Schooling Experiences and Perceptions of Resettled Sub-Saharan African Refugee Middle School Students in a Southwest U.S. State

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Approved April 2012 by the Graduate Supervisory Committee:

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May 2012
ABSTRACT

This study examined the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students in a metropolitan area of the United States Southwest. The research questions underpinning this study included: What are the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students in a southwestern U.S. state? 1a) How do they view their relationships with their teachers and peers? 1b) Can they identify a teacher or school staff member in their school community who is a significant resource for them? and 1c) What factors contribute to their challenges and successes in their school community?

This qualitative study documented and analyzed the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled refugee middle school students, who are relatively new to the U.S. educational system. Purposive and convenience sampling were sources utilized in selecting participants for this study. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to capture the stories of 10 resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students enrolled in 7th and 8th grade, who have lived in the U.S. not more than 10 years and not less than three years. Among the participants, half were male and half female. They came from six countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Somalia.

Findings of the study revealed six major themes: teachers’ helpfulness, positive perceptions of school, friends as resources at school, disruptive students
in the classroom, need for better teachers, and before and after school activities.

Overall, the participants in the study expressed a positive perception of their teachers and their schools, yet presented a dichotomous view of their schooling experiences and perceptions.
To my beloved late mother, who was not allowed to go to school because she was a girl, yet knew that education would change the trajectory of her daughters’ lives.

Thus her simple wish for her three daughters was

“to learn how to read and write”.

That simple wish became a dream for academic excellence.

Amie Kamara, I thank you for giving your three girls Wings to Soar like an Eagle.

May your soul continue to rest in perfect peace.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I once said that I stand on the wings of women. From the wings of my mother, who simply wanted me to read and write, and the countless other women who have contributed in one way or another to my academic, personal, and professional journey, I am appreciative for blessing my life with your love and support. To each one of you, I am grateful and I say thank you. To Mariama Turay, who I call my other “mommy,” I say thank you for your unconditional love and support. There are a few people I would like to acknowledge. They include my dissertation committee at Arizona State University, friends, and family.

Professionally, words cannot express my gratitude to my chair, Dr. Beth Blue Swadener, who embodied humanity at its highest and an instrument for God’s purpose. Her compassion, personal touch, continual encouragement and probing for scholarship was invaluable. I am honored to have had your guidance as a beacon in this journey, meeting me “where I was,” and making it work for me. Dr. Swadener, I thank you for believing in my dream. I also wish to thank Dr. Barbara Klimek and Dr. Lynn Miller, for accepting committee membership, meeting me “where I was”, and contributing to my professional journey with their expertise on resettled refugees. For Dr. Mary Brainerd, at Our Lady of the Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts, Dr. Joan Berzoff, at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and Anne Schelling, in the Kyrene School District
in Tempe, Arizona, my heart is forever grateful for supporting my academic endeavor.

Many thanks to the children who participated in this study, their parents, and siblings, for opening their hearts and homes to me. My gratitude goes to Eman Yarrow, a friend and fellow doctoral student, Georgia Sepic, apartment building manager, John Larsala, homework club coordinator for resettled refugee students, and Vital Ntibushemeye, school liaison for a refugee resettlement agency, in their support for the recruitment phase of this study. For writing support, I thank Claudette Wisdom, Susan Amaya, and Toni Robinson, for being my second set of eyes, reading chapters and probing with their own questions.

For sustaining me spiritually and emotionally, I thank my sisters, Aminah Sallu, Olayinka Massally, and my circle of sister friends with words of encouragement and prayers. Each of you know who you are. Thus, from my heart to yours, I say thank you. Finally, to my children, Amie and Cymche’, I say thank you for always asking about my work and helping me with the technical stuff. Cymche’, mom did not cook much during the last phase of this study, and you managed on your own while I sat in the office upstairs writing. Thanks for understanding and letting mom be saturated in her work.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends suggest that immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the United States (U.S.) child population, with present census data estimating their number to be over 15 million (Butcher, 2010; Conchas, 2001; Kanu, 2008; Njue, 2004). Today, immigrant children comprise over 20% of the U.S. population, and, if current trends continue, immigrant children will represent 25% of the U.S. child population by 2012. This unprecedented flow of immigration has been noted to surpass the 19th century immigration wave of European immigrants to the U.S. Researchers cite the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 and the 1980 Refugee Act as the genesis for this immigration trend (Belete, Hamza, & Touorouzou, 2008; Fuligni, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Vang, 2005). Both immigration laws allowed the flow of millions of non-European immigrants, among them a significant number of sub-Saharan African refugee school-aged children, who differ significantly from the dominant white population currently found in the U.S. The schooling experiences and perceptions of this subgroup of new immigrants in America’s middle schools are relevant in educational research because they provides educators with an understanding of the varied educational needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students during a pivotal time in their middle school years.
Scope of Research

This dissertation explores the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students — specifically from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia — in a southwestern U.S. state, within the context of education during the middle school years. I hypothesize that students with positive school experiences and perceptions have a higher level of school engagement than students with negative school experiences and perceptions. This chapter examines the challenges faced by resettled sub-Saharan African refugees both before and after their arrival in the U.S. I will further provide an overview of how I arrived at this topic, followed by the purpose of this study and the research question.

Non-European Immigrant Children

Non-European immigrant children newly arriving in the U.S., and immigrant parents who have had children in the U.S. in the past three decades, are mostly from the Global South and non-English speaking countries. While the majority of earlier immigrants to the U.S. came from Europe, immigrants entering the United States since 1965 have come primarily from Latin America and Asia. In the last thirty years, African and Caribbean immigrants have also joined the immigrant population (Kanu, 2008; Levitt, 2001; Sambul, 2004). These groups of new immigrants differ significantly from earlier immigrants in terms of ethnicity, language, race, and socioeconomic status. The last thirty years have also seen a shift in the reasons for immigration, away from those searching for economic
opportunities, and towards refugees and those seeking political asylum (Rong & Brown, 2002).

Many of these immigrants and resettled refugees either have children, or are themselves children, entering schools in the U.S. Researchers studying the experiences of immigrant children have expressed hope and concern about their overall well-being (Greenman & Xie, 2006; Lew, 2006, 2007; Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002; Vang, 2005). The presence of immigrant children in classrooms in the U.S. has raised concerns about their academic success and adaptation in a racialized society, because academic success is often a pathway to optimal adult functioning in the U.S. Specifically, researchers have concerns about the emerging patterns of immigrant children’s educational performance (Lew, 2007; Pong, 2003; Portes, 1999; Rumbaut, 1994; M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). On one hand, researchers have noted a higher frequency of poverty among immigrants, especially those housed in inner city communities. Poverty makes it likely that immigrant children will attend poor schools, engage in gang affiliation, and become involved in the drug trade (Greenman & Xie, 2007). On the other hand, researchers have also noted immigrants’ thirst for an education, and their consistently excellent academic performance when compared to native-born American peers (Lew, 2006). Understanding why some immigrant children do well in school, while others fall prey to academic failure, is a crucial consideration in the study of immigrant children.
For immigrant children, school is the point of entrance to a new culture, and it is a key place where they make meaningful contact with their new world (M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Schools have a powerful effect on how students experience their social condition; therefore, immigrant students’ early interactions with schooling, whether positive or negative, have a profound impact on their educational careers and future success. Researchers have noted that quality education is a major pathway to socioeconomic mobility for immigrant children, regardless of their trajectory into the U.S. Conchas (2001) examined the academic achievement of Mexican American students in an urban high school. He found that the students did not feel they had access to good teachers in their school, and often felt invisible on their campus. This invisibility is similar to the findings of Butcher’s (2010) study of perceptions among African immigrants enrolled in high schools in a midwestern city of the United States. Students in that study reported being rendered invisible in their classrooms and school community, which in turn heightened their experiences and perceptions of disengagement from the classroom milieu.

