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A STUDY OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY  
AS REFUGEES WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED INTERRUPTED  
EDUCATION AND TRAUMA

by

Merdin Mohammed

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2022

Dissertation Committee

Lea Hubbard, PhD  
Hans Schmitz, PhD  
Lisbeth Johnson, EdD

University of San Diego

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**University of San Diego**  
**School of Leadership and Education Sciences**

CANDIDATE'S NAME: Merdin Mohammed

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: A STUDY OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS  
WHO IDENTIFY AS REFUGEES WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED INTERRUPTED  
EDUCATION AND TRAUMA

APPROVAL:

\_\_\_\_\_, Chair  
Lea Hubbard, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_, Member  
Hans Schmitz, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_, Member  
Lisbeth Johnson, PhD

DATE: March 25, 2022

## ABSTRACT

Every year, more than 65 million people are displaced worldwide. These refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people flee conflict, poverty, environmental degradation, and other conditions forcing them from their homes. In 2020, the number of individuals internally displaced reached 82.4 million; of this total, 26.4 million were refugees. In 2021, of the 11,411 refugees resettled in the United States, 8.6% resettled in California. When refugee students come to San Diego, the majority resettle in the neighborhoods of City Heights and El Cajon. These refugee children have lived on the road or in refugee camps, faced consistent interruptions to a formal education, and experienced trauma. Most educators have received little or no training on how to address academic and social needs of refugee students. These students come from a variety of home countries with diverse backgrounds. Knowing how to help them is further complicated by limited research on the lived experiences of refugee students from their own perspectives. Knowing how to address the barriers that prevent these students from performing well in school and improving their lives is essential. This qualitative research study documented the experiences of nine refugee high school students attending one charter school in City Heights that serves many refugee students. Using a narrative qualitative research approach, the study focused on students' premigration and postmigration experiences to generate critical knowledge about the challenges they continue to face and how the school site has arranged to support their success. The study can serve as a resource to understand how to help refugee students enculturate into a new educational setting. The study informs stakeholders interested in issues related to trauma and refugee students and as to how they can construct more effective educational practices to support their academic success and overall well-being.

*Keywords:* refugee, interrupted education, trauma, adversities, school

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Shaban Chalabi, my parents, Mejid and Nezahet Mohamed, my family, and to all students, especially students who identify as refugees. My parents and husband pushed me to achieve this life-long dream of mine, no matter how challenging I saw it to be. Throughout this journey, I kept replaying the words my father told me at a young age: “Knowing how to hold the pencil the right way will open the doors for many opportunities, including the happiness that you have longed for.” Without my husband’s support, I would have never been able to reach this achievement, as he made sure that I had everything I needed to give 100% to this research.

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I would like to thank my family, friends, and committee members for their endless support and help. The love and belief of my friends and family in me, made this journey a lot easier. My committee members, Professor Lea Hubbard, Professor Hans Schmitz, and Professor Lisbeth Johnson, for their ongoing support, endless hours of support, guidance, and wisdom. I would have never been able to achieve the opportunity to conduct such an important research study without their belief in me and the study. I hope this research study serves as a reminder that any dream is possible with the love and support of those who believe in you.

## PREFACE

As a refugee, I had a special interest in pursuing this research population and I recognize I have been influenced by my own personal experiences. Though it is important to acknowledge my subjectivity in this research study, I mitigated—to the greatest extent possible—the influence that my own experiences, beliefs, biases, or values had on the topic. This mitigation was important because when a researcher is unaware of their subjectivity, potential problems can arise with the conduction and collection of research data (Peshkin, 1988). In addition to recognizing my subjectivity, I also recognize my positionality as an asset to this study. My experience as a refugee gave me access to refugee students, and my preexisting relationship with the participants included in this study enabled them to be truthful and to go in-depth with their stories. My positionality also motivated my interest in giving voice to this population.

My story is of a family that wanted a better future, and of parents who put their lives on the line to move closer and closer to obtaining “The American Dream.” I have been asked to share this story on numerous occasions; in fact, I cannot recall the number of times I have shared about my family’s and my journey from Turkey to the United States. Each time, I notice sadness, helplessness, and regret in listeners’ faces. I was born in a refugee camp under a muddy tent covering in Mardin, Turkey. In such camps, there were no doctors, nurses, nor any type of first aid. I was told I was lucky to have survived, as many infants died at birth. When I was a child, my parents, brother, sister, and I spent over half a year living in Iraq’s desert and mountains, traveling to and from Turkey on foot. The journey from Iraq—my home country—to Turkey consisted of walking over countless mountainous terrains. Behind us, my home country burned in an inferno and at night, the guttural roars of wild animals overwhelmed the quiet skies as the sounds of the gunshots and bombings faded.



My family was caught in the crosshairs of genocide. They escaped Saddam Hussein and the cruelty of his regime, narrowly avoiding his intention of killing every Kurd in Iraq to deter Kurdistan's independence efforts. Saddam Hussein attacked the Kurds with chemical weapons, guns, gasses, and other cruel methods. We left almost everything behind and only brought what we could carry in our arms or on our backs. Even our family photos and heirlooms—the bonds between different generations—had to be left behind. I have no pictures of myself as a child. I wish I knew how I looked, but all I have are my parents' words saying I had thick, golden-like, straight hair. Yet, even though they left everything behind, they ended up gaining everything in return: (a) a new life, (b) excellent educational opportunities for their children, and (c) newfound access to opportunities. Still, this road to a better life tested my resilience at every turn.

When my family first arrived in Turkey before my birth, they were disappointed to learn the Turkish treatment of the Kurds was also inhumane. Refugees were given one tent per family, but no blankets. The hard bread and cold food was poisoned, as many Turks resented having to care for the Kurds. The water looked like mud. My father would go into town every day to beg for jobs and on occasion, he was asked to help with providing medical care for the Kurds and Peshmergas (Kurdish soldiers) that were injured in the refugee camps. My family lived day to day for an entire year, fearing what we ate and drank and knowing our mere presence was deeply resented in this new country. Fortunately, the United Nations came to our rescue and granted us visas to move to the United States.

Arriving to the United States was one of the biggest events to happen in my life; it allowed me to live. Coming here as a refugee saved our lives, but it was far from easy. We were destitute and had to rely on government aid to survive, and we did not know the English language; I had to learn English on my own because my parents had no educational background.

Like many refugee children, I assumed a leadership role in the household: I translated for my parents any information at school and any reports from doctors, and I got a job at the age of 16 while also taking on the maternal role of caring for my five younger siblings at home.

My parents impressed upon us every day how education was a ladder to a different future, and I have relentlessly pursued educational opportunities since to make my parents proud and make their sacrifices worthwhile. However, my early education in the United States was challenging because my classmates ridiculed, bullied, and made fun of me every day because I did not speak any English. Sadly, many of my teachers were not supportive and had little hope for me. Few people believed in me or my dreams, so I promised myself I would push myself and prove everyone wrong. My dad said, “Knowing how to hold the pencil the right way will open the doors for many opportunities, including the happiness that you have longed for,” and I have kept those words with me, thinking of them often.

In this research study, I told the stories of other refugee students who may or may not have experienced similar challenges to me. As a researcher, I have noticed the lack of shared perspectives from refugee students and I believe storytelling is key in gaining insight into what refugee students with trauma and interrupted education have experienced during their journeys to the United States. This study aimed to understand how refugee students explained their educational experiences in San Diego and was designed to provide an insider perspective—that is, refugee students’ perspectives of educational experiences, along with the academic and social challenges that refugee students face.

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## CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The refugee phenomenon is an age-old story of people who became displaced while escaping poor or unsafe conditions with hopes of finding opportunity in a new country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the term *refugee* is defined as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of (a) race, (b) religion, (c) nationality, (d) membership of a particular social group, or (e) political opinion (USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2021). There are notable differences in refugee types, which provide a brief insight into the complexity of the refugee experience. For example, a *politically motivated refugee* is classified as a person who flees from war because of a ruthless dictatorship (Huyck & Bouvier, 1983). In contrast, an *environmental refugee* is categorized as someone leaving the wreckage of a natural disaster (Huyck & Bouvier, 1983). Regardless, refugees move to a new country seeking “escape, or asylum, from the dangers presented by war, conflict, and other forms of violence” (Willie et al., 2019, p. 33).

In 2019, 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced because of violence, conflict, persecution, and human rights violations (USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2021). In 2020, this number increased by 2.9 million to total 82.4 million, and of this total, 26.4 million were refugees (USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2021). Chan et al. (2016) explained refugees continue to become a global concern because the number of refugees continues to increase. Another way to make sense of this crisis quantitatively is to point out that each minute, 24 people are forced to flee from their home country (Ameen, 2018). Dryden-Peterson (2016) reported the number of refugees who have fled across international borders is at a record high. Chan et al. (2016) stated most refugees originate from the Middle Eastern countries, with Syrians

accounting for the largest population of refugees. Meanwhile, Sim (2016) noted all refugees fight against threats of violence, sexual assault, and discrimination while migrating as they risk everything to find safety. According to Gostin and Roberts (2015), the United States has been one of the most well-known developed countries to welcome large numbers of refugees overall. In 2014 alone, the United States resettled 73,009 refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2016); in 2016, the United States saw an increase in resettlement to 84,995 refugees (Houseknecht & Swank, 2019). However, while under new federal administration guidelines during 2020, the United States only resettled 9,600 refugees (USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2021). When considering these numbers, it is important to note the refugee children who comprised those numbers are now attending U.S. schools, which has highlighted a need for school personnel to adjust their instruction to meet the needs of this diverse student body.

Aydin et al. (2017) explained the need to adjust school instruction by reflecting on how traditional instruction is no longer effective for our diverse learners, saying, “U.S. schools now require programs that incorporate guidance and counseling, character education, on-campus medical and social services, a full-time social worker, and multicultural education” (p. 78). The need to adjust traditional instruction is especially the case where instances of interrupted education and trauma exist. The children of refugees lack access to formal education, and consequently experience periods of interrupted schooling where they cannot attend school for a few weeks, a few months, or longer, either continuously or intermittently. The traumatic experiences they face negatively affect their mental health. Refugee children are especially at risk for developing mental health problems (Buchmüller et al., 2019). According to Van der Kolk (2003), childhood trauma is important to understand because “uncontrollable, terrifying experiences have their most profound effects when the central nervous system and cognitive



functions have not yet fully matured, leading to a global impairment that may manifest in adulthood in the form of psychopathological conditions” (p. xii). Van der Kolk outlined various risk factors of migration, including (a) experiences of organized violence, (b) loss of attachment figures, (c) disruption of formal education, and (d) parents’ suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological problems. By the time refugee students arrive in a new host country, they have often suffered trauma caused by displacement and sudden family deaths. They may also face struggles with adjusting to a new culture, language, and education system, all while storing trauma from their previous experiences.

Despite the educational challenges refugee students come in the United States with, student success is measured according to the educational standards defined by the Common Core Standards (CCS), and they also apply to refugee students. These standards were initiated by 45 states—California included—to assess what students receiving a K–12 education need to know in English language arts and math by the end of each grade level (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2020). These standards drive the content in standardized high-stakes state testing and are uniform for each grade level; however, the CCS do not consider the instructional loss many students have faced because of living in refugee camps or fleeing their home countries.

Despite widespread refugee resettlement in the United States, resources, strategies for curricula adjustments, and the creation of space for students from tumultuous backgrounds have not been widespread. Assimilation becomes increasingly difficult when they enter an educational setting that was neither built nor prepared to support them. Aydin et al. (2017) argued the educational system needs to change because it was initially created to serve, in a separate manner, White children from wealthy families. Yet, the United States experiences a high volume of incoming students who arrive without familiarity and understanding of the educational system

and often speak minimal to no English and are forced to adapt to a new academic setting and new culture regardless of their level of language proficiency (Aydin et al., 2017). Aydin et al. also argued there is a need for differentiated curricula to address the social and emotional needs of these refugees, and not just their academic ones. These students are typically placed in classrooms without such resources, and with teachers who are not trained to support them in such a capacity nor with the linguistic knowledge to address the trauma these students have experienced (Im et al., 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Aydin et al. (2017) stated the United States resettles more refugees, immigrants, and students of color than any other developed country in the world. The 2014–2015 school year was the first time most students in most public schools in the United States were not White (Aydin et al., 2017). Historically however, educational policymakers have largely ignored students' diversity, particularly in considering refugees and their access to education. The challenges faced by refugee students make their experiences in U.S. schools different than their U.S.-educated peers. The findings of Houseknecht and Swank (2019) supported this ignoring of refugee students history and explained despite their different cultural backgrounds, refugees share common pre and postmigration experiences, including: (a) forced displacement, (b) exposure to war and traumatic events, and (c) time in refugee camps.

Given their past experiences, it was imperative to ask the question: What supports do students who identify as refugees actually need? As Mendenhall et al. (2017) pointed out, if educators learn how to develop a welcoming learning environment for newcomers, they could help close the equity gap between U.S.-educated students and refugees students who need greater

academic and emotional supports. To help close the equity gap, it is important that better ways of supporting them—both academically and socioemotionally—be investigated.

The increase in English language learners (ELLs) among the refugee population raises the concern as to whether teachers are equipped with the necessary strategies and resources to support these new language learners academically. A teachers' capacity to serve refugees could affect refugee students' overall feelings of confidence in their eventual ability to perform at grade level. Aydin et al. (2017) pointed out one problem with educating refugees in the United States is teachers have historically been predominantly White and therefore have struggled to educate students who are not White nor native speakers of the English language. In addition, because many of these students have experienced a significant amount of trauma and adversity, Franco (2018) explained poor academic achievement may result from difficulty concentrating, learning problems, and a lack of academic functioning. Similarly, because of exposure to war and violence, refugee students often present higher levels of aggression, which negatively impacts their academic achievement. Franco's assessment of the need for school-based interventions (including trauma-informed and culturally responsive interventions) for unaccompanied refugee migrants (URM) indicated school-based interventions could help them process their trauma, reduce their emotional distress, and in turn, reduce their academic challenges.

This insight brings to light another key concern surrounding the influx of refugee resettlements: are teachers prepared to teach students who have experienced trauma and interrupted education, while also meeting their emotional and social needs? If school personnel do not address students' socioemotional needs and students are not given resources or strategies to better understand their trauma, students' engagement with their education is likely to

be compromised (Franco, 2018). And, as Franco (2018) identified, the emotional needs of students are as important as their educational ones. In fact, unprocessed traumatic events experienced at a young age can lead to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, dissociation, and PTSD (Houseknecht & Swank, 2019). Van der Kolk (2104) also found experiencing trauma can continue to impact present life:

We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organisms manage to survive in the present.  
(p. 21)

Despite this available research on refugee students (e.g. Franco, 2018), little attention has been given to refugees' firsthand experiences with interrupted education and trauma. People who have experienced trauma have a hard time telling people their stories and often disassociate the trauma that they have experienced. (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Dryden-Peterson (2016) argued existing literature on resettled refugees' educational experiences has focused primarily on the time of and period immediately after their arrival in their host country. However, researchers have an increased interest in understanding refugees' presettled educational experiences to better understand what supports are needed over time during their settlement in their host country (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Dryden-Peterson explained this form of research could help schools and teachers have a better understanding of language barriers, privacy concerns, cultural misunderstandings, and stereotypes, as well as hold implications for the continued educational experiences of refugees upon resettlement.

Mendenhall et al. (2017) stated schools are one of the primary acculturating institutions where refugee students often make their first contact with the host society. Still, refugees are

challenged when trying to succeed in primary and postsecondary education because they experienced trauma and ongoing host country challenges, such as negative refugee narratives. Ryu and Tuvilla (2018) argued refugees are often negatively referred to as burdensome or as helpless people who need additional support. Refugee students—once in the host country—must also face the challenges of learning a new language, culture, and the norms or ways of being.

Developing a holistic understanding of students who identify as refugees from their own perspectives through their stories helped paint a more accurate picture of what interrupted education and trauma looked like in the refugee communities. These experiences of interrupted education and trauma had consequences on their personal and academic lives in the community where they settle and the schools they attend. The understanding of refugee students' experiences can aid in creating the kinds of supports that will lead to their success. With proper support, refugee students can engage in emotional healing, experience academic success, and experience greater future educational and career opportunities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research study was designed to examine the challenges faced by refugee students from their own perspectives. The purpose of the study was to better understand the perceptions these newly arrived students have about their past educational and social experiences and experiences in the United States. Specifically, the study was designed to determine how their pre- and during-migration experiences influenced their postmigration experiences, and what optimal academic or emotional supports could be implemented to best support their social and academic needs. Through interviews with refugee students and some of the school staff (i.e., the school director and a senior teacher) from the charter school they attend, this study sought to understand the resources educators and administrators could engage to improve educational

opportunities for refugee students. The U.S. educational system must be better prepared to teach refugee students. By giving participants an opportunity to share their experiences, tell their stories, and explain the challenges they have faced and continue to face academically and socially, this research can help to better inform teachers, administrators, and school staff on how to provide a more supportive educational and emotionally supportive learning environment.

### **Research Questions**

Students who identify as refugees and have experienced interrupted education and trauma in their home countries experience education very differently from their U.S.-educated peers. Because schools are one of the primary points of contact for refugee families in a new country, organizing schools in a way that creates safe and successful learning spaces for refugee children can provide a meaningful and supportive access point for those entering a new culture (Mendenhall et al., 2017). As such, this research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do refugee students' past educational and social experiences influence their U.S. educational experience?
2. How does a school that predominantly serves refugee students respond to the needs of refugee students when they have experienced trauma and interrupted education before coming to the United States?
3. What other factors support or alternatively undermine the educational and social experiences of recently arrived refugee students?

In the next chapter, I review previous research on refugee students. The research reviewed shed light on what their experiences have been prior to relocation to their new host countries and postrelocation in their new host countries. The review also covers existing research

on interrupted education and trauma and how both can influence the posteducation experiences of refugee students. Recommendations from previous research are also reviewed that provide strategies to better support their educational experiences.

The limitations of this research are described. As the review shows, there was limited research available in the form of narratives from high school refugee students themselves and from educators who work with refugee students. This study attempted to address this gap in the research.

## CHAPTER 2: REFUGEE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Education plays a central role in helping resettled refugees successfully integrate into their home countries. This chapter provides a review of pertinent research about the educational experiences of primarily younger refugees in refugee camps and host countries. Studies on refugee students educational experiences have frequently focused on access, interrupted education, trauma, and other issues adversely impacting their academic experience. Overall, the research identifies challenges many refugee students face, and how many schools and educators are not able to fully support these students (Papapostolou, 2020).

Regarding better understanding of refugee post-educational challenges, considerable existing literature explains the importance of understanding refugee educational experiences both in refugee camps and before resettlement (Dryden-Petersonn, 2015). The learning of refugee students past educational experiences is important, as these premigration educational experiences influence refugee postresettlement educational experiences. One main concern regarding refugee educational experiences is whether refugee students have access to education. The available literature confirmed not all refugees have access to education; moreover, statistical educational trends are lower among refugees than non-refugee students (DeCapua and Marshall, 2015). Although refugee students have access to education, not all students can access uninterrupted or unchallenged educational experiences. Amid these experiences of interrupted education, researchers have found most refugee students do not enroll in schools (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020).

Language was a constant challenge presented in the literature that negatively influenced refugees' educational experiences. When refugees move to a new country where they do not know the primary language, they begin to experience barriers to their education. Studies focused



on refugee students in the United States has specifically illustrated how not knowing English nor familiarity with the U.S. educational system imposes challenges on refugee students' ability to learn. In addition to the language challenges when learning new content, language barriers complicate understanding refugee learning needs. As such, one way to better understand these challenges firsthand is through narrative storytelling. Although literature on narrative storytelling is limited, it is a growing area. The literature also addressed the mental health and trauma-related challenges refugees experience due to their experiences with war and violence; thus, the mental health of refugee students is important to understand how the trauma refugee students experience also influence their schooling experiences.

In this chapter, I present a review of the research on what is currently known about refugee students' educational experiences. I begin with a review of the general problems refugee students face as students with little-to-no access to school due to war and other negative factors that cause interrupted education. I present research on refugee students' educational experiences in refugee camps, their settlement in the United States and what is known to date as to how their educational experiences in the United States are connected in important ways to the trauma they have faced.

### **Refugee Students' Access to Education**

One primary area of concern regarding the educational experiences of refugee students is whether they have even had access to education. Dridi et al. (2020) offered statistical trends of refugees and education over their lifetimes and found not all students have access to education. The study revealed that although 61% of refugee children have access to primary education, only 23% have access to secondary education, and only an estimated 1% have access to higher education.

Dryden-Peterson (2016) explained that interviews with refugees from multiple countries, as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), indicated there are three primary structures through which refugees access education globally: (a) in separate, refugee-only schools in refugee camps; (b) in national schools, primarily in urban areas of countries of asylum, and (c) in informal schools, camps, or urban areas. The UNHCR is an organization that provides refugees physical, political, and social protection along with humanitarian assistance and education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The UNHCR's educational role focuses on expanding educational access at primary and secondary levels and providing a quality education to ensure schools are safe learning environments by integrating national education systems wherever possible. Dryden-Peterson explained that countries of first asylum, where 86% of the world's refugees live, have an overstretched and often fragile education system.

When refugee students do attend school, they likely face many challenges in refugee camps and after resettlement. In the United States, the refugee student school dropout rate is much higher than for students whose native language is English (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). DeCapua and Marshall (2015) stated the refugee student dropout rate is greater than 70% and is even higher for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFEs).

### **Interrupted Education**

In addition to concerns about educational access, Custodio and O'Loughlin (2020) outlined a second area of concern: refugee students typically experience education interruptions and subsequently experience educational challenges often leading to struggles in school and to a higher dropout rate. The USA for UNHCR U.N. Refugee Agency (2021) found, worldwide, 3.7 million school-aged refugee children had been out of school for some time. Refugee children are five times more likely to not attend school than their nonrefugee peers (UNHCR: The U.N.

Refugee Agency, 2021). In 2018, only 3.4 million of the 7.1 million refugee school-aged children were enrolled in primary or secondary education (UNHCR: The U.N. Refugee Agency, 2021). For every 10 refugee boys in primary school, there were fewer than eight girls, and for every 10 boys in secondary school, there were fewer than seven girls (UNHCR: The U.N. Refugee Agency, 2021).

In the United States, most refugee students experienced limited or interrupted education, and most of the younger children never enroll in school at all (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). Custodio and O'Loughlin (2020) provided statistics for refugee students with interruptions to formal education, noting, "The dropout rate for teens with school problems before migration is in excess of 70 percent, in comparison with 8 percent for other foreign-born youths" (p. 10). DeCapua and Marshall (2015) described this marginalized group as SLIFE, or English learners who:

(1) Have not had the opportunity to participate in formal education previously, or have experienced significant time periods when they were unable to attend school, (2) are at least two grade levels below their peers in subject area knowledge, (3) have low or no literacy and numeracy skills, and (4) are, with some exceptions, members of collectivistic culture. (p. 357)

Dryden-Peterson (2015) stated, "The prior schooling experiences of refugees have considerable implications for post-resettlement education in the United States" (p. 1). Dryden-Peterson (2016) argued the importance of recognizing where on a chart refugee children fall on when they arrive in resettlement countries with limited proficiency of the language of their resettlement countries and need support to learn it. In fact, it was stated, "experience in an English-language school system, does not guarantee proficiency in English" (Dryden-Peterson,

2015, p.15). Dryden-Peterson (2016) explained the educational attainment rates between men and women who resettle in the United States are low. Twenty-three percent of refugee men and 27% of refugee women over the age of 25 have not completed high school (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Dryden-Peterson (2016) also added refugee students who experienced interrupted education have skills and knowledge below their expected grade levels for their age. In fact, Dryden-Peterson highlighted the impact refugee students' experiences in first-asylum countries have on their schooling after U.S. resettlement:

- Refugee children may have gaps in their skills and knowledge resulting from disrupted schooling. The gaps may be small (a few weeks of missed school) or large (years without schooling).
- Refugee children are frequently exposed to multiple languages of instruction over the course of their migration, resulting in language confusion and limited opportunities to master academic content.
- The quality of English-language instruction available to refugee children in countries of first asylum is variable and often poor.
- Past experience with teacher-centered pedagogy may leave resettled refugee children unaware of the behaviors and approaches to learning required of them in U.S. classrooms. (p. 2)

Additionally, Willie et al. (2019) noted the influence of interrupted education on refugee students' educational experiences in their countries of resettlement. The authors stated, "refugee youth are sometimes marginalized by their placement in English Language [Learner] classrooms

where they have limited opportunities to interact with the English-speaking peers” (Willie et al., 2019, p. 34).

### **Refugees’ Preresettlement Educational Experiences**

To better understand refugee students’ educational challenges, reviewing the experiences refugee students had prior to resettlement, during their time in refugee camps, and how these experiences potentially influenced their later educational experiences is important. Dridi et al. (2020) examined refugee students’ educational experiences and found some refugee students engaged in blended learning in the refugee camps. *Blended learning* was defined as a formal education program that supports learning, at least in part, through the online delivery of content and instruction with some elements of student control over time, place, path, and pace (Didi et al., 2020). Didi et al. found although some students reported teamwork via blended learning with other students was helpful, students had challenges with the blended learning platforms due to internet connectivity. These conditions, of course, interrupted their learning.

The refugees at a camp studied by Huss et al. (2021) were taught a curriculum based on their own culture and ethnicity. Huss et al. (2021) stated, “Refugee schools in refugee detention camps are often impoverished frameworks that can only provide low standards of education” (p. 482). Despite these low standards of education, refugee students tend to work really hard at school. Because of the challenges refugee students experience—and also because of the intense meaning their parents give to education as the path to their future—they typically work harder toward their education than many other non-refugee students (Huss et al. 2021). Despite their work ethic, Huss et al. explained that (a) a lack of school materials, (b) play areas, (c) student conflicts, (d) teachers unable to mitigate conflicts, (e) students not understanding the rules between staff and students, and (f) students needing to adjust to a co-ed school presented

challenges for both refugee students and staff. These challenges can also be affected by their religious or cultural adjustments.

Papapostolou's (2020) research supported these challenges and described others. Using a narrative inquiry approach, Papapostolou recounted how student refugees in a camp in central Greece faced language barriers and volunteer teachers offered language support to help mitigate the language barrier these students faced. Students attending a nonformal educational setting were taught Greek as a second language and English as a foreign language. Papapostolou's data also highlighted how students were challenged by the lack of access to materials and classroom amenities and an absence of knowledge about proper teacher methods. Other challenges found were the "absence of educational guidelines, no informative curriculum, and no support from administrative authorities at the refugee camp" (Papapostolou, 2020, p. 66).

In addition to the refugee schools, some refugee students attend camps equipped as learning centers for youth. In fact, Metzler et al. (2021) found a prevalence of child and youth learning centers (CYLCs), an arrangement becoming more common globally due to the lack of schools in refugee camps. Metzler et al. (2021) found CYLCs that focused on education, psychosocial well-being, and protection outcomes were reported to best support refugee student education and development (Metzler et al., 2021). As a result, students reported high student gains in literacy and numeracy (Metzler et al., 2021).

Further contributing to an understanding of refugee educational challenges during the preresettlement period was a study conducted by Miller (2009). This study addressed the language problems refugee students face, specifically students' lack of academic vocabulary. Miller described a 5-month intervention incorporated into an Australian high school class for 23 English language learners (ELLs) who experienced limited education. This intervention was

followed by a 1-year intensive English language program. Miller found that despite the intervention, refugee students faced barriers in learning an eighth-grade science vocabulary after being placed in regular classes. Through teacher interviews, student journal writing, and the science text itself, Miller explored participants' compounded difficulties of minimal literacy in their first language, combined with learning complex content in a new language, all while struggling with limited science vocabulary and conceptual development. Miller concluded that not knowing content specific vocabulary was one of the most significant barriers to student learning and that teachers often cannot make the association between struggles with vocabulary and academic success. Miller outlined the need for additional academic language support in all areas, particularly science vocabulary for refugee students.

As students migrate to their host country, they also often face a variety of challenges. McBrien (2015) defined *transmigration experiences* as times of unsafe travel, during which refugees encounter the loss of home, country, common culture and language, and family. Refugee students struggle to adapt to their new country. Using a mixed-methods approach, McBrien assessed refugee children at risk for academic failure, and examined the Refugee Friendship Centers (RFC) program, a center that operates as the second-largest resettlement in the southeastern United States. McBrien explained the RFCs Special Services for Youth (SSY) program implementation helped children aged 9–18 who were “at high risk for delinquency and social death owing to poverty; behavioral, social, or mental health risks; poor academic performance; family problems; and responsibilities that prevent socialization with peers and school attendance” (p. 448).

