is still an area where significant gaps exist. One such gap is where young people transition directly from Intensive English Centres (IEC) into TAFE or another adult education or training environment rather than transitioning from IEC into mainstream schools. Hakuta et al.’s (2000) study showed that under normal circumstances it takes three to five years to develop oral English language proficiency and four to seven years to gain academic English proficiency. It takes much longer for disadvantaged children, such as those with poor or interrupted schooling. It has even been suggested that it takes up to 10 years for such students to acquire academic proficiency (Hakuta et al., 2000). Government policies to address the issue of English language proficiency are critical for young refugees’ successful transition into Australian mainstream schooling.

Government Policies

In Australia, government policies have shifted from the socio-structural contexts of settlement to the context of community and individual responsibility. Current policies on refugees and the settlement process in Australia emphasise the need for individual and community groups to take an active role in the resettlement journey

(May, 2011). This shift in policy, however, is not so much of an issue as other variables that need to be considered in the resettlement process, for example overcoming the language barrier, and establishing human and social capital in relation to accessing employment and other services in Australia. There is an emphasis on refugees being proactive in their transition journey whilst relying on limited resources to facilitate the transition process.

Refugee children are seen to be “at risk” of not making successful transitions in their host country Australia, due to their pre-migration experiences, and low English language proficiency upon arrival coupled with challenges faced in their host country (Atwell, Gifford and McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009). The links between transition and risk factors, such as pre-migration experiences and poor levels of social capital among refugees, means that the success of settlement is reframed and becomes the responsibility of refugee individuals and communities (Atwell et al., 2009).

A considerable amount of literature has emerged in relation to the perception of refugees as traumatised victims. McDonald (2006), however, has described how individualism and self-reliance have become the benchmarks of government policies. This is particularly evident in the shift in Australia’s educational policies. Although education departments are avoiding short-fall approaches by not naming refugees as at being “at risk”, the practice of marginalising refugees in policy discourse places them at a significant disadvantage. Coventry et al. (2002, p. 56) highlighted the impact of poor refugee policies on refugee youth in their statement:

> The needs of young refugees are diverse, complex and significant, and they tend to compound each other. Young refugees are likely to suffer considerable socio-economic disadvantage in the short term, and there is a particularly high risk of homelessness among refugee young people, this being some six to ten times greater than for school students generally.

Fraser and Honneth (2003) similarly acknowledged the importance of material and cultural conditions for individuals to participate as social equals, and pointed out that equity policies that impinge on refugee youth differ between states in Australia. Analysis of the effectiveness of refugee policies shows that they leave much room for improvement, both in terms of knowledge of their existence and the successful delivery of services to refugee claimants (Crosby, 2006).

Education as the Means to a Better Future

Education is often seen as the way out of the poverty experienced by refugees; it is the means to a better future (Chegwidden and Thompson, 2008). Sometimes this notion is difficult for parents with little education and a high expectation for their children's schooling to understand. Such parents expect their children to become doctors and lawyers without any parental engagement in their schooling. It is difficult for children with no prior education to fulfil these expectations because their parents usually do not have the required capacity to support their educational needs and have an inadequate understanding of the Australian education system, which expects parental input

Many schools are trying to accommodate the learning challenges of newly arrived youths but are faced with limitations to the amount of support offered to provide the most effective learning environment, especially for those migrating in their late teens into Australian high schools, who have been identified as facing the greatest challenges (Brown et al., 2006, p. 153).

The Education Situation for Refugee Students in Australia

Evidence shows that overwhelmingly young people from refugee backgrounds in Australian educational institutions would have experienced some disruptions to their education prior to arriving in Australia, largely due to spending the most part of their lives in refugee camps or having been displaced. Although some form of schooling is usually offered in the refugee camps, refugees tend to spend more time securing food than attending school (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria 2008, p. 10). Therefore, the Australian mainstream school system has implemented some programs that attempt to address the major issues. For example, in Tasmania, the Department of Education has provided a student support service that supports teaching and learning in an English as a Second Language (ESL) environment. While emphasising that students from refugee backgrounds have had some disruption to their schooling, the support service does not provide in-depth information about the complexities of the disruptions and refugee experiences, or how these can be addressed in the classroom (Department of Education Tasmania, 2006).

The Department of Education in Victoria provides English language training to students from refugee backgrounds in Victorian schools through intensive ESL classes of six to twelve months' duration, depending on students' individual needs

(Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria 2008). Research shows that many schools are putting in place support for refugee students' learning needs. However, there are challenges to continuing support because students arriving in Australia with limited language skills need more resources and training time than those available. Thus, while the ESL classes and support for refugee students in schools in Victoria provide evidence that the Victorian Government understands refugee students' needs, more resources are needed to meet the growing demands of increasing numbers of these students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria 2008 2008).

Need for a Holistic Approach

A report by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria (2008) highlighted the need for a holistic approach to the transition of refugee youth into mainstream schooling. It suggested that schools need to engage in partnerships with parents and community service providers in order to ensure successful transition and retention of students. Some schools have embarked on building effective partnerships with both government and non-government agencies in order to improve the wellbeing of refugee students. However, as Murray and Skull (2005) identified, finding an approach that achieves the desired improvement in English language reading and writing standards is difficult. They found that almost 70% of refugees who enrolled in the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP) showed no significant improvement in their learning at the end of their course. This emphasises that there are significant challenges for both students and teachers in relation to the amount of hours allocated to this program.

Chegwidden and Thompson (2008) expressed concern that ESL classes in Victoria, which were provided for refugees from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, did not adequately cater for these cohorts' needs in transitioning to mainstream schooling. Olliff and Couch (2005) identified that this shortcoming arose from these refugees' histories of disruptive schooling prior to migrating to Australia.

Security in a Structured Language-learning Environment: Positive or Negative?

Gifford, Correa-Velez and Sampson (2009), in their 'Good Starts' study, identified differences between ESL classes and mainstream schooling as an issue that needed to be addressed. They reported that newly arrived refugees are excited by their first experience of language school because they feel safer in a more structured environment. However, when transitioning to mainstream schooling, the

refugee students felt inadequate in their language acquisition and unable to cope with expectations in this wider and less protected environment. Their feelings of enjoying school decreased as they felt less supported by teachers. They began to feel a lack of any sense of belonging. By the end of the fourth year of study, 25% of students had left to either enrol in technical training or to take employment without completing their secondary education. In Victoria, even though there are several additional resources and support is available for refugee students in schools, there is inadequate professional development for teachers dealing with refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling (Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007).

The amount of support and orientation required for refugee students transitioning from primary to secondary schools is dependent on the length of time the students have lived in Australia (Foundation House, 2007). ESL tends to provide a safer environment for refugees that caters for their needs. Transitioning from ESL centres into mainstream schooling can sometimes trigger a sense of loss and anxiety arising from entering an unfamiliar environment and trying to meet the required expectations placed on transitioning students (Foundation House 2007). A successful transition process requires an equal focus on learning and welfare needs (Foundation House, 2007).

Post-compulsory Education Pathways

Sidhu and Taylor (2007) have criticised post-compulsory education pathways as being too inflexible to address the complex needs of young Australian people, especially those from a refugee background. One of the challenges identified by transition officers working with students from refugee backgrounds with disrupted schooling was getting the students to accept TAFE and other alternative pathways to university. This was especially the case among those with limited English language proficiency (Victorian Settlement Planning Committee, 2008). Olliff's (2004) research on staff from specialised learning and support centres working with disengaged youth from a refugee background highlighted the lack of referral pathways to support students as they disengaged from education and employment pathways (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2008).

In addition, Brown et al. (2006), in researching young Sudanese men in Melbourne, identified that this group faced significant challenges. They did not have the capacity to engage with mainstream services or education and employment, and many were experiencing significant mental health problems and substance abuse, as well as having a history of recidivism with the criminal justice system (Turnbull and Stokes,

2012). Foundation House (2007, p. 25) reported that the Victorian Government had developed a blue print for post-compulsory reforms for government schools and had identified the transition of students as a key indicator of improvements in Victorian schools.

Theoretical Frameworks: Post-colonial Theory and Neo-liberal Policies

Theoretical frameworks such as post-colonial theory and neo-liberal policies can be applied to refugee education in Australia because they provide the link that connects the past to the present and exposes the social, cultural and political inequalities in contemporary times. The Australian education system is run on neo-liberal and post-colonial paradigms, therefore this research will adopt these frameworks to better understand how refugees can transition successfully into mainstream schooling in Australia, specifically in Victoria.

Post-colonial theory helps us understand why those in power seek to control the movement of other people through various policies (Crosby 2006). As Moyo (2009) said, “any meaningful analysis of post-colonial situations in society requires an interpretation of the historically situated material; political and cultural circumstances out of which policies of language are produced”. In Australia, one can argue that the educational barriers of exclusion, exemplified by the impact of language policies in schools, are part of post-colonial policies. In contemporary Australia, however, it is clear that there has been a shift in the educational policies that once took into account educational equality of the vulnerable in schools. This has been replaced by conservative rhetoric and solutions that focus on individual agency and output.

A post-colonial framework, therefore, highlights the effects of European dominance–colonialism and imperialism–on learning and education (Bennett, 2001). Australian society has continued to require students to specialise in Western modes of knowledge and given them little or no opportunity to explore alternative epistemologies (Hickling-Hudson, 2003). Post-colonial critique, however, “focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world. The politics of anti-colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain” (Young, 2001, p. 11). Post-colonial theory gives life to a hybrid conceptual language, drawing on discourse theory as well as the vocabularies of social justice to analyse the ambiguities and ambivalence of change, which recognises the epistemologies that underline our

practices.

While post-colonialism involves developing identities and strategies that help to leave constricting neo-colonial ideas and practices behind (Hickling-Hudson, 2003), working partnerships between government and other organisations in Australia are informed, in most cases, by neo-liberal policy rationales (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007). This is demonstrated by educational services, such as state schools that have to work with limited budgets–a situation that creates further burdens for already overburdened sectors (Gifford et al., 2009) taking the bold step of marketing themselves to fee-paying international students to improve their financial status. Some of these schools in the Australian State of Queensland have expressed concern about the presence of refugee students with complex learning needs, stating that these students may compromise the schools' performance in the academic league tables, which would make them less attractive to fee-paying students (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007). Additionally, the link made between refugees' transition to mainstream schooling and the risk factors in their post-migration experiences (for example, the language barrier and low levels of social capital) means that responsibility for their resettlement rests with them, both individually and collectively (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007, p. 9).

Darder and Uriarte (2013), in their research in the US, have argued that neo-liberal policies have taken precedence over equity in the educational sphere despite educational rhetoric about "narrowing the gap". The same can be said in the current educational policies in Australia. Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neo-liberalism as:

> … a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institution framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade … State interventions in markets, once created, must be kept to a bare minimum.

Hence, the marketisation of education in contemporary Australia under the neo-liberal paradigm that focuses on performance creates barriers to refugee students' education. Reid (2002) supported this notion by stating that in contemporary times, neo-liberal policies in education challenge a commitment to social justice. These policies privilege individuals with economic, social and cultural capital over those without capital, for example refugees and those from other disadvantaged backgrounds. This further supports the current debate on school funding in

Australia, wherein public schools will have to compete with private schools for limited resources. It is evident that because most refugees are enrolled in public schools, these policies will have an increasingly negative impact on refugee children's transition into mainstream schools due to limited funding. Research in Australia, North America and Britain has emerged from the influences of critical race theory, post-modern, post-colonial and feminist thought, and the educational movement (Miller, Hyde and Ruth, 2004). These traditions have underpinned the teaching of "Whiteness" as part of a cross-cultural' teaching agenda. Woods (2009, p. 90) argued that Australian schools need to adopt an approach of "recognitive justice" that would recognise "the very different language competencies; the cultural, literacy, and relationship understandings; the educational backgrounds and approaches to education of refugee youth comprising a heterogeneous group of young people; and their resultant educational needs".

In Australia, most refugees are expected to achieve adequate English language literacy levels in order to navigate the complex analysis required of students to succeed in their studies. There is nothing wrong with this approach as long as one is mindful of the complexities faced by students from refugee and other vulnerable groups as they try to learn and comprehend a new language. It is in keeping with the neo-colonial discourses that Hickling–Hudson (2003) has argued appear to be entrenched in Australian society and are difficult to change; traditional schools in Australia tend to promote and reinforce socio–inequity through rigid timetables and complex curricula. Hickling–Hudson (2003, p. 8). This is evidenced by the small amount of funding and other resources allocated to short-term ESL classes for refugee students (between six and twelve months' duration) when Darder and Uriarte (2013), in their research in the US, have argued that students from non–English speaking backgrounds require at least six years of English classes to develop their thinking skills in both their first and second languages (Collier and Thomas, (2009). In addition to developing their thinking skills, there is also the difficulty of understanding Western contexts that have no bearing on refugee students' prior lived experience. May and Hornberger (2008, p. 31) argued that "such policies and educational practices are always situated in relation to wider issues of power, access, opportunity, inequality, and, at times discrimination and disadvantage" (cited in Darder and Uriarte, 2013, pp. 14-15). It can be argued, therefore, that education for refugee youth in Australia and their transition process into mainstream schooling can be best understood from a post–colonial perspective.