The invisibility theme was also evident in Suarez-Orozco’s (1987) study of Central American immigrants in inner city schools. His study revealed that many immigrant children were placed in “overcrowded, understaffed classes in overcrowded, understaffed poor inner city schools” (p. 288). Despite the educational disparity faced by these immigrant students, they believed in “becoming somebody,” and that school was the place where this hope of
“becoming somebody” can happen. Conchas’s (2001) study of Latino students’ school engagement contended that low teacher expectations, lack of cultural awareness, Eurocentric curricula, and a lack of institutional support systems were factors in the low academic achievement among Latinos, when compared to their white peers. This variation between two studies of Hispanic students indicates that immigrant children are not a homogenous group. Rather, each group has distinct attributes that affect them as they seek to negotiate an educational system with embedded Eurocentric norms, and a number of factors play a role in the school success or failure of the immigrant child.

As noted earlier, certain segments of the immigrant student population tend to do better in schools, and have greater social and economic mobility, than earlier immigrants. In particular, these immigrant children tend to have higher socio-economic status and strong cultural networks that support their education. Pong (2003) noted variation in school performance within groups. Larger percentages of immigrant children from Asia demonstrate academic advantage and outperform white children native to the U.S. Yet, within the Asian population, Chinese, Southeast Asians some groups, e.g., Hmong refugees do not do as well (Vang, 2005), and Koreans fare better than Pacific Islanders. The same academic variance is noted among Hispanic groups, with Cuban immigrants outperforming the other Hispanic groups, including Mexicans, the largest Hispanic group. Several assumptions have been noted in the literature to account for this variability in school performance among immigrant children. The first
assumption is that an immigrant student’s reasons for leaving his or her homeland, their status in the host country, their context upon arrival, and the resources available to them, all shape their school performance (Levitt, 2001).

Lew (2006) argued that schooling achievement among immigrant children largely depends on the social and economic context of their communities and schools. The role of parental socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, and achievement motivation needs to be considered when explaining academic variability. As for refugee students, the scars of war and other traumatic episodes must also be considered a factor in their school performance (Davis, 2008; Kanu, 2008).

Sub-Saharan Africans in the United States

In this dissertation, I have chosen to identify *sub-Saharan Africans* as Africans south of the Saharan desert and/or with dark skin pigmentation. Sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees account for about 4% of the overall immigrant population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Like other immigrant groups, sub-Saharan Africans come to the United States seeking a new life or refuge from the social, political, and economic turmoil plaguing their homeland. As a group, they utilize several pathways in order to reach the United States. The first pathway is that of obtaining an educational or professional visa, followed by the U.S. State Department Lottery Visa system. The Visa Lottery Program allocates 25,000 immigrant visas for Africans each year — excluding spouses and children, who are often added once an individual
wins the lottery (Ghong, Larke, Saah, & Webb-Johnson, 2007). Another pathway is provided by the 1980 Refugee Act, which increased the influx of global refugees, with a higher percentage of sub-Saharan Africans seeking refugee status in the United States (and other Western industrialized countries) than before (U.S. Committee of Refugees, 2004).

The global migration of sub-Saharan African refugee children has increased the number of resettled school-age refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa in U.S. classrooms. Sub-Saharan African refugee students come to U.S. schools, not just as African immigrants and racial minorities, but as refugees who are resettled as a result of war and dislocation in their home countries. Such students have typically spent many years in refugee camps in the initial receiving country, before being resettled in the United States. In U.S. schools, resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students receive what is likely their first sustained exposure to the multifaceted issues of race, culture, and socioeconomics, and also issues of invisibility (Butcher, 2010; Shepard, 2005). These issues individually have a jarring effect that may influence students’ experiences, perceptions, motivations, overall school engagement, and academic outcomes. Because systems are interactive, the multiplicity of factors noted may collectively impact an individual’s level of functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Several explanations have been given to account for the invisibility experienced by resettled sub-Saharan African refugee children in schools in the U.S. One of the explanations is skin color. Because resettled sub-Saharan
African refugee students share skin color with native-born African Americans, teachers often perceive them to be African American without fully exploring the diversity they present in terms of language, culture, ethnicity, religious differences, and learning styles, both within their group and among those who share their skin color (McBrien, 2005). Secondly, if students identify as Africans, teachers often do not know if they are refugees or immigrants (Sambul, 2004), and schools lack the structures to help identify the differences between resettled refugees, immigrants, and native-born African Americans. Teachers’ perceptions tend to deny educators the opportunity to authentically examine the educational needs of this new group, thereby ignoring the needs of the resettled refugee students as learners.

**Educational Challenges Faced Pre-arrival in the U.S.**

The education of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students is influenced by a multitude of factors, and the situation is further heightened for those coming from post-conflict regions prior to their arrival to the United States. These factors include: a) language of instruction; b) access and availability of schools; c) gender practices that influenced girls’ access to education; d) lack of assurance for meaningful universal educational access; and e) political and social turmoil plaguing sub-Saharan Africa (Belete et al., 2008; Butcher, 2010; Njue & Retish, 2010; Shepard, 2005). Of the factors noted, three represent major challenges to the education of students when they are in sub-Saharan Africa. These factors individually — or in combination — tend to undermine the
education received by most sub-Saharan African students. Because of the disparity between the educational systems in their home countries and the U.S., students are often unable to cope with the instructional expectations in the U.S.

The first factor that creates a challenge for resettled sub-Saharan refugee students is the issue of language. Many countries in Africa have more than one indigenous language, plus an official language, which is often a language from the legacy of Africa’s post-colonial administrators. Though many countries utilized the language of their colonial administrators as their official lingua franca, there are a few countries where the question of language of instruction has remained an area of contention. The complexity of language of instructional choice often accompanies resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students to the U.S., and tends to negatively impact their learning, especially if that language is not English (Njue & Retish, 2010).

The second factor that becomes a challenge for resettled refugee students is the inaccessibility of education and/or the lack of meaningful universal education in sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations has noted this lack of accessibility as a crisis. Several reasons have been suggested for this educational crisis: a) protracted civil wars; b) underfinancing of education; c) economic stagnation; d) rapid population growth; and e) a reduction of spending on pupil education by 20% in real terms since 1980 (United Nations, 2007).

Consequently, over 20 million children of primary school age are out of school, and millions more leave school before gaining basic literacy skills (United Nation,
As a continent, sub-Saharan Africa spends less on education than a single country in the industrialized nations. As a result, education is not accessible to all school-aged children. Though it is home to 15% of the world’s children and young adults, public expenditure on educational spending is the lowest, at 2.4%. This is in contrast to North America and Europe, which account for less than 10% of the world’s children and young people, but 55% of public expenditure on education (UNESCO, 2007). This underfinancing of education appears to be directly linked to the lack of access to schools, and, for those enrolled in schools, a lack of access to quality education.

The third factor that creates challenges for resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in U.S. schools is the prevalence of gender practices that tend to marginalize girls and their access to education. Within some communities in sub-Saharan Africa, embedded cultural beliefs regarding the role of women within the family and larger community appear to limit the rights of girls’ access to education. The role of girls as future housewives and mothers denies any urgency that formal education for them is of importance (Njue & Retish, 2010).

The fourth factor that affects the students is the political and social instability in their home continent, which has propelled the displacement of millions of people within and outside of sub-Saharan Africa. Awuku (1995) noted that “civil wars, inter-state conflict, conflicts caused by socio-economic and governmental changes, ethnic conflicts, abuses of human and individual rights coupled with natural disasters have resulted in the unprecedented refugee
movement” (p. 79). Disruption of schooling, and the traumatic experiences of war, have had a horrendous effect on the education and mental health of refugee students.