The RFCs Special Services for Youth program was designed specifically to help refugee students resettle and help the families of refugee youth who are at risk of “social death”

(McBrien, 2015). According to McBrien (2015), *social death* refers to the condition the at-risk refugee population face; *at-risk* was classified as the population most susceptible to a “prolonged, and in some cases a permanent, marginalized state” (p. 447) in the society. After school tutoring, one-to-one tutoring, summer enrichment camp, a dance group, and an art club led to positive changes for the refugee population (McBrien, 2015).

### **Refugee Students’ U.S. Educational Experiences**

Research on refugees and education in the United States continues to grow (Sim, 2016); however, Dryden-Peterson (2015) stated, “The existing literature on the education of refugee children in the United States focuses primarily on post-arrival experiences, with little attention to educational experiences in the children’s countries of origin and first asylum” (p. 1). Dryden-Petersons’ (2016) argued, “These pre-resettlement experiences of refugee children constitute a ‘black box’ in their post-resettlement education” (p. 133). When considering refugees’ educational experiences, some of this research focused on challenges related to transitioning to a new country and the immediate educational barriers, such as quickly learning a new language. Most refugees enter schools in the United States unable to speak English and are unfamiliar with the educational system and academic content. They tend to struggle academically more than their peers because of the different academic settings and experiences they have had compared to students who had no interrupted education (DeCapua, 2016). As a result, the problem at hand for most school officials is knowing what practices are most beneficial for refugee students; namely, practices that are inclusive and can enhance academic achievement.

Most of the research on U.S. refugees has covered school policies and the obstacles school personnel face when attempting to adapt schooling for a new student population; however, few studies have used narrative storytelling to portray refugee students’ firsthand



accounts of their needs and experiences. Little is known about evidence-based practices that would best support these students. Additionally, little is known of the refugees' histories, as these histories are often hidden from U.S. teachers and school staff because of language barriers, privacy concerns, stereotypes, and cultural misunderstandings (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Ryu and Tuvilla (2018) used refugee youth narratives to assess the educational experiences of refugee students in the United States. The study consisted of high school students who spoke about their experiences as refugees, including the marginalization they faced. Ryu and Tuvilla discussed how student narratives revealed they felt they were portrayed by others as tragic victims, invaders, or potential threats in their host country. The study was important because it allowed participants to tell their own stories and allowed others to better understand their circumstances.

He et al. (2017) used participants' group discussions to understand some of the challenges refugee students faced in the United States. They found deficit thinking played a significant role in their experiences. He et al. defined *deficit thinking* as "the mind-set through which the differences between marginalized/minority groups and traditionally identified norm groups are perceived as gaps that need to be filled or problems that need to be fixed" (p. 958). The research participants in this study were from a county in North Carolina where students spoke more than 150 different languages. Teachers held low expectations for these refugee students, leaving students feeling uncertain of their ability to succeed. Teachers blamed low achievement on factors associated with the socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and prior schooling background of the children (He et al., 2017). He et al. explained how deficit thinking was also "evident in the family involvement efforts of schools where migrant and refugee family members may be excluded from family engagement activities due to cultural or language

differences, which leads to voices not being heard” (p. 958). Otherwise, refugee families simply might not attend school functions because they do not feel comfortable. This family uncertainty is often misinterpreted by others as not caring about their student’s education when in fact, such hesitance is related to them feeling that they do not belong. To avoid deficit thinking and to provide greater support for refugee students, He et al. (2017) argued:

To promote an asset-driven perspective and reject deficit thinking, it is important to highlight voices from traditionally marginalized groups, such as immigrant and refugee populations. To accomplish this, educators must learn about the resettlement of refugee and immigrant families to better leverage families’ assets and heritage as funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth assets that can be used in enriching the educational context. (p. 959)

In the end, He et al. (2017) recognized:

To challenge and problematize existing deficit perspectives, prejudice, and discrimination in education, it is critical to engage all community members in both positive retrospective reconstructions of past educational experiences to uncover assets and resources and prospective imagination for a co-constructed educational community to create a shared vision. (p. 979)

## **U.S. Educational Strategies and Policies**

The research on educational strategies and policies in the U.S. school system is another area of study that helps educators better understand the factors influencing refugees’ educational experiences after resettlement. The problem is, many current policies do not take into account the needs of refugee students; for example, DeCapua and Marshall (2015) pointed to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the standards all students must meet based on their academic

grade level. Meeting CCSS are of particular concern for ELL students or any student who has experienced interrupted education, because these students must learn subject content alongside learning literacy skills. Teachers have a difficult time teaching the requisite skills to refugee students because they are a new population for them, and they lack strategies to best support the language needs and content gaps that refugee students typically bring to the United States.

Dryden-Peterson (2016) specifically addressed the challenges of U.S. educational strategies and policies that influence the language development and learning of refugee children in post-resettlement education. Dryden-Peterson stated, “Ongoing migration and shifting policies also contribute to the ways in which language learning shapes the educational trajectories of refugee children pre-resettlement” (p. 142). UNHCR data and interviews with Dryden-Peterson argued exposure to multiple languages of instruction can result in language confusion and limited opportunity to master academic content. Teachers lack educational strategies and the appropriate curriculum to support refugee students when many students do not have a solid language background in their own language. Policies regarding the time students are given to learning another language must be examined, as “refugee children spend a disproportionate amount of time learning languages while often falling behind in age-appropriate academic content. Most refugee children transition to a new language of instruction in a country of first asylum” (Dryden-Peterson, 2016, p. 142). To date, there are no specific language support requirements for refugee children in most countries; Dryden-Peterson found through interviews and observations “that a common strategy for language learning in this context of language transition is to place refugees in classes with younger children” (p. 142). Recognizing the language challenges of refugee children and the policies that support or do not support them is important. Currently, there has been little attention given to this area of research.

## **Curriculum, Instruction, and Education Systems**

Research has also been less helpful in investigating whether, or what, schoolwide practices, teaching methods, and resources account for refugee students' educational experiences (Papapostolou, 2020). Although schoolwide frameworks have been mentioned by Huss et al. (2021), they have not been the focus of the research, nor have school practices used to address the impact of trauma and interrupted education been fully investigated. Curriculum impacts refugee students' overall educational experience. Developing school curriculum that addresses the learning needs of refugee students who have experienced interrupted education and trauma is important. Previous research regarding the U.S. educational system found that a school's curriculum typically requires change due to the high numbers of refugee students enrolled in U.S. schools (Aydin et al., 2017). In the review of the literature, there was little attention to how school structure, culture, curriculum, and instruction impacted refugee students; yet, Aydin et al. (2017) found refugee students required a different setting for learning, a curriculum focused on their current academic levels, and teachers with sufficient knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds. Aydin et al. research called for a pedagogy that does not focus on students' deficits.

Dryden-Peterson (2016) explained teacher-centered pedagogy is common in low-and-middle-income countries and this teaching style results in fewer student contributions to the class. Dryden-Peterson explained, "Even at the primary level, children's participation was limited to factual questions posed by the teacher that required children to repeat only what the teacher had just said" (p. 143). Still, research tells educators that a more culturally responsive pedagogy—one that is attentive to the culture of each student—is more supportive (Ladson Billings, 1995).

As mentioned previously, language barriers pose additional challenges requiring additional time for language learning, without which often results in falling behind in age-appropriate academic content (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Refugee students fall years behind in content mastery due to the continual shifting of the language of instruction and resulting lack of exposure to subject-matter content during their preresettlement.

Although studies have revealed “differentiated instruction” approach which means catering to the unique needs of each student learning needs when instruction occurs is successful, particularly in reading-writing, mathematics, and biology, Santisteban (2014), stated there are few studies on the effect of differentiated instruction on reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and writing for refugee students. Santisteban’s study on differentiated instruction analyzed the literacy and foreign language processes of learners whose highest level of education was first grade at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. This action research study used multiple methods to collect data including surveys, interviews, and observations. Santisteban found differentiation of instruction had a positive impact on student success, performance, and motivation, although refugee students continued to struggle to learn due to their prior educational experience. Santisteban stated:

Due to the fact that the refugee population has increased in the United States and in other developed countries, it constitutes an extra challenge for teachers since most of the refugee students have had interrupted schooling, are over age, and have low levels of literacy in their first language. (p. 35)

According to Aydin et al. (2017), the educational structure created to support wealthy White students in the United States is not ideal for current student demographics. In examining whether the curriculum is responsive to student needs, Aydin et al. found holes in the education

system that create educational challenges. They found U.S. public education needs better trained teachers who can (a) meet refugee student needs, (b) understand the role of cultural norms and values, (c) respond to the demographic changes in the classrooms, and (d) address curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all students. Despite proposing helpful considerations, Aydin et al. did not provide specific tactics or changes to the curriculum to minimize refugee students' educational gaps, nor the common deficit perceptions teachers and others have of the refugee community. Instead, Aydin et al. stated school personnel must recruit staff members from diverse cultural backgrounds, including bilingual teachers and staff members who are willing to educate themselves on immigrants and refugee students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Willie et al. (2019) interviewed 11 school personnel across three rural districts on their experiences with refugee youth and their families. The participants' positions included administrator, special service providers, and teachers of ELLs. Through a qualitative approach, the researchers found that communication, cultural differences, resource allocation, curriculum, collaboration, and family–school relationships all explained how refugee students are marginalized in the classrooms. According to Willie et al. (2019), “Unfortunately, refugee youths are sometimes marginalized by their exclusive placement in EL classrooms where they have limited opportunities to interact with their English-speaking peers” (p. 34). Similarly, Willie et al. presented teachers' concerns of refugee students falling behind academically and “the importance of using alternative strategies and modified curriculum to meet the academic needs of students, keep them motivated, and help them advance as quickly as possible” (p. 38).

DeCapua and Marshall's (2015) study identified three instructional barriers to formal U.S. educational success for this marginalized group of students. Focusing on cultural inclusion

through the mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP), DeCapua and Marshall developed a framework that addressed this marginalized group of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). They also discussed a culturally responsive instructional model that allows students to succeed on standardized testing and school-based ways of thinking and learning to address the cultural dissonance in U.S. classrooms. The researchers found that a significant barrier to learning was the individualistic pedagogical approach teachers took in the classroom, which does not typically include collaborative work because most cultures refugees come from are collectivistic as members of a group (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). This approach was difficult for many students who come from collectivistic cultures, making them less likely than their peers to raise their hands for discussions.

Another barrier students faced was the focus on standardized testing in U.S. schools, as it requires mastery of academic thinking and school-based tasks by grade level and refugee students are often initially below grade level. Lastly, according to DeCapua and Marshall (2015), refugee students are challenged to be motivated to stay in school because they do not have the same access to future rewards, such as attending college upon completing high school. The difference between refugee students and non-refugee students is due to the academic challenges they encounter because of the interrupted education and trauma they experienced.

DeCapua and Marshall (2015) suggested reframing the conversation on academic success for refugee students from “not understanding the expectations, discourse styles, and modes of school-based ways of thinking and learning in U.S. educational institutions that leave them feeling confused and alienated” (p. 357), to a focus on cultural dissonance using a culturally responsive teaching approach to “promote classroom engagement and achievement as they make the transition” (p. 357). DeCapua and Marshall failed to provide data on the successful

implementation of the MALP practice they recommended. Their research suggested an intercultural communication framework for teachers of students transitioning to formal education, along with supporting teachers to become more culturally competent, could translate into greater competence.

Dryden-Peterson (2015) stated refugees struggle to access instructional content taught in a language other than their own, or in an environment with limited resources to support their language learning. Additionally, educators must reassess instructional lecture, pedagogy, and curriculum, as the curriculum does not consider all students' academic achievement levels. In Dryden-Peterson's (2016) later study, also noted a lack of quality instruction also affects refugees' overall educational experience. Dryden-Peterson (2016) argued inadequate quality was due to limited teaching resources, low educational standards, and most of the instruction being teacher-centered with a focus on lectures and little opportunity for students to participate in the classroom.

DeCapua's (2016) study emphasized the importance of culture and curriculum in reaching refugee students. DeCapua argued that developing an understanding of the beliefs, values, norms, and ways of thinking and learning of students with limited or interrupted formal education was central to developing effective instruction for this population. DeCapua was one of the few researchers to emphasize cultural understanding in a curriculum. DeCapua stated a lack of understanding SLIFEs' beliefs, values, norms, and ways of thinking or learning has a harmful impact on their education.

Finally, DeCapua and Marshall (2015) asserted educators develop learning paradigms based on how they learned growing up, and these paradigms do not consider how refugee students have been exposed to other formal and informal ways of learning in refugee camps,



rural areas, and areas without adequate educational infrastructures. Because of the barriers refugee students have faced, educators may not understand that their cultural expectations and assumptions do not resemble educational practices elsewhere and are ineffective at supporting these students' learning.

### **Refugees' Experiences With Trauma and Mental Health and Their Influence on Schooling**

I began the literature review by exploring refugees' educational challenges, including access to education and their experiences with interrupted education (e.g., Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). I then discussed some of the challenges researchers have identified that influence the experiences refugees face with schooling in the United States. I now turn to the research that focuses specifically on the trauma and mental health issues that have been shown to influence students' educational experiences (e.g., Brown et al. 2006).

Traumatic experiences for refugees can occur in various situations due to changes in their familial, relational, social, and cultural lives (Luci, 2020). Understanding both mental health and trauma are important, as they are inextricably connected. Further research into these areas can support a deeper understanding of how preresettlement education, health, and trauma may affect refugee students' educational, social, and/or emotional being.

### **Trauma**

Research has confirmed that refugees experience trauma due to witnessing violence and war (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Cameron et al. (2018) found compared to immigrants or locals, young refugees were more likely to have been exposed to the sudden death of a person, fire, or war zones. Refugees and trauma is an important area of research, as these youth are more likely to suffer negative long-term consequences of war than adults who experience similar

events (Mirabolfathi et al., 2020). For individuals in host countries to mitigate traumatic experiences, they need to understand trauma.

Sullivan and Simonson (2016) explained three categories of trauma: (a) trauma experienced when fleeing their homes because of war in their home country; (b) trauma experienced along the journey made to their host countries, as many children and parents are separated then; and (c) trauma experienced in their host country. The authors stated, “Refugees often experience significant psychological distress due to exposure of direct or indirect trauma, as well as intergenerational trauma between family members” (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016, p. 505).

Students enter schools having experienced trauma. Taylor et al. (2020) investigated the nature of trauma of 12 asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom by using an interpretative phenomenological approach. They reported refugees had witnessed torture, war, sexual violence, loss, trauma, and other stressors. The authors stated, “Refugees are around 10 times more likely to experience psychiatric disorders than the other general population” (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 1). The conditions most frequently reported by the research participants in Taylor et al.’s study were loss, struggle, and memory loss. They concluded by arguing the high levels of trauma refugees experience lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation. Through two-stage interviews, the researchers found the lack of social support problematic.

The influences of trauma and interrupted education on refugees’ schooling experiences was reported in a qualitative study by Brown et al. (2006), who studied eight Sudanese refugees and eight of their teachers attending two Victorian schools in Australia. The participants arrived having experienced interrupted education, trauma, and a lack of literacy education. Teachers had

a difficult time creating classrooms where refugee students could still participate in their education because they struggled to meet specific academic, social, and linguistic needs. Brown et al. recommended helping students to make their trauma explicit, as it can become a starting point to developing educational strategies, resources, and policies that could meet their needs.

Tweedie et al. (2017) also addressed the influence of trauma-informed practices in teaching refugee children in Canadian schools—schools that continue to see an influx of refugees. The researchers explained refugee students enter school having experienced trauma, disrupted schooling, and a lack of literacy in their first language. Tweedie et al. (2017) found “prolonged time periods in refugee camps may have led to interrupted schooling, with the consequence of literacy and innumeracy in their first language (F.L.), and the effects of trauma from war and involuntary displacement” (p. 38). The authors stated living in constant threat of not having any resources leaves adolescents with a difficult time thinking clearly, working through problems, and unable to consider multiple alternatives. They argued it is important for educators to have knowledge of trauma-informed teaching practices and noted how the attachment, regulation and complexity (ARC) framework can be of help in working with refugees. The ARC framework is used to describe core issues in a child’s recovery from complex trauma. The four characteristics of complex trauma impacting academic performance are: (a) reduced cognitive capacity, (b) sleep disturbance, (c) memory, and (d) language delays (Tweedie et al., 2017). Tweedie et al. noted the importance of rebuilding attachment, self-regulation, and developmental competencies in children from refugee backgrounds to help them have a strong start in school. This research provides more of a guide for trauma informed care but does not, however, contain a real step-by-step manual (Tweedie et al., 2017).

Experiences of trauma are not only prevalent premigration but also postmigration, an area in which counselors need knowledge as trauma continues to pose educational challenges for these students (Houseknecht & Swank, 2019). Houseknecht and Swank (2019) wrote:

The abrupt nature of leaving one's home country may include: (a) loss of identity and culture; (b) family separation; (c) a downgrade in socioeconomic status and employment; (d) dramatic shifts in social, family, and gender roles; and (e) racism and discrimination. (p. 128)

Once in the host country, the lack of language knowledge hinders acculturation and can further negatively influence students' experiences. Houseknecht and Swank (2019) subsequently concluded for counselors to be effective, they need to understand refugees' historical, sociopolitical, cultural, and psychological contexts. Houseknecht and Swank acknowledged the importance of counselors' awareness of the refugees' cultural influences on health care and mental health. They stated, "Researchers have found that refugees tend to normalize their symptoms due to language barriers, and often avoid care because of different views of illness" (Houseknecht & Swank, 2019, p. 128). Appropriate training is vital for school counselors who work with these students, and more research in this area is needed.

With the recognition and increased focus on the effects of trauma, more attention has been given to strategies school personnel can use to help students process trauma. Franco (2018) assessed the need for school-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive interventions to help students process trauma, reduce emotional distress, and mitigate academic challenges. Franco's case study addressed the migration trauma that unaccompanied Mexican and Central American refugee minors experienced to understand how premigration, in-journey, and postmigration stressors contributed to trauma. Franco defined *unaccompanied refugee migrants*

(URMs) as youth under the age of 18 who fled their countries without an adult and without an option of returning to their homelands, leading to possible effects of either posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, or depression. Franco (2018) explained as these young people “enter the U.S. with past or current histories of PTSD, an increase in awareness about the presence of school-based mental health services has emerged among educators and policymakers to promote the best academic and social–emotional outcomes” (p. 557). Franco’s case study described how refugee students are susceptible to experiencing difficulties in the educational system and do not perform as well as their peers because of the impact trauma has on educational learning and academic achievement. Specifically, Franco outlined how trauma results in concentration difficulties, learning problems, and a lack of academic functioning. Franco’s research is helpful in drawing attention to the mental health issues among refugees; however, his study did not offer effective ways to remedy this problem, discuss what interventions have been attempted, nor identify the perceptions of the refugees themselves.

The trauma refugee students experience has been found to influence other areas of their overall mental health (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Arvanitis and Kiprianos (2019) suggested that giving voice to the voiceless gives them an opportunity to explain their experience. Giving refugee students an opportunity to voice their stories is not only an act of agency and inclusivity, but can also add to service providers’ knowledge of what is needed to help them. In that vein, Luci (2020) examined the relationship between displacement, home, trauma, and sense of self. Luci sought to discover to what extent and under what conditions displacement becomes traumatic and how it can affect mental life. To better understand how displacement conditions become traumatic, clinical case studies of three refugees were conducted and reported in the form of vignettes (Luci, 2020). These stories were told from the refugees’ perspectives and were

focused on their experiences with displacement and what the search for home meant to them.

Luci (2020) explained refugees continue “to search for a place that helps them feel ‘at-home’ in the world” (p. 263). A place that feels like home is their desired end destination.

### **Mental Health**

Trauma creates mental health challenges; yet, there is little research on refugees’ overall mental health (Franco, 2018; Sim, 2016). As Franco (2018) argued, the limited research on this topic is problematic, because refugees’ mental health is affected throughout their migration experiences, including premigration, in-journey, and postmigration. Buchmüller et al. (2019) acknowledged that refugee students are at risk of developing mental health problems. Refugee students often experience psychological distress without receiving support services. Chan et al. (2016) reported many refugee students suffer from continued distress after resettlement, leading to major depressive disorder; thus, school leaders must address refugee students’ mental health needs, though they often lack the cultural and linguistic capacity to do so (Im et al., 2020). The lack in cultural and linguistic capacity to address mental health needs becomes a challenge for educators when words such as “trauma” and “mental health” do not translate properly in other languages. Im et al. (2020) explained, “The western mental health terminologies are not often translated into the languages of diverse cultural groups” (p. 2). Therefore, it is difficult for educators to fully understand the issues their refugee students deal with, which prevents them from providing the support students need.

A review of Mölsä et al.’s (2017) study showed that PTSD was often the consequence of trauma. This study included 128 participants between the ages of 50–85 in Finland’s Somali refugee population. In interviews and in their responses on the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (Mölsä et al., 2017), participants attributed their trauma to (a) war, (b) childhood adversities, (c)

PTSD, (d) depression, (e) psychological distress, and (f) somatization. Newly arrived refugees exposed to war and trauma showed greater PTSD symptoms. Findings indicated that it was important for school personnel to understand how trauma, social environment, and other everyday stressors could influence how students cope with conflict. To address PTSD among refugees, universal interventions with a problem-solving and a coping framework were suggested as likely to be beneficial.

Hoffman et al. (2018) suggested current models of PTSD claim the way traumatic events are appraised play an important role in the development and maintenance of PTSD symptoms. Hoffman et al.'s (2018) findings concurred with these results and stated, "Refugees are typically exposed to multiple traumatic events, and accordingly elevated rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been documented in forcibly displaced and conflict-affected groups" (p. 1030). Their study consisted of 222 refugee participants over the age of 18 from different backgrounds that resettled in Australia as they were exposed to multiple traumatic events that resulted in increased occurrences of PTSD. Hoffman et al.'s (2018) study also employed a variety of instructional tools to measure exposure to trauma, such as the Moral Injury Appraisal Scale (MIAS), which examines the relationship between moral injury factors and other key predictors and outcomes. The researchers also employed the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, Patient Health Questionnaire, and the Post-Traumatic Diagnostic Scale–5. The last instrument used to gather data was the Patient Health Questionnaire, a 9-item, self-report questionnaire that assessed depression symptoms (Hoffman et al., 2018). Hoffman et al. concluded there may be subtypes of moral injury appraisals associated with different mental health outcomes, and found those with higher trauma exposure had severe anger and depression.

Buchmüller et al. (2019) discussed how children as young as 6 years old reported emotional and behavioral problems that could develop into mental health problems. Language demands contribute to the problems children face with assimilation after resettlement (Willie et al., 2019). Mental health directly impacts students' educational experiences and personal lives. Schools may be the first or only place where many of these students can get access to services. As Sullivan and Simonson (2016) pointed out, school officials should be concerned with ensuring these students receive their needed supports. According to Sim (2016), children never outgrow posttraumatic stress; it leaves a lasting impact on their mental health. Sim also explained most mental disorders become evident after reaching the host country, and more resources are needed after resettlement.

According to Sullivan and Simonson (2016), there are several tiers to health care needed to support refugee resilience and integration:

Tier 1 is providing basic service and security such as food and shelter as well as protection and advocacy; Tier 2 are programs designed for community and family supports; Tier 3 are programs and intervention focusing on the nonspecialized supports, and Tier 4 consists of activities that are specialized services addressing the mental illness and functioning problems. (p. 4)

There is a need for mental health resources and access to education so no student falls through the cracks. A refugees host country must provide the tools to mitigate traumatic experiences, thereby preventing further mental health problems. School officials, however, are typically not well-positioned to respond to all four tiers. Sullivan and Simonson (2016) stated “the continued influx of refugees from trauma-ridden locales, many of whom are children, means that schools are often challenged to address the significant mental health needs of these unique populations”



(p. 503). As this review of the literature has shown, educators still do not know enough about how to support these students when they enter U.S. schools.

Although each of the studies informed this research with an abundance of helpful data and insight on the challenges refugee students face—both before and during resettlement—this research has limitations. The reviewed research included studies that used surveys and structured and unstructured interviews; only a few studies used validated instruments to measure specific variables (e.g., trauma and aggression). There was also a lack of narrative studies or stories of refugees telling their personal accounts and narrative studies from the perceptions of school staff who worked with the refugee populations. There was also little statistical data from the assessment of refugee students' standardized test scores or a comparison of these scores to those of their classmates.

Additionally, there were a lack of data on refugees' educational attainment in the United States, specifically in San Diego. Most of the studies were conducted in other countries. Prior to 2015–2016, a larger body of research on refugee education experiences in the United States was present, but there has since been a decrease in this literature. A limitation to referencing studies outside of the United States is the inability to generalize their findings when it comes to how educational gaps affect experiences in the United States. Another limitation was the scarce amount of research on the refugee student population's premigration educational and social experiences. Furthermore, many studies tended to focus on older individuals, making it hard to generalize their experiences to students, specifically those younger in age.

### **Conclusions**

This literature review found significant gaps between the state of research on refugees' educational experiences and resulting educational practice. Studies have identified and explained

a number of challenges experienced by many refugees, including access and interrupted education (e.g., Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; UNHCR: The U.N. Refugee Agency, 2021). Refugee students face challenges, including (a) their struggle to adapt to a new and individualistic educational system, (b) learning a new language, and (c) meeting academic standards despite literacy disadvantages due to interrupted education. Language barriers create challenges with refugee student's ability to perform at the same academic standards as their peers and their grade placement. In addition to academic learning challenges, language barriers create challenges in refugee students' ability to communicate with school staff about their past educational, social, and traumatic experiences, creating challenges for educators to be knowledgeable of refugee students' past histories and identify how to better support their educational experiences.

As mentioned earlier, school officials must review and update their school policies and curricula to better meet the learning needs of refugee students, as they do not perform at the same academic level as their non-refugee peers. The updating of school policies is important because refugee students who have experienced some time of interrupted education often take a longer time to meet the same educational standards as their classmates. As some studies found, an all-inclusive teaching style, not a teacher-centered pedagogy, better supports a refugee student's overall educational experience (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). In addition to academic challenges, the trauma refugee students experienced or their overall mental health influences their overall academic performance. School educators are often unable to meet these students' educational and psychological needs. In fact, most educators often focus more on curriculum, rather on the trauma refugee students have experienced (Aydin et al., 2017).

With regard to trauma, researchers have yet to fully recognize its harmful effects on the education of refugee students. Often, greater emphasis is placed on the ability to master English and perform in class. As Amanda and Gregory (2016) argued, “Given the relations between mental health, academic performance, and general well-being, education should be concerned with ensuring these students receive needed supports” (p. 503). Providing refugee students with mental health supports is especially important as schools may be the first or only place children and youth can receive these supports (Amanda & Gregory, 2016).

This review also indicated there is a growing need for research to better understand the trauma and loss of education these students experience, as well as ways to better support them in the U.S. educational system. To date, most of the research in the United States has focused on school system preparedness for the refugee population in their classrooms and their curriculum (e.g., Aydin et al., 2017).

In the next chapter, I discuss the design of my study. Given the minimal research on high school refugee students in the United States, this study sought to understand refugee students’ educational and social experiences from their perspective. This study examined their experiences before they arrive in the United States, how these experiences shaped their education, and how instructional- and trauma-based support strategies in a charter school setting responded to these refugee student needs.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research study contributes to a better understanding of the socioemotional and educational environment that refugees need as they settle in the United States. The study looks specifically at what interventions, if any, are provided at a refugee-dominated charter school to address specifically the needs of students who have suffered from trauma and interrupted education. In doing so, I answered the following research questions:

1. How do refugee students' past educational and social experiences influence their U.S. educational experience?
2. How does a school that predominantly serves refugee students respond to their needs when they have experienced trauma and interrupted education before coming to the United States?
3. What factors support or alternatively undermine the educational and social experiences of recently arrived refugee students?

In the first part of this chapter, I elaborate on the research design and methods. Afterwards, the chapter turns to providing a historical overview of the school as research site. The next section elaborates on the participants, their selection, demographic backgrounds, and profiles. Participants included students and school staff members. After introducing the participants, I then explain the data analysis, including the interview guide, the coding process, and the quality measures taken to ensure credible and trustworthy results from the online surveys and interviews.