Similarly, Hickling-Hudson (2003), in her studies on post-colonial approaches in Australian schools, suggested that post-colonial policies are at play in schools because teachers working with people from non-English speaking backgrounds have inadequate training or professional development in relation to understanding refugee issues such as the challenges faced pre and post-migration, and dealing with cultural issues that may arise when working with this group of people. Most of the time, children in Australia are expected to fit into mainstream school cultures irrespective of their culture, race or beliefs. Hickling-Hudson's (2003) research provides grounds on which to claim that in Australian mainstream schools, the study of languages other than English is inadequately provided, students' diverse languages are disregarded, there is a strong emphasis on English language and Anglo-Australian perspectives dominate the curriculum (Hickling-Hudson, 2003). While this in itself is not a bad approach, other factors need to be put in place to cater for those who may be struggling to fit in due to factors such as non-mainstream cultural backgrounds or beliefs.

Research Aims

This research aimed:

- To explore ways in which refugee youth in Victoria, particularly South Sudanese youth, experience their transition into the mainstream education system.
- To explore and compare the findings from the perspectives of both students and teachers.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

- To understand the realities of South Sudanese youth refugees' transition into mainstream schooling in the Australian State of Victoria

- To suggest ways in which the education system in Victoria can be improved to create a smooth transition process for refugee youth.

Research questions for students:

- What are the experiences of African refugee youth during their transition into the Victorian Educational system?
- How effective are the Victorian Education system's transitional arrangements for African refugee youth?

Research questions for teachers:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach African refugee youth transitioning into the Victorian educational system?
- How useful are these transitional arrangements of the Victorian Educational system for African refugee youth?

Relevance of the Study for Social Work Practice

The IFSW (2014) defined social work as a "practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing".Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environment. Human rights and social justice principles, which are fundamental to social work, are incorporated in the AASW Code of Ethics (2010, pp. 10-11):

> …social work is a profession that recognises its responsibilities and is accountable to the Code of Ethics, the expressed values and principles in the Code, and the recognised professional obligations, behaviours and actions social workers must adhere and comply with.

Early intervention

Early intervention is necessary to prevent, or assist in overcoming, psychological barriers to refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling; barriers that result from the cumulative effects of social and economic exclusion from mainstream Australian society (Olliff, 2004). Social work has a vital role to play in early intervention because its focus on social justice aims to create an equal distribution of resources to meet individual needs and assist all individuals to achieve their full

human potential (AASW, 2010). Studies carried out with refugees and Humanitarian entrants in Australia have consistently focused on the issues affecting refugee students' transition to mainstream schooling in Australia.

Social Workers' Obligations

Social workers have an obligation to contribute to the smooth transition of refugees into mainstream schools in Australia. Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011) have argued that a turning of the lens inwards and back towards social work as a profession is needed to scrutinise the foundations of our thinking and practise before we engage with clients from vulnerable groups such as refugees. Working from a strengths-based approach would be appropriate, with a focus on refugee strengths rather than their weaknesses. Various studies on refugees have suggested that a holistic approach should be practiced when dealing with refugees' transition to mainstream schools (for example, Department of Early Childhood Learning Victoria (2008)). This research seeks to add to that call by adopting a collaborative and inclusive approach aimed at assisting the smooth transition of refugee students to schools.

Studies in the US and Canada have shown that strengths-based approaches utilised by social workers have been effective in measuring strengths and educational indicators, such as hope, engagement, wellbeing, achievement and retention in schools (Saleeby, 2006). Baltra-Ulloa (2013, p. 232) stated that social workers working with people from refugee backgrounds need to accept that what is considered conventionally relevant and helpful practice is, in fact, only relevant and helpful to Western social workers working with people from similar backgrounds because these relevant and helpful practices are products of Western ways of thinking, doing and being. Tehan and McDonald (2010) stated that employing strengths-based approaches with parents increases program effectiveness and improves parental engagement with services. Anderson (2004) further emphasised the importance of strengths-based approaches in education because these begin with educators discovering what they are good at, then developing and applying their strengths as they, in turn, help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process. This enables refugee Humanitarian entrants to realise their full potential.

Social Work's Role in Refugee Students' Transition to Mainstream Schooling in Australia

Social workers have immense scope to intervene in the education of refugee youth in schools in Australia. This study was undertaken to create research evidence to

argue that the social work profession in Australia has an important role to play in the educational arena, working in partnership with teachers, parents and students to achieve a better outcome for refugee students, particularly when settling into a new culture. This study argues that the social work profession in Australia can best support Humanitarian entrants if refugee clients are viewed from a strengths-based perspective; as survivors, not as victims. Not only can social workers work to improve service delivery to refugees in Australian schools, they can also take the lead by engaging in culturally sensitive practices through research and building collaborative relationships with all stakeholders.

Wagnild and Collins (2009, p. 1) defined resilience as "the ability of a person to bounce back following an adversity and challenge, and bring back their inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility and the ability to cope effectively". Consequently, Wagnild and Collins reiterated in their findings that despite the challenges refugees face in their post-migration process, they show enormous strength in their settlement process. Social workers can advocate on behalf of people from refugee backgrounds to address the inequitable discrimination and structural barriers they experience as they settle into Australian communities.

Thesis Structure

This chapter has introduced the thesis. Chapter two discusses the literature related to refugee resettlement and refugee youths' transition into mainstream schooling in Australia, in particular in Victoria. Chapter three describes the qualitative-phenomenological research methodology, and data collection and analysis methods. Chapter four presents the results, and the content and thematic analyses. Chapter five discusses the research findings in relation to previous research. It also draws conclusions, discusses the study's limitations and suggests recommendations for further research.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of refugee youth arriving in Australia, the post-migration challenges they face (particularly language barriers), the issues of transitioning into mainstream schooling in the Australian education system, the post-colonial theoretical framework underpinning the research and the study's relevance to social work practice. It has argued that there is a role for social workers, especially in schools and community services, to enhance the transitioning process of refugee youth into mainstream schooling. It has also argued that it is imperative

for social workers to work with refugee youth more inclusively from a strengths-based approach to successfully mitigate the issues they face in schools. Finally, this chapter has identified that social work literature lacks systematic research on refugee youth transitioning into mainstream schooling in Australia, hence the focus of this study.

The next chapter gives a review of the literature related to the transition of refugee youth into mainstream education in Australia.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explains the reason for focusing on refugee youth in this study. It explores the social and psychological challenges of refugee youth in Australia, and their implications for transitioning smoothly into mainstream schooling. It also explores the importance of parental education and support for their children's schooling, problems arising from the interaction between refugee youth and Western education systems, family relationships, gaps in Australia's education system and education programs designed to fill those gaps for refugee youth in Victoria.

Literature Search and Selection Process

Key words used in the literature search are as follows:

- Transitioning of refugee youth
- Refugee youth and the Australian educational system
- Settlement process of refugees
- Educational pathways
- Parental participation

Other data bases searched during the literature review included: Proquest; Social Care Online; Social work Abstracts; Sociological abstracts; PsycINFO; and Education Abstracts. Key words searched included:

- Refugee youth in Australia
- Education and Refugees
- Educational transition and refugee youth
- Resilience and Refugees
- Education in Australia and refugee youth

The key words were entered into this data base to find relevant journal articles, text books, empirical studies, social work and policy data, and relevant Australian public affairs publications. Other major web-based resources accessed for this research included:

- Refugee Council of Australia
- The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Migrant Resource Centre publications

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship
- Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth affairs
- Centre for Multicultural Youth

The following selection criteria were used when considering which literature was relevant to the study:

- Relevance to the research question.
- What knowledge it provides about the research question to enable the researcher to appraise the available evidence.
- Literature that identifies research gaps either within it or enables identification of the gaps through missing evidence.

Refugee Profile

While many of the refugees migrating to Australia in the 1990s were from the former Yugoslavia, there has been a change in the demographics of refugees migrating to Australia since 2000. Between 2000 and 2005, most arrivals came from Western, Central and East African countries, with the intake from these countries increasing from 30% to around 70%. There was another shift in the intake demographics between 2005 and 2006, with an increase in refugees from the Middle East, and South West and South East Asia (Refugee Education Partnership Project 2007, p. 11). The changing demographics of refugees into Australia has posed significant challenges to the authorities, especially in regard to education and employment for refugees who have had disrupted schooling, and have arrived in Australia with limited or no English.

At the time this study was conducted, the profile of refugees arriving in Victoria between 2000 and 2007 was as follows:

- have had minimal formal schooling in their first country of asylum
- have low levels of literacy in English
- may have lived in insecure societies where civil order and services have broken down
- have experienced extreme violence
- may be suffering the after effects of trauma, and in some cases torture
- may be affected by the loss of family and be without parental support

- may have disrupted schooling due to movement within and between countries so that literacy skills are not consolidated in any one language
- may have spent long periods in refugee camps or first country of asylum with minimal or no education
- may have come from a language background where writing is relatively a new phenomenon. (Refugee Education Partnership Project 2007, p. 10)

Richardson et al. (2002) reported that the settlement outcomes for Humanitarian entrants are least favourable compared to other migrants because refugees experience a range of barriers that are unique to them. Their difficulties are not due to service delivery failure. Ho and Alcorso (2004) have argued that shortcomings for refugees result from the lack of a human capital approach to migration in Australia.

Why Focus on Refugee Youth?

Findings from other research indicate that a significant proportion of those arriving in Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program are young people, with 59% of new entrants arriving in the five years between July 2005 and June 2010 aged less than 25 years on arrival, and 31% aged between 12 and 25 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013). Most of these young refugees are at a transitional stage in their lives, negotiating their identity and path into adulthood. Many would have spent their childhood as refugees in a refugee camp and therefore have limited educational experience (Olliff, 2010). Various studies on this cohort of people have portrayed them as “at risk” in regard to their transition to schooling in Australia due to having disrupted schooling and limited English acquisition.

Social and Psychological Challenges of Refugees in Australia

Western research shows that identity contributes to positive self-esteem and self-concept, and a person’s ability to function successfully in society (Bashir, 2000). Therefore, it is likely that refugees and young people who face new and unexpected identity formation will go through significant changes individually, as well as disruptions to their families because both will be affected by pre-migration events and resettlement (Bevan, 2000).

Lange (1990) stated that young male refugees, whose countries of origin practice patriarchal family structures and roles, feel vulnerable in negotiating their identities

when they arrive in Australia because they have to manage a loss of status. The acculturation process has also been linked to emotional and behavioural problems such as anxiety, depression and exclusion (Williams and Berry, 1991). Research shows that refugees' acculturation process is often associated with feelings of loss, sadness, grief and ambivalence (Moore et al., 2008). The developmental challenges of adolescence for young people who arrive as refugees are generally compounded by the traumatic nature of the refugee experience, cultural dislocation, loss of established social networks and the demands of resettlement (Francis and Cornfoot, 2007).

The actual age of some refugee youth might indicate the onset of adulthood, which their Australian counterparts would have dealt with in their early teenage years (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2006a). Refugee youth tend to require youth support services for a longer time than other youth. They are usually faced with complex and difficult issues arising from torture and trauma. The Refugee Council of Australia (2009) stated that torture and trauma have considerable physical, social and psychological effects on classroom dynamics, resulting in slower academic progress and challenging behaviours. The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2006b) also identified that the concept of adolescence is not recognised in all cultures, further illustrating that young people's concepts of transition are dependent on a range of factors, for example class, gender and migration experiences.

The physical, psychological and social effects of torture and trauma notably affect young refugees' ability to learn and can play out in educational environments in a number of ways. For example, Brown et al. (2006, pp. 151-2) noted that in classrooms, "teachers find that some of these students are withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, and anxious or hyperactive". Burgoyne and Hull's (2007, pp. 9-10) research into young Sudanese students found general agreement among participants in their study that learning to read and write presented the greatest learning challenge. However, there was no general agreement about the ease with which Sudanese learners were able to learn to speak English. There was little evidence that teachers were not aware that learners (refugee students) from highly oral cultures develop oral language strategies that do not rely on written prompts (Burgoyne and Hull 2007; Tayebjee, 2005; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2004). A report to the Ministry of Education (2000, pp. 89–93) on interventions to foster resilience for refugee children in New Zealand schools noted the following strategies:

- *Create a secure, nurturing and accepting climate in the school which promotes social interaction*
- *Offer programs that foster self-esteem and other personal resources such as social skills and internal locus of control*
- *Teach the host language to both children and adults to support the family unit and to develop social networks of support*
- *Organise whole school activities which also support social support networks and allow refugee families to meet locals, as well as each other*
- *Teachers and counsellors should be aware of refugee students' needs*
- *Utilise group processes to facilitate the development of friendships for refugees*
- *Access to information on local services should be made available to refugee families to assist in relocation and settlement*
- *Understand that punishment may not be an appropriate response to maladaptive behaviour in refugee students, but rather recognising that it may be an indication that therapy is needed.*

Parental Education and Support

According to the Victorian Foundation for Survivors and Torture (VFST, 2007) there is a higher unemployment rate among people from refugee background. This information needs to be taken into account when discussing the issue of parental engagement in their children's schooling in Australia because many refugee parents appear to lack an understanding of the Australian education system. Limited education of parents implies that it will be challenging for those parents to engage with school authorities to enquire about their children's' education. Vincent and Warren (1998), in their research on refugee families and schools in the United Kingdom, noted that the main problem facing refugee parents when communicating with schools was not sharing a common language with the teachers. In order for parents to engage in their children's education, improved communication is needed at all levels. This will provide parents with an equal responsibility for their children's education. To this end, Vincent and Warren (1998) suggested the use of interpreters, pointing out that it is a human right to understand and to be understood.