**Resettled Sub-Saharan African Refugees**

The number of resettled refugees from sub-Saharan Africa has been on the rise since the 1960s. For example, the number of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees rose from less than 100,000 in the 1960s to 5 million in the mid 1990s, but dropped to 3 million in the 2000s. At the beginning of the 21st century, sub-Saharan Africans accounted for a quarter of the total number of refugees in the world. The main countries of origin for refugees are Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Somalia (Njue & Retish, 2010; Tabutin & Schoumaker, 2002). These refugees’ destinations are often outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and many seek refugee status in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States.

In the last two decades, a large number of sub-Saharan African refugees have sought permanent residency in the United States after fleeing from atrocities in their country of origin, and years of living in refugee camps. Research data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report that half of all refugees entering the United States are school-aged children. Social science researchers Belete and colleagues (2008), Davies (2008), Kanu (2008), and M. Suarez-Orozco (2001), have suggested that these refugee groups often contain a large number of poorly schooled, semiskilled, or unskilled workers that
have lived in refugee camps prior to their final destination. The majority of school-aged resettled sub-Saharan African refugee children never had access to school; and for those who did, their schooling was insufficient (Davies, 2008). Researchers have cited political and socioeconomic instabilities in sub-Saharan Africa as the causes of the fractured education experienced by refugees (McBrein, 2005; Davis, 2008; Rong & Brown, 2001).

McBrien (2005) suggested that there are two types of refugees within the refugee prototype. The first type are described as *anticipatory refugees*: this group foresees unrest, makes plans to depart, and may choose a country that will provide refugee status. Anticipatory refugees tend to be educated and financially stable. The second type are described as *acute refugees*: danger for this group is immediate. They are likely to experience traumatic episodes and are often poor and unskilled. Sub-Saharan African refugees tend to fall in the acute refugee group. They are forced to leave their country of origin under violent and traumatic conditions and, prior to permanent resettlement by the United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), their experiences in camps are fraught with traumatic episodes (McBrein, 2005). Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by traumatic situations experienced by refugee children can be detrimental to their learning and overall schooling experiences. As a result, upon arrival in the U.S., resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students struggle to fit into a school environment that is culturally, educationally, and linguistically different from
their prior educational experiences (Awuku, 1995; Davies, 2008; Njue & Retish, 2010; Sambul, 2004).

**Educational Challenges Postarrival**

The presence of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees in the U.S. has been an area of profound challenge for schools and students. Historically, resettled refugee groups have largely been concentrated in poor, inner city communities, due to the low cost of housing, access to public transportation, and entry-level jobs (Portes, 1997). Resettled sub-Saharan African refugees of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to reside in poor, inner city communities in large metropolitan cities in the United States. Schools in these communities are repeatedly presented with a number of social and economic challenges that tend to diminish the quality of education received by students enrolled in urban schools. Researchers have cited a decreased tax base, a heavy flow of new immigrants and resettled refugees, declining educational budgets, under-resourced schools, and endemic gang activity and drug activities as reasons for the educational underperformance of urban school districts (Belete et al., 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; M. Suarez-Orozco, 1987, 2001; Zhou, 1997; Vang, 2005). It is within such a challenging educational structure that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ educational and social needs compete with those of poor native-born Americans for the scarce educational resources allocated to schools.

Rong and Brown (2001, 2002) have suggested seven factors that challenge the sub-Saharan African immigrant’s educational experiences in the U.S.
classroom. First is their previous educational background, which may differ from the educational experiences of native-born Americans. Education in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of resettled refugees originate from, is fractured or non-existent. As a result, educational levels are not comparable to those in the United States. Second, age of entry into schools is a challenge that often leads to mismatching the actual grade level of the student. The third factor, cultural conflict, impacts the refugee’s value system, as students negotiate the expectations of the dominant society and those of their parents’ African identity. This cultural push and pull on sub-Saharan African immigrant and refugee students leads to relational strains between parents and children, and sometimes withdrawal from school and work (Rong & Brown, 2001, 2002).

The fourth factor is parental involvement or noninvolvement, which can lead to misunderstandings between parent and school. In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the business of educating students belongs solely to the teachers, and parents trust schools to duly perform this duty (Sambul, 2004). In the U.S., lack of parental involvement tends to equate to parents who do not care about the educational wellbeing of their children. A teacher’s phone call to a parent’s home has a different interpretation for the sub-Saharan African parent, because parents believe that teachers should deal with school problems and not involve the parents. Parental involvement from the sub-Saharan African point of view tends to mean that teachers lack control over their students and lack competency in their profession. This tension of misunderstanding is one of the key educational issues

The fifth factor, the need to work to support the family, is another challenge confronting some resettled sub-Saharan African refugees and immigrant students, who believe that it is their duty to help their families. Hence, providing financial help in sustaining their families, or paying an unspoken gratitude to their parents for bringing them to the United States, is perceived to be part of the cultural nuance (Belete et al., 2008).

Regular school attendance is cited as one element which contributes to school success. The sixth post-migration factor of mobility therefore has an adverse effect on the schooling experiences of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees and immigrants. Recurrent moves, related to employment, housing, or the need to travel to their country of origin, interrupt the learning of students, in turn causing gaps in their learning (Rong & Brown, 2002).

The seventh factor noted is the psychological adjustment that students experience upon arrival in the U.S. Depending on the mode of entrance, some students who came as resettled refugees might have the most difficult transition, as they cope with the trauma of war, life in a refugee camp, and the loss of loved ones. These traumatic episodes might have an adverse effect on the education of refugee students (Rong & Brown, 2002, 2007).

The myriad educational and social needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students entering schools in the U.S. must be recognized in order for
educators to address the educational challenges presented to this group of learners. In response, teachers must diligently make accommodations to meet their educational needs. In the U.S., quality education is the vehicle for optimal adult functioning, and positively positions the U.S. in the global economic market. Therefore, responding to the educational and social needs of this new group of learners will help them become contributing members of our global society.

**Background of this Study**

While on an educational trip to Argentina over the summer of 2009, through the Arizona State University’s Graduate School of Education, one of the professors who accompanied our group, Dr. Gustavo Fischman, suggested that I explore immigration and education. I chuckled and responded with a passive nod as I contemplated the many paths that may lead to a doable and intriguing dissertation question. The exchange with Dr. Fischman led me to reflect on a situation in my school district in the 2009-2010 school year, when the assistant superintendent of the Kay School District (pseudonym) requested that I help the principal at Nan Elementary (pseudonym) with a situation involving resettled Somali refugee families. Resettled Somali refugee families and advocacy groups raised concerns that their children were “fed pork” in school lunches and eating pork is forbidden in their Islamic religious tradition. Investigation of the pork issue appeared to be the genesis of a multitude of parental concerns regarding the unmet educational needs of their children.
Prior to chatting with Dr. Fischman, I had not considered doing research on African immigrants and/or resettled refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. It was not a part of my consciousness, even though I am an educator and have interacted with students who are from sub-Saharan Africa, worked as a liaison in my school district with resettled Somali refugee parents and advocacy groups, and have students whose parents are immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. After returning to the U.S. from Argentina, the professor of my qualitative research class, Dr. Theresa McCarty, further encouraged me to pursue the topic.

In pursuit of this topic, she directed me to the *Harvard Educational Review* journal issue from 2001 that was dedicated to immigration and education in the United States. In the editorial page, the editors expressed concern about the absence of the educational experiences of sub-Saharan African immigrant students in social science research. The editors encouraged scholarship in the study of this group, who appear to be relatively new in the immigration landscape of the U.S. As an educator born in Sierra Leone, this absence in the literature presented me with a topic for my dissertation.