### **Research Design and Methods**

Qualitative research was chosen for this study because it provided the best lens to understand how participants interpreted their experiences, how they constructed their worlds, and

the meaning they attributed to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In fact, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated the purpose of qualitative research is to “achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 15). The research design was a narrative inquiry focusing on the stories of nine high school students who identified as refugees and attended a charter school in San Diego, predominantly comprised of refugees and two staff members of the school. Through both an interview and an online survey, I compared the experiences of the student participants who attend this school. Patton (2015) explained to treat the stories as data and the narrative as analysis, which involves interpreting the story, placing it in context, and comparing it with other stories” (p. 128). Qualitative studies are important because as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, case studies are “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (p. 232). In this case, my research study approach was a narrative inquiry of refugee students. Qualitative research allows researchers to go in-depth and focus on understanding the participants’ internal perceptions of their own lives (Patton, 2015). Moreover, one of the seven contributions of qualitative inquiry I was interested in was making case comparisons to discover important patterns and themes by analyzing both similarities and differences (Patton, 2015).

To illuminate these students’ perceived experiences with interrupted education and trauma, and how they interpreted their experiences in relationship to their current educational experience, the participants’ narratives are used. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, “the power of narrative is not so much that it is about life, but that it interacts in life. Narratives are how we share our daily lives” (p. 34). The interview questions were designed to allow the participants to share their pre- and post-migration educational and psychosocial experiences as refugees.

Similarly, the school director and a senior teacher on staff, both of whom work with this diverse group of students, were interviewed and an analysis of each of their stories was used to make sense of the information that was provided by the students. Polkinghorne (1992) noted, “stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes the human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (p. 8). The students, school director, and senior teacher each told their own personal accounts of either being or working with refugee students.

### **Research Site and Site History**

As the researcher, I received prior approval at the research site to meet institutional research board (IRB) policy (see Appendix A). The school site’s selection was convenient because the school population was primarily made up of the research population of interest for this study and I had developed a rapport with the students, staff, and families due to having been an employee of the school since 2014. My employment at the charter school allowed me the time needed to create strong relationships with students and families, and my familiarity with the participants may have also increased their willingness to participate in this study, as the trust I built had to be developed over time.

The charter school includes a community of students who identify as refugees and speak over 25 different languages. These students come from (a) Afghanistan, (b) Ethiopia, (c) Burma, (d) Thailand, (e) Haiti, (f) Somalia, (g) Syria, (h) Nepal, (i) Vietnam, (j) New Delhi, and more. In comparison to the neighboring schools, this charter school holds a higher percentage of refugees and English language learners (ELLs). As of the 2020–2021 school year, the student population was made up of approximately 85% refugees, 100% English learners, and 100% socioemotionally disadvantaged students. At the time of enrollment, all student information was

placed into the school's online PowerSchool program that tracks student demographics, attendance, grades, immunizations, and any special education services that they may be enrolled in. In PowerSchool, each student is given a state identification number that provides the school with more student information such as English language status, which students are categorized as socioemotionally disadvantaged or qualify for free meals based on their family income. To be specific, 100% of the student population qualifies for free meals.

This high percentage of refugees is explained by the school's founding interest in, and focus on, refugee students and providing them with a small and safe learning environment. The school, which currently educates approximately 124 students, has seen a decrease in enrollment due to the high cost of living in San Diego and the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It was founded to serve newly arrived students who identify as refugees, ELLs, and underrepresented youth. The charter school is located in the center of City Heights, a part of San Diego overwhelmed with poverty, gang life, and violence. The San Diego Unified School District approved the charter school in 2011 and has continued to renew the school's charter petition; however, students did not enroll until the 2012–2013 school year because they did not have a building to host the classes in until then. The school began with 30 sixth-grade students and additional grades were added sequentially. Today, it serves Grades 6–12, and many of its students have experienced interrupted formal education or a lack of access to a free, safe education. To address some of those educational equity gaps, the school focuses on college preparation while providing students with a program that will allow them to perform at the same grade level as other students in their community. To date, there have been a total of two administrators, each of whom had a different leadership approach to meeting the academic and socioemotional needs of their students as now discussed.

### **August 2013–July 2019: School Development During the First Administration**

When the charter school was founded, it had one small class of 30 sixth graders, and it has continued to grow through the years. Under the leadership of the first school director—who was also the school founder—the school rented classrooms from a church and shared the campus with the church and a preschool. The campus and classrooms were small. Initially, the school occupied two floors of the church facility but as enrollment expanded, the facility expanded to three floors, including two portable classrooms to hold additional classes. On each floor, one of the larger classrooms was renovated by adding a wall to divide the space into two smaller classrooms that could seat 32 students in each. However, due to the challenge of space, the school was unable to provide a science lab or a centralized library. Instead, teachers kept books in the back of their classrooms to act as a makeshift library. In addition, there was only a small outdoor play area for students.

When the school was founded, there was a significant focus on providing a curriculum that addressed the students' current and future academic needs, while addressing their educational gaps and performance regarding their grade levels. During this time, City Heights was welcoming many resettled refugees and, as such, a Community Outreach Director at the school would regularly work with local resettlement agencies, elementary schools, and members in the community to recruit students. The partnerships between the charter school and resettlement agencies, elementary schools, and community members was the most effective way to spread word about the school to the local community and to enroll students. Upon arrival, all students were tested to assess their academic performance through the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test, administered on their 1st day of enrollment and again toward the end of the school year to document both current grade level



performance and growth. At first, the school tested students solely in math and English; however, since 2018, it also began testing students in science. The MAP test is an internal tool used to assess the effectiveness of the school curriculum and instruction for students' academic needs based on their initial placement.

The school administrators found most refugee students did not perform at grade level. In fact, most tested at the kindergarten level regardless of age because they had experienced a significant interruption in their formal education. In addition, the academic standards and ways of teaching in the United States differed from their home country's educational system. Overall, students performed better in math than they did in English, because they were not yet fluent in English. With these results, the director saw the need to provide curriculum that addressed refugee students' learning loss. Thus, curricula and resources targeted students' English learning needs in hopes they would also accelerate the learning process required for them to perform at their current grade levels. Therefore, students with different ages were placed in different grade levels based on their MAP test scores.

One of the ways this was achieved was through the implementation of specific classes that were taught by teachers who held appropriate teaching credentials: (a) newcomers class, (b) individualized math (IM) class, and (c) an academic English class (AE). During this time, students in sixth grade were automatically enrolled in the AE and IM classes and sixth grade math and English, meaning they received 2 periods a day in each subject. The math teachers also administered a math diagnostic test at the beginning and end of the course to track learning and necessary areas of additional student support. All students, regardless of grade and academic performance, were enrolled in a reading class that met every day of the week for 30 minutes. In the reading class, students' reading levels were tested by a Running Records Reading test, which

evaluated students' performance in the basics of the English language, including knowledge of the alphabet. Based on test results, students were assigned by teachers to read books that appropriately reflected their reading level. The teachers continued to assess students' reading levels throughout the term to collect progress data.

Students who were enrolled in seventh grade and higher, and who would have benefited from taking the AE and IM classes, met for 30 minutes prior to their 1st period class, in what was referred to as zero period. When they lacked basic English knowledge, these students were also enrolled in a newcomer class, instead of the reading class. This class taught students their alphabet, how to read and write in English, the number system, how to ask for help, basic greetings, how to tell time, and other foundational phrases that would help them feel included when in class. The students took tests every 2 weeks to assess their progress, and once they mastered the skills, they graduated from the program and returned to their regular reading classes. In addition to this support, the school focused on literacy and an A–G curriculum. The A–G curriculum included general academic classes that all students take in high school and that colleges review for college admission eligibility. Such classes include: (a) 2 years of history/social science, (b) 4 years of English, (c) 3 years of college-preparatory math, (d) 2 years of laboratory science (i.e., biology, chemistry, physics), (e) 2 years of a language other than English, (f) 1 year of visual and performing arts, and (g) 1 year of a college-preparatory elective chosen from the “A–G” courses, as defined by the University of California and California State University systems (Callas, 2021). Students enrolled in this college preparatory program were taking these courses in addition to all the remedial classes that had been designed for them. If they still needed additional individualized support, they took AE or IM classes before their normal classes began or during the scheduled reading class time.

In addition to providing individualized support, the school focused on creating a safe learning environment for all students through zero bullying and zero drug tolerance policies, making it one of the few schools in the neighborhood that was able to provide a safe and drug free school environment. According to feedback in surveys given at family meetings, these policies were a large reason families continued to enroll their children at the school.

Furthermore, the school director saw a need for a supportive environment to meet the emotional needs of the students. Through discussions with their families and translators, and through the images that students drew explaining their experiences (drawings that proved crucial because their English use was so limited), it was evident that students' prior experiences—for example, their journey to the United States—required emotional processing support. Therefore, to respond to these needs, a seminar class for all students was created and strategically scheduled as the last class of the day. All students were enrolled in a small class, which was taught by a teacher or teacher assistant and included no more than 10 students. This course focused on providing academic support while helping students address their social needs, and acted as a liaison between the school and students' families. The class also cultivated socioemotional development, leadership, life skills, community service commitments, and college readiness. The teacher assistants assembled lesson plans and activities, and there were different monthly learning targets for the students to meet, ranging from fitness and health goals to college readiness and community service opportunities.

The school also provided a weeklong intensive support program, Peace Camp, that was coordinated by the teacher assistants, the school administrator, the assistant director, and administrative staff. The staff received training on how to implement the Peace Camp program from the assistant director, who had attended training on trauma-informed services and resources

to address student trauma. Based on teacher recommendations, specific students were encouraged to participate in the Peace Camp, which met for 2 hours every morning during spring break. During this time, the students learned about trauma, how to identify it, and ways to speak about it. Additionally, they engaged in numerous activities aimed at helping them process their trauma and navigate their emotions, all occurring with the help of the staff members mentioned previously. Art therapy was a major component of such processing; for example, students used clay to mold object(s) that were meaningful to them, and they shared the stories that influenced the objects. They also used drawing as a tool to represent their current emotions and events that may have been traumatic. If they felt ready, they would speak about their experiences with the rest of their small group to process the trauma.

The school director prioritized providing all students with school materials and school uniforms for free, in addition to offering free resources for teachers' professional development. The school had a school uniform policy requiring students in middle school to wear blue and gray uniforms. Those in high school were allowed to dress in any clothing that adhered to professional standards. The school director also provided online resources and tools to the teachers to help them with their curriculum development. In addition to this, she met with the teachers monthly to discuss their lesson plans and student learning objectives. Additionally, the staff continued to engage in webinars and presentations that specialized in ELLs and refugee students. Finally, there was a weekly community lunch speaker series where community leaders were invited to speak to students about their educational paths, how they reached their current positions, and the challenges they encountered along the way. These speakers then provided advice on how students could go about achieving the same education or career goals.

**July 2019–Present: New Administration**

With the change in leadership came changes in school-wide practices, course offerings, and roles (e.g., the hiring of a fulltime school counselor). The number of students enrolled in the school has remained small in light of less refugees being able to resettle in the United States under President Donald Trump's administration (Phan, 2018). For example, in August 2020, the school enrolled seven newly arrived refugee students from Afghanistan, and in April 2021, the school enrolled three newly arrived refugee students from Burma and Cambodia. In past years, a more typical enrollment number would be between 15–20 new students. However, lower enrollment rates have allowed for more in-depth support of the current student population and a continuation of strong relationship building among the staff, the families, and the students at the school. The school has also retained most of the same teachers, and among the current staff, there are three staff members with a tenure of 6 years, four staff members with a tenure of 4 years, and the remainder of staff members have been with the school for 2–3 years. The most recent addition to the school's staff was the full-time school counselor, who was hired after the new school administrator started.

In December 2019, the school moved to a new location that no longer required shared facilities. The property consists of four large buildings, which hold a total of seven large classrooms, a science lab, a library, offices for administration, a service provider room, an all-purpose room, a double fenced building with security and alarm systems, a quad, and lots of outdoor space for students to sit and talk on benches or play games of basketball, soccer, foursquare, or jump rope. This new location has given the staff more autonomy to use the space freely and to engage in project-based learning. In addition, the school has created a cohesive school brand with the finalization of a school logo and has been able to use it throughout the new

campus. In March 2020, the school was forced to shut down their physical campus because of the COVID-19 global pandemic and has only been able to offer distance learning since that time. To date, the school is still providing all families with computers, internet connectivity, school materials, and free meals, with all courses being taught through distance learning.

Along with the change in school leadership, the curriculum during the 2019–2020 school year for both middle school and high school students expanded to include various electives, Advancement Placement (AP) courses for high school students, as well as dual–enrollment opportunities, which allow high school seniors to also enroll in community college classes. The school has implemented a Project Lead the Way elective course, which uses project-based curricula to teach computer science, engineering, and biomedical science for high school students, in addition to offering honors and AP courses. Such updates have included the replacement of the newcomers, academic English (AE), and individualized math (IM) courses with other all-inclusive courses, in which refugee and nonrefugee students are intermixed. The changes to the school schedule has allowed for the addition of social studies and science classes as well as a remedial language intervention class for eighth–10th graders who are reading at or below a second grade level. Students who meet these criteria are enrolled in the language intervention course instead of their regular grade level reading class and are tested using Reading A–Z by a licensed teacher with a reading credential, who then oversees the courses, tests student performance, and provides ongoing support so that students gain remedial literacy skills. The class is primarily made up of refugee and ELL students.

Along with the change in curriculum and offered classes, there have been notable student scheduled changes. For example, the instructional minutes under the current administrator include decreasing class from approximately 47 minute-long content classes, one reading class,

and one seminar class, to four 55-minute-long content classes, one reading class, and one Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class. The school director introduced AVID because he strongly believed that it will be a beneficial course to students in both academic and social support. AVID is the first period class for all sixth- through 12th-grade students, and is designed to prepare them for college eligibility, career readiness, and success by giving them the same opportunities received by students who have more support at home. AVID uses a writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading model that emphasizes writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading (AVID, 2021) and has proved quite effective in readying students for college (Mehan et al., 1996). The teachers who teach this class engaged in a 1-week intensive training in the summer of 2018 prior to implementation, and they continue to receive professional development from AVID throughout the school year, which includes access to an online platform with curriculum, learning videos, resources, and project-based learning. Additionally, other professional development opportunities are held at least twice a month for teachers. Teachers are also encouraged to attend professional development opportunities outside of the school and to participate in online webinars to bring new and creative ideas to the school. Another major support provided to students at the charter school is the introduction of restorative practices and circles, which are now used school-wide.

With an ongoing collaboration between the staff and school counselor, there are continual discussions of ways to close the equity gap and to ensure that students at the charter school have the same, or better, educational opportunities compared with students enrolled in surrounding schools. In fact, following the results of student surveys, after-school activities expanded, and the school uniform was replaced with a new school dress code. These decisions were influenced by students expressing a strong interest in being able to express their personalities and cultures

through their attire, similarly to students in nearby schools. Additionally, they wanted access to the same after school clubs and activities their friends were given access to at the neighboring schools.

To date, there have been a total of two graduating classes from the school. Of the two, only the second graduating class participated in the AVID program, as there was no AVID program prior to the 2019–2020 school year. The first class of seniors in 2019 was made up of three refugee students, all of whom had 4-year college acceptances. The second graduating class in 2020 included six seniors, who had all graduated with an 85% acceptance rate to a 4-year university. Among these nine seniors, each of them decided to attend community college first, and then transfer to a 4-year university primarily for financial reasons. Most of the students work to supplement the cost of college attendance. Two students moved out of state, while the rest were still local. The current class of seniors, who are expected to graduate in 2021, consists of 11 students who are all on track to graduate because they have fulfilled their high school graduation requirements, and have applied to a mix of community colleges and 4-year universities.

### **School Mission and Goals**

In line with its mission and vision, the research site remains dedicated to ongoing discussions about ways to promote student equity and college-readiness. The discussions about promoting student equity and college-readiness at the school involves continuing to provide rigor and support for all students, assisting them in reaching their desired academic goals, and continuing to create and implement programs and resources that target their unique needs. Decisions such as employing a school counselor and teacher assistants and offering after school tutoring and 1:1 Chromebooks and school materials in the classrooms, are a few of the ways



these unique needs are met. The school counselor reviews student transcripts, creates student schedules, and is an additional staff member with whom students and families can talk. Teacher assistants serve as additional support to students learning, as does the after-school tutoring program, which gives students the opportunity to access additional support from their teachers and teacher assistants. Furthermore, there is an ongoing solicitation of family involvement and both parent/guardian and student surveys are provided to continually assess evolving needs.

Meanwhile, the staff remains focused on developing curricula that address the Common Core Standards (CCS) and continues to evolve around the students' academic and socioemotional needs. One such support teachers use is thinking maps, which are visual maps that help students learn the different ways to take notes or brainstorm for projects or writing assignments. All classrooms are equipped with a set of thinking maps hanging in the classrooms. The universal grading scale, ongoing use of grading rubrics, and homework calendars are also used, as all have been found helpful by both students and teachers. The idea is for students to fill out the calendar at the beginning of each week to document upcoming important assignments and projects and act as a tool for parents to track student work completion.

Meeting the academic needs of ELLs remains a large focus of the school and is addressed by ensuring that all teachers hold the correct qualifications (e.g., English language authorization credentials) and provide the right assignments to teach this student population. The school identifies all ELLs at time of enrollment and administers a home language survey that asks about their primary language. If a student answers that they speak a language other than English on the home language survey, the school administers the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC) to determine the EL status. The school also continues to administer the

MAP test twice per year to first assess students' initial grade placements and then document their academic growth. The questions asked are aligned to the CCS.

Additionally, the school not only focuses on meeting the academic and social needs of refugees and ELLs, but also on providing a special education program. In fact, the student population is comprised of 21% students with an IEP, so an education specialist works with these students, employing intervention strategies and resources to support their academic needs, while the school counselor and psychologist work to meet the mental health needs of all students. The school has also set up a student support team (SST) that is made up of teachers, administrators, and other school professionals. The purpose of the SST is to screen all students with behavioral and academic difficulties and refer those with special education evaluations to the special education program. The school remains all-inclusive, and students are not separated or placed into separate classroom settings so that they do not miss the standard-base core class instruction for all classes. However, students are pulled out if they have an IEP for speech and language therapy and other interventions by special education personnel. The parents continue to be involved throughout the process and nothing is finalized without parent approval.

There are also practices the teaching staff continue to implement because they received positive feedback from the students and their families. For example, the teachers continue to showcase student work samples in each classroom (along with the rubric) for each grade to demonstrate proficiency and to celebrate the student's hard work. The positive teacher feedback is something a lot of families have commented on enjoying at the family meetings. The school continues to schedule these family meetings, and although family engagement remains small, the school has witnessed a rise in family participation. These meetings consist of back-to-school nights, parent conferences, gatherings to discuss school updates or college applications and

financial aid resources, as well as meetings centered around families' input on expenditures, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), the school safety plan, and anything else they might want to voice their opinions on.

### **Study Participants**

In this section, I explain the sampling strategy and provide background on the study participants.

#### **Sampling**

For this study, a random sample of 10 students from a purposeful sample were selected, which included five female and five male high-school refugee students. However, only nine agreed to participate: five female students and four male students. According to Patton (2015):

purposeful sampling is when people, organizations, communities, etc. are selected because they are “information rich” and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of phenomenon of interest; sampling then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalizations from a sample to a population” (p. 46).

Interviewing nine students allowed for the opportunity to garner a more in-depth and gendered understanding of the lived experiences of these refugees. The research participants each had to have: (a) a refugee status of 10 years or less (i.e., the time they have been living in the United States), (b) an experience of formal interrupted education, (c) a current enrollment in grades ninth–12th, (d) a current enrollment at the chosen charter school, and (e) an experience with what they defined as trauma. For the purposes of this study, I defined *trauma* as witnessing a negative or violent experience that negatively interfered with their safety, schooling, health, or day to day life. Being an administrator at the school allowed me a familiarity with each student, including a background knowledge of whether they had experienced a time of interrupted

education and trauma. This knowledge was gained through data collected when originally onboarding the students. At the time of enrollment, all students were asked the name of the last school they attended, the grade they were enrolled in, and their age when they had first attended school. In addition to the school's documentation of information during initial enrollment, in conversations over the years, students shared stories of their past schooling experiences (including missed schooling) and experiences they were uncomfortable with (which were later identified as trauma) in their educational and social experiences.

The student participants in this study were selected according to the research site's original enrollment categorization. At the time of student enrollment, the school updated their school information system (i.e., PowerSchool) with students' refugee or nonrefugee status. Thus, PowerSchool was used to ensure that potential participants were categorized under a refugee status and had been living in the United States for less than 10 years. Students who experienced trauma were identified based on past conversations, documentation in their student files, and checking with the teaching staff and school counselor regarding their knowledge of any refugee students who had experienced trauma. Students were also asked on the survey if they had experienced trauma. However, due to the small student population and the close relationships I had already established with students and their families, I felt confident when it came to which students had experienced trauma. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) defined trauma as an emotional response to a terrible event.

The names of all potential participants—a total of 49 high school students—met the aforementioned categories. The families of each participant who met the criteria were called to solicit interest in participating in the study. Then, the names of all participants who had been given permission to participate were placed into two separate bowls divided by gender and

names were randomly drawn. Five participants were selected from each bowl. From this initial selection, two parents of the students whose names were drawn and who had agreed their child could be part of the study, ended up being resistant to signing the informed consent forms. Four students whose parents had given their consent declined to participate. One participant who agreed to participate later declined to follow-through because he felt overwhelmed by his studies. Given this set of circumstances, the names of other student participants were selected, but many students showed no interest in participating.

Eventually five female students and four males students agreed to move forward with participation. I focused on the gender component because I was interested in learning if gender differences might illuminate a difference in the participants experiences. In prior pilot studies, I found female participants took on a caregiver or mom role at home, including cooking, cleaning, and helping younger siblings with homework. It seemed they had different responsibilities than their male counterparts. Male participants reported taking on the translator role, attending family appointments, and sought early employment opportunities to provide an additional source of income. Because of this, I wondered if such differences might influence participants' overall educational and social experiences in the United States.

Because participation in the study was voluntary, selected participants were given and asked to submit a signed parent informed consent and child assent form before their interview (see Appendices B and C). The participants and their parent or guardian signed the forms at their homes, which have since been stored in a secure area. All participants were given a pseudonym to provide anonymity. The IRB approval was given through the University of San Diego (USD), as the research participants identifying as student refugees are considered vulnerable subjects (see Appendix I). Once they had been identified through a review of student profiles in

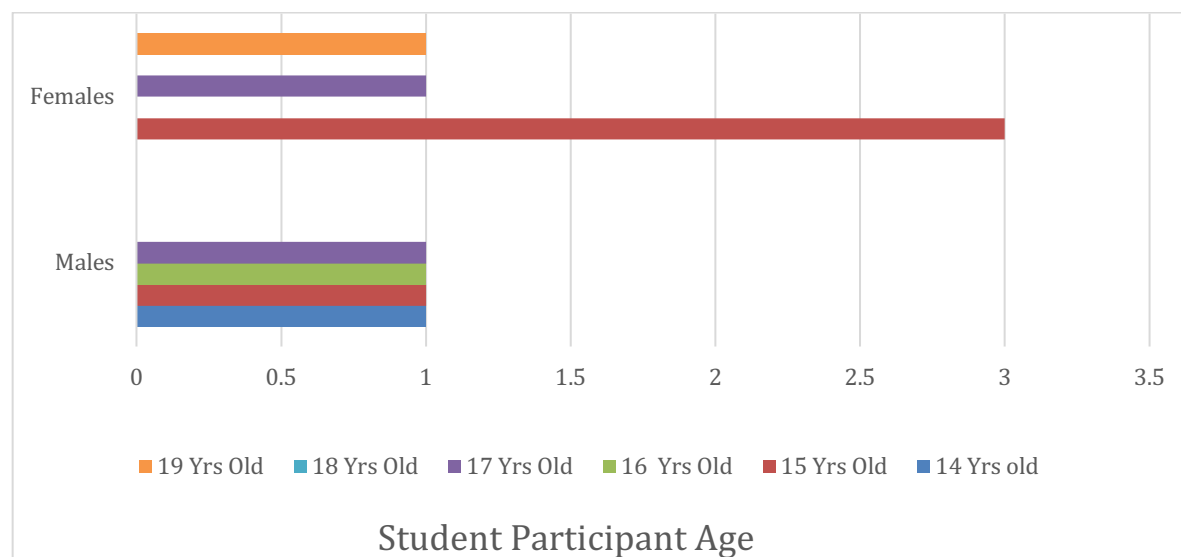
PowerSchool and hard copy school files, and had agreed to participate, a Google Forms survey was sent to participants before their interview session to gather background information on their: (a) grade level, (b) arrival date to the United States, (c) home country, (d) family size, and (e) general demographic background. Sending the survey ahead of time was intended to shorten the time of the interview sessions and ensure important information was captured across all interviews; however, none of the participants completed the survey prior to the interview, necessitating the gathering of such information at the interview.

### **Participant Demographics**

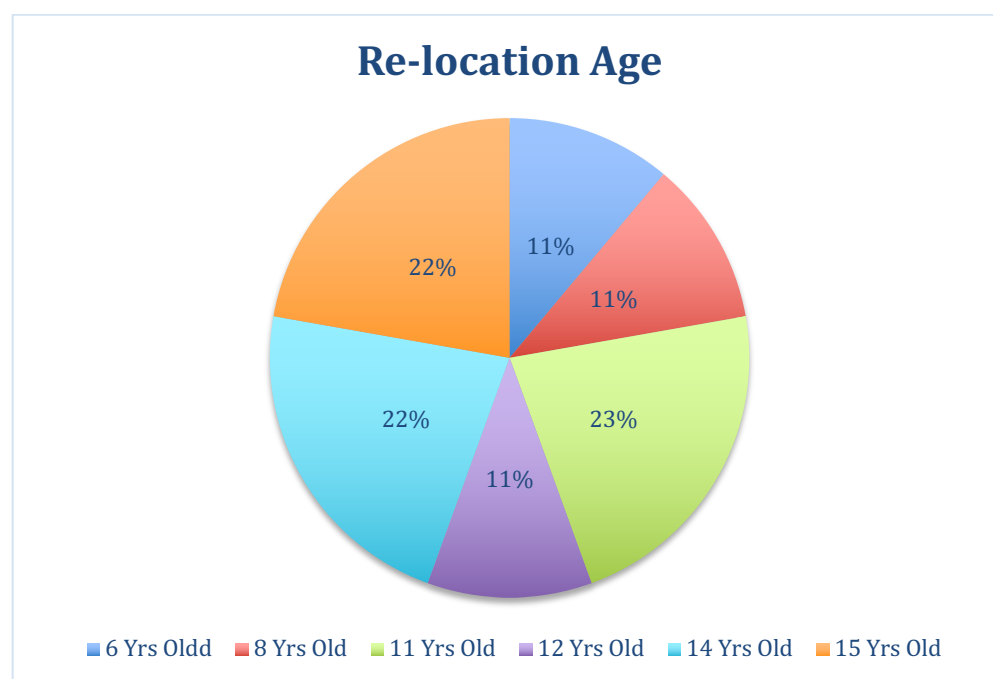
There are a total of nine student participants, ranging in age from 14 to 19 years old and between grade levels ninth–12th (see Figure 1). Figure 2 provides an overview of the age in which the student participants relocated to the United States in. They all identified as refugees because they fled from home countries where ongoing wars are taking place. These nine research participants had a total of seven siblings who also attended the school but were not interviewed. The research participants are from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somali, and Syria. All the participants had lived in the United States for less than 10 years.

**Figure 1**

*Student Participants' Years in the United States by Age*

**Figure 2**

*Student Participants' Ages When Relocating to the United States*



An interview guide developed by me, then validated with the feedback of several USD professors and students and three non-USD graduates with familiarity in qualitative research and my study was used to conduct the interviews. Eight of the student interviews were conducted online via Zoom, and one was conducted in-person at the research site. Each interview lasted 1 to 1 and a half hours. All interview sessions were audio-recorded, including those of the director and senior teacher, which took place at the research site. The interviews with the school staff were approximately 1 hour each and were conducted in-person. In selecting the senior teacher, the individual had to meet the following requirements: (a) have a valid teaching credential, (b) have been in a teacher role at the school for at least 5 years (since the school has been in existence for a total of 7 years), and (c) have taught at the school the longest. The length of tenure at the school would help to ensure the teacher had a significant level of involvement with refugee students. Of the seven teachers at the school, only one teaching staff member met those qualifications. Both the school director, who had been in his role for 3 years, and the senior teacher, were given information about the research study prior to the interviews to ascertain their interest. They were also given a consent form to sign and submit, which have since been stored in a secure location (see Appendix D).