Problems Associated with Refugee Youth and Western Education Systems

Studies, such as that of Chegwidden and Thompson (2008), have summed up the problems associated with refugee youth and the education system in Australia.

Chegwidden and Thompson (2008, p. 19) observed that:

> … most refugee youth in Australia have experienced disrupted education and faced difficulties navigating the educational system because of the significant differences between their country of origin and that of their host country. Refugees have to juggle their resettlement experience compounded with education and family responsibilities cause a lot of stress for the youth.

Olliff's (2010) later summary of the issues facing refugee youth and the education system in the Australian State of New South Wales echoes Chegwidden and Thompson's (2008) findings. The same issues appear to affect refugee youth in the education system in Canada, indicating that the transition of refugee youth into Western education systems that are foreign to them carries similar issues regardless of the host country due to their race, ethnicity and countries of origin. Kanu (2008, p. 917), in his research on the educational needs and barriers of African refugee students in Canada, stated that these students usually carry scars of their experiences to the host countries. They are likely to have spent years in refugee camps, had disrupted schooling, and experienced economic and physical disadvantage. As a result, this "group of students may experience greater difficulties adjusting to, and integrating into a new society and may be slower in learning academic concepts, skills, and a new language" (MacKay and Tavares, 2005).

Kanu (2008, p. 935) noted that:

> Clearly, untreated pre and trans-migration psychological stresses and post-migration academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges affected the ability of the African refugee students to adapt and acculturate into their host country and cope with the school world. When these challenges are compounded by perceived, or real, attitudes of prejudice, marginalisation, and racism from fellow-students, teachers, and administrators, refugee students' confidence and self-concept are severely challenged and the stage is set for feelings of rejection, inadequacy, frustration, and dropping out even when dropping out is not intended.

Mackay and Tavares (2005), writing on appropriate programming for adolescents and young adults from refugee backgrounds in Canada, noted that early intervention and program planning is critical because these young people are more prone to experience mental health and socio-emotional issues in comparison to other groups

of migrants. There is overwhelming evidence that the effects of war can pose significant challenges to refugees if untreated, which in return can severely affect the socio-emotional wellbeing of learners and reduce their capacity to learn. Mackay and Tavares (2005) reported that despite the challenges and limitations of support and programs in place for refugees, many teachers support students with compassion and also spend significant time supporting their families.

Family Relationships

Many children in refugee families take on the roles of caring for their siblings. Some take on parental roles in place of their parents under unusually difficult circumstances (Bashir, 2000). Older children are usually more confident with English than their parents, which puts them in advocacy and interpreting roles with services and government agencies. These responsibilities can have a negative impact on the young person's educational opportunities, which may be put on hold, eventually leading to a power imbalance in the family. Research shows that family support and relationships are protective factors for young people adjusting to the resettlement process (Bashir, 2000).

According to the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Trauma (2007), young refugees' aspirations with regard to education are usually well above the reality achievable with their literacy abilities. False expectations and pressure to achieve them are further compounded by family pressures and expectations arising from pre and post-migration experiences. This can have a disruptive impact on family relationships and cause family break-down (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2005) has found that many young people who arrive at an older age or in late adolescence (15-24 years) face an array of problems. These include more significant pressure to achieve educationally, less previous experience of education and higher levels of family responsibilities than those who arrive at a much younger age (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2005). Victorian Foundation for Survivor and Trauma (2007) have reported that the transition of refugee youth is enhanced if there is collaboration between families, school staff and students during the transition process.

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that most refugees migrating from Africa tend to have little understanding about the Australian education system. It is this lack of understanding that fuels unrealistic expectations in regard to suitable educational pathways for children in light of their literacy levels. More often than not,

there is the tendency to enrol children directly into mainstream schooling rather than in ESL language centres prior to mainstream schooling. Parents in Kanu's (2008) study stated that the economic issues they faced in the host country post-migration prevented them from engaging fully in their children's education. In addition, the slower pace of the parents' acculturation, coupled with their limited English, cultural differences and expectations also hindered their participation in their children's education. Therefore, Kanu (2008, p. 929) suggested that there needs to be a dialogue between parents and teachers to better understand "what the other party is equipped to provide to support the learning of African refugee students".

Gaps in Australia's Education System

Regional areas in particular suffer from lack of resources for refugees' learning and resettlement. Tasmania is a prime example. It has insufficient structures for the establishment of intensive English centres for new refugee arrivals. Most educational sectors in Australia are experiencing restricted budgetary allowances to provide support to refugees (Olliff, 2010). The Multicultural Development Association (2011) identified in their report in Queensland, that ESL (English as a second Language) refugee students face significant barriers in regards to budgetary constraints in purchasing English as a Second Language resources to facilitate an efficient service delivery especially for those in primary schools with limited or no previous schooling pre - migration to Australia. Those in Secondary schools also face challenges transitioning into mainstream schooling when studying the standard curriculum due to poor English language, and the inability of some mainstream schools to support them adequately. In Queensland there is limited support available to refugee students transitioning from Intensive Learning Centres into mainstream schooling. Teachers in regional Queensland schools reported that there are limited resources and inequity with regards to access to ESL funding for families. In addition, there are issues with specialist teachers in regional areas and inconsistencies in ESL (English as a Second Language) delivery across the state (Multicultural Development Association, 2011).

In Victoria the Outer Eastern local Learning and Employment Network (2011), reported that there are issues in regards to specialist trained staff delivering English as a Second Language programs. They sometimes utilise English teachers and not trained "English as a Second Language trained teachers" with experience with refugee students. There are also funding issues in Victorian schools as they are required to reach a threshold before funding the schools can access funding.

The Multicultural youth Advocacy network (2012), in New South Wales identified that teachers in rural and remote areas do not have ESL qualifications or experiences in working with refugee or migrant students. The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (2012) is concerned about the reduction of positions in support programs that assist students from refugee background into their transitioning into mainstream schooling in New South Wales.

Thus, refugees between the ages of 16 and 24 who have disengaged from education and employment as a result of complex needs are falling through the cracks between early intervention and crisis youth services (Olliff, 2010).

Dooley (2009, p. 8) noted that:

> From the literature it is clear that many African middle school students have high level needs for code breaking and text participation resources in English. Some of the students are acquiring these resources for the first time, while others are extending repertoires of resources they began to develop in Arabic, Kirundi, French and other languages…. Beyond beginning literacy, there is a need for vocabulary and complex grammar resources that enable participation in the meanings of middle-school content area texts.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2005) reported that it is much easier for students arriving in Australia in primary school years to gain better literacy and numeracy than their older peers. However, there are few educational pathways for older refugees between the ages of 16 and 24, such as getting apprenticeships and enrolment in certificate courses in the educational services in Tasmania, for those who have had little or no formal schooling prior to arriving in Australia. Even when alternative pathways are considered for this group, parents are usually reluctant for their children to pursue them. These parents, due to significant language barriers, are either not aware of these alternatives or do not understand why they are being offered to their children (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2005). The children, likewise, have high expectations of finishing mainstream schooling and pursuing a university degree (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2005). While this in itself is encouraging, further and much greater support is needed to assist them to reduce the impacts of disrupted schooling and to understand the education system processes in Australia.

Wyn and White (1997, p. 25) reminded us almost two decades ago that the experience of young people is best understood when we “take into account the diverse ways in which [they] are constructed through social institutions, and the ways in which they negotiate their transitions”. It seems that in the case of refugee youth struggling to transition into mainstream Australian schooling, this still has not happened. It is paramount for us then, as practitioners, to listen carefully to refugees telling their stories and to understand their contexts. McDonald (1998) stated that in Australia and the United Kingdom, parents and students have resisted special foundational classes because they saw these as an exclusion from the mainstream curriculum rather than as a stepping stone into it (McDonald, 1998). Woods et al. (2009, p. 90) have argued more recently that Australian schools, in an effort to fill this gap in youth refugees’ educational transition, should adopt an approach that would recognise “the very different language competencies; the cultural, literacy, and relationship understandings; the educational backgrounds and approaches to education of this heterogeneous group of young people; and their resultant educational needs”.

Education Programs for Refugee Youth in Victoria

Refugees migrating to Australia, and in particular to Victoria, are provided with an intensive English language program, which differs from state to state (Brown et al. 2006). Victoria has several English programs in place in Melbourne in addition to ESL funding to its schools. The Victorian Education Department employs several teachers’ aides to assist students on a one-to-one level. The main criteria for eligibility for the ESL program is that you should have lived in Australia for less than seven years and must have English as a second language. The Victorian Education Department provides English language training for students from refugee backgrounds for between 6 to 12 months prior to their commencement in mainstream schooling (Brown et al., 2006; McBrien, 2005; Muir, 2004).

In Victoria, the authorities have identified that students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced significant disrupted schooling require more intensive support in order to achieve English language proficiency (Brown et al. 2006; McBrien, 2005; Muir, 2004). As a result of people arriving in Victoria with little or no English, the Victorian Government has put several initiatives in place to cater for this cohort, including the appointment of transitional coordinators to support the transition of students into mainstream schooling (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2010).

Thomas (2004), in research on meeting the needs of Victorian secondary ESL learners with disrupted schooling, emphasised the importance of recognising and understanding the students' backgrounds in order to devise relevant learning programs. Thomas (2004, p.4) outlined a description of learners' characteristics that signal the need for specific, individually-targeted programs to assist refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria:

- Students who have had minimal schooling in their native language or have experienced disrupted education prior to migration to Australia.
- Students with low literacy levels
- Students that have been assessed as being at risk of not completing school in a mainstream setting
- And may be suffering from the effects of trauma or torture as a result of losing family members
- And come from a background where writing is a new phenomenon.

Above all, as identified by Victorian Foundation for Survivors and Torture House (2007), transitioning into a new culture, coupled with post-migration stressors and disruptive schooling, can be challenging. Parents with little or no English can find the settlement process quite daunting, having to navigate issues such as funding, housing, finances, health and the confusing nature of schooling in Australia (Victorian Foundation for Survivors and Torture, 2007).

Refugee youth between the ages of 16 and 24 may find it difficult to read or write as a result of disrupted schooling prior to their arrival in Australia (Brown et al. 2006). Some refugee students have limited literacy in their first language and do not have the capacity to acquire a second language. (Brown et al., 2006). This then poses a complexity of issues for both students and teachers. Many students are ashamed when they are unable to complete tasks or when they fail tests (Brown et al. 2006, pp. 150-62). Children in these situations are usually frustrated, and often present their frustrations through behavioural issues, not engaging with their peers or sometimes becoming delinquent (Refugee Council of Australia, 2006).

The Department of Education and Early Learning Childhood Development (DEECD) (2008, p. 21) reported that they have identified significant needs of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 as result of disrupted schooling prior to migration. Many refugees in this cohort do not have the skills to meet the reading and writing

standards required by schools. In response, the Victorian Government has developed the 'Victorian Certificate for Applied Learning', which focuses on the individual's level of literacy and numeracy development.

Thomas (2004, p. 6) made the following recommendations for a model program to assist refugee youth transition into, and through, mainstream schooling in Victoria:

- Full time studies should be offered for at least twenty hours for about 15 students
- There should be a combination of intensive small group instruction, mainstream classes and supplementary ESL classes
- There should be additional components of the program to include small groups or individual literacy sessions
- There should be provisions for ESL teachers to work alongside mainstream teachers in mainstream classrooms to support literacy learners
- Parallel classes of low literacy students that follow mainstream curriculum content should be developed.

Olliff (2010) and Cranitch (2008), in response to addressing transition issues, stressed the importance of acknowledging and valuing refugee youths' experiences and the potential benefits they bring to Australia.

Summary

The studies referred to in this literature review provide a summation of the existing empirical work on youth refugees' experiences in their transition to mainstream schooling in Australia. The focus is primarily on the complex and challenging needs of this cohort in Australia and other Western countries, and the current lack of specific programs to effectively address their transition into mainstream schooling. Most of the literature shows that refugee students, while lagging behind in formal education due to interrupted learning through war, displacement, torture and a primary focus on physical survival, have amazing resilience, motivation and willingness to learn despite being marginalised. The literature also shows that refugee youth need solid family relationships and family involvement in the mainstream education process to help smooth their transition into mainstream schooling; a need that is often not met due to parental lack of understanding of the Australian schooling system and communication difficulties.

While gaps in the schooling system have been highlighted and recommendations have been made for a model program to assist “at risk groups” transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria, there is no evidence that any such programs are currently implemented successfully.

What is missing from the literature is systematic research specifically about the resilience of Sudanese refugee youth during their transition to mainstream schooling in Victoria. This cohort has no voice. Therefore, this research focuses on Sudanese refugee youths’ experiences of their transition process in the Victoria education system and their resilience in navigating the personal, family and systemic complexities of their journey. Greater insight into the complexities for students and educators is an added dimension, with students’ and teachers’ experiences analysed and compared.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Much thought was given to the most suitable methodology and methods to achieve the study's stated aims and objectives. To reiterate from Chapter One, the study aimed:

- To explore ways in which refugee youth in Victoria, particularly South Sudanese youth, experience their transition into the mainstream education system
- To explore and compare the findings from the perspectives of both students and teachers.