Several reasons led me to pursue this topic. As stated earlier, the absence of the educational experiences of sub-Saharan Africans in social science research is my primary reason for studying this group. Documenting the voices, experiences, and perceptions of this group is of the utmost importance, because it provides educators with knowledge about sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees in the U.S. Secondly, the existing educational structure in the
U.S., as it relates to curriculum, pedagogical practices, and daily interactions, tends to marginalize resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. I would argue that this marginalization extends to all resettled refugee students, regardless of their country of origin (Lee, 2005). Thirdly, there is a persistent invisibility surrounding resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in schools in the U.S. Because sub-Saharan Africans and native-born African Americans share the same skin color, they are often lumped together with indifference (Rong & Brown, 2001), and viewed as the same. Another explanation for their invisibility could be that refugees are simply perceived to be African immigrants.

This indifference of U.S. educators and school districts has a negative impact on the education of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. Therefore, my fourth reason for pursuing this study was my intention to identify problems and offer a comprehensive understanding for scholars and practitioners in educating resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, as a result manifesting the complexities and needs of this population. In addition, my work will contribute to the growing body of scholarship on resettled sub-Saharan African refugees by documenting and narrating their stories and counter stories. I hope to provide information educators can use to address the unique educational needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, thus distinguishing this group from native-born African Americans, African immigrants, and other refugee groups, with respect to schooling and education.
Problem Statement

In all social science research, a review of the literature affords the researcher a foundation and understanding of the topic of interest, and aids in identifying a research problem. In my examination of this population, I observed a dearth in the literature regarding the educational experiences of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. This silence likely has many causes. First, it could be that the population of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees in the United States is statistically low when compared to other resettled refugee groups, and therefore may not be considered to warrant a study. A second factor may be the issue of skin color and perceived sameness, which was raised as a concern on the editorial page of the Harvard Educational Review special issue on immigration and education in 2001. Whatever the reasons might be, the absence of information on resettled sub-Saharan African refugees in the social science literature informed me of the need for a research question focusing on the schooling experiences and perceptions of these students in the United States.

The problem this research planned to explore is the invisibility of the stories of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in classrooms and in educational research. As a group, they are either silent or not heard, and their educational needs are largely unmet (Butcher, 2010; Kanu, 2008). In order for educators to understand and meet the diverse educational needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, empirical-based research is needed (Stewart, 2011). There appears to be an overabundance of research examining every facet of the
educational lives of Asian and Latino immigrants and resettled refugees. However, this is not the case for sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees. Sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees need the same level of scholarly attention, because they come from a diverse and complex cultural background ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and socio-economically. All these factors influence their learning styles and their perceptions of who they are in the world.

Since the reporting in the *Harvard Educational Review* of the inattention towards sub-Saharan African schooling experiences in the U.S., only a handful of research publications and doctoral dissertations have documented the lived experience of this population (Butcher 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that, in 2006, 20% of African immigrants and resettled refugees were school-aged children. Further census data show a yearly increase in the migration of sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees into the U.S. Specifically, 23% of sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees entered the U.S. before 1990, 35% entered between 1990 and 1999, and 42% entered between 2000 and 2009 (United States Census Bureau). With the current social and political unrest in Darfur, Democratic Republic of Congo, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, this increase in the resettled refugee population will continue in the U.S. and other industrialized countries. Although the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee population is statistically insignificant when compared to other resettled refugee groups, their education and schooling
experiences are significant for social science research. Teachers must be knowledgeable about key educational issues impacting the schooling of this new population group in order to effectively educate a future generation that will contribute to the U.S. and the global economy.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research is to examine the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern state in the U.S., in order to enhance learning and school engagement. I hypothesize that students who have positive school experiences and optimistic perceptions will likely have a positive learning outcome, compared to those with negative school experiences and perceptions. This dissertation focused primarily on resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students who have resettled in the U.S. during the last 10 years. In order to provide insight into understanding this population, I will adopt the United Nations definition of a refugee, as stated in Article 1 of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol. The protocol defines a *refugee* as the following:

A refugee is a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 1996)
The United States Committee on Refugees (USCR) reports that half of the refugees resettling in the U.S. are children, therefore making schools a premier destination for a significant portion of newcomers. Researchers have noted that one in five children in the U.S. is the child of immigrant and/or refugee parents, and it is projected that by 2040 one in three children will be a part of this immigration trend. Researchers cite this flood of new refugees as the largest flow since the immigration influx at the beginning of the 20th century (Davies, 2008; Howard, 2003; Njue & Retish, 2010; M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) suggested that this trend will continue indefinitely, with significant implications on the demographic composition of classrooms, and the future of the U.S.

**Research Question**

The goal of this study was to examine one encompassing question: What are the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. state? Related questions include: 1a) How do they view their relationship with their teachers and peers? 1b) Can they identify a teacher or school staff member in their school community who is a resource for them? and 1c) What factors contribute to their challenges and successes in their school community? The existing literature, using self-determination theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework, will serve as an anchor for answering these questions about the schooling experiences and perceptions of
the targeted population. The following chapter presents a review of relevant literature.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I explore the role of pedagogy, school performance, race, and other research related to this study. I also introduce race as a paradigm that may or may not shape the educational experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. Self Determination Theory (SDT) was initially used as a major theoretical framework for this study, to assist in understanding the schooling perceptions and school engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U. S. state. This psychological framework examines individual human motivation, engagement, and perception. I further explore ecological and sociocultural theories, because of limitations within the SDT framework. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, and Rogoff’s sociocultural theory, help to decipher and understand the schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students, and may be applicable to other, non-European immigrant children.

Relatively few scholars have studied the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in the United States. The few studies that exist include Belete et al. (2008), Butcher (2010), Davies (2008), Dooley (2009), Kanu (2008), Sambul (2004), Shepard (2005), and McBrien (2005). The lack of research on resettled sub-Saharan African refugees has led me to review studies on other resettled refugees, immigrants, and racial
minority groups in the U.S. These studies researched non-White populations; therefore, they serve as a benchmark in understanding the schooling perceptions of a non-White group relatively new to the U.S. For instance, there is a wealth of information on the education perceptions of African American, Asian, Native American, Latino, and Caribbean immigrants. Reviewing research conducted on these immigrant and minority groups helped to identify some of the issues experienced that can be applied to the study of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees. Ladson Billings’ (1995a, 1995b) study of the schooling experiences of native-born African Americans, Pewewardy’s (1993) study of Native American school experiences, Bartolome’s (1994) work on humanized pedagogy, and Rong and Brown study (2001, 2002) of black immigrants from the Caribbean, provided a framework for understanding the phenomena under study.

One study in particular can be adapted and replicated in the current study. Wang and Holcombe (2010) examined adolescents’ perceptions of their school environment, their engagement, and their academic achievement in middle school. Their work provides a suitable model for this study because it addresses pertinent issues during the middle school years. Middle school is noted as a pivotal time in the engagement and disengagement of students, and is therefore an ideal time to study adolescents. Replicating this study, and specifically examining resettled sub-Saharan African refugees during their middle school years, may highlight difficulties encountered by this group of learners. Resettled sub-Saharan African refugees present varied and unique educational needs as learners. Therefore, it is
important for educators in the U.S. to become familiar with key educational issues that affect the schooling experiences and perceptions of this new resettled refugee population in classrooms across the U.S. Educators’ responses to the educational needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees are critical in engaging this student population.

In this section I will examine the middle school years, school engagement, and role of pedagogy as they relate to resettled sub-Saharan African refugee learners. I will also look at school performance among this subgroup, and will further examine the salient role of race in a racialized society (McBrein, 2005). The following section reviews the conceptual framework employed in this study to analyze the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. The study will utilize the theoretical frame of self-determination theory (SDT), which will allow the reader to comprehend the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in the U.S. The tenets of SDT — autonomy, competency and relatedness — are elements identified as indicators for positive school performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Middle School Years and School Engagement**

Adolescence is a period when relationships with peers and adults outside of the home have increased meaning. Adolescents start seeking peer and adult acceptance and support, making the middle school years a critical phase in child development. Schools become the premier destination where these relationships
are formed and nurtured (M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Schools can provide support during these formative years through the provision of quality student-to-teacher and student-to-peer relationships, as schools seek to engage students intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

During the middle school years, student school engagement (and, conversely, disengagement) can be viewed as following within three categories: a) school participation (behavioral engagement); b) school identification (emotional engagement); and c) use of self-regulation (cognitive engagement). While research is not clear about the outcomes of these types of engagement with regard to academic achievement, they appear to impact students’ experiences, perceptions and motivations (Wang & Holcomb, 2010).