### **Student Profiles**

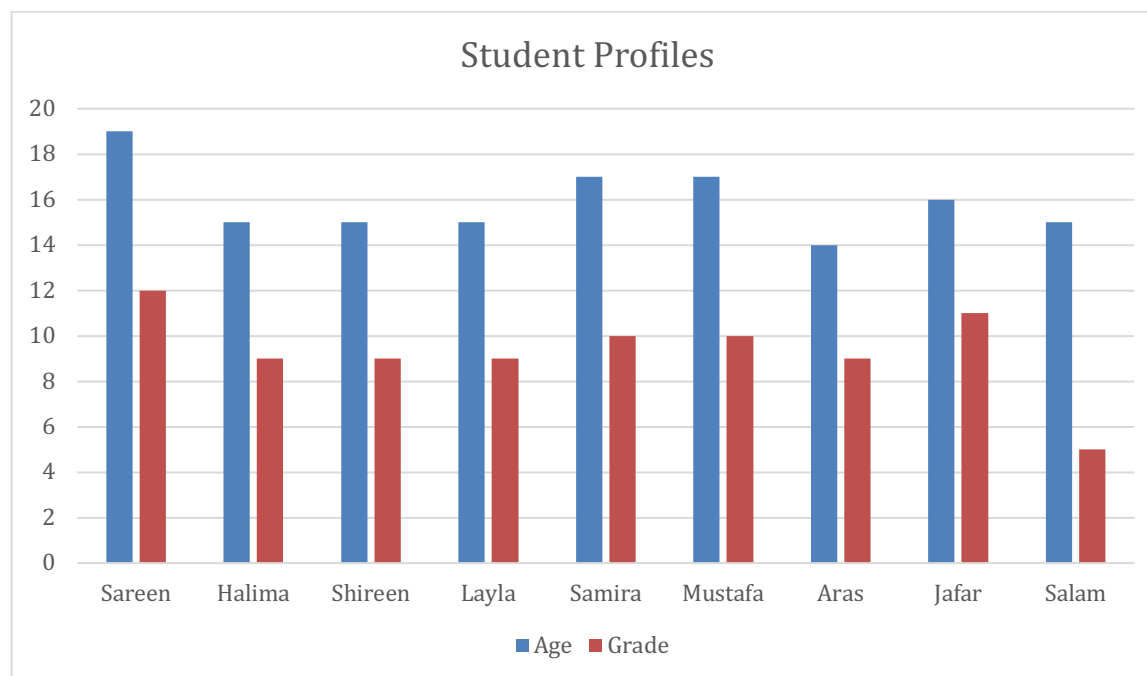
Each of the students interviewed for this study left their home countries due to war and lived in refugee camps for a time. In the camps, they experienced interrupted education and trauma. All participants experienced their overall migration differently, depending on which country they fled. All relocated to the United States for safety and access to formal education. Although a brief description of each participant was provided in Chapter 3, the stories of their



individual experiences are expanded upon here. The following is a written profile of each student research participant, and Figure 3 provides an illustration of the student profiles.

**Figure 3**

*Student Profiles*



***Sareen***

Sareen, 19 years old—Sareen was in 12th grade at the time of this study and relocated to the United States with her family in 2014 at the age of 11. She relocated with her father, three brothers, and two sisters. She is the second oldest in the family. She is a refugee of Ethiopia, who is Somalian. She had been enrolled at the school for 7 years.

Sareen, her father, three brothers, and two sisters relocated from the refugee camps of Ethiopia to the United States in April 2014, when Sareen was 11 years old. Her parents had previously relocated from Somalia to Ethiopia because of the ongoing war. Sareen was born and

grew up in the Ethiopian refugee camp. Families in the camps added their names to a list of families who wanted to relocate, but they had to be Somali refugees to enter the United States. Sareen described being tested to make sure she was Somalian and not Ethiopian: “You have to speak Somalian because you take the test in that language.” Her grandmother was a citizen of Ethiopia and was unable to relocate with them.

The families had to check the list daily to determine if they could relocate to the United States. Sareen recalled the stress of her family almost losing the opportunity to relocate because they did not check the list for a couple of days. When they were selected, they had only a couple of days to prepare to leave. She stated, “I think we had 3 days. Nobody [had] checked it. I think we were busy that day.” She explained that on the second day, people from the refugee organization came to say that her family could leave, but they had to get vaccinations first. By then, they had only one day to get these and medical examinations. Luckily, the agency gave them more time before they had to go to the capital of Ethiopia to process their paperwork, where they were questioned to ensure they were related. Sareen shared, “They would talk to you individually to see if you were really related. They would ask you questions about your dad, and if you answered correctly, and [they could verify] you were related to them, you passed.” They stayed at the capital for a month before everything was processed. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organization helped relocate Sareen and her family to the United States, providing them with airplane tickets and helping them pay for housing.

Sareen was excited about moving to the United States because she wanted to become a nurse, return to Somalia, and give back to her people. Hers was a dream largely shaped by her mother’s death, which she felt was avoidable. Referring to that tragedy, which happened when Sareen was 8 years old, she stated:

I am scared a little, but I want to become a nurse just because my mom died in a refugee camp. Looking back at it, I know there wasn't stronger doctors there. I know that if I can become a nurse, and then I am going to work for a couple of years here to be strong. I feel confident that I could help others.

Sareen said that it took her and her family 2 days to arrive in San Diego because of the time difference and the stops they made. She was very excited about being on an airplane for the first time. At the San Diego airport, there were people there who provided transportation to their apartment. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helped with their resettlement. This included helping pay their rent and getting government assistance in the form of food stamps because the family had no source of income upon arrival.

### ***Halima***

Halima, 15 years old—Halima was in ninth grade at the time of this study and relocated to the United States at with her family at the age of 15. She is a twin, and the oldest of five sisters and four brothers. She relocated in July 2020 and enrolled at the school in August 2020. She had been enrolled at the school for 1 year.

Halima and her family relocated to the United States from Afghanistan in July 2019, when she was 15 years old. When asked why they relocated, she responded, “The main reason why is education because I wanted to be a doctor and the education of America is really good. The second [reason] was because of security.” Halima’s father was a cultural adviser for the United States Army, and because of his role, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) processed the paperwork for the family to come to the United States, paid for their airplane tickets, helped them find housing, and made their assimilation into the community easier. Although it is normally a very expensive process, it was made easier because of her father’s

professional affiliation. Despite receiving this support, however, they were required to pay medical fees and get vaccinations. As Halima stated, this was difficult for her father, even with his resources:

We didn't have enough money to get vaccinations. The vaccinations per person [were] \$500. We were a lot of members of our family. My father [had] money difficulty. We got vaccinations, and then the Coronavirus came. It was a possibility that we stay in Afghanistan. I was very scared for that, and that was a big challenge.

While awaiting their relocation paperwork, her father also needed to manage his \$1,000 a month salary so that he could continue to purchase their school materials and pay for their private classes in English and math support, clothes, and food. Many times, he had to borrow money to provide for their education. Halima described her emotions upon arriving: "I was very happy, and it was a feeling that I would never forget in my entire life."

Similar to Sareen, Halima's family spent 2 days traveling because of the distance.

Because her father worked for IOM, they received a lot of support at the airport. Someone from the Jewish Family Organization met them at the San Diego airport and took them to their uncle's home. They did not have a place to stay, so they stayed with family until renovations to their apartment were complete. She could not recall an exact time but estimated to have stayed for at least a month. In addition to IOM, they also received support from Jewish Family Centers, which helped with their rent, different community organizations that donated items for their home, and government assistance through food stamps.

### ***Shireen***

Shireen, 15 years old—Shireen was in ninth grade at the time of this study and relocated to the United States with her family at the age of 15. She is a twin, and the oldest of five sisters

and four brothers. She relocated in July 2020 and enrolled at the school in August 2020. She had been enrolled at the school for 1 year.

Shireen also relocated from Afghanistan to the United States with her family in 2019. She asked, “Do you know Afghanistan’s situation with security? And everything is not as good as like here? In Afghanistan, there is war.” For Shireen and her family, relocating meant fleeing a war-torn country and gaining access to formal education. She witnessed the effects of war constantly, including its effect on her education. However, what made her relocation most challenging was the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. At one point, she questioned whether they would be able to leave Afghanistan because everything was shutting down. Nonetheless, “I felt that I was the happiest girl in the world coming to the United States. That trip, I will never forget in my life.”

Shireen’s integration into San Diego was relatively easy because the IOM coordinated with the Jewish Family Organization to pick them up from the airport and take them to their uncle’s home to stay until their apartment was ready. The Jewish Family Centers helped pay their rent, they received food stamps, and people in the community brought them furniture, dishes, bathroom supplies, clothes, and toys. She summed up her motivation to come here by saying, “The main point and reason I came here is to get an education and go back to serve our country.”

### ***Layla***

Layla, 15 years old—Layla was in ninth grade at the time of this study, and relocated to the United States with her mother, three brothers, and one sister in 2012 at the age of 6. She is a refugee of Syria, lived in Jordan for a total of 6 months, and had been enrolled at the school for 4 years.

Layla relocated to the United States in 2012 at the age of 6 and did not recall much of the experience. She migrated from Syria to Jordan and then to the United States. Her parents began their relocation to the United States in 2011 while she and her siblings lived with her grandmother and Aunt in Syria. Her parents relocated first to get a place ready for the rest of the family. Layla had to stay a year in Syria while her parents processed the paperwork for her and her siblings to relocate as well. She recalls the IRC helping her father process the paperwork for her family. Her mother returned to Syria to help with the paperwork and take her children to Jordan, where they stayed for 6 months until they received their visas. The trip from Jordan to San Diego took 2 days because of the time zone difference and multiple layovers. The difficulties in her migration experience included not having her father around, as she did not see him for more than 2 years. Layla also stated that all she wanted to do was hug her father at the airport, but upon arriving at the San Diego airport, she still could not because they needed to go through customs.

### ***Samira***

Samira, 17 years old—Samira was in 10th grade at the time of this study and relocated to the United States with her family in 2017 at the age of 14. She is a refugee of Kenya and has five brothers and three sisters. She had been enrolled at the school for 4 years.

Samira and her family relocated from Kenya to the United States in 2017, when she was 13 years old. When asked why they relocated, she responded that it was because of the violence, but people also relocated because of not having food to eat. She shared, “I know people over there always worry about what they are going to eat in the morning, what they are going to eat in the afternoon. People there don’t have water.” This lack of security, food, and water is why many Kenyan people were forced to relocate. The organization that helped her family resettle as

refugees was the IRC, which helped with the expenses of airplane tickets, transportation from the San Diego airport, finding a home and paying rent for the first year, and the food stamps to buy food. After the first year, her father and mother needed to find a job so they could continue to pay for rent.

### ***Mustafa***

Mustafa, 17 years old—Mustafa was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the time of this study and relocated to the United State with his family in 2012 at the age of 9. He is a refugee of Syria and Jordan. His father and mother relocated to the United States first, before his mother returned to Syria and brought him, his two brothers, and two sisters to the United States. He did not begin attending the charter school until August 2016, as his elementary school years were spent at a different school.

Mustafa's relocation experience from Syria to the United States in 2012 was not one he found enjoyable at the age of 9. He remembered the fear of being on an airplane for the first time and reflected on this experience, saying, "I was like scared. I was next to my mom the whole time." He mentioned the 2-day experience felt a lot longer because of his fear of the plane. When asked how his family was able to relocate to the United States, Mustafa shared that "living in Syria was bad; there was always war and people dying and killing." He came to the United States with his family to escape war. His father had the assistance of IRC to get him, his mother, and three other siblings to the United States. They also assisted by purchasing plane tickets, providing transportation at the San Diego airport, helping with paying rent, enrolling in schools, and enrolling in government-funded assistance programs.

### ***Aras***

Aras, 14 years old—Aras was in ninth grade at the time of this study and relocated with his family to the United States at the age of 14. He is the third eldest in a family of 11, having relocated with his parents, eight sisters, and three brothers. He is a refugee of Afghanistan and lived in a refugee camp in a small village outside of Kabul. He began his 1st year at the charter school in August 2020.

Aras and his family relocated to the United States from Afghanistan in 2019 at the age of 14 with the help of the IOM. The living environment and educational experience in the refugee camps of Afghanistan were not positive, which influenced his family's decision to relocate. He explained that it was not safe because of the ongoing war; in fact, he witnessed daily bombings while living there. This violence and the constant feeling of being in danger of death led to his family's decision to leave. He reported feeling good when he learned that he was relocating to the United States and, although it was his first time on an airplane, it was a good first experience for him. The 2-day experience did not feel long to him. The IOM helped process the family's refugee paperwork, paid for their airplane tickets, found them housing, and provided them with transportation from the San Diego airport.

### ***Jafar***

Jafar, 16 years old—Jafar was in 11th grade at the time of this study and relocated with his family to the United States in 2016 at the age of 11. He is the middle child in a family of nine, which includes his parents, one sister, and five brothers. He is a refugee of Kenya and had been enrolled at the school for 5 years.

Jafar did not recall much of his relocation experience from Kenya to the United States in 2016 at the age of 11. He stated, "I do not exactly remember, but I was just excited to leave." He did recall that his family had to live in a refugee camp in Kenya because of the war. About his



first thoughts when his parents told him they were relocating to the United States, he said, “I was happy. One thing in Africa is that people saying money grows from the trees and stuff [in the United States]. I was excited about that.” He also stated that Alliance for African Assistance was the organization that helped finance their plane tickets (a migration that took 2 days), provide transportation from the San Diego airport, pay rent, enroll him and his siblings in school, and process applications for them to receive government assistance.

### ***Salam***

Salam, 15 years old—Salam was in ninth grade at the time of this study and relocated with his family to the United States at the age of 11. He and his family are refugees from Somalia who sought refuge in Kenya because of the ongoing war in Somalia. He, along with his five brothers and three sisters, were born at a refugee camp. His family relocated to the United States in 2017, which is the same year he became enrolled at the charter school. He had been enrolled at the school for 4 years.

Salam relocated to San Diego from the refugee camps of Kenya with his family in 2017 at the age of 11. Reflecting on that time, he stated, “Meeting new people was scary, but [I was] excited to see the refrigerators, buildings, and cities.” When asked why he was excited about the refrigerators, he shared, “Yeah, they say there was going to be a button. African people said if you push a button, you can see all types of food, but when I came here, [I discovered] that was a lie.” His parents left Somalia for Kenya to seek refuge from the ongoing violence in the country. He did not recall the name of the organization that helped his family resettle in the United States but did recall that the migration included much paperwork, taking pictures, and getting full medical reports. Salam and his family went to another part of Kenya for a month first, and then to Nairobi for 2 weeks, before arriving in the United States. They did not attend school there, and

while they waited to receive their visas, they lived with another family. When he learned he was relocating, he felt very happy “because some people say that place [U.S.] is good and you can get a good life.” Alliance for African Assistance funded their plane tickets and helped provide transportation from the San Diego airport to their apartment. Similar to the other research participants, it took 2 days for them to relocate to the United States.

### **Staff Profiles**

#### ***Dr. S***

Dr. S, the school administrator, had worked in an educational setting for over 21 years and had been employed in the roles of assistant principal, school principal, or school director over the course of 15 years. Most of his experience took place in the southeast Los Angeles area prior to his move to San Diego 3 years before this study took place. His career path in school administration began while he was in his 6th year of teaching as a history teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District, when he was approached by the school principal about filling a vacant temporary assistant principal position at that school. Although he was surprised by the offer and had no ideas where it would take him, he agreed and soon learned that it was a role he enjoyed, thus continuing in that direction ever since. Dr. S was eventually hired in a permanent capacity as an assistant principal for that school, and since then, became the assistant principal and school principal in several more middle and high schools throughout southeast Los Angeles, which serves 98–99% of Latino students. In addition to this experience of Dr. S’s, he helped to restructure one middle school into a science, technology, engineering, arts, and math academy and started another high school from scratch. From such experiences, he learned he likes creating educational opportunities and working toward closing equity gaps so that all students can be successful in an academic setting.

Dr. S had no previous work experience at a charter school or with such a diverse and mainly refugee-dominate group of students, prior to his current employment. However, when asked what sparked his interest in continuing as a school administrator—especially in his current capacity—he replied:

what you start to realize—once you get past the overwhelming part of all the duties of an admin—is how you can have a large impact. I think the number one thing is that your range of impact is larger.

He continued to explain how as a teacher, one’s impact is limited to the students he or she sees in the classrooms, but as an administrator, one can begin to learn about the different ways in which policies, student schedules, student opportunities, and money allocation can create a larger impact. Dr. S explained how school administrators can positively influence refugee student educational experiences outside of the classrooms:

I think the best thing for me is that you can have a larger reach of impact, and when you start to realize that, and then you see all of the work you put into change—whether it is policy or reconfiguring policy, budget, or resources—and you see it all come to life in the classroom and on the kids’ faces, that makes it all worth it.

### ***Mrs. M***

Mrs. M had been a teacher at the research site for 7 years. The 2021–2022 school year was be her 8th year teaching at the school. Although she holds a multiple subject, single subject, and reading specialist credential, Mrs. M did not begin her professional life with the intent of becoming a teacher. She received an undergraduate degree in premed (i.e., physiology) at the University of Arizona prior to redirecting her career path toward teaching. Upon redirecting, she decided to get her master’s degree and teacher’s credential in Iowa, which she soon used to fill a

long-term substitute position at an art-integrated charter school in San Diego before accepting a position at her current place of employment during the 2014–2015 school year. According to Mrs. M, a notable difference between the art-integrated charter school and the current charter school was:

There was a lot of support from the families there, which was very different than this setting because you have a lot of family members here who do not speak English, and the students are at a higher education level than their parents have reached.

However, she explained these differences made her even more passionate about working at the charter school, describing the students to be the most hard-working, caring, and resilient students she has worked with thus far. Throughout her time here, she has taught all grade levels and content classes, and has also worked under the leadership of the former founding director and current school director.

When Mrs. M spoke about what made her interested in teaching at the school, she shared about her initial interaction with the students, recalling her first memory of exploring the classrooms and meeting the students with the founding director, “we went around to all of the classrooms, and in every single classroom, a kid came up, shook my hand, introduced themselves and told me what they were learning, and I just thought that was so cool.” In addition to this welcoming experience of meeting students, she spoke about the school giving the teachers the autonomy to design their curriculums, which was not the case at her previous places of employment. She explained, “I liked that I could be creative in my curriculum here. Everything is still based on the standard, but I have more flexibilities to do projects, and field trips, and things like that.”

## **Data Collection Procedures**

In this section, I detail my analytical procedures applied to analyze the collected data. I begin with explaining my own positionality regarding this project, the research tools and procedures used to guide the research, the procedures on how the data was analyzed and coding procedures, and lastly the credibility and limitations of the study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My positionality as a researcher is described as both a refugee to the United States and the assistant director of the school that was the research site. I was aware my position as the assistant director of the charter school could create a situation where the participants might not be truthful with me due to my position of authority, thus resulting in a limitation to the study. I attempted to mitigate this problem by emphasizing to the participants the data I was collecting was for research purposes only and not for any type of evaluation. Furthermore, the established trust I had built with each participant may have minimized any worries they held in this regard and our preexisting relationships may have created a safe space for them, allowing them more comfortability in sharing about difficult topics. My relationship with these students might have served as an advantage to this study, as trust and rapport already existed between us. In fact, one research participant shared that although she never shares experiences that are so personal to her, she felt comfortable doing so with me. The parents may have also been less likely to allow their children to participate in the interview sessions if I had not developed a preexisting rapport with them over the years.

I was also aware that my positionality and biases as a refugee could have a potential impact on my research so, to address my positionality, each interview session began with telling all participants about my status as a refugee and how personal experiences as a refugee drove my

interest in conducting this research study. None of the participants asked that I share my personal experiences, but I felt it was important to establish some comembership. The reason why the participants may have not showed interest in my personal experiences is because some of the conversations were hard and at times emotional, something I had noticed in past pilot studies through facial or verbal expressions. Therefore, to mitigate any of my biases, after each interview session, an analytic memo on any emotions I noticed from the participants during and after the interview sessions were noted. Because of social desirability bias, the bias that can come into play given the unequal power distribution (Larson, 2019), all participants were asked for their honesty. Social desirability bias was not obvious to me, and I made every attempt to be reflective during and after each interview.

### **Interview Guide**

The data collection involved in this study featured a mix of in-depth and open-ended interview questions. As Patton (2015) mentioned, “the major way in which qualitative researchers seek to understand the perceptions, feelings, experiences and knowledge of people is through in-depth, intensive interviewing, not just open-ended items and questionnaires” (p. 27). The interview guide was vetted thorough process in which the questions were reviewed thoroughly by both USD professors and students and three outside members of the school who were familiar with the research study intent. The questions were developed and critiqued in a surveys course offered by USD in which the questions went through multiple rounds of revisions based on the feedback of the professor and students of the class. Additionally, my committee chair and I reviewed and adjusted the questions multiple times to assure they were written with the intent to answer the research questions of the study. As mentioned earlier, three non-USD

students, but graduates who were familiar with the research study and qualitative research, also reviewed and provided feedback on the interview guide.

I used a total of three interview guides: (a) a separate interview guide for the student research participants, (b) the school director, and (c) the teacher (see Appendices E–H). The interview guides were designed to answer the research questions of the study because as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, “a research interview is a conversation that has a structure and purpose” (p. 107). Interviews were used because I was interested in experiences from the participants’ past that are impossible to replicate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and the open-ended questions allowed for more in-depth conversations during these interviews. Because the interviews were unstructured, additional questions were asked throughout the interviews, following the guidance of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who stated there are six categories needed to solicit good data: (a) questions about experience and behavior, (b) opinions and values, (c) feelings, (d) knowledge, (e) sensory, and (f) background and demographics. Specifically:

Experience and behavior questions address things participants do or did, behaviors, actions, and activities; opinion and value questions address what participants think about something; feelings questions address how participants feel about something; knowledge questions address the participant’s actual factual knowledge; sensory questions solicit data about what is or was seen, heard, touched, and so forth; and background and demographical questions ask demographical questions. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 118)

These six categories were taken into consideration and students were asked about their background and family, their experiences as refugees in school settings, their time of and experiences with interrupted education and trauma, the length of their time in the United States, the schools they have been or are currently enrolled at, their perceived challenges, and their

perceptions of their educational journeys. The questions included words interviewees were familiar with, based on the observation of Merriam and Tisdell (2016) that “using words that make sense to the interviewees worlds reflect the respondent’s world view and will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview” (p. 117). Separately, the interview guide for the school director featured questions about what interested him in terms of becoming a school director, what his experiences at the charter school have been like, and what he has seen to support or undermine the educational and social experiences of students who identify as refugees. Meanwhile, the interview guide for the senior teacher asked questions about her path toward becoming a teacher, how she became an employee of the school, what her experiences at the charter school have been like, and what she has seen to support or undermine the educational and social experiences of students who identify as refugees.

### **Interview Procedures**

The interview sessions were approximately 1–2 hours long, and data collection was divided into two different processes. First, there was the attempt to send an online survey that asked for participant demographic information in a Google Forms format to the student participants’ school email addresses before the scheduled interview sessions. The survey was sent in advance with the attempt to shorten the interviews because of the number of questions that were going to be asked at the interviews. However, none of the participants completed the surveys beforehand, so the questions were asked in the second part of the data collection procedure, which consisted of open-ended interview questions. No online surveys were sent to the school director or senior teacher. Combined, the interviews were completed over a total of 12 days. In some instances, not all the questions were asked, as some participants answered multiple questions with one response. In other instances, additional questions were asked because the



conversations that happened during the interviews necessitated or otherwise benefitted from follow-up or clarifying questions.

Though an interview guide supported each of the interviews, the interviews were conversational in nature, making the participant feel as though it were a natural conversation. They allowed the student participants to explain their feelings about and perceptions of their education (Patton, 2015), and the use of open-ended questions allowed the students to talk about their experiences in detail. The research participants were also given the opportunity to further express any opinions they shared and provide more content. Due to the confidential nature of this research, all information provided by the participants—including the device used to audio record the interviews and the written data that were transcribed—will be kept on a password-protected computer file for a minimum of 5 years. All paper data will be shredded, and all audio recordings and online data will be deleted from the computer after 5 years.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

After each interview session, the notes and memos written at the time of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to look for common words or phrases and develop common themes. The audio recordings of the interview sessions were transcribed and played back to identify potential codes, and to evaluate areas where further clarification was needed. Clarifying participant responses was unnecessary, and I was able to make sense of my data and develop themes from the initial interview conversations.

Coding is a standard procedure in qualitative research to push analysis to make meaning of participants' responses. As Saldaña (2016) explained, "Coding in qualitative research is a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns an attribute to the languages based on the data" (p. 4). And as Polkinghorne (1992) mentioned, coding methods include both an analysis of

narratives and a narrative of analyses. In a narrative analysis, or narrative reasoning, elements help tell a story (Polkinghorne, 1992). For this study, the analysis procedure was an analysis of narratives, also known as paradigmatic reasoning (Polkinghorne, 1992), in which common elements were found from stories. The student participants' stories were collected as data, arranged in different themes and categories, and compared between the participants. The staff data and student data were also compared, and the interviews were analyzed for a within-case comparison of data.

A coding of the narrative was the best approach to analyzing the data within this research study, as it allowed for the codes to be identified and categorized in such a way that made meaning of the data. The participants' responses determined the coding categories, and the process was done manually and conducted across multiple days. The manual method allowed for questioning the rationale of the identified codes by engaging in a self-dialogue that provided a deeper understanding of the collected data. In fact, Saldaña (2016) reflected on how the use of paper to write codes gives more control and ownership of a researcher's work and what the researcher is aiming for: control and understanding of the data. After each coding cycle, the codes written on the side of the printed interviews were transferred into a field journal to analyze potential themes and repeated patterns from the data. According to Saldaña (2016), "Coding for patterns makes it more trustworthy evidence of the findings as it demonstrates habits, salience, and importance in people's daily lives" (p. 6). Following this step, the proposed codes and themes were discussed with a colleague who has knowledge of, and experience with, qualitative research. As Patton (2015) explained, "Interrater reliability is appropriate with semistructured interviews in which all participants are asked the same questions in the same order when the data is coded all at once at the end of the data collection period" (p. 667). Overall, the same codes and

themes were identified between the interviews; however, I coded more than 95% of the data and my colleague coded and agreed the other 5% of the data.

### **Coding of the Data**

I transcribed all interviews to identify, organize, and analyze any codes that showed up between the different interviews. The transcriptions were shared with a colleague who has a knowledgeable and experiential background with qualitative research, and who reviewed the possible codes and themes. When generating data from semistructured interviews, qualitative coding allows to interpret, organize, and structure my observations in meaningful theories. In my data analysis, there were multiple codes that emerged between the research participants. *Coding* is defined as “the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in meaningful way” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2850). Few of the many codes were violence, anger, death, hope, family roles, stress, education, lack of access to food, water, hospitals, education, language barriers, and materials. I then created a general theme that addressed all the emergent codes.

The themes that emerged from the coding of the data included: (a) Relocation—the impacts of migration on the participants’ overall experiences; (b) Interrupted Education—the influences of interrupted education on participants’ educational experiences in the United States; (c) Trauma—the impacts of premigration trauma on the participants’ academic and social experiences in the United States; (d) Roles and Expectations—the influences of at-home roles on the participants’ overall experiences; and (e) Hopefulness—the hope for a future that is better than their past. These themes related to the research questions by telling the stories of what factors influenced students’ overall educational and social experiences, both before and after relocation to the United States. The themes introduced previously were mentioned frequently

throughout the interview. Meanwhile, different codes between the school director and teacher included: (a) education challenges and performance, (b) trauma, (c) resources, (d) learning environment, (e) curriculum, (f) trauma, and (g) teaching style. Therefore, the finalized themes that appeared with the staff participants at the school are: (a) Resiliency, (b) Language Barrier, and (c) College-going.