Its objectives were:

- To understand the realities of South Sudanese youth refugees' transition into mainstream schooling in the Australian State of Victoria

- To suggest ways in which the education system in Victoria can be improved to create a smooth transition process for refugee youth.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted and informed by phenomenology and critical anti-oppressive approaches in relation to the transition of refugee youth into mainstream schooling in Australia. A description of the methodological approaches used and justification for choosing them is explained in the following sections.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is used to gain an insight into people's attitudes, behaviours, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles, and to inform policy development, communication and future research. A qualitative approach assists people to understand personal experiences and interpretations (Dan and Kalof, 2008). Daly and McDonald (1992) argued that qualitative methods facilitate the investigation of people's lives within social contexts and that these methods facilitate insight into, and understanding of, how contexts shape and influence people's lives (Baltra-Ulloa 2013, p. 75).

Qualitative research commonly uses focus groups, in-depth interviews, content analysis, ethnography, evaluation and semiotics to gather and analyse data. It also

uses analysis of unstructured materials and reports (Newman, 2004). The qualitative data analysis process involves collating data into “categories” or “themes” based on valid inference and interpretation (Patton, 2002).

Content analysis is a rigorous form of thematic coding that highlights the inter-relatedness of themes (Sproule, 2010). Alston and Bowles (2003, p. 191) stated that content analysis is useful to researchers when they analyse some forms of communication for patterns and trends. However, Wimmer and Dominick (2006, p. 154) argued more recently that there are possible limitations in content analysis because the researcher determines the categories for coding and analysis, meaning that the process cannot be replicated authentically by different researchers.

Thematic analysis has been described as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within data (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis involves searching data from interviews or focus groups to find recurring patterns and meanings (Tuckett 2005). It organises and describes data in detail, and interprets aspects of the topic being investigated. Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 226) claimed that thematic analysis is exciting because “you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews”. Joffe (2011, p. 212) argued that thematic analysis is best suited to research in which researchers seek to get a clear understanding of a particular phenomenon.

Phenomenology

Van Manen (1990, p. 36) stated that phenomenological approaches see the lived experience of people as the “starting point and end point of research”. A phenomenological and qualitative approach to research is concerned with issues of culture. Sadler (1969) spoke of “bracketing” the researcher’s cultural heritage during the research process to understand the world as it was before the researcher was acculturated.

The Qualitative-Phenomenological Approach Used in this Study

The above review of qualitative research and phenomenology convinced the researcher that a qualitative-phenomenological approach would be most useful for answering the research question: “How do South Sudanese refugees perceive their transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria”? It was seen as most appropriate for gaining a deeper insight into the real life experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2010) of refugee youth undergoing the phenomenon of transitioning into mainstream schooling. The researcher believed it would provide the highest level of

understanding of the process South Sudanese refugee youth go through when transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria.

A phenomenology that is critical of culture and imposes certain ways of seeing and being in the world encouraged the qualitative approach in this study. Furthermore, the researcher utilised Bourdieu's socio-analysis of critical phenomenological perspectives in:

- Reflexive journaling
- Interaction with participants
- Developing an understanding of cultural oppression and the role culture played in perceptions and actions during the interview process by journaling all interactions with participants and during the data analysis process
- Practising cultural sensitivity (Husband, 2000). Recognising its role in research helped the researcher remain open minded about the experiences shared by all participants, even when this made her feel uncomfortable.

Critical and Anti-oppressive Influences on the Research Design

Critical and anti-oppressive theories also influenced the research design in that methods were selected according to critical and anti-oppressive values; that is, values that better suit cross-cultural research by giving equal voice to diverse participants without the researcher judging them by her own cultural values. The researcher was mindful of power dynamics and maintained a position of "power with, rather than power over" participants (Razak, 1998). The critical paradigm was useful because it reinforced the practice of focusing on participants' experiences and building relationships to promote alternative ways of thinking and of doing research. Anti-oppressive practice therefore provides awareness of oppression as a site where relational and cultural power and privilege is exercised (Razak, 1998).

Methods

The researcher used volunteer sampling to recruit participants, semi-structured interviews to collect data, and content and thematic analysis to make meaning of the results. She was vigilant at all times to maintain critical and anti-oppressive values. Though it was intended to use focus groups to collect data, participants wanted individual interviews only hence focus groups was not utilised.

Volunteer Sampling and Recruitment

Volunteer sampling to recruit participants for this study was selected as the most appropriate recruitment method because, as proved by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), it is effective when undertaking research within networked communities, including research with people from refugee backgrounds. MacDougall and Fudge's (2001) three stage model for sampling and recruitment of under-represented target groups in research with people from refugee backgrounds also informed this study's approach to sampling and recruitment.

Volunteer sampling allows flexibility and responsiveness to the cultural needs of participants from refugee backgrounds who are willing to participate in research through face-to-face interactions. There is no element of coercion and no risk of people participating against their better judgement. Volunteer sampling is a method whereby participants decide to participate of their own free will.

Volunteer sampling in this study began with development of a recruitment poster (see Appendix 1), written in English, inviting potential South Sudanese refugee youth and Victorian Education Department teacher participants to contact the researcher by telephone or e-mail to express their interest in taking part in the research. Copies of the poster were distributed to youth groups and service providers in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne, to the Migrant settlement services and Whittlesea Community connection agencies that were known to be in contact with communities of refugee background, and to homework clubs.

Recruitment after distribution of the posters was carried out through:

- Contacting potential participants through informal discussions and casual conversations
- Setting up initial contact as a way of showing commitment to each potential research participant.

Participation Criteria

In order to qualify and be selected for this research, respondents had to fulfil the following inclusion criteria.

Students needed to have lived in Australia for at least two years, be aged between 14 and 20 years, be enrolled in the Victorian education system and be willing to share their experiences of their transition process into mainstream schooling in

Victoria.

Teachers must have taught refugee youth between the ages of 14 and 20 years, be willing to share their experiences of refugee youth transition into mainstream Victorian schooling, and be teaching in a Victorian school.

The focus on the 14 to 20 year-old age group was due to the high refugee resettlement intake of that group in Victoria, and the need to examine the transition process into mainstream schooling for that group to identify and rectify the current gaps in the transition process.

No potential participants were to have had any contact with the researcher prior to this study. This criterion was set to ensure a neutral pathway throughout the data collection and analysis.

Participants

All potential participants were recruited through the 'homework club' at the Spectrum MRC in Victoria. Following their agreement to participate, participants were provided with an Information Sheet outlining all aspects of the research and were provided with the opportunity to ask questions before and during the research (see Appendix 2). They were also given a Consent Form (see Appendix 3) and advised that participation was voluntary, so if they did not feel comfortable participating they could withdraw from the interview at any time or decline to answer certain questions. The third lot of information participants received was an Interview Schedule that described potential topics for discussion during semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 4).

The sample consisted of seven South Sudanese refugee youth (n=7; 4 males & 3 females) with an age range between 14 and 20 years, and three teachers (n=3; 1 male & 2 females) who had worked with African youth from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne high schools. Two of the teachers had taught ESL and humanities for over 20 years, while the other had taught for over two years.

The refugee youth had migrated when they were between the ages of 6 and 10 years, all lived with both parents, five attended public schools (n=5), one attended private school (n=1) and one was at university (n=1).

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University. It met the required ethical considerations related to privacy and confidentiality to prevent identification of participants or their schools. The researcher and the participants pledged confidentiality. All identifying information in the data was deleted. Participants were identified only by numbers. This was in keeping with Silverman (2011, p. 94), who stated that when researchers report their observations from interviews, it is important to protect the identities of people participating in the research, and to ensure that they understand and consent to the research. The researcher made a conscious effort to consider the issue of informed consent, confidentiality and minimal risk to research participants in regard to their culture (Russell and White, 2001). This was achieved by giving all participants the Information, Informed Consent and Interview Schedule sheets described above, and implementing critical and anti-oppressive values and actions at all times. All participants had the opportunity to ask questions face-to-face with the researcher about the research before participating. Participants raised no questions or concerns. The researcher stressed that all participants were fellow researchers; the research was being undertaken with them, not being done to them.

No participants could take part until the researcher had received their consent forms. In the case of the refugee youth participants under the age of 18 years, parental consent was required.

The researcher thought deeply about the fact that she was undertaking the research partly from an insider's perspective because she comes from a refugee background. While this posed a slight ethical dilemma, she acknowledged that her affiliation with the target group (South Sudanese refugees) had influenced the research topic, and was vigilant in keeping an open mind and not making value judgements during data analysis. However, she did not see herself as having insider knowledge because she did not speak Arabic, the common language of the target group. In that respect, she was an outsider. She considered the costs and benefits of the insider and outsider roles in research, and agreed with Barnnick and Coghlan (2007), p. 60), who argued that:

> …as researchers go through a process of reflexive awareness, we are able to articulate knowledge that has become deeply segmented because of

> socialisation in an organisational system and reframe it as theoretical knowledge, and that is because we are close to something or know it well, and can research it.

The researcher was highly aware of the ethical implications of any influence on her perspective as the researcher (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As suggested by Liamputtong (2009, p. 25), the researcher undertook critical reflexive processes throughout the data analysis to acknowledge personal beliefs or views that could have impacted on the results. She also acknowledged the ethical dilemmas associated with cross-cultural interactions.

Additional ethical considerations were required for participation of the South Sudanese refugee youths by the Flinders HREC guidelines because they were considered a "vulnerable" group and some were under the age of 18 years.

Specific Ethical Considerations for Refugee Participants

Block et al. (2012, p. 69) stated that ethical research practice with "vulnerable and marginalised groups such as people from refugee backgrounds" involves maximising participant input, enhancing their capacity to give informed consent and adapting research methods to "heighten their relevance to the circumstances of participants' lives".

The South Sudanese refugee youths were informed about free counselling services for refugees in case this was needed. However, it was not utilised in this research. In addition, the researcher sought to demystify the research process for refugee communities that were often the "subject" of research but seldom the "researchers".

Most importantly, the researcher ensured that any refugee participant under 18 years of age had parental consent to participate.

Data Collection

The qualitative research tool of semi-structured individual interviews, which involved asking open-ended questions to understand the respondents' points of view rather than making generalised statements, was used to collect data from the South Sudanese refugee youth and the teachers.

Semi-structured Interviews

Why use semi-structured interviews? According to Bernard (1988), semi-structured interviews provide reliable and comparable qualitative data, and allow researchers

to develop a keen understanding of the topic being investigated.

A meeting was held with the South Sudanese participants and their parents to explain the semi-structured interview process before interviews were conducted at a community house. This was time consuming because most of the parents were working. It was easier to meet, and conduct interviews with, the teachers at their schools.

A set time was agreed between the participants and the researcher for each interview after participants were asked for locations, times and dates convenient for them. The initial interview was designed with open-ended questions that helped to generate the participants' interest in the conversation (see Appendix 4). The refugee youth were asked about their perceptions of their experiences in transitioning into mainstream schooling in the Victorian education system. Teachers were also asked about their experiences of the refugees' transition process.

The length of each individual interview for both groups was between 30 and 40 minutes. Interviews were completed over an eight-week period during June and July 2014. Questions were asked in a way that opened up more discussion, especially with the students because they needed more prompting.

Interviews were tape recorded with the participants' consent. This was done to attain an accurate account of what questions were asked and the answers received. In addition, the researcher took notes to record particular non-verbal behaviours that could not be captured by the audio device. One student preferred not to be recorded but consented to notes being taken by hand instead. After each interview, the participant was asked about their experiences during the interview and if they wanted to make any additions or changes to their transcript. The researcher then reflected on the interview session. She developed trust and respect with participants in the pre-interview meeting and also during the interview by remaining sensitive and empathetic to verbal and non–verbal cues (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Data Analysis

All ten participants' responses were included in the content analysis. Individual interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis in line with qualitative research procedures. This process aimed to obtain inclusive, thorough and comprehensive data, and to evaluate the participants' perspectives about refugee youth transitioning into the mainstream schooling system in Victoria. The

researcher had to use considerable caution in drawing interpretations from the analysis because when the participants are also the researchers, and not research subjects, multiple interpretations can be produced depending on the storytellers (Ladson-Billings 2003, p. 417).

The researcher followed the five-phase content and thematic analysis of Braun and Clark (2006, p. 79) described below.

Phase One – becoming familiar with the whole data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. The process of thematic analysis is a process that entails identifying and analysing data in which one is interested. Data from the transcribed interviews was read and re-read until recurring themes on the experiences of refugee students were found that provided a collective picture.

Phase Two – coding data by breaking it down into the smallest parts. This involved identifying key words in responses that represented something that participants mentioned repeatedly as important and relevant to the research question. The researcher then identified initial codes from the data that might assist in answering the research question. By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide for conducting thematic analysis, she became familiar with the data through reading the interviews multiple times and became immersed in the content. Data was read thoroughly to allow themes to emerge.