Educational researchers have characterized disengagement as an immediate and persistent problem for resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students (Butcher, 2010; Davies, 2008; Njue & Retish, 2010). With the severe and myriad educational and social issues confronting resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, there appears to be an urgent requirement to identify their learning needs in middle school. Additionally, it is imperative to provide schools with the opportunity to meaningfully engage this group of learners behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. It is only through this prism of engagement that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students have a chance to succeed in middle and high school, and consequently to become productive
members in their host society (Kanu, 2008; Sambul, 2004; Shepard, 2005; McBrien, 2005).

As discussed earlier, researchers Wang and Holcombe (2010) examined schooling perceptions among middle school students. The findings of their study suggested that engaged students are more successful in schools than disengaged students. This issue of engagement and disengagement as it relates to perception during the middle school years is pivotal in the schooling experiences of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students (Awokoya & Clark, 2008). The most frequent and efficient learning occurs when students meet the expectations set forth by teachers and school administrators. For example, students who attend school regularly, go along with school expectations, stay on task, and are able to manage their behavior, are able to meet the academic challenges set forth by their teachers. Their positive schooling performance relates to their involvement, which constitutes engagement. In contrast, disengaged students tend to be underachievers and are more likely to drop out of school (Garn, Matthews, & Jolly, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2001). Researchers looking at this phenomenon have noted the acute problem of disengagement during the middle and high school years. As with the majority of disengaged students, resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students who are disengaged are less likely to complete their schooling. The negative effect on their schooling in turn makes their transition to and future in the United States more difficult.
Many factors that refugees encounter contribute to disengagement. The few researchers who have examined the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students have noted the unique educational needs they present in classrooms across the U.S. These needs relate to: a) cultural misunderstanding; b) pedagogical disconnection; c) rigorous curriculum; d) lack of conceptual and contextual understanding; and e) inheriting racism in a racialized society (Butcher, 2010; Davies, 2008; Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Njue & Retish, 2010; Shepard, 2005). Thus, researchers have expressed concerns that their educational needs may be ignored. These factors are noted as conditions that may influence the experiences and perceptions of this subgroup, thus creating students who may disengage from schooling and learning.

Deci and Ryan (2000) defined disengagement as a multidimensional construct with three components: behaviors, emotions, and cognitions. Behavioral engagement refers to students’ actions and practices that are directed toward their learning. It includes positive adaptation to the school milieu and student involvement in their learning process. Emotional engagement refers to affective reactions and a sense of belonging to the school community. Cognitive engagement refers to students’ self-regulation and overall approach to learning. All three engagement components interact within an individual student. A student can experience multiple types of engagement simultaneously, and student schooling success has been linked to the level and frequency with which all students, but especially resettled refugee students, are engaged in their learning.
environments. In order for resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students to form positive school experiences and perceptions, educators must appeal to the multiple aspects of engagement. By considering emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement, educators can attend to the varied educational needs that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students present in schools (Butcher, 2010).

In exploring the issues of engagement, empirical studies have examined minority and immigrant groups, and more specifically resettled sub-Saharan African refugees. Researchers have cited instructional pedagogy, school performance, and racism as elements that affect the engagement and disengagement of these groups (Carter, 2008; Dooley, 2009; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; McKinley & Brayboy, 2005; Rong & Brown, 2001).

Consequently, in order for educators to accommodate and increase school engagement among this subgroup, the issues of pedagogy and race in a racialized society must be explored, because it appears that it is through these variables that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students form their experiences and perceptions of school in the U.S.

**Pedagogy and Resettled Sub-Saharan African Refugees**

Ladson-Billings (1995a) asserted that culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria: a) a student’s academic success; b) developing and maintaining cultural competence; and c) developing critical consciousness and thus challenging the current social order. It is imperative that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students develop academic skills so that they can meaningfully
participate in the future of the United States. Therefore, students must learn “what is most meaningful to their lives” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160).

Allowing students to maintain cultural integrity and academic excellence is core in culturally relevant teaching. A culturally relevant teaching process calls upon teachers to “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). As schools create global citizens, they must “develop broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). For resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, this pedagogical approach will provide them valuable skills as they prepare to become productive members in their host country, meanwhile asserting their cultural identity in a racialized culture that sees and treats them as African Americans.

It is necessary for pedagogical approaches to consider and incorporate the types of engagements reviewed in the previous section. Empirical researchers have suggested that cognitive engagement is related to academic success. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) defined cognitive engagement as a student’s strategy and self-regulation towards learning. Therefore, in understanding the educational perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, one has to understand educational pedagogy and how it informs student learning and school engagement. Webster’s dictionary defines pedagogy as a “corrective use of instructive strategies”.

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In correlation with instructional strategies, the teacher applies his or her own philosophical beliefs of instruction. These philosophical beliefs are governed by background, knowledge experiences, personal situations, and environment. The instruction is then dictated by the learning goals set by the student and teacher. For resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, the pedagogical factor is foundational in their school engagement because of the differences in pedagogical styles that may have been utilized in sub-Saharan Africa when compared to the U.S. (Butcher, 2010). By addressing the differences in pedagogy, educators can positively affect student engagement. More specifically, the pedagogy must be culturally sensitive. Educational researchers Ladson-Billings (1995a) and Pewewardy (1993) suggested that pedagogy has to be relevant to the cultural background of students. In their respective research about the relevance of culture for African Americans and Native Americans, both Ladson-Billings and Pewewardy asserted that culturally relevant pedagogy is critical to the engagement, and therefore the academic success, of students.

Ladson-Billings (1995b) argued that, in the case of African American students, culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes and celebrates African and African-American culture. Her assertion that pedagogy is relevant in the education of non-European children is also documented by Native American educator Cornel Pewewardy (1993). Pewewardy suggested that one of the reasons Native American children experience difficulties in school is that educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into education rather than inserting
education into Native American culture. This statement is one that has persistently defined education for children who are non-European students in the U.S. Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students enter schools in the U.S. where, historically, cultural affirmation is not available to non-European children. Students must then negotiate their learning within an educational institution where their cultural context may be absent (McKinley & Brayboy, 2005). For schools to authentically engage resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, educators must create a school environment where all children are culturally affirmed.

Researchers Bartolome (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) have begun to identify teaching strategies and programs that successfully meet the educational needs of culturally and linguistically subordinate minority student populations. They argue that culturally relevant pedagogy is a framework that builds a foundation of learning, which serves to humanize the experiences of non-European students. Bartolome argued that a humanized pedagogy is one that allows a reflective process, in which teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice. Reflection, consequently, helps teachers to recreate and reinvent “teaching methods and materials by always taking into consideration the sociocultural realities that can either limit or expand the possibilities to humanize education” (p. 177). This humanizing teaching process is key in educating resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, because their sociocultural reality is distinct from the dominant American culture (Sambul, 2004).
Bartolome (1994) contended that humanized education goes beyond competence in an area of content: a humanized education effectively and sufficiently works with disempowered and marginalized students to create positive perceptions of their school environment. It is also important that teachers understand the sociocultural reality of students and the context of their learning. Bartolome (1994) suggested that teachers reflect on their *deficit orientation* and how it affects their perceptions concerning students from minority groups. Deficit orientation refers to the implicit and explicit subscription to “a belief system that renders ethnic, racial, and linguistic minority students at best culturally disadvantaged and in need of fixing, or, at worst, culturally or genetically deficient and beyond fixing” (p. 180). A cycle of deficit orientation may harm the educational experiences of both students and teachers: students’ learning is thwarted, and the stagnation of teachers’ perceptions of students continues to deepen the deficit orientation.