### **Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, and Limitations**

The number of participants in this study was an expected limitation, which may have impacted the credibility of the study. However, to combat the expected small pool of research participants, I engaged in credibility as one way to validate my results. This meant I ensured the findings were presented as truthful and accurate (Ellis, 2019). I asked the research participants to be truthful with their response at the start of the interviews by asking questions that attempted to gain quality answers from the research participants despite the small pool of research participants. In addition to this, triangulation and second member checking were a process of credibility that I engaged in (Ellis, 2019). Triangulation was done through my observations during the interviews, the interviews themselves, and my in-depth review of the available research. As for member checking, I confirmed the accuracy of my interpretation or what I was hearing with the participants during the interviews

Another possible limitation was dependability. According to Ellis (2019), “Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability of data over time and conditions; it is an evaluation of the quality of the data collection, data, and theory generation that has been undertaken in a study” (p. 111). The limitation can exist in eight of the student research participants being interviewed on Zoom and one student including the two staff research participants being interviewed on the school site. However, I did review the interview transcripts multiple times

and compared the found codes before finalizing the generalized themes. They were also reviewed by another peer who had expertise in qualitative research for feedback.

The process in which the data was collected was tracked as research notes in field books and all interview transcripts have been collected. As Ellis (2019) stated, this is known as confirmability, and the best qualitative papers keep track on not only how data interpretations are made but the integration of quotes from the participants into research paper. Therefore, to address any limitation with confirmability, I included quotes from the research participants to validate the credibility of my data interpretations.

Considering the small sample size and that not all of the participants had the same experiences, the results could not be generalized to all high school students who identify as refugees. In addition, the participant selection was an even number of males and females, as there were five females and four male participants. Therefore, this data could not be generalized to a specific gender or race, as there was not an equal or large number of participants for each group nor was the sample size large enough. However, the intent of qualitative research is not generalizability, but rather, to gain a deep understanding of the experience of some individuals—insight that can stimulate additional research. As interpersonal validity assesses “the extent to which an evaluator can relate meaningfully and effectively to individuals in the evaluation setting” (Patton, 2015, p. 691), I recognized the importance of interacting with the participants constructively throughout the inquiry and creating a positive interview setting. I also recognized the importance of credibility within the sample size; therefore, it is important to note that more than 90% of the research site’s student body comprises students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are English learners, 100% are categorized as economically disadvantaged, and 75% are comprised of refugee students from the charter school.

In addition to credibility, reliability was another limitation of the study. When considering reliability, one often asks whether the same data can be replicated with a different group of students or with the same students but a different researcher. However, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, “Human behavior is never static, nor is what one experiences necessarily more reliable than another person’s experiences” (p. 250). Therefore, a variety of interpretations could be made from the data, something that is especially true whenever research participants are asked to recall prior experiences that may be emotional or painful to share. The review of the painful experiences and meaning making from the research data with participants was prioritized and I engaged in member checking. As mentioned earlier, the conversations with a colleague about the proposed codes created a space to receive feedback and to articulate the reasoning behind any proposed codes, helping to clarify any emergent ideas and generate new insight about the data (Saldaña, 2016). The feedback from my colleague allowed for additional insight into codes that may have been overlooked, were questionable, or needed to be refined prior to finalization. The feedback also allowed for an additional validation of the finalized list of codes.

Although qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable, a main limitation to this study was the inability to generalize its data to all schools who educate refugees and all students who identify as refugees. However, generalizability was not the intent of the study. Instead, the study aimed to dive deeper into the lived experiences of students who identify as refugees at the charter school, and who have experienced a time of interrupted education and trauma. According to Maxwell (2021), there are internal and external generalizations, internal refers to generalization within the group to events not directly represented in the data collected, and external as to generalization beyond the persons studied to other persons. Therefore, my study

was limited in its external generalization. However, with internal generalizations, I can confirm the data I collected are generalizable to the rest of the research participant groups. And with external generalizations, as Maxwell (2021) stated:

The concept of “transferability” implies that one needs to provide enough information about meanings, contexts, and processes operating in one’s study setting or population that a reader can adequately judge the likelihood that one’s findings would apply to a different specific setting, group, or population. (p. 116)

The sample size was not big enough for other purposes and was only comprised of refugee high school students who had been living in the United States for 10 years or less after having experienced trauma and interrupted education. This study did, however, align with its intended purpose to provide important information about the refugee student experience from their own perspectives. These findings offer direction for additional studies and a deeper understanding for the educators who work with refugee students.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Research Question 1: How do Refugee Students' Past Educational and Social Experiences Influence their U.S. Educational Experience?**

My interviews with participants helped me gain a deeper understanding of their past educational and social experiences and how their experiences have influenced and continue to influence their U.S. educational and social experiences. There were many similarities in their premigration educational experiences, particularly the fact that all students experienced interrupted education. The following sections present a discussion of their experiences and the factors that account for them. I begin by addressing (a) the interrupted education refugee students reported due to their caregiver roles, (b) consequences of the war and violence, (c) the difficulties of creating positive teacher student relationships, and (d) limited educational resources. I then discuss how refugee students' past social experiences of living in an area full of violence, not having access to food at home, or living in poverty without income translated to challenges they could face in the United States. I end the discussion of Research Question 1 by discussing how their limited educational experiences prior to migration have challenged their educational experience in the United States because of language barriers and difficulty to perform at the same academic level as their peers and their grade placements.

#### **Overview of Research Question 1**

In response to Research Question 1 on how refugee students' past educational and social experiences have influenced their U.S. educational experiences, the student participants each discussed their perceptions of the influence of their academic experience—sharing a story largely of interrupted education. Although they differed somewhat in their stories about exposure to war and violence premigration, their relocation experiences, and the ways their gendered roles



affected their experiences, students routinely described how they lacked appropriate academic resources while in the camps and suffered from verbal attacks or physical punishment from teachers and other students. In addition, they all felt they lacked a safe living environment. All these conditions affected their academic and social–emotional readiness for U.S. schooling.

***Educational Experience: Interrupted Education***

One of the most significant experiences all participants shared was their experience of some interruption in their education. All participants confirmed they lacked access to a consistent and equitable formal education. In fact, all participants experienced anywhere from a few weeks to several months of interruptions due to taking on caregiving roles in their families, experiencing war, suffering emotional and physical abuse at school, and attending under-resourced schools. All student participants attended school in refugee camps. The following sections provides an overview of their educational experiences with interrupted education due to having to take on caregiving responsibilities, the war, damaging actions by teachers and staff, and lack of resources.

**Caregiving Roles.** A primary reason for interrupted education was the need for the student participants to have roles other than that of a student, including to be a caregiver for family members while in the refugee camps. The absence of a parental figure at home due to family loss, coupled with the family’s financial needs, required students to provide for their families and support them at home. Taking on caregiver roles meant participants experienced interrupted education because their presence was expected at home.

For Sareen, education was interrupted because she had to take on a caregiver role at the age of 8 while in the refugee camps of Ethiopia. When asked if she ever missed school, she replied:

When my mom died, I [had] to stay to take care of my little sister because my dad had to go out. So, I did have to skip school, but I didn't like to skip school because that [was] the only place I could meet my friends and play because at the house I had to be a grown up and take care of my little siblings even though I wasn't the age of doing that.

Sareen helped her grandmother at home, reporting her gender affected her educational experience. Because she was the eldest daughter, she had to help at home; after her mother's death, she was needed even more. She stated, "I became the mother of the house." This role resulted in her missing school several times a week to care for the work at home and her younger siblings.

Similar to Sareen, as the oldest daughter, Halima became a caregiver at the age of 10 while living in the refugee camps of Afghanistan. As the oldest daughter, she was responsible for caring for her younger siblings. She shared:

I am responsible to my siblings doing their homework and telling them to pray and the times [to pray] and kneading the flour to make bread. I feel happy because, as first girl of this house, this is my responsibility. If I don't take this as a serious responsibility to do it, it is not good for my siblings' future.

The responsibilities at one point resulted in her missing 30 days of school to help her mother after the birth of a sibling.

Shireen also assumed a caregiving role at home while living in the refugee camps of Afghanistan. At age 11, this role interfered with her ability to attend school daily. She missed school four to five times a month because she needed to help her mother at home. Similarly, starting at the age of 9, Samira cared for her younger siblings when her mother was sick or at work. She missed school up to four times a week. When her mother gave birth to Samira's two

younger siblings, Samira had to stay home for at least a month or until her mother was feeling well enough not to need help. Samira took on the role of both of her parents at home because both worked. Because she was the oldest of her siblings, she had the responsibility of taking care of them.

The boys in this study also discussed how they had to take on the role of caregiver in their family. Mustafa took on a caregiver role at home and at his grandmother's house at the age of 9. He was responsible for helping with work around the house at the refugee camp in Syria. His responsibilities meant he did not have enough time to focus on his learning or to study the material presented. As with Mustafa, Aras reported taking on a fatherly role while growing up in the refugee camps of Afghanistan. As the second oldest child and the oldest boy, he helped to meet some of the family needs that his parents could not. He also often accompanied his mother when she left home because women could not go out without a male escort in Afghanistan. He said that he missed school at least seven times a month.

Jafar attended school in a Kenyan refugee camp but, at a young age, he would often miss school to care for his siblings. Jafar reported taking on a caregiver role with his younger siblings (two brothers and two sisters) at a young age, especially when his parents were not around because of work. He stated:

I do this sometimes. It's like when my parents go outside and they are not home, I take care of the kids. This involves being responsible for and ensuring they have food to eat, helping them do their homework, and watching over them when they play outside.

Regarding responsibilities at home, Salam said he had to take on a fatherly role early on when living in the Kenyan refugee camp, which interrupted his education. When asked what the role entailed, he explained, "I come to my brothers when they do something wrong. I do what my

dad does. I help my parents.” He helped his parents care for his siblings, which meant spending a great deal of time away from his own education.

**War.** War and violence in their home countries was another reason the student participants’ education was interrupted and due to the war and violence they experienced while living in refugee camps. The war had consequences for them. Although each experienced and was exposed to war differently, all participants’ education was interrupted because of the conflict. They were physically unable to attend school because of the violence and threat of death. For example, Sareen relocated from the refugee camps of Ethiopia to San Diego, California with her family at the age of 11 due to the war there. She stated the disasters of the war left them with no access to a formal education, clean water, or food.

Similarly, Halima said her education was interrupted while in the refugee camps due to frequent bombings near the schools. The schools had secret rooms where the students would go in case of a bomb threat or attack. They would stay home for 9 days or until it was safe to return to school. At home, they did not have computers, internet service, or school materials.

Shireen, who lived in an Afghanistan refugee camp and attended school in the camp, said bombs blasting near schools forced them to close regularly. The bombings happened every few months, causing them to stay home for several days. She reflected on the experience, stating, “We were so scared [when] we [were] going to school. We thought we were never going to come back alive. We thought we were going to die. We were reaching for our death.”

Layla who relocated to the United States at the age of 6 from Syria could not attend school in times of increased violence and danger. She also would not attend school during violent outbreaks between people living in the refugee camps and the police.

Samira, who relocated to the United States at the age of 13 from Kenya with her family explained because of the war, she lacked educational and social experiences. At the refugee camp, she reported having to miss school at least four to five times a month because of the threat of bombs or when tensions escalated. Like Samira, when Mustafa was asked how often he missed school in Syria, he responded, “a lot.” His learning environment was not safe because of the war. Ongoing violence made it hard for the school to be open daily. There was an ongoing threat of violence at school or on the streets as students went to and from school. Mustafa also said that frequent political protests influenced the days on which schools were open. With all the violence, the students had to stay home and could not go to school. When Mustafa did attend school, the ongoing war made it difficult for him to fully engage or really focus on learning.

Aras who relocated to the United States at the age of 14 stated his education was interrupted due to frequent bombings. Students would stay home from school for anywhere from 7 to 8 days, and these bombings occurred every 2 to 3 months. Jafar who relocated to the United States at the age of 11 from Kenya did not attend school longer than 3 years before relocating because of the disruption caused by the ongoing war in his home country. The school frequently closed because of the threats of death and the bombings. In Kenya, Jafar’s school was in session from Monday to Wednesday, and the students had classes with two or three teachers per day for 30 minutes each. This short schedule was due to the ongoing conflict.

Lastly, Salam and his family, who relocated to the United States from Kenya at the age of 11, also reported experiences of war. Salam mentioned during the times in which the violence in Kenya erupted and lives were at risk, the schools shut down. Salam said that the length of closure ranged anywhere from once a month to five or six times a month.

**Schools as Sites of Punishment.** Another primary reason students experienced interrupted education was their experiences with educators in the refugee camps. They told stories of physical and verbal abuse, inhibiting their desire to go to school. Many of them skipped school to avoid abuse. Sareen explained how most teachers treated the students, noting, “If you got it wrong, [the teachers] would hit you with the ruler. I hated that.” Additionally, she spoke about physical punishment when students did not show their work for math. She gave an example:

One day, I did not solve the problem, and I wouldn’t show the teacher [my work]. And then, a girl in front of me got it wrong, and I answered it correctly. And then [when] she saw my paper, I had [no work shown, so] she hit me [with the ruler]. And one time also, a teacher held my hijab close to my neck because I did not show my work. Another time, I jumped out of the window [to avoid punishment] because I did not do my homework.

The consequence of not doing homework or showing work on assignments was physical punishment, which affected Sareen’s overall experience at school; sometimes, she did not want to be at school because of the fear of being hit with a ruler.

Layla described the strict rules that students had to follow in the Syrian refugee camp. As an example, “They [the school] did not allow long nails [for girls].” As a consequence, the staff yelled at students in front of their peers, which she described as “embarrassing because you would be scared that you would get yelled at all the time by the teachers.” She expressed she would not go to school three to four times a month to avoid being yelled at. The yelling made Layla feel unsafe. Teachers hit students with rulers for breaking school rules. A teacher hit her once for wearing a hat to school. To avoid further physical punishment that day, she said she ran away from school, went home, and did not go to school the next day.

Samira said the teachers at the refugee schools in Kenya were from Sudan and taught in Swahili and in English. They were strict and punished students who did not do their homework with “extra Swahili homework to do.” The Swahili assignments were harder for students to complete and she, like others, missed school on days they did not complete their homework to avoid punishment. Mustafa shared he, too, would leave school regularly because the teachers hit him with a ruler for not knowing Arabic or for not doing work that he was unable to complete because he did not know the language. He did not feel he had a safe learning environment because of the staff. Mustafa explained, “They used to hit me day and night, like every day because we didn’t know Arabic at all, like not even one word. I just knew Kurdish.” The stress of not knowing Arabic was difficult and resulted in him skipping school as early as the second day of school to avoid the consequences.

Jafar’s education was interrupted because he often decided not to attend school to avoid interactions with the school staff, as teachers were primarily negative and not helpful. He stated, “You can ask for help, but it [the student support from the staff] would still be the same.” Furthermore, the learning space was very noisy; students were loud and did not follow the classroom rules. Jafar recalled it was hard to focus and said that the teacher once hit him for talking when he should not have been, “We would get yelled at or hit in the butt or something.” Further, students were not assigned homework, so they could not practice what they learned at home. He recalled, “I did not do good. I probably failed all of my classes.” He attributed his low performance to his lack of English knowledge; his school absences; and an unsupportive, abusive learning environment.

**Limited Educational Resources.** All participants felt their education was interrupted because they had limited educational resources. They lacked school materials, a rigorous

learning curriculum, and the same learning opportunities as nonrefugee students. The participants reported refugee schools were underfunded, so students received an education arguably very different from students who did not attend school in refugee camps. They attended schools with no technology, internet service, science lab, or nutritious meals. The lack of resources impaired their ability to perform at the same academic level as the rest of their peers once they arrived in the United States.

Sareen went to a very under-resourced school with weak course content. The classrooms consisted of heavy square tables and classrooms with cracked floors and old chalkboards. She explained her overall educational experiences at the refugee camp in Ethiopia were negative, “because of the lack of sports, the lack of rigorous learning, the lack of theater, as theater is big in the Ethiopian culture, and the lack of access to science classes and science lab.” There were no computers, art supplies, or science labs. Sareen laughed as she described how they learned art, saying:

The funny thing about doing art is that we used to use the dirt to make houses and other things. It was so cool. We used dirt water to build little houses and put in the sun for three days to dry and check it like we used to do. I call it hand art.

Learning science in an under-resourced refugee school without science books or science labs was also a challenge. Sareen explained how she and her peers only learned the basics. Her lack of access to rigorous science curriculum was evident to her as she began to take science classes in the United States. Sareen said she felt behind when attending a science class in the United States and had to work twice as hard as the other students to catch up.

Sareen also said attending a good school in Ethiopia costs approximately \$15 a month. The good (i.e., private) school she did not attend was next to the refugee camp school. Sareen



stated, “The thing that hurts me the most is that we had a private school right in front of us.” Still, due to her family’s lack of finances, she attended the refugee school, which was free but had fewer resources. Sareen’s school offered oatmeal for free, but other options were at a cost and too expensive for her. The lack of meals at school made it difficult for her to focus and retain information, which made her feel behind in her learning.

The lack of resources also damaged Halima’s educational experience in Afghanistan. Not having free meals at school was difficult for her. She had to learn on an empty stomach and was always hungry. Because she was at school for only half the day, no time was carved out for lunch. She waited until the window of time between her regular morning classes and her other afternoon courses to eat. This delay meant she focused on her empty stomach rather than on what she was supposed to learn for the day. Halima did not have access to science videos nor labs. Instead, science instruction was all lectures. She explained:

Like in Afghanistan, they say when you put calcium and potassium and sodium, they make like salt. They were just talking. But here, [in the United States], we see a video. We see what it is they are [combining]. Here is everything practical, but in Afghanistan, everything is just talking.

Didactic teaching in the absence of videos made it challenging to learn science content and hampered Halima’s ability to learn science concepts in the United States. She came unprepared. She was not familiar with the science terminology, and she did not have the science foundation she needed to access the curriculum in the United States.

Shireen attended free refugee schools in Afghanistan. Her educational experience was one of overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources, including a lack of technology and

teaching materials. Similar to Halima, she also provided an example of this difficulty by sharing about her science classes:

We could not experience biology, science. There was no materials or [science labs] to teach us how to conduct experiments and did everything orally by mouth. [The teachers taught by telling us] to do this and do that. And we did not get the [learning content]. We were just confused about the stuff, and we didn't have videos, and we didn't have [internet] access to watch the experiments. We just heard [the teachers explain the experiments], we did not see [them].

The classrooms in Afghanistan were overcrowded, with about 50–60 students in each class. Students bought school materials on their own, as school personnel did not provide them. The classrooms did not have tables nor chairs, so students sat on the cracked, rough ground while teachers taught at the chalkboard. Shireen also shared her school did not offer meals, which she felt negatively affected her, “I was really hungry and [there was] no food in school. That was a big challenge for me. It [hunger] made it difficult to focus in class.”

When recounting the main difficulties Layla faced during her time in refugee camps, Layla said they related to a lack of resources, strict teachers, and the inability to express herself freely. Layla went to two schools in Syria, neither of which was free. She recalled she was only taught in Arabic and Kurdish and her schooling was interrupted both in Syria and Jordan. In Jordan, she missed 6 months of school because of the cost of attendance and supplies. Her mother did not have the money to meet these costs. She described the classrooms as big, with only tables, chairs, and chalkboards. There were no computers. The school did provide free meals, and students had a long lunch break to either eat food from home or buy something at school. When she had money, she bought lunch; otherwise, she did not eat.

The Kenyan classroom Samira described was made from rocks with windows, tables, chairs, and a chalkboard. There was no technology, but they received school materials for free. Nonetheless, she wished for more resources like something to sit on to make learning easier. It would have also helped her focus more on the content and recall what she learned. For meals, the school provided free oatmeal.

Mustafa attended two different Syrian refugee schools because his living arrangements were split between his aunt's and grandmother's house—neither school was free. He said the cost was related to several factors, stating, "It depended on the family. If you worked, your family has money, it was not expensive for them. It depends on the family and how many children they have." The schools Mustafa attended did not provide free meals. The classrooms did not have computers or textbooks. When asked what could have made his education experience different, he replied, "I wish there were computers." He felt behind in his knowledge of computers in the United States. He reported lack of access to computers was especially difficult with classes being taught online.

Aras attended a free refugee school in Afghanistan, where he was taught in Farsi and received free textbooks. He explained, "Because it was books in our language, we can read it and write it. It was easy for me." However, students purchased their own school materials, such as pencils, paper, and pens. The cost of the materials was expensive and not something his father could easily afford. Other challenges included a lack of science labs and the learning environment, which consisted of classrooms without tables, chairs, or computers. The approximately 70 students per classroom sat on the hard floor. This tight space even made it harder to focus and retain what the students were taught. Aras said given this learning environment, he felt behind when he attended school in the United States.

While living in Kenya, Salam attended a free school in the refugee camps. Although students received school materials at no expense—including textbooks for English, Swahili, math, and science—and classes were taught in both Swahili and English, there were no computers in the classrooms. At the refugee camp, the teachers taught at a chalkboard, and the students were required to take notes. Additionally, Salam stated the school provided free lunch; however, it was a Somalian type of oatmeal and not something that made him feel full. He felt a better selection of food and more food would have made his educational experience better.

**Summary of Interrupted Education.** The participants stated (a) the violence of the war, (b) having to assume caregiving responsibilities, (c) negative experiences with school staff, and (d) limited school resources influenced the interrupted education they experienced. Although each shared a different perception, all similarly argued their educational experience could have been different and arguably more academically supportive had they had been able to attend school all the time and not missed school. If they had been able to focus on being a student instead of a caregiver, and if they had had access to quality instruction, they may have been better prepared for U.S. schools.

### ***Past Social Experiences***

In addition to interrupted education, participants' social experiences at the refugee camps also influenced their fears as they approached education in the United States. The participants shared about how (a) violence, (b) verbal attacks, (c) lack of family resources, (d) lack of security, (d) gender inequalities, and (e) discrimination at the refugee camps affected their efforts to acculturate into the U.S. educational system.

**Violence, Safety, and Resources.** The research participants felt their living environments in the refugee camps were often violent and unsafe. This lack of safety led to

Sareen feeling very shy when first arriving in the United States and not wanting to show her smile because of her fear of bullying. In Ethiopia, Sareen faced hardships and bullying because of her refugee status. She missed school to avoid these interactions when walking to school. She was told that in the United States, “They’re going to make comments about your culture and stuff.” It was that fear that often kept her from interacting with her peers after she arrived in the United States.

Halima also had security concerns when she came to the United States. Having been born during a war, she explained, “Everyone. . . [it] is possible to die in every age. So, security is not good in Afghanistan. It is a big challenge for everyone to feel safe.” Feeling unsafe was a daily worry when attending the refugee school, walking in the neighborhood, or just living in the refugee camp. She said the bombings near the school made it scary to learn. In fact, she described feeling “the risk of death was the price they had to pay for an education.” Her mother also lived in constant fear of something happening to them. Although her mother knew Halima would not face bomb threats in the United States, she feared she would face verbal or physical attacks because of her religion. Halima also worried and she was also concerned about what attending school would look like, especially once the school community transitioned from distance learning (i.e., a condition imposed by the COVID global pandemic) to in-person learning.

Halima faced many social challenges in the refugee camps because of her gender and worried she would experience them in the United States. In Afghanistan, girls could not go out in public without the threat of men verbally harassing them. In fact, for many girls, school was prohibited. The women were simply not allowed to go outside. Due to this cultural practice, girls and women were always escorted by men; however, she and her sister could not always find a

man to walk with them to and from school each day and if not, they missed school. Halima knew this was not a cultural practice in the United States but questioned whether this arrangement was something her family would continue to impose, regardless of whether she and her sisters felt safe walking to and from school without her brother.

Shireen discussed some negative social experiences she faced prior to coming to the United States that related to her gender. She stated, “The streets [were] too hard [risky], and the girls could not walk like they [can] here [in the United States].” The lack of transportation made it difficult for her and other girls to get to and from places without being verbally harassed by men. Girls had to be fully covered when they went outside and most girls were accompanied by a man, as a cultural practice, which helped to avoid harassment. She shared such societal and cultural expectations made it difficult to live in Afghanistan. If a man did not walk with her and her sister in public, it was easier for other men to attack them and spread lies about them. Shireen explained:

When a girl goes somewhere in Afghanistan, they have to cover all of the body, like no nails showing, no feet, no face. Everything must be covered. It was very hot. And when you cover your eyes and your body, you feel so depressed. Like you cannot go outside. I couldn’t breathe when I was walking.

Although Shireen knew circumstances would be better in the United States, she could not help but fear whether she would face harassment when walking to and from school, particularly if her brother did not accompany her. She was also curious if she had to be fully covered from head to toe when dressing for school or if she could wear jeans, shirts, and dresses, without having to be fully covered to avoid harassment on their walk to school. All these unknowns caused some additional tension.

Although Samira noted it was safer than her home country for her to be outside of her home in the refugee camps, there were some neighborhood fights. The fights were something she would even witness early in the mornings when walking to school. Because of these memories, living in a U.S. apartment complex with people “from around the world,” people she did not know and with whom she could not communicate, made it hard for her to feel she could trust to go outside. She was afraid of possibly experiencing fights when walking to or from school and felt it might be safer if her parents walked her and her siblings to and from school. This fear limited her ability to make friends in her neighborhood and, because of this limitation, she missed out on some opportunities to get help on homework that were offered from some neighbors.

Mustafa felt scared about attending U.S. schools because of not knowing what to do and also because he did not know if he would face the same political battles and negative interactions he experienced in Syria with police officers. His past involvement in political protests—specifically, his past negative experiences with Syrian police officers—caused him to worry about the police officer stationed at his elementary school. Schools routinely have police officers placed on school grounds as a safety measure; however, their mere presence stimulated fear in Mustafa and meant he could not focus on his schoolwork when he first arrived.

For Aras, his past experiences of witnessing bombings in the village near his school and at shopping centers meant he could not attend school or play outside with his friends. These memories made him wonder and worry if the United States would be similar. He wondered if people would give him a hard time because he was a refugee or because he did not speak English. His past violent experiences also made him wonder what kind of violence, if any, he would encounter on his way to and from his new U.S. school.

Experiencing hunger was one of Jafar's main social challenges in the refugee camp. He explained how his access to learning was affected largely because he did not have enough food. Jafar's family lived in poverty, and he worried their financial circumstances would be similar in the United States. Hunger had affected his overall ability to concentrate in class. He questioned whether U.S. schools would offer meals and, if they did, would the meals be free, and the meat would be nonpork. His religion restricted the faithful from eating pork so he wondered whether he would have enough food. It was a month before the charter school provided a translator to ask him and his parents why he did not eat and recommend he take advantage of the free-and-reduced meal plan, as it was free and not always pork. Jafar's family had not known about this government-supported meal plan for low-income families; thus, had gone without the support to which they were entitled.

Other traumatic experiences occurred when Jafar was in the refugee camp. There were ongoing fights between he and his friends. He explained, "My friends and I would play fight and then it would get real. We would fight for real and hurt each other. And then we would stop and do it again." He wondered if U.S. students would be similar. Would he make any friends at the schools, and if he did, would they also get in fights and cause additional trauma?

**Summary of Past Social Experiences.** The student participants voiced how their social experiences while in the refugee camps created concerns that they might have the same or similar experiences in the U.S., which would affect their ability to do well in U.S. schools. Participants shared their stories about poor living conditions, lack of family resources, and fears about safety. Each of these conditions caused them to worry, and, as I will describe next, how these conditions, and their academic experiences with interrupted education as described previously, would influence their U.S. school experience.



### ***Limited Educational Experiences Shape U.S. Educational Experience***

The participants shared their perspectives regarding their limited and interrupted educational experiences prior to relocation and how those experiences influenced their U.S. charter school experiences. Not being taught in English undermined their efforts to understand lecture and text content and their ability to complete assignments. Their exposure to limited educational resources also meant students could not perform at the same academic level as their nonrefugee peers. Grade placements and the courses they had to enroll in were not what these refugee students expected.

**Language and Resource Barriers.** Not knowing the English language was a major access barrier for the participants' overall educational experience in the United States. When Sareen was asked what thoughts or concerns she had about starting school in the United States, she cited not knowing the language. She recalled being overwhelmed:

The first test I got in charter school I did not write anything on the paper. I cried.

Everybody has the privacy boards, and I was just sitting there looking at it. Should I write something? What should I write? Should I even write my name? I was so, so nervous. I started tearing up. I just crumbled the paper and threw it [away]. I was so embarrassed, sad.