Phase Three – searching for themes by tracing smaller parts of data (codes), such as key words like "participation", back to their broader pattern, for example, where participation was referred to frequently. All responses that were relevant to the issue were gathered and a prevalence associated with the issue of "Participation" emerged, which was reported and experienced by the South Sudanese refugee students' transitioning, and also by the teachers. A collection of themes then became an initial "thematic map".

Phase Four – reviewing themes by examining data abstracts related to each theme. Data was collated and coded in a spread sheet, then searched for themes by examining initial codes for broader patterns and meaning. Each participant theme was reviewed against the data created to determine whether they answered the research question. Themes were scanned to make sure they were relevant to the analysis. Any that were not relevant were discarded.

Phase Five – after extensive defining and refining of themes, the themes were

named by revisiting data abstracts and gaining clarity on the key feature of the verbatim content.

Descriptive themes identified from the students' and teachers' interviews emerged from the data, which enabled comparison of emerging themes. There was rigorous checking and re-checking of the coding process throughout the data analysis. Once the themes were finalised, the researcher developed a narrative extracted from the data. This was then compared to, and contrasted with, existing literature about studies of refugee youth. Some direct quotes were used to portray the accuracy of participants' input, emphasise meanings and ensure that participants' real voices are heard (see Chapter Four).

Rigor of this Qualitative Research

Research is viewed as a privilege and the responsibility for conducting research honestly lies with the researcher (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, p. 44). Conducting qualitative research can sometimes prove challenging (Smith et al. 2010). From a constructionist perspective, human understandings of the world and individuals' experiences are socially constructed.

Critical reflection on the analysis process was undertaken in accordance with Liamputtong (2009). The researcher used the reflexive technique of journaling to ascertain and assess how her perceptions, background and history may influence the data analysis. This provided the researcher with a means to reflect on the feelings, frustrations, problems and biases that may occur due to her preconceived notions. Another safeguard against bias the researcher employed in this study was interacting with the participants, which provided the opportunity to appreciate the different perspectives in the information gathered (Brookfield, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

This study has assumed that there are multiple stories of the lived experience of refugee youth transitioning to mainstream schooling. The responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the stories told by this study's participants was met by confirming with participants the accuracy of the interview transcripts as a representation of the themes that emerged, and as a valid picture of their transitional experiences.

In order to check the validity of this research, the researcher employed Ratcliff's (1995) factors for identifying qualitative research validity. She used the raw data, including word for word transcription. She checked with participants to clarify or

make changes to transcripts, as required; and she implemented triangulation of the data by examining the findings in relation to existing literature. The credibility of the research includes findings that are somewhat contradictory to previous research on Sudanese refugee youth in the education system in Australia.

Summary

During this research, the researcher has learnt to critique research methodology and methods, and select the most appropriate research approach to fulfil her research aims and objectives. This chapter explains the qualitative-phenomenological methodology underpinning the research, the qualitative research data collection method of semi-structured interviews and the data analysis method of thematic and content analysis. It justifies the researcher's choice of methodology and methods, and illustrates her broadening research focus from the personal to the political to the social.

This chapter demonstrates the cultural and historical underpinnings of engaging with participants in a process of reciprocity, and how being a person from a refugee background and a social worker implies working with contradictions.

It has highlighted the ethical dilemmas arising from the researcher's insider perspective and the necessary ethical safeguards to participants' privacy, confidentiality and wellbeing.

Finally, this chapter has established the rigor of this research and the value of participants acting as researchers rather than subjects of research. Their input in checking the raw data and the themes arising from analysis, particularly their ability to make changes to ensure accuracy, has added to the credibility of this research.

The next chapter presents the results from the refugee youth and teacher interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter examines the experiences of participants that emerged during the interview process. It provides an overview of the central discourse or themes identified, which provided a framework for detailed discussion during data analysis. The themes were identified as a result of their prevalence in the transcripts and journaling of participants' non-verbal communication / behaviour during the interviews.

Overarching Themes from Analysis of Refugee Youth Students' and Teachers' Data

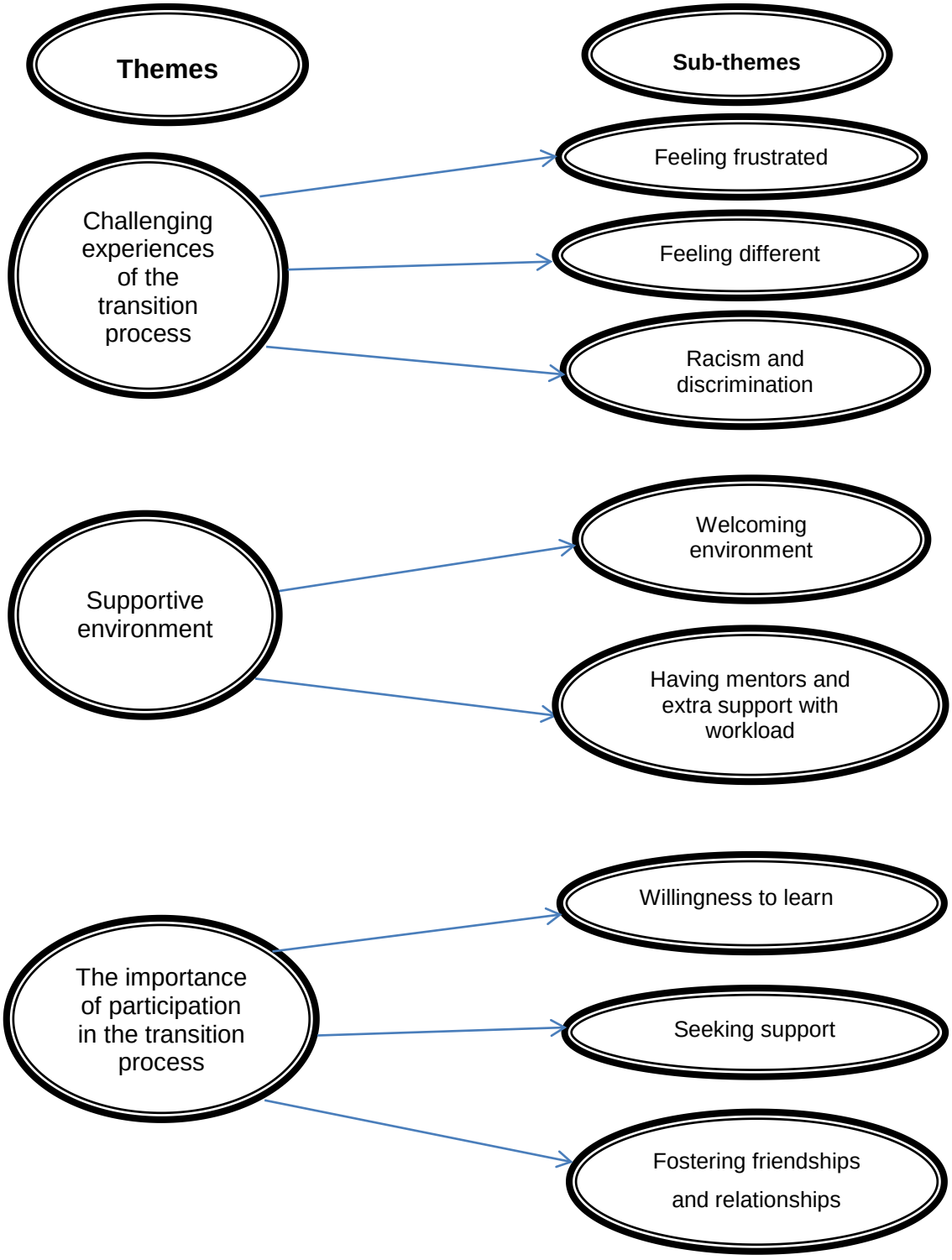
Three overarching themes were identified from in-depth analysis of the refugee youth students' interview data. These were "Challenging experiences of the students' transition process", "Supportive environment" and "The importance of participation in the transition process". Eight sub-themes were identified as emanating from these overarching themes, as illustrated in Table 2 (next page). Only two overarching themes were identified from the teachers' interview data. These were "Challenging experiences of students" and "Professional training of teachers to understand refugee issues". Five sub-themes emanated from these themes, as summarised in Table 3 (see page 49). The themes and sub-themes from the two participant groups are discussed in two sections. The first looks at results from the South Sudanese refugee youth students' data; the second looks at results from the teachers' data.

Results from the South Sudanese Refugee Youth Students' Data

Theme 1: Challenging Experiences of the Students' Transition Process

The interviewees repeatedly indicated that they faced many challenges in the transition process. Having not fully overcome traumatic events such as the death of family members and split families, experiencing difficulties navigating services in the host country and trying to cope with the transition process made the students feel frustrated and different. They felt that the worst of the challenges they experienced was racism and discrimination from some teachers and peers in the education system in Victoria.

Table 2: **Summary of themes and sub-themes from refugee youth students' data**



The following examples of what the students experienced, in their own words, demonstrate the sub-themes of Theme 1 and highlight the depth of the impact of the transition process.

Participant #2

> *It was bad, they put me down and I get all of the physical stuff but the mental stuff … sometimes it's really hard when you don't get to know more about the subject.*

Participant #3

> *I don't know because I dislike them because some teachers are rude. They pick on certain students. Ah, going back to when I first came, all the way back in Language school, I just, I was a bit uncomfortable of how things were because obviously the language barrier, I could not speak English or write properly, so I felt uncomfortable every day going to school, because I wasn't like everyone else. I didn't enjoy straight away. I gradually start liking school because I thought, "Ah, I'm speaking English, now things shouldn't be too hard".*
>
> *… For example, when teachers said something they do not repeat it, for example "If you miss a class you will have to catch up with a friend", and that moment I do not have that much friends and friends are usually in other classes.*

Some students felt that the attitude of some teachers, which arose as a result of the students having limited English language, hampered the transition process.

Participant #4

> *The transitioning was sometimes challenging, especially when people say bad things about my culture.*

Participant #5

> *We could not be in the normal classes with the other students because they know everything, English was new to us, you know, and did not know anything and ESL classes helped a lot, like we started from the bottom.*

Theme 2: Supportive Environment

The students strongly expressed the opinion that a supportive environment was a crucial element in their transition process. They noted that without adequate support from teachers, parents and peers, it would be difficult to achieve a smooth transition.

Several participants were of the opinion that it was imperative to have a welcoming environment in schools; mentors in the form of teachers and also peer support; and extra support in the form of homework clubs to help with their school workload. The following examples of some of the participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions stress the necessity for readily available support to assist refugee students to transition into mainstream schooling.

Participant #2

> *Ah yes, meeting new students and stuff, they were very nice, they make you feel welcomed and they help you too.*

Participants were of the view that having a safe and welcoming environment was paramount in their transition because it changed the whole dynamics of the transition process. The participants highlighted the role mentors played in their successful transition process. The teachers, in addition, appointed "buddies" to work with students.

Participant #2

> *It was long time ago, but what the teachers did then was to pair a new student with old students that will show you around and everything, and to be their friends. I became friends with a lot people through that. They make me feel welcome and encouraged me to work hard.*

Participant #5

> *I was behind with my school work and instead of catching up I focused on soccer. I then started attending homework club after school every Wednesday. I attended that and my Maths teacher helped me out a lot.*
>
> *… the teachers give me homework but at times I do not do it and wait for Wednesdays, like if I'm really behind, I will go to homework club in Preston and get some help from there because I also work.*

When asked about the positive issues in their transition into the Victorian education system, all the student participants indicated that the ESL program and homework clubs were very beneficial. They were unanimous in their responses that while some teachers were not supportive, others were very supportive and helpful, and that without the support of these teachers, it would have been difficult to transition into

mainstream schooling in Victoria.

Participant #6

> *I have had a lot of help in high school and outside school, for example having homework clubs supporting through the MRC one day a week for 3 hours. Just come, bring your stuff, they will help. They can also assist with that through the homework club, I had a Biology teacher and an English and Psychology teachers, I called them up when I really needed them. I make friends with them even now; I am still in contact with them.*

Participant #4

> *I reckon they push everyone, they push you to the max, they encouraged you to better yourself and that hunger for school in so many ways, for example they have after school classes to help you better yourself.*

Participant #1

> *I would like to see teacher push their kids, more especially that of refugee kids. I want them to inspire them in school is all they say to them, I mean, if I was a teacher and have refugee students I will always communicate and be close to them. If you are a refugee man and you try and learn English and get the right grades to please your teachers, sometimes you think, "I'm a refugee, and the teacher thinks that I am not good", so as a teacher I will make friends with them. I will try to work with them a lot and offer them extra support and advise what to do before class so they can be prepared. If you study before class you are more interested in the topic and subject.*

The lack of parental support was in contrast to the support from teachers, the ESL program and homework clubs. Most students said they had minimal parental support. They were of the opinion that although their parents offered suggestions to them, they felt that the parental support they received was inadequate. The initial reaction of most students when asked about parental involvement in their education and transition process was silence because they did not want to say anything inappropriate in regard to their parents. The researcher understood this to be a cultural issue because South Sudanese children are taught to respect elders and not to say negative things about their parents, especially in public or to strangers. However, one participant stated otherwise.