The educational system must consider many factors in order to remedy the deficit orientation and improve schooling for resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. First, how can U.S. schools meet the pedagogical needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students? Second, how can teachers build English resources that allow for a deep conceptual understanding, while still teaching basic English skills? For others with basic literacy skills, the question becomes: how can teachers fill conceptual and contextual gaps while allowing students to learn academic English and other academic subject areas? These
Educational needs can be daunting for schools that tend to teach from a solely Eurocentric perspective, which are suddenly confronted by a cohort of learners who desperately need teachers to develop an inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogy. Therefore, using a pedagogical lens to examine and improve student engagement appears to be imperative during the middle school years, because it has a direct impact on their motivation and school performance, and the perceptions they form during these fundamental school years.

**Hindrances of Resettled Sub-Saharan African Refugee School Performance**

As discussed in the Introduction, many pre- and post-arrival factors hinder the schooling and affect the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. A large percentage of resettled refugee children entering schools in the U.S. come from homes where English is not the dominant language. The parents of resettled refugee students often have little or no knowledge about the functions and expectations of schools in the U.S., and some have little or no formal educational background themselves (Sambul, 2004; Shepard, 2005). Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students enter schools in the U.S. with a high level of educational needs. When resettled refugee students enter schools, they encounter educational expectations that vary greatly from the expectations in their country of origin. In some cases, the resettled refugee students have very little experience with school. Researchers Shepard (2005), Dooley (2009), and Kanu (2008) noted that these students have experienced protracted civil wars and life in refugee camps before their arrival at their final
destinations — typically the U.S. or another Western country. As a result of their experiences of war and refugee camps, a large majority of such students have had little or no schooling, while others had interrupted schooling. This has created learning gaps in their education. The fractured educational experiences that characterize this cohort of resettled refugees have presented a challenge for educators in U.S. schools.

The academic success of resettled refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa is affected by more than just their prior schooling experiences; it is also affected by how they engage in the U.S. schooling environment. Finn (1993) described students’ behavioral engagement as a major construct in understanding their engagement with school. He defined behavioral engagement as students’ actions and practices towards school, and their learning as it relates to school attendance, positive school behavior, completion of assigned class work, and participation in school activities. Consequently, student behavioral engagement is influenced by factors both within and outside of school. For resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, the relationship between home and school is crucial to their school engagement. Thus, cultural differences between home and school serve as a vehicle for cultural misunderstanding, as a result impacting their behavioral engagement (Awokoya & Clark, 2008).

The fractured educational experiences of resettled refugee students, coupled with cultural misunderstandings on the part of their teachers, result in students’ needs not being met (Sambul, 2004). Researchers (Awokoya & Clark,
Butcher, 2010; Njue, 2004; Rong & Brown, 2001) have examined the educational needs of black immigrant students from the Caribbean and Africa. The immigrants studied were primarily of African ancestry, with shared skin pigmentation and a cultural background distinct from that of the dominant U.S. Their studies revealed that the black immigrant population’s educational needs have not been met, due to sociocultural misunderstandings and a lack of understanding of parents on the part of the U.S. school system. Though the research was not conducted with the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee population specifically, there is evidence that resettled refugee groups from sub-Saharan Africa experience the same educational obstacles (Davis, 2008; Kanu, 2008).

On the other hand, there is anecdotal evidence of black sub-Saharan African and Caribbean immigrants whose school performance is on a par with, or better than, their American counterparts. Though, over the past decade, studies of the schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African immigrants and resettled refugees from political unstable countries have consistently suggested that students have difficulties acclimating to the academic rigor and expectations of schools in the U.S. (Davies, 2008; Dooley, 2009; McBrein, 2005; Njue, 2004). This difficulty is often made worse by the fact that teachers frequently have low academic expectations of these students. As such, teachers do not motivate or place as much effort in educating the students (Kanu, 2008; O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007).
The low academic expectations are often a result of teacher perceptions that black immigrant students are intellectually weak (Ghong et al., 2007). Many black students from sub-Saharan Africa are forced to repeat grade levels, or are placed in the wrong grade level because of their age. For example, a 12-year-old who was in fourth grade in his or her country of origin in sub-Saharan Africa, might be placed in seventh grade in the U.S. This grade placement may be dictated by the inappropriateness of placing the more mature 12-year-old with less mature 9-year-olds in fourth grade (Awokoya & Clark, 2008). Students who are placed in a class because of social concerns typically do not possess a core academic foundation. In this situation, students are likely to experience continual learning gaps in their education, thus making them unable to accomplish meaningful academic gains. Low teacher expectations, combined with incorrect grade level placements, create situations that may have adverse effects on the schooling engagement and academic success of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees.

**Inheriting the Legacy of Racism**

Race and racism are other facets that affect how the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee student perceives his or her education and contributes to his or her level of success. The issue of race and racism informs the emotional engagement that non-European students have towards their learning and participation in the larger school environment. Examining the construct(s) of race and racism, and its influence on the schooling experiences of non-European
immigrants of color and resettled refugee groups in the U.S., will serve as a benchmark for understanding the emotional engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students (Lee, 2005). *Emotional engagement* is defined as students’ affective reactions and their sense of identification with the school environment (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Understanding school engagement through the lens of race, and negotiating oneself in a racialized society, is a significant factor in this study. Not only does this consideration inform educators, but it also helps in the development of strategies to bolster the engagement of marginalized groups.

In the U.S., the paradox of race and racism has been, and continues to be, an area of interest for social science researchers. Mills (1997) noted, “From the inception, [in the United States] race is in no way an afterthought, a deviation from ostensibly raceless Western ideals, but rather a central shaping constituent of those ideals” (p. 14). Race shapes individuals’ access to social resources, how individuals perceive themselves, and how others perceive them. Howard (2003) asserted that “…the United States has explicitly and implicitly subscribed to racial hierarchies for the past four centuries” (p. 196). The color line is intricately woven into the American social psyche and continues to be salient in the 21st century. While there are regional and historical variations in how the color line has played out in the U.S., there have been two central racial categories: white people and people of color (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Resettled refugees from sub-Saharan African fall into the latter group. Therefore, in order to understand
the schooling engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in the U.S., one has to look through the paradigm of race. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) contended that the color line has historically defined the boundary between two modes of ethnic incorporation in American life. The first was the assimilation of millions of European immigrants from heterogeneous ethnic groups into white society, which ultimately blurred their ethnic origins. The second was the marginalization of ethnic groups that were viewed as non-white.

The result of the color line is marginalization. The act of marginalization inserts racial groups into the categorization of immigrants of color and into racialized, hierarchical structures that can be problematic for school engagement (O’Connor et al., 2007). Moreover, marginalization often diminishes valuable tools for understanding the educational needs of the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee student newcomer. M. Suarez-Orozco (2001) argued that, because the vast majority of new immigrants are from non-European, non-English speaking, developing countries, the American social stratification designates them as people of color, regardless of their cultural heritage. As such, the immigrants and resettled refugees must contend with the U.S. racial hierarchy that values whites and devalues people of color (Rong & Brown, 2001; McBrien, 2005; Ogbu, 1992, 1998; Shepard, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition, those who have emigrated recently tend to be concentrated in poor urban communities, which compounds the process of racial ascription. Rong and Brown (2001) argued that “...urban residency places new arrivals in close contact with native-born
minorities [blacks] and leads to the labeling of black immigrants, resettled refugees and the native-born blacks as the same in the eyes of the majority” (p. 541). This sameness is due to their shared pigmentation, and appears to be problematic because it denies identification of the specific educational needs of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students (Davies, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Rong & Brown, 2001; Ogbu, 1998; M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This denial appears to negate engagement, and to create a perception within the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee student population that they are invisible, thus undermining the schooling experiences of this subgroup.