According to Halima, the language barrier and lack of science labs influenced her performance at the charter school. These obstacles made her work harder and longer than her peers, which was challenging. Not knowing the English language made it difficult for her to understand the learning content. Similarly for Shireen, not knowing English was one of her greatest challenges, interfering with her ability to understand teachers' lectures:

The biology words are very hard for me. When I do not understand, I feel a little nervous, like why do I not know this word? Then I Google it and check out the meaning of it. That is English, and the vocabulary is challenging for me.

Layla's lack of knowledge of the English language was a concern to her as well, as she did not know enough to communicate in her classes. She said, "I didn't know what to call a teacher. I would call her Ansa. Yeah, that is teacher in my language." The language barrier also made it difficult for her to communicate with her classmates. Samira said the language barrier made it challenging to learn the content at the same pace as her peers. Samira's lack of knowledge of the English language meant she had to work extra hard to learn what she was taught and to quickly learn English so she could engage in academic learning in the classroom.

Samira expressed the emotional impact her workload had on her when she first arrived, saying, "They [subjects] were hard and a lot because I did not know English. I would get stressed a lot because it also made my grades bad. It was hard, but tutoring helped, I guess." The amount of work and not knowing English made her educational experiences stressful in the beginning.

According to Mustafa, the content they learned in Syria was different from what they were taught in the United States. Mustafa explained the language barrier was evident in some of his classes upon arrival. His peers noticed he could not speak the language, and he needed more time to understand what they learned or did in class. He said not knowing English affected his ability to learn: "For example, like world history is hard to learn because it is just the English is too hard for me." Not knowing the vocabulary nor English made it difficult for him to fully participate in his class.

Salam and Jafar found not knowing English was a daunting barrier for them in learning and in making friends. Jafar only knew two phrases when he came to the United States: "I am

fine” and “How are you?” When asked if the remedial classes were helpful, he stated, “They were very helpful. Especially the newcomer one.” Although they were taught in English by local Kenyan teachers, learning English was difficult because they did not speak English. Jafar only knew Somali, and because the students did not receive English lessons at the school, he did not get the support he needed to learn or master the content in his other classes.

**Grade Placement.** During the interview, some participants said their language barriers, as well as the limited progress they made at the refugee camps, influenced their grade placement at the charter school. They were not placed in age-appropriate grade levels, had to repeat a grade, or were enrolled in remedial and newcomer support courses. For example, Sareen who was 19 years old at the time of this study, was in 12th grade because she took remedial courses when she arrived and repeated a grade. Her prior education limited her progress in San Diego. She explained the experience, saying, “I feel that if I went to school straight [without experiencing interrupted education], I would be more strong, more confident.”

Halima discussed how her interrupted educational experience meant she was placed in the ninth grade, instead of the 10th grade, due to not having the credits required to apply to a university and not having the same academic performance as her peers. Shireen felt gaps in her learning influenced her grade placement, which she believed influenced her grade placement at the charter school and affected her ability to perform at the same academic level as her peers. Layla’s prior educational experience meant a reading specialist needed to pull her out of her classes at least 30 minutes a day to teach her how to read and comprehend English text and the English language. Like Halima and Shireen, Samira’s grade placement was impacted. She was placed in the sixth grade and in remedial courses for math and English, as well as the

newcomers' class to help with her basic English skills. Samira was not placed in the eighth grade as with other students her age.

Aras was also unable to perform at the same grade level as other students his age when he arrived. Instead of being placed in the 10th grade, he was placed in the ninth grade. He was also placed in remedial and English support classes and a reading interventions course. Upon his arrival in the United States, Jafar did not perform at the same academic level as his peers and was placed in the sixth grade when a more age-appropriate placement would have been the seventh grade. Additionally, he was enrolled in remedial courses for math and basic English. Jafar said his interrupted education and lack of English proficiency rendered him unable to perform academically at the same grade level as his peers. Salam was also enrolled in remedial courses upon arriving at the charter school. He did not perform at the same grade level as his peers and repeated the sixth grade. Although these placements offered students a chance to catch up academically and get the remedial help they needed, they also placed students on a track that would make it difficult for them to become college eligible by their senior year. I return to this discussion in Chapter 5. Next, I discuss Research Question 2 and the reported response of students and staff on how charter school personnel have responded to the academic and social needs of refugee students who have experienced both interrupted education and trauma.

### **Research Question 2: The Charter School's Response to the Needs of Students Who Have Experienced Trauma and Interrupted Education Before Coming to the United States**

The second research question was interested in the reported perceptions of the refugee students and staff on how the charter school responded to the academic and social needs of refugee students. The participants were asked to share about what, if any, ways do the school has positively responded to those needs. I begin by presenting the staff's perception on how the

charter school responded to refugee academic and social–emotional needs, and end with the discussion of the refugee students perception of the school’s response to their academic and social–emotional needs

## **Overview of Research Question 2**

Regarding the second research question—how does a school that predominantly serve refugee students respond to their needs when they have experienced trauma and interrupted education before coming to the United States—the student participants agreed the charter school responded to their academic and social–emotional needs. According to the students, notable academic and social supports included: (a) providing a supportive learning environment, (b) remedial classes, (c) daily check-ins, and (d) having learning content translated into their home languages. After-school office hours functioned as a place where they could talk to their teachers about how they felt and discuss any other areas in which they felt they needed extra support. The staff and student check-ins were named most frequently by all the students as the form of support most helpful to their social–emotional well-being. The check-ins entailed the space where teachers asked the students about their emotions and how they are feeling. In addition to the safe space it created, the check-ins allowed students to use their teachers as an opportunity to talk about themselves and allowed teachers to address their social–emotional needs. The teachers’ caring attitudes seemed to be an obvious factor in constructing an experience that was emotionally supportive for these students.

On the other hand, when answering Research Question 2 on the staff’s perception on how the charter school responds to refugee student academic and social needs, Dr. S and Mrs. M discussed how the charter school responded to these needs of refugee students who experienced both interrupted education and trauma. To respond to the students’ interrupted education,

academic learning, and social–emotional needs, the school and staff attempted to address the whole student. They created a supportive learning environment where students had a science lab, library, art room, a variety of school courses, supplemental support courses, and supportive online platforms. In addition, they provided free school materials. The positive staff and student relationships and restorative circles were emphasized as most supportive in addressing students’ social–emotional needs. They specifically emphasized the restorative circles and positive staff and student relationships that teachers and staff created to explain how they address students’ social–emotional needs.

***Staff Interpretations of the Charter School’s Response to Refugee Students’ Academic and Social Needs***

**Staff Perceptions of Refugee Students’ Academic Needs.** Dr. S (i.e., charter school director) and Mrs. M (i.e., charter school teacher) discussed their response to the needs of the refugee students in the charter school. They shared their recognition of the academic challenges these students faced and their own inability to recognize what they experienced as trauma. These two educators also highlighted the steps they have taken to foster a supportive learning environment that allows these students to reach the same academic level as their nonrefugee peers.

***School Director.*** Dr. S worked most of his career in southeast Los Angeles with a large Latino community. He worked at Title I schools that received federal funding to support education programs with large populations of low-income students who received free-or-reduced-price meals. These schools did not have a refugee population, but there was a large English language learner population. Despite these differences, Dr. S shared all the students he has worked with over the years have required supportive and equitable opportunities and a

focused attention on providing the same educational access as students attending different more affluent schools. Dr. S stated a supportive learning environment is vital to students' educational progress and shapes the direction school personnel take to meet that goal.

Dr. S believed this charter school positively supports the refugee population. As school director, he believed the following characteristics at this charter school provide a supportive educational learning environment:

First and foremost, it is small and is a caring enough place to where it creates a sense of safety and security. Secondly, because it is smaller, it has such a dedicated staff that really care about closing the academic gaps that exist.

He further supported this sentiment by stating:

For refugees, not only do they come with a language barrier, there are some cultural differences, some adjustments, there is the potential [that they have experienced] interrupted education; where they have been out of school. There is just the uneasy feeling of all the changes and potential trauma that have happened. So, we have the potential ability to reach to all of that and meet all of those needs in a very unique way.

Dr. S also described the charter school as warm, friendly, welcoming, easy-going, safe, and secure. He shared how the school culture addresses the whole student, including their academic and educational needs. Teachers hold high expectations of success and college and career readiness that contributes to the overall school culture. Dr. S said these expectations create “a culture of belief that these students who come from all over the world can be successful here [at the charter school].”

According to Dr. S, the charter school was originally founded to support the learning loss and trauma of students who identify as refugees. Over the last 3 years, during his role as director,

he made changes to better support these students' needs. One change was relocating from a campus shared with a church and a preschool to a new, independent site. He discussed the impact of the school site relocation, saying, "The entire physical make-up of what we could do and offer changed." This move allowed for the school to provide a safe and secure school environment and create a science lab, library, and art room. In addition, changes to the school calendar, staff, and bell and master schedules allowed the school to increase its capacity as a supportive learning environment. Dr. S emphasized the impact a devoted staff has on addressing students' learning loss:

I look for teachers that are caring, that are passionate, that are willing to learn, that are hardworking. Those are the people that appreciate the diversity and are willing to work with these kids, are caring and passionate, are hardworking and responsible.

Dr. S noted having teachers who align curriculum and instructional materials with the Common Core Standards (CCS) supports students' educational experiences by enforcing high standards while ensuring students receive appropriate accommodations and academic supports. Dr. S also said that a smaller school setting, small class sizes, teacher-student relationships, academic interventions, and online platforms are supportive as well. He explained:

I think what really supports them is the smaller setting, the caring and passionate teachers, and creating an environment where they are given those opportunities to make mistakes [and] to learn from their mistakes. They are given time and space because they can't move at the same pace most students would want to move at.

According to Dr. S, the staff members address students' learning loss because they are more willing and more devoted, and the school size is small:



Class sizes here are smaller, and we do a better job each year of structuring the master schedule to meet the needs of all students. I wouldn't say we do a perfect job—nobody does—but we do a much better job than large traditional high schools because I have worked at those schools where they may have been a refugee or two, and those kids are just placed wherever.

Dr. S also discussed academic interventions and online educational platforms such as Khan Academy and Math IXL, two programs that support academic needs in an engaging way. Additionally, he mentioned teachers “know where they're at, and being able to support them and work with them in smaller groups and being patient with them because it is going to take time.”

Lastly, he spoke about the literacy intervention course built into the schedule to target English learning and writing and stated that beginning in the 2021–2022 school year, the school will offer a math intervention class. Lastly, Dr. S said the addition of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) was another support for refugee students' academic needs, explaining:

We are schoolwide AVID, and AVID itself helps close a lot of those gaps by teaching necessary skills, such as note-taking, studying habits, processing, and synthesizing information. So, learning AVID strategies will inherently help students to learn at a better rate or be more successful in their academic classes.

***School Teacher.*** As a teacher and reading specialist with a multiple subject learning credential and single-subject credential in science, Mrs. M taught students in different content areas and grade levels throughout the years.

According to Mrs. M, the school's mission is to prepare every student for college and to be a leader in the community. She said the school culture was “very much a college-going

culture; the kids are very serious about their academics, about their future, and their goals.” She explained this culture cultivated a space where students knew they could succeed and opportunities were possible for them:

All of a sudden, they’re, like, “Oh yeah, I’ll be at San Diego State,” or “I will be a doctor,” or “I’ll be a nurse; I’ll be doing this.” So, I think the culture here allows kids to dream big.”

AVID offered further support for this mindset, which Mrs. M said motivated the students to set goals for themselves. In addition, she said goal setting taught them to study, noting, “Some kids have never studied for a math test until AVID. When you are in a group setting and do a tutorial and quiz each other and study, it [AVID] supported them in all their content classes, too.” She reflected on the words of one student during an AVID field trip to visit San Diego State University, “He looked around and was like ‘This is why I came to America. Like, when I think of America, this is what I thought of.’”

In addition to AVID, Mrs. M spoke about other academic classes that support the students’ learning experiences, including academic English and individualized math. She recalled the ways in which the Academic English class for newcomers is quite beneficial:

I think that with most middle and high schools, there aren’t classes where a student can go to learn basic phonics or to learn just reading skills. We had to do vowels and letters; some of the students didn’t even know the English alphabet when they started, so we had to go to the very basics: ‘This is the letter. This is the sound it makes,’ so letters could be put together to make words.

Because many refugee students experience interrupted education and lack English skills upon arrival, this class supported their reading and writing skills and helped teach them English.

Regarding the individualized math class, Mrs. M shared, “A lot of them were losing the basics. Like, they didn’t know about multiplication and division, even addition for some of them, and not even just how to do it, but what it is. The whole concept of it.” These courses highlighted their lack of access to formal education and helped to fill learning gaps.

In addition to AVID, Mrs. M described how the CCSS helped direct her to identify and fill in students’ learning gaps due to interrupted education. She was enthusiastic about teaching students about U.S. history, for example. She explained it this way:

It was really cool just teaching them about the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Like the right to free speech, freedom of religion. Just some of the things that, living in America, we can forget are actually great rights that we have, and seeing the students [yet are required content according to the Common Core standards].

Mrs. M also explained how the CCSS and Next Generation Science Standards—which are written standards for all students regardless of English language status—help support students’ education:

I think that [integrating proficient English speakers with non-English speakers in the same classroom] is helpful for our refugee students and our English learners because it can help fill in some of those gaps. Like, if I see a gap somewhere in a concept, I can fill it in, and it still meets those standards.

In addition to providing targeted support classes, she stated the school provided students with the materials they need to participate in learning from home, offers them Chromebooks as well as internet service.

Mrs. M also expressed the importance of building relationships and incorporating differentiated learning. She described her teaching philosophy:

If you have a goal for where that kid is going to be, there is not just one way to get there. There's not just one process to get there; everybody doesn't have to necessarily do a presentation to show they learned something. Some other kids might want to show you a story or a piece of art, and so, giving kids a lot of choices is a big one for me, too, because I think it gives them a chance to try.

Mrs. M explained using more than one teaching style allowed refugee students to feel more included with the rest of their peers. She also mentioned teaching the foundations of reading supported their academic performance in other content areas, and literacy helped fill in those educational gaps, as some students who arrived at an age-appropriate for a ninth- or 10th-grade level placement read at a kindergarten level. According to Mrs. M., teachers' awareness in this area can help:

Just communicating with the teachers and letting them know this student reads this many words per minute, at this level, [or] they do have this assignment missing, or whatever. Let me just show you how many hours it would take them to read at their reading level. And an assignment that would take other kids an hour, it would take them like 15 to 20 hours with teacher support just because of their reading level.

**Staff Perceptions of Social–Emotional Supports.** The school staff reported their perceptions of what supports refugee students social–emotional needs in schools, according to the strategies and practices that were implemented at the charter school. The staff also reported on their perceptions of refugee students' social and emotional needs.

**School Director.** According to Dr. S, teachers provided after-school tutoring for academic support and relationship building for emotional support. According to Dr. S, the strongest support for students' social–emotional needs were the positive staff–student

relationships and restorative circles. He explained relationships are “a key part [of the work] as teachers can inherently help address some of the [hurt] just by creating a safe environment, creating a place where students feel welcomed, where students feel loved.” Student–staff relationships can help create a sense of security.

Furthermore, because there was no school counselor at the charter school when he arrived, Dr. S hired one to support students’ academic and social–emotional needs. Reflecting on this decision, he stated:

I think that adding a counselor adds a structured setting where there is a point person that may be able to offer some of those services to address the trauma, or if they are not, at least, they can help make those referrals and connections to people who can.

***School Teacher.*** In regard to the students’ social–emotional needs and wellness, Mrs. M stated many students are not able to identify, or have not processed, the trauma they experienced:

I think that some of them have not processed it. I think some of them don’t realize it was something traumatic and think it’s just how things were. And, so, I think that in restorative circles and stuff, some of the kids hear others share what was traumatic for them and start realizing that maybe they had some trauma, too.

She further said the restorative circles helped heal the trauma students experienced:

Most of our students have lost people they loved. Many lost siblings, and that is something that supports some of those refugee students because they see we are all human beings, and we can all support each other through this.

To better understand and implement restorative circles, the staff attended a weeklong training session with educators from all over California. Mrs. M explained the impact of the experience and her ability to incorporate it in the classroom:

The restorative training was really nice because, sometimes, you are nervous to talk to the kids about stuff because you do not want to trigger trauma or stuff like that, but the restorative stuff was more about how you could share experiences that you have been through and making it a safe place and nothing really leaves the room, you know? It stays in the circle, giving permission to ask tougher questions and giving students a safe place to talk.

Mrs. M also discussed another professional development session where the school brought together a panel of parents who helped the teachers understand better ways to support the students. She commented, “That was the coolest PD [professional development] we had. Just bringing a parent panel of refugee students and getting to hear from them about their culture and their experiences as parents of students in the U.S. It was amazing.”

Regarding the trauma her students have experienced, Mrs. M said some students were not able to identify some of their experiences as traumatic. She provided an example of a student speaking in class about the lack of water access in her home country:

One of the students shared that in her country, there was a big lake that everyone got water from, but the water never lasted the whole summer because it got so hot and the water would evaporate, people would drink it, and a big truck would then come from the UN or something to bring water, but people would jump on the truck and fight for it [the water].

She described a conversation she had with a refugee boy from Congo, saying, “One day, we were reading a book about something, and he started talking about seeing dead bodies on the street, and stuff, in his country.” Mrs. M explained how this conversation highlighted the trauma

many of the students come to school with even though they do not always describe it in those terms. It becomes important for teachers to recognize the effects of trauma and attend to it.

### ***Students' Perceptions of Academic Supports***

**Student Participants' Interpretations of the School's Response to Their Needs.** The student participants came to the charter school having experienced interrupted education. They did not know the English language, were unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, and hopeful they could fill in their learning gaps. The students voiced their perceptions of how the charter school supported their learning and social–emotional needs.

The students reported a positive perception of the school's response to their academic needs. The students had to become familiar with a new learning environment and a new language as they tried to mitigate their learning gaps. The school provided educational support resources through remedial course offerings, translation of school materials, and teacher and student check-ins on their progress in learning content. Other support resources offered included teachers' office hours and translated school materials.

Sareen described a positive perception of the school's response to her academic needs, saying the teachers checked in to make sure their students understand subject content. In Mrs. M's class, for example, they do hands-on projects, and in her English class, they go over the learning material until the students confirm they understand it. This process allows students to be re-exposed to content and gives her more time to take-in the material. Sareen also credited the simple words the teachers used when teaching as helpful because English was not students' primary language. The simpler words make it easier for her to follow along; thus, students felt included in the learning.

When asked how the school ensured students received extra or additional academic support, Sareen stated, “The school has study hall, before school, and zero period, and the newcomers class.” She expressed appreciation for the Newcomers class offered every Friday by her science and English teachers. Sareen also said the after-school clubs were enjoyable and allowed her to explore her interests, be active, and engage in activities that were not available to her at the refugee camps in Ethiopia. According to Sareen, the AVID class was helpful in making sure students receive help with applying to colleges and exploring career paths.

Halima appreciated her math teacher translated all the assignments into her language so she could understand the content while learning English. She explained, “They translate every assignment into Pushto [her primary language] for us.” After-school office hours also helped Halima because they provided her with additional academic support. Halima also said the school ensured all students had internet service, computers, and school materials. These support resources removed the financial burden off her parents and allowed her to get her work done. As she noted, “If I want paper, the teacher tells the office, and I get it the next day.”

Halima said the fact that the school provided everything she needs for her studies made both her educational and social experiences better; for example, the school provided her construction paper so she could participate in the school’s talent show, and Mrs. M created a link for an online Jeopardy game so she and her classmates could have something fun and educational to do at night. The school helped alleviate stress on her father regarding purchasing these materials. Halima also considered the school’s class exit tickets as supporting her educational experience, saying, “The teachers ask us questions about what we learned that day and for us to answer before we can leave for the day to check that we understand the learning content.” She expanded on this sentiment with the following example:



If I put my answer wrong, they do not let me leave. They say stay. They ask me why [I don't understand]. For example, they ask if I did not understand, if I say I did not understand, they give me a link to office hours.

From Halima's perspective, some teachers asked her easier questions about the content of a subject when she first arrived. She noted, "It was helpful, stress-alleviating, and supportive" of her educational experience. She also said, "The teacher asks easy questions from refugees because they know they do not speak that much good as other students."

However, in some cases, teachers gave refugee students too much work, causing Halima to recommend all teachers engage in easy teaching methods. According to her, easier teaching methods meant being sensitive to their limited language proficiency:

Our teacher gives us an assignment to write two paragraphs. He says how are you feeling? Describe in two paragraphs. So, we have no idea how to describe our feelings in two paragraphs. We do not have the words. It is difficult for us because we do not have [the] words in English to write two paragraphs just about our feelings

Halima felt her enrollment in AVID was a contributor to her performing well in her English class because it focused on teaching students different techniques on how to be successful in their core classes. Halima stated:

Every class gives us topics, writing a paragraph, and it is very important in English class. If we did not take this, we will never learn this, and we might fail English class. We pass English class because of this class because we know how to write a paragraph. How to write an essay.

Shireen found her school supported her educational experience by providing equal opportunities for students by providing computers, internet access, and translations on classwork

and homework. These were all aids she did not have at the refugee school, allowing her to have the same educational experience as her classmates. Shireen shared, “The best way the charter school supports refugee students is they put translations in their slides for us.”

Shireen also discussed the positive impact the teacher’s exit tickets had on her educational experience. The exit tickets allowed her to express what she did not understand. She said, “When I do not understand, maybe I will just write a wrong answer, and they will tell me, ‘Hey Shireen, your answer is wrong, you have to fix that.’ And then they [ask] me if I understand.” She also said AVID was the one course that helped her learn the different online platforms the school used, and it implemented daily check-ins about her educational and social–emotional needs which kept her on track.

Shireen said she can receive additional help on assignments she did not understand during office hours or by messaging her teachers. She said, “I can chat with teachers, and they guide me.” Teachers provided explanations in simple words that she can translate. Additionally, the chat service allowed her to get immediate responses. During office hours, she felt safe to ask questions and get more one-on-one help from her teachers. Fewer students were there, and it was easy for her to have her questions answered.

In Layla’s experience, the translations of assignments and lecture notes were among the most helpful supports to her and her refugee peers. She explained the positive impact of the math assignment translations for her peers, saying, “I think it is Farsi or something. She translates the slides in different languages so that they could understand, too.” The translation of school assignments and lecture notes has allowed her and fellow refugee students to remain engaged in the learning content and not fall behind. In addition, Layla reported AVID’s positive influence on her educational experience, as it taught her academic and social skills, including how to apply

to colleges, attain financial aid, and navigate taxes. She said, “It is helping us for the real world and what to do after high school.”

Layla also identified some of the same supports that were noted by her fellow students. She shared the school offered different resources to meet students’ educational needs, including check-ins, after-school office hours for individualized support, and free school materials. The teachers also assigned weekly reflections and daily check-ins to get a better gauge of how students are doing academically. She explained she went to office hours to ask clarification questions. The teacher also used the student check-in as an opportunity to ask her about assignments. These conversations allowed her to feel included and supported in her learning.

Layla also credited her AVID teacher for providing the support she needed. When discussing positive educational course supports, Samira explained her ninth-grade AVID teacher taught her to take notes both when she was asked to and when she was not. This class supported her social experiences as well by teaching her about and preparing her for college. Mustafa also shared his enrollment in AVID supported his overall educational and social experiences in the United States “because it teaches you when you live on your own and what you have to do, and this stuff, and it is more easy.” Overall, he stated, “It [AVID] helps you with life.” He also said the simple language for instruction also supported his educational experience; however, he found the translation of slides and assignments in his math class to be most supportive, “because we only read Arabic, she [the teacher] translates the slides in Arabic so that we can read them. It is helpful.” Mustafa also felt that the English support he received and the provision of school meals supported his overall educational experience. He also learned more English, which positively supported his academic and social experiences.

Samira said the support systems for students' academic needs included the space to receive help through student check-ins. This daily check-in structure allowed her to ask for help on learning material that she was taught during class or on homework assignments that she did not understand. She said her teachers always helped her when she struggled and the school provided equal opportunities for students by offering office hours to everyone. The office hours allowed her to get help in a smaller learning space and provided her with any school materials she needed for her academic success. The remedial support classes allowed her to get support with her English reading and writing, and the newcomers classes allowed her to learn English quickly and better participate in her education.

Samira also found her middle school individualized remedial math and academic English classes helpful and supportive of her educational and social experiences. She explained, "It helped me with English and [got me] used to the assignments and how to do them." These classes also supported her social experience by allowing her to learn enough English to communicate with people in her community. She suggested one way to better support students who identify as refugees is "give them those classes and know that they might not understand the language yet, or how to get used to the school assignment, [but it will] help what they are doing." Translations of the assignments and notes also supported her educational experience.

Mustafa agreed the school provided a great deal of academic support. He explained teachers "helped me a lot with my English and reading." He was also challenged by a language barrier at the start of his education, and the support allowed him to participate more in his classes. Mustafa explained: "The school wants all their students to learn and get educated. They give us daily check-ins like write one paragraph of what you learned today and those things." These writing assignments create an alternative small space where he felt safe to ask for

additional help without his peers knowing he was struggling and an opportunity for his teacher to provide the support he needs.

According to Aras, having teachers constantly engage with students who identify as refugees to see if they have questions or need help create a supportive learning environment for them. He also said the educational and social support of his AVID class was beneficial, explaining his AVID teacher regularly asked how he was doing and taught the class about nonacademic things as well as the importance of exercise and workouts. School officials also created a supportive educational experience by helping refugee students learn English so they could understand the learning content. Learning English also helped students communicate with other people in the community, thereby helping them socially.

Aras also said the school attempted to meet students' academic needs by providing equal opportunities, which he explained by referencing the provision of computers, internet access, notebooks, and school materials that are given to all students. He felt the school responded to his educational needs by making sure he had notebooks when he asks for them. In addition, his teachers were aware when he did not understand something in class. In those instances, the teachers reached out to him.

Jafar agreed with his peers that the teachers were very supportive of their learning. He stated the teachers' continuous check-in practices ensured he understood the content that was taught. The school's after-school office hours support his learning by allowing him to get more of his teachers' attention, help on homework, and knowing what he should focus on for his tests.

Jafar also appreciated the remedial courses offered to him during lunchtime and after school during office hours. He said these courses had a positive impact on his educational experience, as did his enrollment in AVID, which helped him with organizational skills. He also

referred to the support AVID provides in terms of knowing about college. AVID teachers teach students, “especially college stuff because 12th graders [need to] get ready for college.”

Salam also noted the remedial support classes supported students’ educational needs. He shared, “Kids can go to these classes that need help like math, actually not just math, reading and writing.” He found AVID to be supportive of his educational needs as well because, “It’s nice. It prepares you for college, and now I know more things that I did not know before.” Like his refugee peers, Salam also emphasized the equal opportunities provided to all students at the school, saying, “everyone is treated the same, no one gets more than others, and the school is fair.” Salam referred specifically to the number of assignments given to students in class and after school. Although Salam learned English slower and performed as a lower level than his peers, it did not mean he received extra homework as punishment. Equitable practices seemed striking to these students, as these experiences were very different from their experiences in the refugee camps.

Salam credited the remedial English and math support classes. He said these classes were where he “learned how to read and write.” These classes allowed him to perform at a higher academic level and learn English so he could engage in class.

**Some Caveats.** Once in the United States, students were enrolled in remedial courses, placed in non-age-appropriate grade levels, often made to repeat a course, and enrolled in additional remedial academic support classes in English and math. Though arguably necessary, these actions both supported and undermined academic advancement. Being placed in remedial support classes or being pulled out of their content classes during the day to receive additional support in reading and writing in English meant they did not learn the subject content that would allow them to accelerate at the same pace as their nonrefugee peers. Students were less likely to

perform well on standardized tests, a high-stakes measurement that can further restrict academic advancement. Lack of access to the same learning content as their peers put these students behind. Moreover, not knowing the English language hindered learning beyond their mere ability to communicate. Students reported not being fully engaged in learning and not able to follow what they were taught. Needing to learn how to read and understand English, while simultaneously needing to learn subject content, made these students feel as though they were in a bind, unable to complete or perform well on assignments and tests.