Participant #1

> *Parents, it has always been hard because they want you to be this when you want to be that. I told my parents I do not need them to tell me what I wanted to be because "I am the one that stresses in school. When I fail a test I am the one that is hurt, not them. I am the one that wakes up in the morning like when I do not want to go to school. I do that and when I get late to school I am the one that get screamed at, therefore it is really my life. I will choose what I want to be because what the point is, I do not or will not live my life for you". But my dad is like, "Just as long as you go to university and become something positive", and it is all good. As I said, "parents will always be parents".*

Theme 3: The Importance of Participation in the Transition Process

The importance of refugee students' participation in the transition process into mainstream schooling in Victoria was identified as a major theme from participants repeatedly expressing their concerns about their own willingness to learn and participate in their education by seeking support from both teachers and parents. They understood that taking an active role in their learning would enhance their chances of a better transition into mainstream schooling. Some mentioned that they were motivated to participate in their transition process by pushing themselves to read and write in order to be able to complete tasks that were presented to them.

Participant #1

> *… after a while when I push myself to learn to read and write, try to simulate and be like everyone else, things became a little better.*

> *I think it is just depends on the student, really if you are slack then they will treat you like one of the kids who do not want to learn, so they will take it easy on you but if you are committed they will try and push you to the higher level where you can better yourself.*

Participant #2

> *I decided I want to learn English and I am going to study and I am going to get where all the other students are, and I am even going to be better than them, and you know now, studying helped a lot.*

The students highlighted the need to seek support from teachers because teachers were always willing to assist. Students also said that actively seeking help from teachers fostered a good relationship between them and the teachers.

Participant #6

> *… again it comes back then to the individual input and if you try to help yourself the teachers are willing to give the extra support. Yes, the teachers will always pay attention to those who are trying to help themselves.*

A number of participants also recognised that fostering friendships with peers could make the transition process less stressful and more positive. Forming initial friendships with peers both at school and in their community was equally important for improving their knowledge, and building their social skills and community connectedness. The students acknowledged that having friends within their community was crucial.

Participants #5, #6 and #7

> *I had a lot of friends in primary school that helped me stay in school.*

Summary – Students

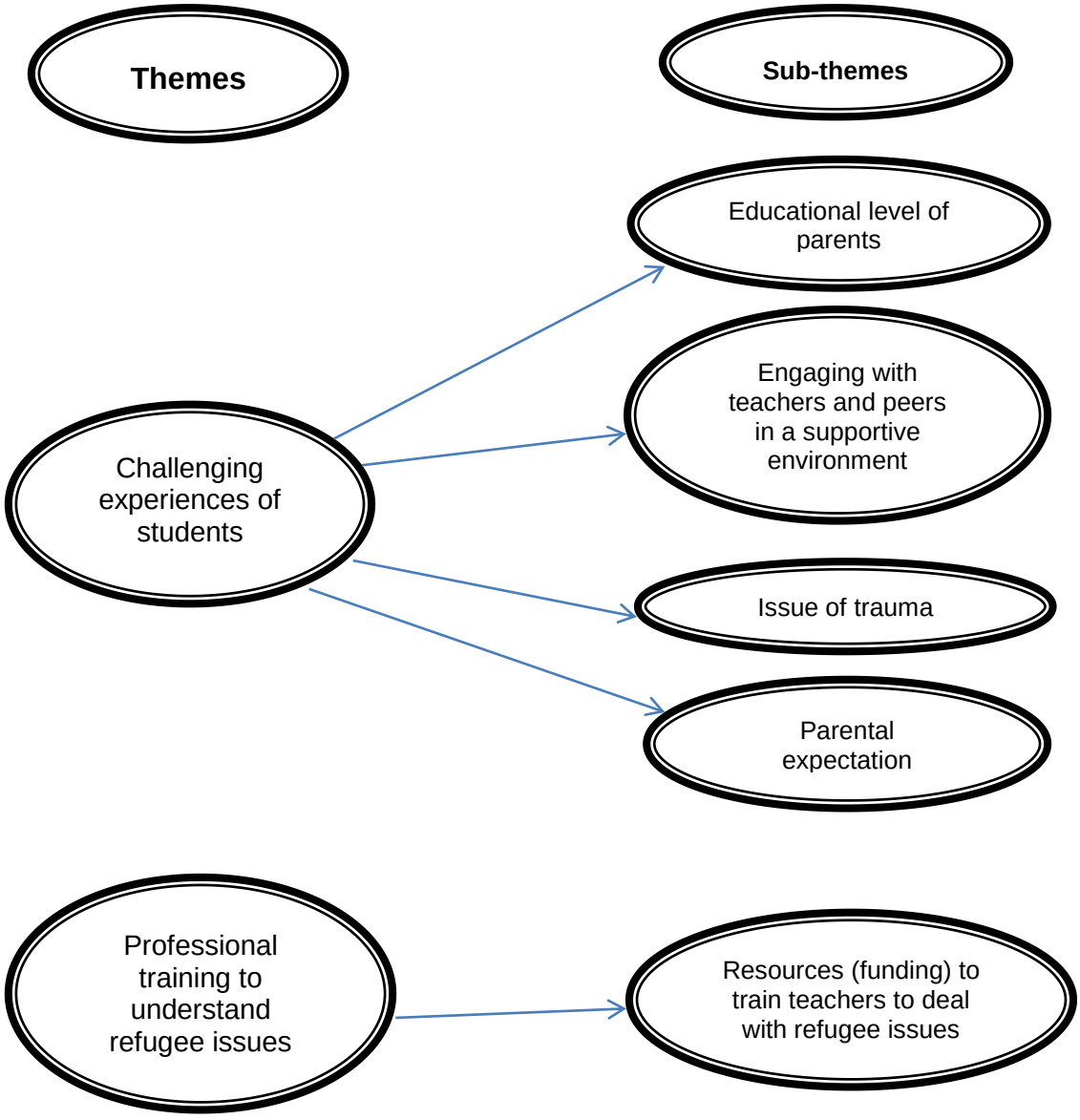
Results of the findings from the interviews with the South Sudanese refugee students highlight the need for them to participate in the transition process in a supportive environment. This will help alleviate some of the challenges faced by migrants in the transition process, especially South Sudanese refugees transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria. Most students identified that the learning (transitioning) period was challenging for them but overcame the barriers, including the racism and discrimination they experienced at the hands of some teachers and peers, by engaging in their learning process and seeking support from other teachers and services such as homework clubs. However, they continued to “feel different” as a result of limited English and moving into a new environment.

The students showed a great deal of initiative in navigating the transition process with minimal or no parental involvement. They realised that their parents did not understand the transition process. Most were of the opinion that having a welcoming environment, fostering good relationships and seeking support were paramount in their transition process.

Results from the Teachers' Data

The themes and sub-themes extracted from the teachers' interview data are summarised in Table 3. They balance those from the students' interview data to provide a whole picture of the issues for students and teachers during the South Sudanese refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria.

Table 3: Summary of themes and sub-themes from the teachers' data



Theme 1: Challenging Experiences of Students

From the teachers' perspectives, the challenging experiences of the South Sudanese students they came into contact with had a fundamental effect on the students' education and their engagement with their peers. One of the challenges the teachers identified included the inadequate educational level of parents and the

impact this had on refugee students' education. According to the teachers, the English language barrier is a huge hurdle for those children with limited knowledge of English and parents who are not able to adequately help their children to undertake simple homework tasks.

Teacher #1

> *The older they are when they transition into mainstream school, the higher the language expectation, so the harder it is for them to pick up adequate language in the classroom. It makes it really difficult; I guess if you have a teenager coming in with no English.*

Teacher #2

> *This year I came across a girl from an African background that could not do her homework properly. I could see she could not read the book. So, I made us meet once a week so I could teach her to read. Some of the texts the schools give these students are unreasonable. It is problematic, the kids come, a lot of them come, they have been here for only two years and so their English is not good, and a lot of them missed school.*
>
> *… Generally speaking, if a student fits into the criteria to do English as an additional Language at VCE and they have been in Australia for less than 5 years, then they will be encouraged to go into that stream. It is not mandatory. …a student who came from the former Soviet Union (Russian country) would probably not need that … a little bit more support is all that is needed. It is not that much of a difference but the exam gives them a bit more time to do things.*

Teacher #3

> *Teenagers are really difficult to teach and of course the kids just want to appear the same as everyone else. Sometimes to take ESL (English as a Second language) can be an issue for the kids and also if I removed them from the class to make up time … for example their Science class gives them extra time.*

There was also the issue of trauma experienced by students as a result of forced migration, which teachers identified as an underlying factor in student behaviours they found difficult to understand and deal with. Students may have had to leave

immediate family members back home and live with extended family in Australia. Teachers felt the trauma students experienced in this situation impeded their engagement with learning and their transition into the mainstream school system.

Teacher #3

> *… It goes back to the opportunity the kids have had previously and of course the other issue is that if you're talking about refugees, the issue of trauma or death within the family and God only knows what they have seen or been through.*

Teacher# 1

> *A lot of the kids need help, living with an aunty or they have come from a terrible situation and so apart from coping with all of that, they have to deal with the challenges of transitioning into mainstream schooling. I do not know how they do it. They are incredibly cheerful you know.*

Parental expectation was also an issue the teachers felt affected the transition process of some refugees. Teachers pointed out that most refugee parents did not have the capacity to support their children's education, and so relied on schools and community services to support their children through homework clubs and extra assistance to enable their children's transition into mainstream schooling. Some parents had huge expectations for their children to excel in the early transition stage of schooling, which placed added responsibility and challenges on the students.

Teacher # 3

> *I think it is really great that they get specialist English Language lessons to start off with, however if the students come from a background where they had a little bit of education their transition will be easier.*
>
> *You also get the other side of students who do not have any previous learning and who come from families where education is not important, they are those who struggle the most when come in; a little bit of education can go a long way to assist the transition program. I have another example of a Somali family, when they were in Ethiopia the parents hired someone to teach the kids English so they came with a small knowledge of English, that background in English helped the students and they progressed a lot more quickly than students who had no knowledge of the English language.*

Teacher #2

> *We had a student from a country in the former Soviet Union Federation last year. Her family was really enthusiastic and keen in getting educated and supporting her … however, you also meet students who do not have any previous learning and come from families where education is not that important and so they are the ones who struggle when they come.*

Teacher# 1

> *I think that the education of students is the responsibility of the parents and the students, because parents should work with their kids and push them up to be at the same level as their peers.*

Teacher #2 raised a concern regarding the tasks some teachers allocated to refugee children, which may not be achievable without special assistance.

Teacher #2 was concerned that placing refugee students in school according to their chronological age, without first assessing their literacy level, was doing a disservice to students.

Teacher #2

> *We had a similar case where the student was not going to be able to perform at VCE (Victoria Certificate of Education) level, even though being in a mainstream situation where the student received 3 hours of specialist support per day, that was not sufficient and a waste of the student's time. Some students can simply not learn and do not know how to learn or acquire any further skills. There are also studies available for people who migrated to Australia in their late teens at YAMEC (Young Adult Migrant English Course) this is an alternative pathway to mainstream schooling for that age group. They spend similar hours up to four days a week but all that time is spent learning English at the student's level. YAMEC is far more productive for the students. Really, having 17 periods of stuff happening in the mainstream schooling that the students do not understand is not relevant and a waste of their time.*

These quotes illustrative how the teachers expressed the challenges they encounter with refugee students who have migrated in their late teens, and who have had disrupted schooling with little or no English, have suffered the trauma of separation

from, or loss of immediate family, are living with extended family and have little or no support at home for their education. The teachers identified these challenges as a barrier to refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling, and as challenges to themselves, as teachers, to find ways to assist the students during the transition process.

The teachers also highlighted the need for a supportive environment for students from refugee backgrounds to help eliminate any form of discrimination against them and offer students a safe and trusting environment. Two of the teachers interviewed were mentoring students from refugee backgrounds in homework clubs run by a local community service in Melbourne and identified the issue of unsuitable reading material given to refugee students, which made their learning more difficult and was non-supportive of their transitional needs.

Teacher #3

> *She came out of a war torn country and she has to read about this middle class sort of literature book, and like it is an ESL class, why would you choose this book anyway? So we spent a lot of time on the book and she did not know for example the word "orchard", she has never heard about a "cherry" before. So I went and bought the $20 a kilo cherry, I bought two dollars' worth, that is about seven of them, so I gave it to her. And then there is the Russian names in the book. So I get frustrated with the tasks the teachers give the kids coming from a different background.*

However for refugee students whose parents are educated, the outcome is usually better because the parents are able to advise their children about career pathways, help in completing homework and monitor their children's progress in school. These parents follow up their children's progress with their teachers and educational authorities.

Teacher #1

> *And for those kids who have enough English, they need to develop that further. The transfer happens reasonably well, in this particular school, we do have kids whose parents studied in Latrobe University, so the whole attitude within the family will be different and expect to have quite good success.*

Teacher # 3

Because I work with the grade 5 and 6 students, I found that the students who are supported at home progress really well and it sets them up for continuing academic success.

Theme 2: Professional Training of Teachers to Understand Refugee Issues

The second major theme from the teacher's perspective was the issue of professional training to understand the complexities of people from refugee backgrounds and their transition into mainstream schooling. The teachers identified that some teachers have a limited understanding about the plight of refugee students in regard to the effect of prolonged displacements. They discussed the need for more teachers, and special training in the methods of teaching refugee children and assessing these children's knowledge and literacy level to place them in the appropriate year of schooling. Resources in the form of funding to train teachers to better understand and deal with refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling was identified as a sub-theme. The following teachers' comments illustrate the second theme and its single sub-theme.