Researchers contend that the social lens of white Americans designates resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students as black because of their shared pigmentation with native-born blacks, despite the fact that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee blacks have a distinct cultural heritage, and a pre-migration history distinct from that of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa (Davies, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Rong & Brown, 2001; Ogbu, 1992; M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Historically, African Americans have been assigned the lowest rank in the racial hierarchical system; other black immigrants and resettled refugees, by pigmentation proxy, automatically carry the racial caste category and the burden of blackness. As a result, race becomes a powerful social marker for the new black immigrant and resettled refugee (M. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Rong and Brown (2001) suggested that this burden of blackness is “the most jarring change for black immigrants from the Caribbean as they become part of the larger black
population in a racially divided America” (p. 542). The process of being pegged in a racial hierarchy can be problematic for the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in schools.

A number of educational researchers have noted that the interrelationship between students’ racial background, and schools’ social, instructional, and organizational environment, is significant for students’ engagement and academic achievement. Wang and Holcombe (2010) suggested that the interaction of students’ behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement conceptualizes a “multidimensional construct” (p. 634) that further helps in understanding the “antecedents and consequences of the three types of engagement simultaneously and dynamically” (p. 634). If education is a determinant key in the United States for economic mobility, then how schools succeed with respect to the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students during the middle school years is essential to their academic achievement and future participation in the U.S. economy.

**Conceptual Framework**

Because of the nature of the research, it was important to select an effective conceptual framework. Self-determination theory (SDT) is a conceptual approach that provides a legitimate and effective basis for analyzing the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. To understand why SDT is the most suitable conceptual framework for the current
study, it is important to provide background on its discipline and origin. Such
information will be followed by an explanation of the role of perception and
school environment, and the theoretical underpinnings of perception within SDT.

Self-determination theory (SDT) originated in the discipline of
psychology. It provides a theoretical framework that may best help to understand
how resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ perceptions of school are
formed or influenced in middle school. SDT is primarily a theory of motivation,
which posits that individuals “possess innate psychological needs to experience
autonomy, competence and relatedness and that the satisfaction of these needs is
essential for personal growth” (Oliver, Markland, & Hardy, 2010, p. 309).

*Competence* refers to knowing how to achieve results and feeling efficacious in
doing so. *Autonomy* is the self-initiation and self-regulation of behavior. Studies
reveal that students with better school outcomes — such as classroom
engagement — are those with a strong sense of autonomy. *Relatedness* is the
affiliation with and level of connection to others within a given context. In the
school context, relatedness refers to how a student relates both to peers and
teachers. Oliver et al. (2010) asserted that an individual’s greatest well-being is
experienced when these needs are satisfied, whereas thwarting these needs is
likely to result in a negative social state and poor well-being (p. 309). The
psychological needs noted within the SDT framework are of interest to
educational researchers exploring how student perceptions influence motivation,
engagement, and learning outcomes.
Identifying factors that influence students’ schooling experiences, perceptions and success, is an area of research that educational and psychological disciplines have continually examined because of the correlation between students’ overall well-being and their schooling performance, regardless of their social or intellectual background. As a conceptual framework for understanding human motivation and engagement, SDT has been applied in a variety of settings, including general education (Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Niemiec et al., 2006; Guardia, 2009), politics (Losier, Perreault, Koestner, & Vallerand, 2001), and religion (Neyrinck, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Guardia (2009) examined SDT as a theory that led to understanding identity, and asserted that the main focus of SDT is the relationship between individuals and their social environment, and how the environment shapes individual motivation. Human motivation is not solely maintained by intrinsic factors, but is also guided by extrinsic factors. As a result, extrinsic factors are instrumental in determining students’ experiences, perceptions, motivations, and academic achievement in school. In her study, Guardia (2009) focused on how teachers influenced childhood and adolescent development, specifically in relation to motivation. According to Guardia, these influences on school perception led “to early school competencies and later academic pursuit that positively influence the trajectory of adulthood” (p. 91). Because of the extent to which teachers influence students, the naming of specific stressors that can impact learning is of utmost importance to social science researchers. It is within this
SDT framework that I investigate the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students who are enrolled in a southwestern U.S. state.

Schooling experiences and perceptions are important due to the role both indicators play in motivation and engagement, and consequent schooling performance outcomes. In Garn and colleagues’ (2010) examination of SDT and learning motivation among gifted students, they found evidence that school engagement and learning motivation help to “explain differences between high-achieving and low-achieving gifted students” (p. 263). This difference in motivation and its impact on student learning is applicable to the current study, which is designed to investigate the school experiences and perceptions of a group of students whose cultural, educational, and familial frame is different from that of their U.S. peers. Self-determination theorists Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested that intrinsic factors (i.e., pleasure or sense of satisfaction in completing a given task) and extrinsic factors (i.e., classroom, school, family) shape academic motivation for all students. The current study will examine how intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape the motivations and perceptions of the subject population.

The Impact of Experiences and Perceptions of School Environment

Individual experiences result in the creation of perceptions. Perceptions are important for two reasons. First, they play a role in school motivation, engagement and performance outcomes. Second, schooling experiences and perceptions are the overarching question of this study: what are the schooling
experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. state? This question relates to SDT, which focuses primarily on motivation and engagement outcomes that sway perception. Theorists studying SDT suggest that the degree to which “students perceive that the school context meets their psychological needs determines the level of students’ engagement in school” (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 635). Essentially, student experiences and perceptions of how schools meet their educational needs dictate their engagement, which in turn affects their performance outcome. The SDT framework fits the central question in this study, which seeks to understand the schooling experiences and perceptions of a subgroup new to schooling and pedagogical structures in the U.S.

SDT asserts that students’ optimal learning is related to the opportunities provided for them to develop a sense of competency and autonomy, and relationships with others within the school environment. Students’ school engagement and academic achievement is enhanced when they experience a school environment that supports their fundamental needs for competence, autonomy, and relationships with others. Guardia’s (2009) study suggested that autonomous students are more actively engaged in their academic pursuit than students whose autonomy is controlled. Research has noted that connectedness to teachers and peers in school affect academic engagement and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teacher warmth or relatedness is important in encouraging autonomous orientation for classroom activities (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), as
well as increasing academic gains (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). The interactions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential in fulfilling the educational needs and school engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students.

SDT provides an outline of self-determined forms of motivation, based on the social environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the school environment, influences such as classroom climate, teacher orientation, peer relationships, and instructional pedagogy tend to fulfill three needs: a) autonomy support; b) competence — which is the need to positively engage with one’s own environment; and c) relatedness, which is the formation of relationships with peers and others within the school environment. These three needs are noted in self-determination theory as indicators that impact motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The current student mainly focuses on the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as essential constituents for individual well-being (Guardia, 2009). The conceptual framework is then specifically applied within the context of the schooling experiences and perceptions of middle school students who are resettled sub-Saharan African refugees.

**Characteristics of Schools and Classrooms**

Schools often implement distinct measures to fulfill the needs of students and promote engagement among their student body. In their study of school perception in middle schools, Wang and Holcombe (2010) identified four focal school characteristics that can have a positive or negative effect on the learning,
social, and psychological needs of students. These four foci therefore promote student engagement. They are: promotion of performance goals; promotion of mastery goals; support of autonomy; promotion of discussion and teacher social support. I hypothesize that schools which seek to meet the competency needs of their student population (promotion of performance and mastery), their autonomous needs (support of autonomy), and their relatedness needs (promotion of discussion and teacher social support), exhibit positive predictors of student engagement.