### ***Students' Perceptions of Social–Emotional Support***

The student participants with experiences of trauma discussed how the school responded to their social–emotional needs. The students explained that teacher and student check-ins were not just focused on academics but rather, they were designed to provide a space for them to be honest and open with their emotions, check on their well-being, and give students the opportunity to have someone to talk to about how they are doing. The student participants all shared student check-ins supported their social well-being. Having someone to talk with proved helpful because it allowed students to discuss how they were feeling mentally.

**Student Check-Ins.** According to Sareen, the charter school strongly responded to the students' social–emotional needs by offering student check-ins. She shared check-ins allowed students to share how they were doing. According to Sareen, Mrs. M dedicated much of her class time to checking in with her students, “Sometimes, 30 minutes she takes out of the class, and we talk about [how] things going on and how we are feeling.” The student check-ins was important to her. This practice had not occurred for her and her peers at the refugee schools in Ethiopia. There, she was not allowed to speak to her teachers at all. At this charter school, Sareen explained the teachers provided multiple opportunities for students to talk about their emotions.

Sareen mentioned she was able to talk to Mrs. M about her mother's death and some of the challenges she faced before moving to the United States. The check-ins really helped her because, for the first time, she was able to talk with someone about how she blamed herself for her mother's death, and received reassurance it was her mother's medical health that caused the death, not her. Additionally, she reported how the opportunity to talk about her emotions with Mrs. M allowed her to feel comfortable enough to talk with someone without worry about judgment.

Halima had a positive perception of the charter school's response to her social-emotional needs. She also found the daily check-ins helpful, as they gave her the space to report what she needed and how she felt. The check-ins she found the most helpful were the Friday check-ins, which "ask how you are feeling and how [can we] support you at your home and school." Halima recalled how Mrs. M often shared links to resources that informed them on how to improve on their social well-being and address some of the problems she [and other students] experienced. Upon reflecting on this, she expanded, "They are asking us [about] our social [well-being] and that helps us with our social life, they encourage us . . . they always support us." In addition, Halima stated the school offered free nutritious meals so they always had something to eat, so she and her peers could focus on their learning. This provision was of course in stark contrast to the experience Halima had in the Afghanistan refugee camps where she described always being hungry because free meals were not offered at the refugee schools.

According to Shireen, the charter school provided her a safe learning environment. The safe learning environment was important because she recalled not being safe in Afghanistan. They experienced constant bombings and violence. When asked what the teachers did at the charter school to make it feel safe, she replied, "They always send me a check-in, and I am



filling [writing] them up. They are asking me what problems we have in school and out of school. If I have a problem, they help me.” Through the daily check-ins, Shireen felt she could speak about her social–emotional needs. In addition, she said school breaks reignited a spark or excitement for school. She said, “When it is the last day of break, and tomorrow school starts, I was very happy that, tomorrow, my classes start.” The school breaks reminded her of the feelings of excitement she first had when she knew she was going to attend school in the United States.

Layla stated the student council and the teachers were most helpful to her regarding her social–emotional needs. Like Sareen, Layla explained as she did not have a positive relationship with the teachers at the refugee camps in Syria. It was different for her at the charter school. The teachers made it safe for her and other students to speak about their emotions. About one teacher she said, “She would make us feel good about our emotions. The teachers are also pretty good at calming us down.”

When asked about the school support systems that responded to students’ emotional needs, Samira mentioned the teachers talking with students to gain a better understanding of what was happening during instances of conflict or distress. Mustafa also reported his math teacher showed she cared about their emotions by checking in with them daily with questions such as, “What did you do? How did you eat? Did you sleep, or did you have enough time?” He explained the teachers wanted to make sure they were mentally doing well. Mustafa said being asked these questions made him feel important and like he could share about anything that was challenging for him.

According to Aras, the charter school had a good emotional support system. He said through the teacher and student check-ins, the teachers were direct in letting students know they were there for them and, “they give attention to students; they say they can help me.” This was

an experience he did not have at the refugee schools in Afghanistan. Aras felt cared for by his teachers through the daily check-ins, where he was asked how he and his classmates were feeling, and if there was anything they need. Although Jafar said he did not need social–emotional support, he stated the charter school had services that were helpful to his peers. Salam was grateful for the emotional support system the school provides. He explained, “[The teachers] talk to you; sometimes they send you to the counselor, and the counselor will help you and ask what’s wrong.” He also stated the teachers showed they care by, “helping me and talking to me and asking me what’s wrong.”

I end this chapter by addressing Research Question 3 of the study. The question was interested in understanding what other factors supported or undermined refugee students overall educational and social experiences in the United States. The question was answered by both the student and staff participants.

### **Research Question 3: What Other Factors Support or Alternatively Undermine the Educational and Social Experiences of Recently Arrived Students Who Identify as Refugees**

Research Question 3 focused on the factors that supported and challenged the educational and social experiences of refugee students. The findings begin with a presentation of the student perspectives. I begin by discussing the students reports of living in a safe environment, living with people who speak the same language, and gender equality to fostering a supportive environment. I then discuss the factors that undermine their experiences because of language barriers, lack of financial support, and fear of family loss. I end by presenting the perspective of the staff on what factors support or undermine refugee students’ experiences.

### Overview of Research Question 3

When students are relocated to safe environments with no violence and know the English language, their social integration is easier. This experience was not the case for these refugees. Several of them worried about the violence they saw on television. They faced racism and discrimination from their peers. Additionally, not having enough money meant their families struggled to meet their financial needs in a country where everything is expensive and unfamiliar.

Overall, the student participants mentioned living in an area with other refugees or people who speak the same language, which made their social experience easier. This familiarity provided a support because it allowed them to connect with people who had also relocated, may have had the same challenges, and could have someone they can talk to and ask questions. Not having strict gender rules made it easier for participants to be themselves without gender restrictions. Receiving housing and meals was another support that made the integration easier.

The school staff also discussed factors that supported or undermined refugee students' experiences. When academic needs and performance levels align with the CCS, students understand where they are academically and where they need to be. For this to happen, there must be a supportive learning environment. This environment includes: (a) differentiated teaching and a variety of noncore classes, (b) science classes with labs, and (c) a focus on vocabulary focus. An interrupted education and language barriers undermine the educational experience. Therefore, English must be taught in all their classes. Lastly, to meet students' social-emotional needs, educators must know the whole student, including their individual needs.

All research participants discussed curricular, pedagogical, social, and other factors that supported or undermined their social and educational experiences. In terms of what has, or could, undermine their social experiences, the students mentioned factors such as not living in an area where people speak their native language, a school not providing them with free school materials or offering them English support classes, and not having an in-person learning environment due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

***Larger Contextual Factors Supporting Refugee Students' Perspectives of Educational and Social-Well-Being***

When students were asked what other factors supported their social well-being, they pointed primarily to community and larger contextual factors, like just living in the United States.

The students said being in a new safe place surrounded by nice people (compared to the violence they were exposed to before migration) supported their social integration experiences. Describing this support, students explained being in a community surrounded by people who spoke the same language, living where they had someone with whom they could communicate and their parents felt safe, allowed them to explore the neighborhood and thus, their social integration became easier. Additionally, they said receiving resources for rent and housing relieved the stress of having no income.

Regarding social factors, Sareen said that a family's willingness to go outside and explore their new community could make it easier for them to integrate into it socially. Sareen found the educational systems in the United States supported her social experiences because it expanded her options. Sareen spoke of the influence of just living in the United States and the desire to live the "American Dream":

You know how they say American Dream? Yeah, like you have dreams of becoming whatever you want, no matter what they are, where you from. Like, nobody is going to stop you, not even your family. Even when they tell you [that] you cannot do that; you can do that. So, you can do whatever you want.

Sareen said strict attendance rules in the United States have allowed her to attend school regularly, to break from the gender role expectations in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia she would, “act like a boy. I used to cut my hair because I didn’t like the fact that they said, ‘Oh, girls have to stay home and cook.’” However, she now feels like just being in the United States there are many possibilities. Overall, she had a positive impression of her social experience here and explained that, over time, she has become more confident.

When asked about her social experiences, Halima responded, “My social experiences are very good. The people here are very kind here in America.” Having positive social experiences allowed her to feel free. She spoke to how she felt human here, stating, “They don’t tell people you are less. They treat us like equal.” Lastly, not having the strict social dress guidelines of Afghanistan allowed Halima to dress freely, and she did not feel afraid to walk to and from places and face verbal harassment like she used to. She stated, “Here in America, you can walk. When I go out, and I do not cover my face, I feel kind of independent.”

Shireen’s perception of her social experiences in the United States has been positive because of the equality and standards she experienced. She stated, “I see standard and equality. In the United States, it is everything equal for animals, for people, for everyone.” She also expressed she felt safe and did not need to worry about bombings or without being verbally or physically attacked by drivers as she crossed the street, saying, “You know something that I am really happy about is crossing the roads. There [are] rules with traffic, just simple rules. When I

am crossing, the driver just takes a break and just tells me to go.” Gender equality and not having to experience verbal abuse from men when outside felt positively supportive of her overall social experience in the United States.

On the same topic, Samira shared that giving refugees food, money, and housing could helped support her social experiences. She said practicing the English language in her community more would have supported her educational experience in the United States. If she had more opportunities to practice, she believed she would not have found school and living in a new country as stressful. She also believes that having more opportunities to practice English could have supported her social experiences in being able to make friends and communicate with people in her community.

Aras believed it would be helpful to provide students with more resources, such as food and a home, “when they need food and they need home.” These resources would be a positive support in that his parents would not have to worry about feeding his siblings. Aras also said resources make the relocation experience easier and enable refugees to better engage in their new communities. Also, when discussing entering a new community, Jafar stated putting people who speak the same language in an apartment complex together after they resettle would be beneficial because they would have someone to communicate with. He said, “Let’s say I am new to America. I could not communicate with other people because I don’t know English. The other people from my race or place, Somalians, I can just talk to them, and they can help me.”

Salam stated making friends who knew how to support refugees’ unique experiences would be helpful in terms of social experiences. He explained, “When I first came, there wasn’t any people I could talk to, so I was scared for a couple months.” He expressed not knowing

anyone made his social experiences scary. Being surrounded by friends meant Salam had people he could talk to, play with, and answer questions about their relocation.

**Impact of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic.** The students also discussed some larger context factors that, despite the school's best efforts, undermined their educational and social well-being. The COVID-19 global pandemic—which began in March 2019—led to a school shutdown and as a result, caused these students to lack some of the supportive classes they had come to count on to address their language needs. Moreover, online learning imposed by the pandemic proved to be less supportive of their academic needs.

COVID-19 restrictions meant students were not offered the appropriate support classes that would help to address their language barriers. The COVID-19 global pandemic forced schools to participate in distance learning, which did not allow for an in-person learning space. Students reported the change from in-person learning to distance learning as one educational barrier to some of the research participants. The refugee students who enrolled in the school during the pandemic saw the hardest transition as their first educational experience in the United States was to distance learning. Other students reported distance learning took away the additional remedial classes that supported their educational learning. Sareen said not being offered remedial support classes undermined her educational experiences. As the charter school stopped offering the courses, she suggested the school resume them so students could continue to access the supports most helpful to her.

The transition to online learning undermined both her academic and social experiences. The toll of living through a pandemic heightened all the challenges in her life. Sareen needed to cook for her siblings at home while trying to attend her zoom classes and online after-school

office hours. She shared, “It was really difficult because I had to have two things happening at the same time.” Her family responsibilities interfered with her ability to focus on her education.

Shireen had just begun her educational experience in the United States when, due to her relocation during the pandemic, she only attended classes online. She said attending school in person would have been better:

I am really wondering what are the U.S. classes? What it will look like? Where will I get lunch? I am really wondering about those and excited to know about when I will go and experience those things. I am excited when I will see my teachers that I have never seen them. Just in the camera.

She stated online learning really made it hard for refugee students because they face language barriers, limited access to technology and internet service, and do not know how to access the school’s online platforms.

At the time of Aras’s enrollment, students engaged in distance learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, so his initial experience also included a lack of familiarity with technology and online educational platforms. He had to rely on the help of his older sisters a lot and explained how he had to learn the basics such as turning on and off a computer. However, he had to ask an office staff to show him how to sign into his schools Google classroom account (i.e., where all student assignments are posted) and how to access Zoom to participate in his distance learning classes.

**Students’ Perspectives of the Impact of Social Barriers.** In addition to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic that affected Sareen, Shireen, and Aras, the other student participants also reported not having financial resources and living in an unsafe environment. Students continued to feel fearful.



Halima discussed the traumatic experience of seeing the takeover, attack, and riot at the United States Capitol, as she never thought this would ever happen here. She was reminded of the violence she experienced before coming to the United States. Seeing this violence brought up past fears. She said, “That made me very depressed. I never expected such a thing in America. That made me very scared.”

Sareen said she feared living here and that she would lose her father. She did not have anyone who would take care of her siblings because she had no family here. She said, “Every time, even if my dad sleeps for too long, I ask him what is going on. It makes me crazy. I am so anxious about it because he is the only one that I have. Only one here.” The thought of losing him made her fear her siblings would have to go into foster care or be deported to their home country. This fear of loss has made living in the United States challenging because of the lack of immediate family support.

Sareen also mentioned other difficulties, such as a lack of familiarity with the new community, not knowing where things are, and not understanding haram food because she did not speak English. *Haram* refers to the food she is forbidden to eat because of her religion. She shared, “I knew that pig was haram, but that people eat it. I was so surprised.” Learning what foods were haram was new information she had to learn about.

Shireen discussed the difficulties of not knowing English and being unfamiliar with her community. She has gotten lost in her neighborhood and has been unable to have conversations with people because of not understanding the language. She shared one of her first experiences:

When I was walking. Going to park or somewhere, I was confused [about] where is my house. I did not know the way, but now I can. When someone is asking me about something, I just say, “No English.”

Layla explained her social experiences here in the United States were different from those she had in Syria. Some of her first social experiences felt negative because of the racism she experienced both at her elementary school and in the community:

When I was like in fifth grade, there was a kid who sat next to me in class. When he found out that I was Muslim, he was like, “Oh, so you are ISIS. You are with ISIS? You are going to bomb our school?” I was like, what? But I put him in his place. I also face racism online, so I would yell at them and then block them.

Layla also experienced discrimination in her community from not knowing the English language, “I think that it was one of the hardest things for me when I first came here because I needed to learn how to communicate.” To help her better assimilate to her new community, Layla wished she had not experienced racism and suggested if she had known English better, she may not have experienced this racism. Layla suggested one way to help refugee students’ social experiences might be to help them “to be able to hang out with kids that went through the same things [as they did], so they could make friends easier.”

Samira also reported her experiences in Kenya were different from those in the United States. She was challenged because she does not have money, noting, “Everyone has to go to work, and you have to pay for your own house, and the houses are very expensive and all of that for stuff to buy.”

### ***Recommendations for Additional Support***

The larger community and national context provided opportunity for these refugees but also presented challenges. Relocation to safer environments helped students to feel somewhat safer but, these students remained worried because of the violence they saw on television. In addition, they faced racism and discrimination from their peers. Moreover, insufficient financial

resources also meant their families were struggling to afford adequate housing in part caused by living in a city (and country) where everything is expensive.

Students benefited when they were able to live in an area with other refugees or near people who spoke the same language. Being surrounded with people who can speak the same language allowed them to connect with people who have also relocated and to share many of the same challenges that they have had. Schools and their local community were spaces that potentially gave them others like them to talk to and ask questions of. Rules and regulations in the United States removed gendered educational restrictions that they had experienced previously and contributed to their social well-being.

***School Leaders' and Teachers' Perspectives of Larger Contextual Factors That Undermine Refugee Educational and Social–Well-Being***

The staff also discussed their perceptions on what supported or undermined refugee students' overall experiences.

Limited English language proficiency was the educational barrier that was mentioned most frequently by the educators at the charter school as the factor that undermined the students' experiences. It seemed impossible to work around the need for English proficiency, since English was needed to learn every subject, explained the school's director. He stated:

When you don't have that grasp with the language, it is going to make learning U.S. history difficult; it is going to make learning geometry difficult. It is a little harder here. They are coming at a much lower level, and if they have had interrupted education, and they haven't received a lot of formal academic education in their native language, well, then that makes literacy in any language challenging.

He reported when curriculum did not include teaching opportunities for language, students did not receive access to ongoing learning opportunities to learn the English language. Moreover, teachers across the curriculum did not teach English; thus, refugee and other ESL students were not adequately supported. Dr. S stated it was important for everyone to teach English across their content classes, not just teachers with English credentials. Additionally, although it was important to offer enough special support classes, their academic experience would suffer if these students were not offered a full curriculum. He explained the support classes this way:

I also believe not offering enough access to [a full range of] courses is undermining. Just because they lack some language doesn't mean they shouldn't be exposed to art or computer science, and I think you never know what is going to help a kid flourish. If you just say, "Well, no, they just need reading and writing and math because that's where they have the largest gaps." Yes, there are needs there, but having that outlet to work on computers or be in a drama or art class might actually help them be more productive or learn more of the language in a more playful setting.

Mrs. M explained in addition to the language barrier, a fundamental problem was refugee students did not take a full and rigorous set of courses. She explained they needed access to rigorous courses because when the refugee students are not exposed to this diverse course content, it undermines their educational experiences and they are not prepared for standardized testing. She shared:

It was like they were at a disadvantage on state tests because they didn't have exposure to everything. So, seeing some of the things that we added to our school, like Project Lead the Way, the science lab, and a full-time art teacher [helps].

Mrs. M stated not providing the students with the same elective or extracurricular activities that nonrefugee students were offered at other schools undermined their educational and social experiences. She explained how not providing refugee students with elective or extracurricular activities could prevent them from learning a new skill or hobby. Mrs. M said the lack of noncore classes was not supportive, saying, “Some of those other noncore subjects can expose kids to other things.” Not having access to science materials and science labs interferes with the number of hands on learning they will have access to. Not having access to a science lab or science curriculum was also something many students reported earlier as a barrier to their educational experience while living in the refugee camps.

Both the director and the teacher also explained that although CCSS can support teachers in knowing the content students should be taught, there must be a supportive learning environment for refugee students to learn the material. A supportive learning environment includes ensuring that teachers differentiate instruction and provide a variety of noncore classes, science classes with labs, and focus on supporting English language learning. Therefore, English must be taught in all their classes.

In Chapter 5, I discuss key research findings from the three research questions that outlined this research study. I also discuss key implications for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS

Most research (e.g., Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018) on refugee students has focused on the numbers of refugees migrating to a host country, the burdens they experience, and their resettlement, which is often viewed negatively. Refugees have often been viewed as a helpless group of people who need additional support (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). In fact, in May 2018, 43% of people surveyed did not agree with the resettlement of refugees (Krogstad, 2019).

With these negative perceptions of refugees, the educational and social experiences of students who identify as refugees and settle in the United States must be more thoroughly understood. Over the last decade, the number of refugees worldwide has increased. The United States has resettled a large population of refugees and these students are increasingly entering U.S. schools. The influx of refugees means the makeup of schools is changing, and the presence of a diverse student body throughout school settings is now visible. Knowing how to support refugee students and the diversity they present in the classroom is important.

This study provided a more in-depth understanding of newly migrated students, the challenges they faced, and the factors that supported them. Nine high school students were interviewed for this study. All identified as refugees who experienced a time of both interrupted education and trauma; thus, they felt able to express their firsthand pre and postmigration experiences as refugees. Students came from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Syria. All students attended a charter school in San Diego, California. In-depth interviews were also conducted with both the school director and a senior teacher. The interviews included staff interpretations of what they believed were factors that supported or undermined the refugee students' educational and social experiences at their school.

All research participants shared their perspectives on the three primary research questions that guided this study:

1. How do refugee students' past educational and social experiences influence their U.S. educational experience?
2. How does a school that predominantly serves refugee students respond to the needs of refugee students who have experienced trauma and interrupted education before coming to the U.S.?
3. What other factors support or alternatively undermine the educational and social experiences of recently arrived refugee students?

In the next sections, I review the findings from my interviews, discuss the lessons learned and the implications for educators and policymakers as they seek to better support refugees.

### **Research Question 1 Findings**

There were many similarities in the premigration educational experiences of the refugee students in this study that influenced their U.S. educational experiences. All students came to the United States traumatized and unprepared for the rigor of U.S. schools. Initially, in my interviews with them, not all of the students were able to identify the trauma they experienced. Despite the fact that students could explain the violence, war, and abuse they had experienced in their home country and while in the refugee camps, most students did not describe themselves as having experienced trauma. Students may not have been able to specifically understand they had experienced trauma because they really did not have a group of peers to compare their experiences with. In other words, they may not have fully comprehended the uniqueness and abnormality of their lives at that time. It was only when they got to the United States and learned

about how others experienced education and life, did they fully realize the impact of their experiences.

Over the course of our conversation however, after defining the term trauma, and in interacting with their peers students began to see their experiences and those of their refugee peers as traumatic. The fact that they had been denied a safe living and learning environment, were not able to receive a rigorous formal education, and had experienced interrupted education meant they were struggling emotionally and academically. These students had lost a few weeks to several months of schooling due to caregiving responsibilities and living in countries with ongoing war. Students suffered from emotional trauma and physical abuse. They attended refugee camp schools that were unsafe. Students told stories of jumping out of windows, leaving, or simply not attending school, fearful they would be hit and physically abused. Frequent absences meant they did not learn the course content needed to succeed in U.S. schools. Once in the United States, they explained they had to work twice as hard as their peers.

Refugee camp schools had been under resourced. Classrooms were overcrowded, lacked computers, and did not even teach the subjects they needed to advance in their education. They were not exposed to a rigorous learning curriculum. These challenges negatively influenced the students' learning—not only in the refugee camps, but also their educational experiences in the United States, as they did not perform at the same academic level as nonrefugee students. Their pre-migration experiences had imposed a significant set of challenges for them as they attempted to acculturate emotionally and academically in their new host country.

The important question here is: What can be learned from these students that can inform educators and policymakers as they attempt to address the needs of refugee students? First, the stories of these students expose the important challenges students face when they lack access to



the same learning curriculum as non-refugees, yet sit in the same classrooms and are held to the same academic standards. Refugee students who come to the United States experiencing interrupted education are already performing below their grade level. Not only do they need to learn English, but they must learn a new educational system that demands technological savvy (and, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, needed to know how to use online platforms). They had to learn English at the same time they were learning rigorous subject content.

When educators are unaware of these challenges and yet measure refugee students' academic performance from a deficit perspective, then students face double jeopardy. When expectations are lowered and educators do not fully understand the implications when students experience interrupted education, students will continue to be left behind. Conversely, if educators focus on developing additional strategies to support these students, address their academic challenges as well as the trauma that they suffer from, these students can succeed. Dropout rates can be lowered and graduation and college going rates can improve.

Second, the students in this study also explained how they suffered from the effects of poverty and hunger. The school was unable to provide free or nutritious school meals to all students, which meant they were unable to concentrate on learning. When they were able to provide food, it was similar, as in their own words, to "oatmeal or bread." The student participants were unable to take food from home to school because food was limited at home, too. Not all of the participants' families worked; if they did, they worked long hours and made little money, which made it difficult for them to provide for their families. Hunger created a significant problem for these students. It inhibited their ability to concentrate in class, which impacted their engagement.

These students' stories once again inform educators and educational leaders to be aware of the steps that need to be taken to address hunger. Students cannot learn if they do not have access to free nutritious meals.

Third, these students endured traumatic social experiences as well as academic ones. Many of their stories indicated the ways in which challenges they faced were related to gender. Gender inequalities during premigration meant that girls were limited in what they could or could not do. Girls faced harassment and were required to be fully covered even though they lived in an extremely hot country. Girls were not allowed to be outside on their own.

The United States clearly gave the refugee girls more freedom. The dress code was not forced upon them and they did not have to rely on male escorts when they went outside to walk, go to school or to the store. Both girls and boys had been required to take on caregiving roles in their home country and in the refugee camps, which often kept them from attending school. In general, Gender in the United States offered them the freedom they needed to attend school regularly, regardless of their gender.

Fourth, the students also told stories of violence in the camps. Fights would break out between neighbors and even between friends. Unfortunately, violence became a part of their daily lives, and they would witness it in the mornings before going to school in their neighborhoods. Violence created a fearful existence. Coming to the United States, they worried if they would experience violence at school, or have to avoid any bombs while walking to or from school. Instead, the students reported that the school made them feel safe and they would not suffer from the violent experiences they has suffered from at the refugee camps.

Their stories are instructive in pointing out one of the fundamental needs of refugee students that is, to feel safe. Educators and policymakers need to understand that creating a

physically safe environment for refugee students is essential. Having experienced the kind of trauma these young students experienced demands that specific steps be taken to affirm their well-being.

### **Research Question 2 Findings**

In response to the second research question, students and staff alike shared how the charter school responded to their needs by naming specifically the benefit they derived from the daily check-in's that teachers had arranged to constantly monitor students' academic and social-emotional status. Each student felt that teachers were always checking to ensure they had a safe learning environment, nutritious school meals, and school supplies, including computers and the internet. All the students spoke about the positive relationships they had with their U.S. teachers.

Students also appreciated having access to the school's academic support classes and having additional support services such as: (a) after-school office hours, (b) schoolwide Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) classes, and (c) free school supplies. The remedial support classes—such as academic English and individualized math—really supported their English learning, reading and writing, and overall class performance. They also specified how the after-school office hours, exit-tickets, and instructional check-ins felt additionally supportive. All the refugee students reported that AVID was a great help in giving them learning strategies they needed to become successful in all their classes, prepare for college, and cultivate positive social experiences. The school's attention to providing translations of assignments and notes from English into their native languages, and providing after school office-hours, were other supports in which these students felt responded to their academic needs.

Interestingly, the interviews with the school director and one of the teachers revealed similar but also somewhat different interpretations as to what school factors best supported

refugee students. The school's director, Dr. S, named the safe learning environment, the provision of supplemental online educational platforms, and the school's various course offerings (e.g., AVID, a literacy intervention class, and a soon-to-be-introduced math foundations class)—many of the same factors that the students had identified. They did not, however, mention the daily check-ins that were so highly touted as successful strategies from the refugee students' perspective. Instead, the educators emphasized more generally the efforts of a devoted staff who cared about addressing the learning loss the students experienced and the resilience of the students. Mrs. M added the school's teaching of the common core standards, providing remedial classes, articulating a strong mission statement, and their focus on addressing the foundational needs of students, were other ways the school responded to students' academic needs.

School staff also reported how they focused on supporting students' social–emotional needs by ensuring students could build positive relationships with staff members and the school counselor. The school staff also noted the powerful effects of restorative circles that were implemented to address the trauma students were still living with. Additionally, Mrs. M explained how parent panels were helpful because it gave the charter school educators an opportunity to better understand their students' culture and experiences as refugees. Parent panels consisted of six parents of current refugee students who relocated to the United States from their home countries because of the conflict in their home country. The parents were from the Congo, Burma (i.e., Karen), Syria, Somalia, and Ethiopia. The panels gave parents the opportunity to share their experiences premigration, their culture and values, their thoughts on what could support their children's educational and social–emotional experiences, and a venue to suggest supports that could be helpful for school officials to know about that would provide even

greater support. The panels also gave staff and the parents the opportunity to ask one another question.

The comments of students and educators provide important information to help educators as they continue with their efforts to support refugees. When educators arrange opportunities to learn about students' culture and their migration experiences from the students themselves and from their parents, they are more likely to create a supportive learning environment that addresses refugee students' academic and social–emotional needs.

### **Research Question 3 Findings**

The third research question focused on the non-school factors that support refugee students' academic and social experiences. One of the most important issues from the students' perspective was that they were released from the strict gender restrictions they had been living with. For the refugee participants from Somalia, such as Sareen, not having the strict gender roles meant she did not have to put caring for her family and taking on a caregiver role at home in front of being able to attend school. For the refugee participants from Afghanistan, Shireen and Halima, the gender restrictions meant women living in their home countries needed a male escort to accompany them every time they were out in public. If they were outside, the women not only had to be fully covered in clothing from head to toe (i.e., with only their eyes showing) but there was also the likelihood that they would face harassment from other men. This encounter happened if they walked alone, to and from school, stores, or just anywhere in the community.

Gender equality in the United States (although arguably not perfect) allowed female students the opportunity to enjoy the same academic and social experiences as their peers. The strict school attendance rules in the United States that required all students to attend school daily

also worked to their advantage as they were not legally permitted to stay home and take care of younger siblings. The equality of genders in education allowed all the refugee participants in this study to gain access to the same educational experiences as their peers.