Teacher #2

… it will be really nice to have more time and resources teaching the basic skills in English. It is not going to happen here not necessarily an English Language school but perhaps Maths and English and possibly humanities to be taken in smaller groups, and they can go on and join the rest of their peers in other subjects that they are dealing with.

… We are aware of their needs and we try to do the best we can with what we have got. We have specialist teachers to assist students that are struggling.

Teacher # 3

For example, some of the tasks the teachers give the kids; the poor kids will have problems because they've only been here for two years. Another example, the Sudanese girl, she was in year 12 and in year 12 English they do what's called "context questions", where you get a question, read the book and relate it to your own life. Well, the book this school was using is a

Teacher #3 continued from page 56

> *play called "Bombshell". It is an Australian play where women talk about their lives. The bit she was looking at was about an Australian woman raising children who was really worried being a good mother because she gave them fish and chips and was not doing her Yoga and all this sort of stuff. The Sudanese girl had to try to relate this to herself with no understanding to it and her background, so I asked her, "Well, what is it like for your mother in Sudan? "Oh it's really hard because the rebels came and burnout all the crops and killed my father". I just wonder if the teachers do understand where these kids are coming from.*

During the interview, two teachers emphasised the significance of providing extra support to children from refugee backgrounds within, and out of, school (for example through homework clubs), which has been helpful. Teacher #1 voluntarily provides extra support for one refugee child per year.

Teacher #1

> *I have decided to take and follow up one kid a year and help them because it is much better. You get to know the kid and anticipate what they need and so on, and so I've done that with an Uromo boy, who actually I am seeing tomorrow. I started with him when he was in year 12 and it was mid-year. I started helping and I am seeing him. He'll come here. I read all the books to him because he couldn't read them. You know, I got the tape and CDs for him, but it is too hard for him because he did not have the vocabulary. I do not know how but he passed and he got into Ballarat University.*

Summary – Teachers

Results of the teachers' interviews highlight concerns about the challenges faced while working with refugee students. Teachers highlighted that they experienced minimal engagement from most of the refugee students' parents in the educational transition process but where parents were supportive, generally due to higher education levels, and engaged in their children's education, the transition process was much smoother. A major concern is teachers' lack of awareness and understanding about refugee students' life experiences and how to handle adverse situations. Teachers find it difficult to appreciate the traumatic events and significant pre-migration displacement that the refugee students have been through. This lack

of understanding is reflected in the unsuitable schoolwork given to these students, which results in students struggling to comprehend and complete set tasks. Teachers were of the opinion that having more specialised training for working with refugee students and providing a supportive environment would be of benefit to teachers and refugee students.

Conclusion

The results of the interviews with seven South Sudanese refugee students and three teachers in Victoria have highlighted the major issues for both of these groups during the students' transition into mainstream schooling. Both groups' emphasis on the need for a supportive environment to assist the transition process for all involved is a significant finding.

The next chapter discusses the results in relation to the available literature on the topic of refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to previous studies on African refugee students in Australia. It focuses on the South Sudanese students' perspectives and teachers' perspectives, as well as the role of parents in assisting their children's transition into mainstream schooling. It discusses how the study's results challenge some current assumptions about refugee youth and give insight into the challenges that teachers face when working with this cohort. It identifies the implications of the results for the social work profession and suggests recommendations (from both the students' and teachers' perspectives) to provide better assistance for refugee youth in transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria, and better training for teachers to support these students.

Challenges to Current Assumptions

There is evidence from the literature review carried out prior to conducting this study to suggest that the transition of students from refugee backgrounds is thwarted by mainly psychological challenges such as forced migration and trauma, as well as limited English language skills, disrupted schooling and students' age of migration. Rutter (2006) criticised the focus on trauma experiences of refugee children at the expense of their educational experiences, and Matthews (2008, p. 32) argued that in Australia, refugee education is dominated by psychological approaches that overemphasise the impact of trauma. Rutter (2006) and Matthews (2008) both argued that more research needs to be carried out in areas other than the much researched topics of trauma and war, and that future research should focus on day-to-day issues in the lives of refugee youth, such as their struggle in transitioning into mainstream schooling in Australia. This study has done that. Its results challenge current assumptions inherent in the way previous research has portrayed refugees and their resettlement expectations.

Hutchinson and Dorsett (2012) stated in their research on refugee resilience that pathologising the trauma stories of refugees may further alienate refugees from full inclusion into the Australian lifestyle by denying their inherent resilience in the face of extraordinary life experiences. The results of this study add another dimension to the experiences of South Sudanese refugee youth transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria. The study is unique in that it focuses not on traditional topics such as war in Africa and other traumatic events, but on issues pertaining to South Sudanese refugee youth during their settlement into day-to-day life routines at

school, and how families, members of the Australian community and schools can help to deal with the challenges these students face.

Proactive Students

The concept of participation was relevant in the case of the seven South Sudanese refugee students in this study. They were passionate about their active participation in their transition process. They repeatedly reported how they engaged in their learning, even when faced with significant challenges, and how it had benefited their transition to mainstream schooling in Victoria. They saw themselves as responsible for their transition, particularly in light of many of their parents' lack of understanding about the transition process and the school system.

The students also emphasised that forming friendships made their transition more positive. They talked about how their cultural background could have isolated them in the schoolyard because other students were not forthcoming in forming friendships with them; thus, they must take the first step.

The researcher argues that this trend, while seemingly positive, may affect the refugee students' transition process negatively. For example, Victorian Foundation for Torture and Trauma (2008) noted that some schools are ill equipped to address the complexities of refugee students, and as a result the students may feel socially isolated and disengaged from mainstream schooling. They may form cliques and indulge in anti-social behaviours.

Overall, it is important to highlight the fact that despite the identified challenges, most of the study's student participants demonstrated a willingness to meet the challenges they faced and to learn what they needed to transition into mainstream schooling in Victoria. However, they also pointed out that they needed encouragement from all stakeholders in the transition process, including teachers, parents, schools, government departments and community service organisations.

Supportive Environment Needs Improvement

Research on refugee transition to mainstream schooling in Australia has consistently shown that the settlement process for refugees is their most stressful and frustrating experience because they have to adjust to a new culture, language and other social factors (Refugee Council of Australia, 2011).

While mainstream Australian society and Australian schools may assume that all

schools and communities provide supportive environments for refugee students, this study highlights that this is not the case. The results indicate an urgent need to provide a supportive environment to help refugee students through their transition process to help alleviate some of the challenges they face in transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria.

One of the challenges for the students during their transition process is the lack of parental involvement as part of the supportive environment. Parental involvement is another assumption in the Australian school system, but the refugee students did not have access to this important form of support. This was identified as particularly challenging because the parents did not understand the process and many did not have the English language skills to communicate with the students' teachers.

Also, refugee parents often had limited educational capacity to assist their children with their homework (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). As a consequence, the students usually had to rely on homework clubs run by schools and other community organisations for assistance with their schoolwork and homework. In terms of homework issues experienced by refugee children, Brown et al. (2006, p. 159) pointed out that, "A simple homework revision task that presents few difficulties for a local student may require many hours of work for these students". Numerous studies have recognised the increased processing time needed for reading and writing tasks by students with English as a Second Language (Chegwidden and Thompson, 2008; Cassity and Gow, 2005, 2006a). Despite the provision of homework clubs by schools and community service organisations, extra help from some teachers and other professionals, and ESL (English as a Second language) centres run by the Department of Education, the refugee students still struggled to achieve a smooth transition into Australian schools due to inadequate transition support.

The South Sudanese refugee students indicated that they urgently needed professional help in some important areas associated with their transition into mainstream education in Victoria. This demonstrated their awareness of what was required to transition successfully. Some of the major areas where they needed help included assistance in fostering good relationships with all stakeholders in the education process, including teachers, peers, parents, mentors and community service providers; and professional support in the initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy levels so they would be assigned to the appropriate school year level.

The students talked about racism and discrimination from some teachers as well as

students, and how this made the school environment less welcoming and less supportive, especially during the initial stages of their entry into the school system. Their experiences point to the need for greater availability of, and better, counselling and other services available at schools to deal with issues related to racism and discrimination, and associated issues such as trauma. The students' experience was that they would seek help only from teachers they knew to be supportive.

A recurring theme from the South Sudanese refugee students' interviews was that their experience of transitioning into schooling in Victoria was compounded by their limited English language skills; a barrier they encountered when they arrived in Australia. Limited English prior to migration, which caused the South Sudanese refugee students to feel "frustrated" and "different", was also linked to the racism and discrimination issues, and was a challenge to be overcome in their transition to mainstream schools in Australia. This finding supports earlier research by Chegwidden and Thompson (2008), and Kirk and Cassity (2007), who reported that young people from refugee backgrounds had experienced interrupted schooling and faced significant difficulties in the areas of literacy and numeracy; a situation particularly common among refugee students in secondary schooling. This study's results, in conjunction with other research, point to the need for greater English language learning support for refugee students.

The study's findings are consistent with previous research in regard to refugee students transitioning into mainstream schooling and gaining better literacy and numeracy when they arrive at a younger age. The South Sudanese students identified that age at the time of migration was as an important issue. Nearly 50 percent of the students acknowledged that they had migrated to Australia at an early age and so were able to integrate better by learning to speak English and making friends at school. This finding correlates with that of the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2005), which reported that it is much easier for students arriving in Australia in primary school years to gain better literacy and numeracy than their older peers.

The other 50 percent of the respondents reported that they found it difficult to transition into the Australian education system due to their age at the time of migration. Specifically, they had difficulty in understanding and speaking the English language. This affected the quality of communication with their peers and teachers at school. This finding echoes those of Dooley (2009), who stated that language barriers caused significant hindrance to refugee students' full participation in

Australian society. Morris et al. (2009) also found that refugees needed to be able to communicate their experiences during the settlement process to achieve optimal physical and mental outcomes.

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (2005), in their research conducted on Sudanese refugee students, identified that most Sudanese students needed to learn English upon arrival in Australia. They noted that while Sudanese are usually multilingual and often speak between two to three languages other than English, some students may tend to be withdrawn or present with aggressive behaviour as a result of their limited English language skills. In this study, however, most students acknowledged the difficulties of learning English initially but were quick to recognise that in order to succeed in Australian schools, they needed to put in more time and effort to grasp the English language. The refugee students acknowledged the Victorian Education Department's support in providing special language schools to enhance their learning, and also appreciated and made use of community services such as local migrant resource centre and the local council complimentary after-school support. However, there was inadequate state government support for holistic transition support that included greater English language learning support.

South Sudanese Students as Individuals, Not a Homogenous Group

It is important to note that refugee students from South Sudan are not a homogenous group. They present with different educational backgrounds and experiences that make generalization difficult (Christie and Sidhu 2002). The Refugee Education Partnership Project (2007) report on the educational needs of young refugees in Victoria noted that a whole school approach, which would increase public-private partnerships, would enhance services and outcomes for refugee students enrolling into Victorian schools. It was also highlighted that insufficient funding allocation for ESL students impacted on the transition process.

Challenges of Working with Refugee Students

Some of the challenges the participating teachers experienced while working with refugee students included minimal engagement of refugee parents in their children's educational transition process; refugee children's difficulty understanding the expectations the Australian education system had from them; understanding and recognising the educational needs of refugee children; and being sensitive to these children's traumatic experiences pertaining to their displacement and migration to

Australia.

Supportive Work Environment for Teachers

A report by the Ministerial Council on Education Training and Youth Affairs (2006) argued that for a successful transition process of refugee students, there needs to be a supportive work environment for teachers that will encourage discussion of sensitive issues pertaining to these students. The teachers who participated in the present study observed that there should be increased cross-cultural content in the university curriculum for training teachers. They also suggested that state-level education departments need to increase the number of cross-cultural topics in their ongoing teacher professional development programs to foster an understanding of acceptance and mutuality amongst teachers, refugee students and their parents. When teachers had a sufficient understanding of refugee students' issues and felt confident to assist these students by mentoring them, the students benefitted through increased levels of confidence, improved career opportunities and less social isolation (Weekes et al., 2011, p. 312).

The teachers participating in the present study reported that the refugee students had difficulty understanding the real volume and level of school work they are expected to undertake, and that they lacked the fundamental literacy and numeracy knowledge needed to understand and build on their current work. In addition, the teachers were of the opinion that specialised training and a supportive environment in the form of getting more parental involvement in their children's schooling, and more training for teachers on how to handle the issue of trauma experienced post-migration would be of benefit to the transition process.

Adequate resources are necessary for a supportive work environment. However, the participating teachers identified a lack of time allocated for teachers to spend with refugee students working on their numeracy and literacy skills in accordance with their appropriate grade in school. Having relevant learning resources for refugee students to assist teachers and students with the transition process was another issue raised by the teachers pertaining to cross-cultural understanding and respect.