A factor that challenged the refugee students as they settled in the United States was the transition from in-person learning to online learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Students reported online learning as a major factor that undermined their educational and social experiences. The COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated the struggles they already faced to catch up to their U.S. peers. Online learning meant these students were given less language support because they lost their access to language support classes. Moreover, they had to face the challenges of learning technology. Many had limited internet access and were not familiar with the school's online platforms. With remote learning, they also lost their opportunity to make friends. Being in a classroom setting was important to newly arrived students because they needed the opportunity to make friends and begin to acculturate into their new community. The learning format during COVID-19 interrupted that opportunity.

When discussing their social experiences, the students most often pointed to the fact that they were now living in a safe environment. Upon arrival in their new country, students recounted feeling safe and having some money, food security, and housing. Additionally, students reported living in an area where people spoke the same language helped them to integrate more easily; however, they also reported they continued to struggle with language barriers and have had to face racism both in person and online, which undermined their overall social experience.

When refugees are relocated to an area that is not overwhelmed with violence, it is easier for them to get familiar with their new home, get to know their neighbors, and the women do not

have to worry about being harassed by men when they are outside. Relocating to areas with people who speak the same language helped these refugees feel they lived in a safe space, able to ask their neighbors for help when needed and to not feel alone in their new home. These feelings of safety made it easier for the parents of these students to permit their children to go out and explore their new community. These positive conditions supported the efforts of these refugees and their families to integrate into their new community, but the refugee students continued to suffer the long-term effects of trauma. The fear of loss was most evident as students reported they continued to worry about losing a family member or that their father or mother would die. They worried about losing their home because they could not afford it, losing food security, and uncertain about living in an area that does not feel like home to them.

There were other factors that challenged these refugees in school as well. The foremost challenge students faced was the language barrier they encountered every day. Classes were only taught in English and translation services were not available, posing additional problems when students did not do well on standardized tests and were not prepared to advance through high school and on to college and career opportunities.

Students' stories suggested that non-school support strategies must accompany school support strategies. Key among these strategies is for communities to provide greater support for community integration and language development. Parents and students need this level of support to thrive.

### **Conclusions**

How to best support refugee students once they enter the United States remains a difficult challenge, but this in-depth study with nine refugee students who migrated to an area in San Diego California provided some additional insight as to some of the strategies that have proved

helpful. The City Heights area of San Diego has become home to a number of the 3,100 refugees who resettled in San Diego County in 2019 (Aguilera, 2020). All students in this study lived in this area. They attend San Diego public schools and have all experienced a time of interrupted education and trauma. They came to United States schools underprepared and suffering from experiences of war, violence, lost loved ones, hunger, poverty and insecurity in general.

Although students and school staff shared many similarities for how the school should address their educational and social–emotional needs, there were significant differences in perspective as to what strategies were most supportive. This disconnect indicates the possible need for greater communication between educators and students.. The students in this study found a school that offered them a place where professionals provided students with English language instruction and social–emotional support. They are benefiting from a structure of classes, programs, and pedagogical techniques, such as check-ins that help address the trauma these refugees endure. They remain challenged by language barriers and the enduring effects of violence.

The findings in this study reinforced earlier research on refugee students (Mendenhall et al., 2017). The strategies that were found in earlier research conducted by Mendenhall et al. (2017), such as (a) the power of increased support from the educators of the schools, (b) linguistic support from their teachers, (c) pedagogical approaches that are learner-centered, (d) encouragement and care, and (e) assessment and curriculum approaches (Mendenhall et al., 2017) remained true for the students in this study.

Limited literature, however, has existed that describes the refugee student experience from their perspective. Moreover, we have known little about how the pre-migration education and emotional experience of refugee students impacts their post academic and social



experiences. This study provided this important information and extends understanding of how educational systems can better support these students. Similar to Tyrer and Fazel (2014), this study sought to understand the school environment of refugee students from the perspective of students who identify as refugees and the perspective of their educators as to how they have been affected by interrupted education and trauma.

We have learned from this study that a learning environment can provide a safe space, resources, access to free school meals, and address some of the challenges that result from interrupted education and trauma. In capturing the lived experiences of refugee students, this study has added important knowledge to the understanding of refugee high school students in San Diego and offers new insights into some of the contextual struggles refugees face living in a very expensive area of the county. This study has also shown the tremendous resilience these students have despite the extremely adverse conditions in which they have lived.

In summary, the student and staff participants provided their own interpretations of the three research study questions: (a) how refugee students' past educational and social experiences influenced their U.S. experiences, (b) how a charter school that serves predominately refugee students has responded to their social and academic needs, and (c) what factors support or undermine refugee students' educational and social experiences. The narrative stories of the student participants have given greater insight into how interrupted education, exposure to violence and war, trauma, taking on caregiver roles, and access to resources—whether food, money, or school materials—has influenced refugee students' educational and social experiences. The staff participants' perspectives have also provided their perceptions on what they have found to influence refugee students' experiences whom have experienced interrupted education and trauma. Overall, they reported when schools and communities provide a safe

environment to refugee students with necessary resources, school personnel can positively influence these students educational and social experiences.

### **Recommendations**

The data presented several findings that offer ways to better support the educational and social experiences of students who identify as refugees and have relocated to the United States.. Based on this data, it is recommended that educators focus on providing a safe learning environment for students who have experienced trauma. Daily check-ins can provide an effective strategy to monitor students. To feel supported, students need notes and assignments translated when possible. They need access to remedial support classes for English, and additional support in content classes (e.g., science classes) due to a lack of vocabulary comprehension. Refugee students need to be provided with school materials and access to additional tutorial support after school hours. And, finally, resettlement agencies need to provide more resources that help to integrate the whole refugee family. Families need better information to help them navigate their new community. Knowing where stores are located, how to use U.S. currency, and how to navigate the new systems they encounter can help them more easily integrate into their new community. Additionally, they need to be placed in neighborhoods with people who speak their language so that they have others to turn to for help.

Refugees felt U.S policies and laws in general helped support their goal of getting an education. They continued to struggle however with the language support they needed. If students had more opportunities to learn English, they may not have found school to be as stressful and would have earned better grades. Students also discussed more opportunities to practice English could have supported their social experiences in making friends and communicating with people in their community.

Refugee families in general need more resources, such as food and the security of a home and a job with an income. The stress refugee parents continued to face in the United States is great. While resettlement agencies help families find good schools in the community, connects families with government assistance such as food stamps and medical, refugee families continue to worry about feeding their children and even securing a safe place to sleep. Most resettlement agencies only provide housing assistance for 6 months before families are held responsible for paying rent.

Some nonprofit organizations provide families with free furniture, dishes, and other items for their homes, which helps them to settle and integrate into their new community. They struggle, however, when they are unable to communicate with their neighbors. Placing refugees in in communities or apartment complexes with other people who speak the same language could allow them to communicate and support each other. Being placed with people who speak the same language can also be beneficial when they are seeking job opportunities and trying to understand the financial system. If refugee families are given greater opportunities to make friends they are more likely to feel part of the community . Having someone to talk to who understands them makes the whole experience of coming to a new country less scary—less alone.

All students wished for more financial support, especially living in expensive San Diego. When refugees are given an income that helps support them financially with paying for rent, groceries, transportation, clothing, and items for school, such support may help alleviate the worries of not having somewhere to live or not having enough food to eat. Living experiences create an enormous burden, particularly in an area like San Diego, where rental prices are extremely high. The financial support they receive is arguably not enough.

As the numbers of refugee resettlement continues to grow worldwide, particularly in light of the large number of Ukrainians fleeing from the Russian invasion, refugee students will continue to need our help. Attitudes toward refugees must change. Over the last few years the Mexico and San Diego border has been closed to refugees. The Biden administration has promised that the United States will increase the number of refugees allowed to come into the United States. The hope, is that when they are here, we are able to do all we can to support them. Schools such as the charter school in this study has arguably taken an important step forward. As Mrs. M, the teacher at the charter school in this study, pointed out:

You can look at the news and stuff, and just see so much negative stuff about countries fighting and people can't get along and things like that but then, you look at our school, you see two countries that might be at war, but there are two kids from those countries sitting together eating lunch, playing soccer, like best friends. It is almost like a model of what the world could be like: if people could see our students, they would be more welcoming of refugees.

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## APPENDIX A: FIELD SITE APPROVAL LETTER

March 3, 2021

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, Challenges faced by students who identify as refugees with interrupted education and trauma, presented by Merdin Mohammed, a graduate student at the University of San Diego (USD), I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at City Heights Prep Charter.

The purpose of the study is to understand the challenges that students who identify as refugees experience. The primary activity will be an online survey and one-on-one interviews with the student participants, school director, and a senior teacher. Only students in high school are eligible to participate.

I understand that this study will occur for *1 - 2 hours outside of normal classroom instruction, and outside of students' regularly scheduled instruction*. Merdin Mohammed is expected to complete all necessary data collection no later than May 2021. Merdin Mohammed has authorization to *contact* and *recruit* our students and will *collect data* from City Heights Prep Charter.

I understand that Merdin Mohammed will receive parental/guardian consent and child assent forms for all participants, and have confirmed that she has the cooperation of the school staff (if necessary). Merdin Mohammed has agreed to provide to my office a copy of the IRB-approved document before she recruits participants on campus. Any data collected by Merdin Mohammed will be kept confidential and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or password-protected laptop for a minimum of five years. Merdin Mohammed has also agreed to provide to us a copy of the aggregate results from this study.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,

[Signature redacted]  
School Director

**APPENDIX B: PARENT OR GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM****University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board****I. Purpose of the research study**

Merdin Mohammed is a doctoral student in the School of Leadership and Education Studies at the University of San Diego and the Assistant Director at the school that your child attends. Your child is being invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to understand the perceptions that students who are identified as refugees who have experienced a time of interrupted education and trauma have about their educational and social experiences both inside and outside of the United States.

**II. What your child will be asked to do:**

If you decide for your child to participate in this study, he or she will be asked to: Participate in an online google survey and a private interview with the researcher about the social and educational challenges your child may have experienced and their perception of their educational experience inside and outside of the United States. The interviews will take place either in-person (if social distancing permits it) or online via-Zoom. Your child's participation in this study may take up to a total of 2 hours. The interview session will be audio recorded and I will also record responses in my research journal. I will be the only one who will have access to the interviews and will not be able to share the interviews with you.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

Sometimes when children are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you, or your child, would like to talk to someone about their feelings at any time, they can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-888-724-7240.

**IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to your child from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing you helped researchers better understand the perceptions refugee students have about their educational and social experiences. Understanding the perception that refugee students hold about their experiences with education can inform how teachers, administrators, and school staff can better understand these students' unique needs for achieving their full potential in an academic environment and beyond.



## **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file for a minimum of 5 years. All data collected from your child will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your child's real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings. Still, information from this study will only be reported as a group and not individually. You will not have access to the data your child gives the researcher.

Confidentiality may be breached under the following circumstances: (1) when there is suspected child abuse or neglect; and/or (2) when there is a reasonable suspicion that the child presents a serious threat of physical violence to himself or others unless protective measures are taken.

## **VI. Compensation**

**Your child will receive no compensation for his/her participation in the study.**

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your child does not have to do this,** and your child can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will not affect any benefits you or your child are entitled to, including health care, employment, or school grades. **Your child can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Merdin Mohammed**

**Email: xxxxx@email.edu**

**2) Dr. Lea Hubbard**

**Email: xxxxx@email.edu**

**Phone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX**

Please fill in the information below and return to Merdin Mohammed.

I \_\_\_\_\_ **GIVE / DO NOT GIVE** (circle one) consent for my child  
\_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **GIVE** permission for my child to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do **NOT** give permission for my child to be audio recorded.

**I have read and understand this form and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

---

Name of Parent/Guardian (**Printed**)

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX C: CHILD ASSENT FORM

**University of San Diego**  
**Institutional Review Board**

My name is Merdin Mohammed, and I am a current doctoral student at the University of San Diego. I am working on my dissertation and need to ask if you would like to participate in my research study as a participant. The research study will allow you to share the possible educational and social challenges you have been faced with as a refugee student.



Here are the things I'm asking you to do:

- I would like for you to participate in an online google survey that will ask demographical questions about you.
- I would like for you to participate in a one-on-one interview that could last between 1-2 hours.
- I will ask you questions about any social and educational challenges that you may have faced as a refugee student (both inside and outside of the United States).
- I will ask you about your experiences at the current charter school.
- I will ask you about your experiences with interrupted education and trauma.

This is not like a test at school. There are no right or wrong answers. Depending on what your parent consented to, the interview will be audio-recorded. I will also record your answers by writing your answers down in my journal. I want you to know that no one will have access to the interviews, including your parents/guardian. In my notes, and the published written paper, no one will know it is you as I will not use your real name. I will use a pseudonym and no one will know it is you from the audio-recordings as well.

If there are some parts of this you do not want to do, just tell your Mom/Dad/Guardian. Your Mom/Dad/Guardian will NOT be able to see the stuff you tell me.

If you tell me that:

- Somebody is hurting you or
- You want to hurt yourself or someone else, I will need to tell somebody.

If you need information about mental health services in the county of San Diego, please call 1-888-724-7240, this number is available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger or have strong suicidal thoughts, please call 911. If you are not in

immediate danger, but have thoughts of suicide, you can reach out to the national suicide prevention lines at 1-800-784-2433 or 1-800-273-8255.

It's OK to say 'No,' and nobody will be mad at you. Do you think this is OK for you?

I think it is OK for me to do this. I can change my mind at any time.

---

Child's printed name

Signature

Date

## APPENDIX D: SCHOOL DIRECTOR AND TEACHER CONSENT FORM

### University of San Diego Institutional Review Board Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:  
Challenges faced by students who identify as Refugees with interrupted education and Trauma.

#### **I. Purpose of the research study**

Merdin Mohammed is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Studies at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to understand the perceptions that students who are identified as refugees who have experienced a time of interrupted education and trauma have about their educational and social experiences both inside and outside of the United States.

#### **II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview that could last between 1-2 hours about your experiences of working at the charter school and experiences of working with students who are identified as refugees. You will be audio recorded during this interview and she will be the only one with access to the interview.

#### **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-888-724-7240.

#### **IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing you helped researchers better understand the perceptions students who identify as refugees have about their educational and social experiences. Understanding the perception that students who identify as refugees hold about their experiences with education can inform how teachers, administrators, and school staff can better understand these students' unique needs for achieving their full potential in an academic environment and beyond. This will also serve as a resource to other administrators and educators.

#### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may not be used in future research.

#### **VI. Compensation**

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

#### **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this,** and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to.

**You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

#### **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Merdin Mohammed**  
**Email:xxxxx@email.edu**

**2) Dr. Lea Hubbard**  
**Email:xxxxx@email.edu**  
**Phone: (XXX)XXX-XXXX**

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX E: SAMPLE STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Thank you for participating in the research study. This google survey should take 30 minutes to complete. This survey will allow me to learn more about you.

Question 1: Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 3: Country of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 4: Family Size: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 5: Who makes up your family: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 6: Where do you fall within your family (oldest, youngest, etc.) : \_\_\_\_\_

Question 7: Where are you a refugee of: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 8: What are the place(s) of relocation and date(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Question 9: U.S arrival date: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 10: Age when you relocated to the United States: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 11: What year did you attend the Charter School: \_\_

Question 12: What is your current grade level: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 13: How long have you been enrolled at the school: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F: SAMPLE STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the interview guide is to gain valuable information from current high school students who are identified as refugees enrolled at the Charter school to gain feedback on their educational and social experiences.

I'd love to hear feedback on the academic, emotional, and instructional support of the schools that you have attended inside and outside of the United States. As a student, this is a great opportunity to tell your story. Your participation will allow me to answer my research questions.

It is important that you are honest with your answers and know that you can choose to not answer questions and you can also choose to stop at any time.

All responses will be kept anonymous. I really appreciate your input!

### **Biographical and Migration Questions**

I will begin by asking you questions to learn more about you and your family.

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and your family history.
  - What are some things you enjoy doing? Your favorite hobby?
  - What is your typical day at home like?
  - What role do you take on at home?
  - Do you work?
2. Did you have to leave your home country to move to a new place?
  - Where did you relocate to?
  - Why did you have to relocate?
  - Who relocated with you?
  - In what year was this?
  - How old were you?
  - What was your migration experience like?
3. In total, how many times did you have to relocate from your home country? Please tell me a little more about this.
4. Tell me a little about why you relocated to the United States.
  - Who relocated with you?
  - Was there an organization that helped you and your family relocate?
  - How did you get to City Heights?
  - How did you learn about the Charter School?

### **Social and Educational Experiences Outside of the United States**

Thank you for filling out the survey. I understand that you are a refugee from \_\_\_\_\_ and that you relocated to the United States in \_\_\_\_\_ at the age of \_\_\_\_\_.

I will ask you questions about some of your educational and social experiences prior to arriving



to the United States. I will begin by asking you questions about your educational experiences first.

### Educational Experiences

1. Please tell me about your educational experiences outside of the United States.
  - What school(s) did you attend?
  - How old were you when you went to school?
  - Was school free or did you have to pay for it? Why?
  - In what language did you learn and why?
  - In what ways do you think your gender affected your educational experience?
  - What differences do you see in your classrooms between boys and girls?
    - Describe how the school and your classroom looked like. What was inside of the classrooms – school materials, tech, books, etc.
    - Tell me a little about lunch time at school.
    - Tell me a little about the staff at the school.
2. In your own words, define interrupted education.
3. Growing up, have you ever experienced a time of interrupted education? If so, for how long (time), when (age), and where (place), and why?
4. How has your interrupted education influenced your experience in the United States?
5. When you think about your education experience, what thoughts or concerns did you have about starting school in the United States?
6. Please describe how you perceive your overall educational experiences outside of the United States.
7. What could have made your educational experience different?

### Social Experiences

1. Please tell me about your social experience outside of the United States while living in \_\_\_\_\_.
2. (If any) please describe any other challenges that you faced outside of America.
  - Has your gender affected your social experiences? If so, how? Why?
3. In your own words, define trauma.
  - Growing up, have you ever experienced a time of trauma? If so, please tell me a little more about this. When? Where? What resources (if any) helped?
4. Please describe how you perceive your overall social experiences outside of the United States.

### Social and Educational Experiences Inside of the United States

I understand that you are in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade and have been enrolled at the school for \_\_\_\_ years. I will ask you questions to learn more about your educational experiences in the United States.

1. How did you get to this school?
  - What would you change about your current school?

2. Please describe your learning experiences at your current school. They could be from this school year, previous years, or in totality.
  - What are the challenges?
  - What do you like?
3. Please tell me about your experiences of other schools that you attended inside of the United States.
  - What schools did you attend?
  - What did you like about them?
  - What did you not like?
4. What could have made your educational experience different?

#### School Culture Questions

1. What is your day like in school?
  - What time do you go to school?
  - How do you get to school? Who goes with you?
  - What is your favorite class and why?
  - Are you involved in any school clubs? If so, which ones?
  - What time does your school day end?
2. Does anything make you afraid? If so, tell me a little more about it?
  - How does that influence your time at school?
3. In what ways, if any, does this school feel like a safe atmosphere to learn?
  - What does the teacher do to make it feel safe?
  - When is it not safe? What happens to make you feel afraid?
4. What kind of emotional support system does the school have in place for students?
5. In what ways, if any, does your teacher(s) show you that they care about you?
6. How does the school provide equal opportunities for all students?
7. To what extent do you feel that the charter school responded to your educational needs?
8. To what extent do you feel that the charter school responded to your socio-emotional needs?
9. Do you think that all the other girls/boys who are refugees in this school have the same experiences as you? Why?

#### Educational Materials/Instruction Questions

1. Do you have access to school materials? Why or why not?
  - How could you get materials if you don't have them?
2. How does your teacher(s) check that you understand the learning content?
  - What kind of language does your teacher(s) use when teaching?
3. How does the school ensure that students have access to additional academic support?
4. Are you in special classes? How does it work? Not work? Challenging?
5. Do you take AVID? In what ways if any does AVID help?
6. Are there any other specific supports for refugee students at this school?
7. How could the school better support refugee students?

#### Social Experiences

1. Please tell me about your social experiences inside of the United States.

- (If any) please describe any other challenges that you face inside of the United States.
- 2. Have you ever experienced a time of trauma in the United States? If so, please tell me a little more about this. When? Where? What resources (if any) helped?
- 3. Please describe how you perceive your overall social experiences inside of the United States.
- 4. What could have made your social experiences different?
- 5. Do you think that all the other girls/boys who are refugees in your community have the same experiences as you? Why?
- 6. What could better help refugee students become more socially integrated or comfortable in the US?

Other

1. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

## APPENDIX G: SAMPLE SCHOOL DIRECTOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the interview guide is to gain valuable information from the school director of the Charter school to gain feedback on serving students who identify as refugees who have experienced a time of interrupted formal education and trauma.

I'd love to hear feedback on the academic, emotional, and instructional support of the school. Your participation will allow me to answer my research questions. It is important that you are honest with your answers and know that you can choose to not answer questions and you can also choose to stop at any time.

All responses will be kept anonymous. I really appreciate your input!

### **Questions: Why School Director?**

I will begin by asking you questions to learn more about your path to becoming a school director.

1. Please tell me a little about what interested you in becoming a school director.
  - When did you know that you wanted to become a school director?
  - Tell me a little about what sparked that interest.
  - Tell me a little about what you had to do to become a school director.
  - Tell me a little about your experiences of getting your admin credential.
  - What (if any) challenges did you encounter?
2. Please tell me a little about your admin experience (s)
  - Tell me a little about what school(s) you were a school director at and why you picked those school(s).
  - Where were the schools located? What student group(s) made up the student body?
  - Tell me a little about your experiences at the school(s).

### **Questions: Why the Charter School?**

The next questions are interested in learning more about why you chose the charter school.

1. Tell me a little about why you had chosen to work at the Charter School
  - What made you interested in the charter school?
  - How long have you been at the school?
  - Tell me a little about your initial thoughts of the school.
2. Tell me a little about the School Structure and Curriculum
  - Tell me a little about the mission of the school.
  - What is the intent of the charter school in terms of the refugee population
  - Tell me a little about the school staff. Do they have experience teaching refugee students?
  - What qualifications do you specifically look for when you are hiring new faculty?
  - Tell me a little about the school culture
  - (If any) Tell me a little about some of the changes that have been made at the school.
  - Tell me a little about how the school is or is not built to support the learning loss and trauma that refugee students experience.

- Tell me a little about the curriculum that is used at the school.
- Tell me a little about how the common core standards are taught and how it does/does not address the learning needs of refugee students.
- Tell me a little about parental involvement and some of the challenges? (if any)
- 3. Tell me a little about the Charter School student body
  - Who makes up the student body?
  - Tell me a little about how the students interact with one another and the staff.
  - In what ways if any do refugee students interact similarly or differently from their peers
  - Have you worked with this student population at previous sites?
  - What (if any) challenges do you see as you oversee the academic needs of this student population?

### **Student Perceptions**

- Tell me a little about the academic challenges that you have seen that affect the teaching and learning of refugee students
  - I. Similarities and differences from their peers
- Tell me a little about the resources that support addressing refugee learning loss/needs.
- What have you found to be supportive of addressing refugee academic needs.
- What have you found to be supportive of addressing refugee socio-emotional needs.
- Tell me a little about how refugee students perceive their educational needs (if app)
- Tell me a little about how refugee students perceive how the school has responded to their educational needs.
- Tell me a little about how refugee students perceive the trauma they have experienced (if app)
- Tell me a little about how refugee students perceive how the school has responded to refugee socio-emotional needs/trauma that they have experienced.
- 4. Tell me a little about how it is like to be the school administrator of the Charter School
  - Tell me a little about your experiences of working with refugee students.
  - Tell me a little about how you were prepared to work with these group of students.
  - Tell me a little about staff meetings and how teachers are able to get additional support.
  - What do you enjoy about the school? What are some of the challenges?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

## APPENDIX H: TEACHER SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of the interview guide is to gain valuable information from a senior teacher teaching at the Charter school to gain feedback on the experiences of teaching students who are identified as refugees who have experienced a time of interrupted formal education and trauma.

I'd love to hear feedback on the academic, emotional, and instructional support of the school. Your participation will allow me to answer my research questions and gain insight from teaching staff who teach the refugee population. It is important that you are honest with your answers and know that you can choose to not answer questions and you can also choose to stop at any time.

All responses will be kept anonymous. I really appreciate your input!

### **Questions: Why Teaching?**

I will begin by asking you questions to learn more about your path to becoming a teacher.

1. Please tell me a little about what interested you in becoming a teacher.
  - When did you know that you wanted to teach?
  - Tell me a little about what sparked that teaching interest.
  - Where did you get your teacher credential at? What teaching credential(s) do you hold? • Tell me a little about your experiences of getting your teacher credential(s)
  - What (if any) challenges did you encounter?
2. Please tell me a little about your teaching experience (s)
  - Tell me a little about school(s) you have taught at and why you picked those school(s). • Where were the school(s) located? What student group(s) made up the student body? • Tell me a little about your experiences of teaching at the school(s).
  - Tell me a little about your teaching style.

### **Questions: Why Teach at the Charter School?**

The next questions are interested in learning more about why you chose to teach at the charter school.

1. Tell me why you have chosen to teach at the Charter School
  - What made you interested in teaching at the charter school?
  - How long have you been teaching at the school?
  - What grade(s) and content classes do you teach?

- Are you aware of the percentage of refugee students in the classrooms/at the school? • You should ask something about their awareness that there are so many refugee students. • Have they taught refugees before?
2. Tell me a little about the School Structure and Curriculum
- Tell me a little about the mission of the school
  - Tell me a little about the school staff
  - Tell me a little about the school culture
  - Tell me a little about how the school is or is not built to support the learning loss and trauma that refugee students experience (if app)
  - Tell me a little about the curriculum that is used at the school. Is it effective (what do you mean here?? If not, why? What would make it effective?
    - Can you describe the learning and social needs of refugee students?
  - Tell me a little about how you teach the common core standards and how it does or does not address the learning needs of refugee students.
  - Tell me a little about parental involvement among the refugee population and some of the challenges? (if any)
    - Tell me a little about what you would change about the school (if app)
    - What have you found to be supportive of addressing refugee academic needs • What have you found to be supportive of addressing refugee socio-emotional needs • How could the school better accommodate the academic and social needs of refugee students?
3. Tell me a little about how it is like teaching at the Charter School
- Tell me a little about your experiences of teaching refugee students.
  - Tell me a little about how you were prepared to teach these group of students.
  - (If app) Tell me a little about how the school/administrator has prepared you to teach. • Tell me a little about staff meetings and how teachers are able to get additional support. • (If app) Tell me how the school has prepared you to address the learning needs and trauma that the refugee students have encountered.
  - Tell me a little about what the school/administrator could have done to support you. • What do you enjoy about teaching at the school? What are the challenges?
  - What are some things that you would keep/change about the teaching?
4. Tell me a little about the Charter School student body
- Who makes up the student body?
  - Tell me a little about how the students interact with one another and the staff. • Have you worked with this student population at previous sites?
  - What (if any) challenges do you face teaching the students?
  - Tell me what you enjoy about teaching these group of students.

Students' Perceptions of their experience at the charter school

- Tell me a little about the academic challenges that you have seen to affect learning • Tell me a little about the resources that support addressing refugee learning loss/needs • Tell me a little about how students who are identified as refugees perceive their educational needs (if app)
- Tell me a little about how students who are identified as refugees perceive how the school has responded to their educational needs.
- Tell me a little about how students who are identified as refugees perceive the trauma they have experienced (if app)
- Tell me a little about how students who are identified as refugees perceive how the school has responded to their socio-emotional needs/trauma they have experienced.

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?



## Study Details

## Submissions

Approved

**IRB-2021-259** Challenges faced by students who identify as Refugees with interrupted education and trauma.


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Link Proposal

<b>Approval Date:</b>	<b>Expiration Date:</b>	<b>Organization:</b>	<b>Active Submissions:</b>
03-18-2021	N/A	Sch of Leadership & Ed Science	N/A
<b>Admin Check-In Date:</b>	<b>Closed Date:</b>	<b>Current Policy</b>	<b>Sponsors:</b>
03-17-2022	N/A	Post-2018 Rule	N/A

## Key Contacts ⓘ

## Attachments

Team Member	Role	Number	Email
Merdin Mohammed	Principal Investigator	6192604600	mmohammed@san Diego.edu
Lea Hubbard	Primary Contact	619-260-7818	lhubbard@SanDiego.edu