Cross-cultural Training

Most cultures in Africa regard teachers highly and, as a show of respect, do not encourage questioning of their teachers' work (Victorian Foundation for Survivors and Trauma, 2009). The teachers who participated in this study were unanimous in their experiences that parents from refugee backgrounds did not engage in

conversation with their children's teachers, and they thought this was due to their respectful attitude. However, this observation cannot be generalized because the refugee student participants and their parents did not come from a homogenous group. Factors such as parents' educational background, ability to communicate in English and other social indicators must be taken into account before labelling parents as "non-engaged" in their children's education. It is necessary for teachers to understand the whole picture in order to devise ways of dealing with the issue of parental involvement, which is an assumption in Australian schooling. The participating teachers tended to blame parents for their minimal engagement in their children's education but did not suggest solutions for improving how participation. They showed a lack of cultural sensitivity towards the refugee students' culture, which is a drawback in the Victorian education system.

Interpreters

In 2014, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provided interpreters through the Victorian Interpreting Services to provide interpreting and translation support to refugee children enrolled in Victorian government schools, and for those whose parents were from a language background other than English (DEECD, 2014). However, the researcher did not find any evidence to determine the ratio of interpreters to parents needing their services. The researcher found out from the participating South Sudanese refugee students that most often the schools lacked interpreters who spoke the local Sudanese languages.

This researcher proposes that the Department of Education uses interpreters in schools in which refugee parents have limited or no English language skills. It is important that when recruiting interpreters for Sudanese children and their parents, the school request the services of an interpreter familiar with the Sudanese Arabic language because different forms of Arabic are spoken in different Sudanese and Arabian communities (South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre, 2007).

Interpreters could mitigate the incidence of non-engagement of refugee parents in their children's education. The use of interpreters could enhance communication between the school, the teachers and the parents, and ensure the smooth transition of their children in the following ways: student enrolment; parent-teacher meetings to explain school policies and programs; individual parent and teacher interviews to explain welfare and discipline in schools; and student services assessment in the form of feedback on the children's progress. In addition, the use of interpreters

would ensure that parents understand the need to take an active part in their children's education (Department for Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2014).

Implications for the Social Work Profession

The issues raised by the seven South Sudanese refugee students and three Victorian school teachers have implications for social work because they have identified areas in which support for students, their parents and teachers is lacking. While social workers provide services to refugees in the context of support services, including advocacy, health, mental health, domestic and family violence, housing and child protection services (AASW, 2009), there is a need for social workers to provide more services to refugee youth in schools and, in conjunction with the Department of Education, to advocate for the rights and obligations of all stakeholders to commit more resources to refugee transitional processes in Victorian schools (Testa, 2012). Social workers have an ethical responsibility to advocate for this additional support for refugee students in keeping with the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) Code of Ethics (2010), which is committed to social justice and human rights. This advocacy will ensue that social workers take a lead role in influencing government policies on discrimination and racism in schools, and on better refugee student transitional processes into mainstream schooling.

This study's emphasis on refugee students' lived experience of their transition into mainstream schooling provides an understanding of how social workers can contribute to the transition through direct practice in schools and in the transition process. The researcher, noting the lack of advocacy by social workers in the Victorian education department despite social justice being the core professional principle, argues for a stronger shift towards social work intervention in schools and for social workers to take a holistic approach to assisting refugee students through the transition process.

Further, the researcher argues for the need for an Australia-wide, culturally competent approach when supporting the basic human rights of refugee students in schools. Currently, there are distinctions between education departments in different states, with each offering different programs for refugee students.

Conclusion

Sudanese refugees are difficult to reach for research purposes because they are of the opinion that they have been over researched with no positive outcomes. As a result of previous research, no concrete policy changes have been put in place to support their transition into mainstream schooling. This research, however, has given voice to seven South Sudanese students who have migrated to Australia and highlighted their experiences of transition into the mainstream education system in Victoria. It has also given voice to three teachers who work with these students to assist them through their transition. This research is unique in that it focuses on the experiences of transition of Sudanese refugee students into mainstream schooling in Australia by engaging them directly and adding their voice to the ongoing discussions on transition into mainstream schooling in Australia. This research has captured the transition process from both students' and teachers' perspectives, highlighted the issues faced by both parties and offered suggestions to remedy the issues associated with the transition of refugee youth into mainstream schooling in Australia.

The results highlight the refugee students' resilience and determination to learn and succeed, which provides evidence of the need for professionals working with people from refugee backgrounds to focus on the refugees' strengths rather than their weaknesses, as has tended to be the case in the past based on an assumption that refugees are victims and not active participants in their resettlement process. The refugee students' strengths which can be tapped into to enhance the resettlement process include personal qualities, religion, resilience and strong family ties.

The Sudanese refugee students stated that they experienced challenges in their transition to mainstream schooling as a result of having limited English language and "being different", but were able to get through the transition to mainstream schooling because of their resilience. Despite facing racism and discrimination at the hands of both teachers and peers at times, they kept heading towards their goal of succeeding in their educational transition. Homework clubs appeared to be a major support in enabling them to do so.

A key finding from this study is the importance of, and need for, parental involvement in their refugee children's schooling. This can only be improved if schools acknowledge the challenges faced by the parents in the settlement process in the areas of housing, employment and financial obligations. All of these factors

impact on their engagement of their children's schooling, as does their lack of English language competence. The provision of specialised cross-cultural training for teachers to enable them to understand refugee students' predicaments is paramount for the teachers to support the students in their transition process.

All of the challenges described by the refugee students and the teachers who took part in this study can be addressed through the creation of a supportive environment that incorporates strategies to address every challenge; a holistic support system to assist refugee students to transition smoothly into mainstream schooling in Victoria, and in Australia.

Limitations of the Research

This research, as mentioned earlier, utilised a small sample of 7 students from South Sudan studying in Victoria and 3 teachers working in Victorian high schools. This study offers only a brief snapshot of the experiences of the Sudanese refugee students transitioning into mainstream schooling in Victoria. This localised and highly contextualised study would be difficult to replicate. While this can be viewed as a limitation, the phenomenological approach was of great value in uncovering the participants' experiences. Also, a different sampling strategy could be used to reduce self–selection bias. Hence, it would be premature to generalise the findings with other African student groups in their transition processes.

The time frame was also a factor because most of the students and their parents work and have very busy schedules. Therefore, it was time consuming to organise and conduct interviews. All student participants were of the opinion that they made the best out of their transition because they were active participants rather than passive recipients. Further research needs to be conducted to include Sudanese refugees from diverse backgrounds, such as children from single parent families and those from other religious groups.

Despite these potential limitations, this study is unique in its focus on the experiences of Sudanese refugee youths' transition process into mainstream schooling in Victoria. Its method of directly engaging participants has added their voices to the ongoing discussion about refugee students' transition into mainstream schooling in Australia.

Participants' Recommendations

Student participants were asked if they had any suggestions about how the transition process could be enhanced for other students. These were their responses:

1. There should be pathways that would match the skills of participants and what they intend to study. Advice should be provided to students about what is required from them when pursuing tertiary education.

2. Extra classes for students migrating from refugee background in their late teens should be mandatory before enrolling into mainstream schooling.

3. There should be uniformity in Victorian schools and the transition process for all refugee students transitioning into mainstream schooling.

4. A more inclusive participation by students, parents and teachers would aid the transition process for those identified with significant language barriers and who have had disrupted schooling.

5. More time to teach basic English and maths to students from refugee backgrounds and not to assess them by simply matching their age to a grade/school year, as happens for entry to mainstream schooling in Australia.

The teachers provided the following suggestions through their responses:

1. More time to be allocated to teach refugee students, and specifically in the areas of maths and English.

2. Department of Education to provide alternative concepts for refugee children struggling with the mainstream school curricula as there are differences in teaching styles in Australia.

3. Professional training for teachers on cross-cultural sensitivities and how to work effectively with children from refugee backgrounds would be beneficial to all the three parties, namely, refugee children and their parents, and also the teachers.

The use of interpreters in engaging with parents of refugee children to build a better working partnership

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

"Did you come to Australia as a Sudanese REFUGEE?"

Is your age between 14 and 20 years and enrolled in the Victorian Educational System….and would like to share your experience?

If your answer is yes to any of these questions and would like to contribute to improve the transition of REFUGEES into the Victorian Educational System, why not consider participating in the following study.

Amira Reindorf BSW *(Bachelor of Social Work).* Master of Arts (Social Work) student at Flinders University is hoping to understand how Refugees in the 14 to 20 age group transition into the Victorian Educational System.

How can you participate?

If you can spare a maximum of 1 hour to be interviewed and join a focus group, please email Amira at reinoo39@flinders.edu.au or phone 03-94043542 for more details. Amira can travel to you or discuss arrangements that suit you. Interviews will be private and confidential.

Look forward to your contributions! Thank you.

Teacher

Volunteers Required!!

Are you a registered Teacher, who teaches Refugees or have taught Refugees in the 14 to 20 year age group and would like to share your experience of how they transition into the Victorian Educational System?

If your answer is yes to any of these questions and would like to contribute to improve the transition of REFUGEES in the Victorian Educational System, why not consider participating in the following study.

Amira Reindorf BSW *(Bachelor of Social Work).* Master of Arts (Social Work) student at Flinders University is hoping to understand how Refugees in the 14 to 20 age group transition into the Victorian Educational System.

How can you participate?

If you can spare a maximum of 1 hour to be interviewed, please email Amira at reinoo39@flinders.edu.au or phone 0418259717 for more details. Amira can travel to you or discuss arrangements that suit you. Interviews will be private and confidential.

Look forward to your contributions! Thank you.

APPENDIX II: INFORMATION SHEET

INFORMATION SHEET

Title: 'How do African Refugees perceive the transition into the Victorian Educational system'?

Investigator:

Mrs Amira Reindorf

Student Department of Social Work and Social Planning

Flinders University

Ph: 0418259717

Description of the study: How do African Refugees perceive the transition into the Victorian Educational system' .This project will investigate Refugee Youth and teachers perception of the transition process of African refugees in the Victorian Educational system. This project is supported by Flinders University Department of Social Work and Social Planning.

Purpose of the study:

This project aims to find out the experiences of refugee youth engaging in mainstream schooling in Victoria.

- To explore different interpretations and needs of African refugee youths' engagement with the transitioning process of the Victoria Education system.
- This research intends to develop ways to improve students' potential outcomes.

What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to attend a one-on-one interview and you will be asked few questions about your views on the transition process into mainstream schooling in Victoria. The interview will take about one hour. You will also be invited to attend one focus group session that will take about two hours in which we will discuss mainstream schooling in Victoria. The interview and focus group will be recorded using a digital voice recorder to help with assessing at the results. Once recorded, the interview will be transcribed (typed-up) and stored as a computer file and then destroyed once the results have been finalised. This is voluntary

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?

You will have a chance to tell your story and provide your opinion of what has gone well and what could have been improved upon during the interview and focus group sessions. This research is not a guarantee that things will change but a chance to have your views voiced in a confidential manner.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?

We do not need your name and you will be anonymous. Once the interview has been typed-up and saved as a file, the voice file will then be destroyed. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file stored on a password protected computer that only Amira will have access to. A copy of your interview, once written up, will be given to you to keep. Another copy is locked at the University and will also be electronically stored on an USB flash drive secured by a password which only Amira knows how to use. All material is destroyed after 5 years of locked storage at the University.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?

The only issue to be mindful of is whether or not during the interview you feel sad because you have remembered a bad experience. You do not have to talk about anything you do not wish to talk about and if you do feel sad Amira will be there to talk with you. If you wish the interview can be stopped or you can decide not to do it at all. If you do not want to talk to Amira after you have felt sad we can arrange a time for you to talk with a counsellor from the Migrant Resource Centre. This research has nothing to do with any government department and the university will not have access to your personal details.

How do I agree to participate?

Participation is voluntary. You may answer ‘no comment’ or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from the focus group or interview at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form.

How will I receive feedback?

Outcomes from the project will be summarised and given to you by Amira if you would like to see them.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

APPENDIX III: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH
by interview

'How do African Refugees perceive the transition into the Victorian Educational system'?

I ….....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the research project on…….
…….

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:

- I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
- I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
- While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
- Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on any treatment or service that is being provided to me.
- Whether I participate or not, or withdraw after participating, will have no effect on my progress in my course of study, or results gained.
- I may ask that the recording be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.

Participant's signature……Date……..

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(by interview and focus group)

'How do African Refugees perceive the transition into the Victorian Educational system'?

I
….....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to my child .....

participating, as requested, in the research project
on……
…….
.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my child's information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
    - My child may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
    - My child is free to withdraw from the project at any time and is free to decline to answer particular questions.
    - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, my child will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
    - Whether my child participates or not, or withdraws after participating, will have no effect on any treatment or service that is being provided to him/her.
    - Whether my child participates or not, or withdraws after participating, will have no effect on his/her progress in his/her course of study, or results gained.
    - My child may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and he/she may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.

APPENDIX IV: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Refugee Youth

1. What experiences have you had transitioning into the Victorian Educational System?
2. What are some of the positive and negative issues identified by the youth in the educational system?
3. What frameworks or strategies are needed to be incorporate into the current curricular?
4. What has worked (and has not worked) in your interactions with teachers?

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. What experiences have you had working with youth of refugee background in the educational system?

2. What are some interventions or strategies implemented, and what are the outcomes?

3. What framework or strategies are needed to be incorporated into the current curriculum?