School characteristics examined by Wang and Holcombe (2010) included four discourses that influence students’ perceptions. The first discourse is the support of competence, which emphasizes achievement structures through school policies and instructional practices. These practices may or may not have an impact on the learning outcomes of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, but I suspect that because of pedagogical practices that are primarily Eurocentric, teaching and learning might fall short in its support of competence. The second discourse is the mastery goal structures that allow for students’ perceptions of teacher expectations as they relate to their own feelings of self-improvement, the rewarding of classroom efforts, and the value of mastery as the goal of learning. The third discourse is the performance goal structures which promote social comparison and competition among students — in contrast with the mastery goal structures. Performance goal structures also define high grades as the main goal of learning. The fourth discourse is the support of autonomy,
which refers to the perceptions students have about opportunities provided by 
teachers for them to participate in classroom decision-making processes and 
discussions. These discourses interact, and are fundamental in the engagement of 
middle school learners, allowing them to build positive experiences and 
perceptions that promote learning.

I will examine the four discourses as they relate to: a) the support of 
competence, which is the achievement goal that teachers tend to accentuate 
through pedagogical practices and school policies; b) the mastery goal, which 
promotes student perceptions about their teachers, specifically looking at self-
improvement, reward of effort, and mastery of knowledge as the main thrust of 
learning (Anderman & Midgley, 1999); c) the performance goal, which relates 
students’ perceptions of their teachers to external structures — for example, social 
comparison among students, promotion of competition among students, and 
striving for high grades as the focus of learning; and d) the support of autonomy, 
which represents students’ perceptions of how their teachers encourage them to be 
participants in their own learning. These four discourses are interactive, and 
important for educators as they seek to engage students in their learning.

**Middle School Students’ Engagement and Perception**

Several researchers examining engagement, experience and perception 
during the middle and high school years have noted a correlation between school 
performance goals and students’ confidence and mastery of assigned academic 
tasks (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Additionally, students are more
enthusiastic towards their learning, and are more likely to engage in detailed
cognitive processes, when they perceive their teachers in terms of mastery goals,
rather than in terms of performance goals. These are probable outcomes because
focus on comparison and competition in middle school is contradictory to
students’ sense of emotional and psychological safety, which consequently
undermines their feelings towards school and learning. I share the hypothesis
Wang and Holcombe (2010) developed that school promotion of mastery goals
instead of performance goals heightens students’ participation in school activities,
increases self-regulation strategies, and promotes identification with the school
environment.

In the SDT tradition, researchers have established the need for support, by
which teachers provide students with classroom structure, caring, and
opportunities for autonomy (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Specifically, a plethora of
classroom teaching practices, such as teacher orientation toward students, and
contextual factors in the classroom, have been noted to promote or undermine
motivation (Guardia, 2009). Consequently, learning in middle school is promoted
when students experience autonomy support. Support of autonomy entails
students’ perceptions that teachers encourage them to participate in classroom
discussions and other learning tasks within the classroom (Roeser, Eccles, &
Sameroff, 1998). Teachers who engage their students in such democratic
processes are likely to have students who perceive themselves as a part of the
group and choose behaviors that support the learning goals in the classroom. I
also share the hypothesis of Wang and Holcombe (2010) that “support for autonomy will enhance school participation and the use of self-regulation strategies and, to a higher degree, promote school identification” (p. 637) — which directly affect learning. In her study, Guardia (2009) focused on the influence of teachers on childhood and adolescent development, specifically in relation to motivation towards learning. She concluded that such influences lead to early school competencies, and later academic pursuits, that positively influence the trajectory of students into adulthood. Guardia’s observation suggests that the influence of teachers is a key factor in providing a learning environment where all students can have access to positive learning outcomes.

The role of teachers in providing structures that enable appropriate interaction is central in the engagement of students. *Promotion of task-related discussion* refers to students’ perceptions regarding encouragement from the classroom teacher for students to engage each other, discuss ideas, and provide opportunities to practice prosocial skills and self-regulate their behavior and emotions. As a result, students’ feelings of relatedness with peers become a classroom norm. Furthermore, promotion of discussion enhances school and classroom identification because it creates opportunities for social interaction within the classroom — though it may also create conditions for students to go off task. Wang and Holcombe (2010) treated promotion of task-related discussion as “an exploratory analysis” (p. 637), and I will view it in the same manner.
When the classroom is a space students consider to be safe, their learning is fostered. *Teacher social support* is characterized by students’ perceptions of their teachers in relation to support, response, and a caring attitude towards them (Burchinal, Peiser-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). Students’ experiences and perceptions of their teachers as social support systems have been associated with positive indicators that reinforce behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Such engagement reduces the possibility of behavioral infractions during the school day (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Likewise, in a school environment that is perceived by students to be supportive and caring, students tend to have positive attitudes towards academic tasks and a sense of belonging and safety. As a result, the social support that teachers offer students influences their levels of distraction and school identification. I will utilize the hypothesis of Wang and Holcombe (2010) that “students will be more strategic about learning and invested in mastering the learning task” set forth by teachers (p. 639).

**The Impact of Engagement on Schooling Performance**

Academic performance is often associated with students who attend to the task of schooling. For example, students who attend school regularly, complete assigned class work, and follow school and classroom rules, tend to get good grades and perform well on standardized tests. However, few studies have examined emotional engagement and achievement. Though some studies reveal associations between combined measures of engagement, it has been difficult to
show the independent contributions of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement to academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Some studies have examined the relationship between engagement, school belonging, and academic performance, based on race. Though there is inconsistency in the studies, they reveal different outcomes for White and African American students. For White students, there was an association between school identification and better test scores, but this was not the case for African American students. Black and Deci (2000) have associated academic motivation and engagement with better student achievement — specifically, greater interest, curiosity and confidence, and less anxiety and boredom in school.

With regard to cognitive engagement, several studies report that self-regulatory strategies tend to improve student-learning outcomes because of their use of “metacognitive strategies, such as regulating their attention and effort, connecting new information to existing knowledge and monitoring and evaluating their progress” (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 639). Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students may have difficulties related to their cognitive engagement, because they often lack the conceptual and contextual knowledge — and pedagogical awareness — to utilize metacognitive strategies to enhance their learning, if meaningful support is absent in building foundational knowledge.

More importantly, researchers using SDT to understand motivation and engagement in schools have suggested that many school tasks are often undertaken for extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, reasons, thus making SDT an
appropriate theoretical framework for examining the perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students.

SDT was considered an appropriate framework for this study, due to the educational challenges resettled refugee students must negotiate in classrooms, including issues of learning gaps, pedagogy, language, lack of conceptual frames, and inheritance of America’s racial hierarchy that assigns persons of color to a lower class. Teachers who provide greater autonomy support, structure, and involvement, are assumed to have students who are more autonomous when it comes to performing school tasks, which leads to academic success (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Support from the school environment “encourages informational orientation, openness toward attending to, processing, and interpreting information from the social environment in order to grow values and goals within the academic environment” (Guardia, 2009, p. 96). This level of teacher support is fundamental in the engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African students.

For resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in middle schools, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement is central in their educational process as they strive to become contributing members of society in their host country. Providing conceptual and contextual understanding, culturally relevant pedagogical competency for teachers, and a school environment that supports their learning, is critical while this subgroup attempts to learn the new cultural and school milieu and adapt to a new and rigorous curriculum. These experiences
inform their schooling perceptions, and are a determining factor in their schooling performance.

**Limitation of SDT Framework**

Though the SDT focuses on school engagement, and the study was replicated using Wang and Holcomb’s (2010) research on middle school engagement, the theory was not meaningful in understanding the lives of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. Acculturation theory examines the process of cultural and psychological change that occurs when immigrants and resettled refugees arrive in a new country, which consequently impacts their assimilation process. Though relevant, I did not use this theoretical framework, because of my interest in the microsystem world of classrooms, and the interplay of cultural relationships within those systems that informs schooling engagement. Therefore, I utilized Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1986) ecological theory, and Rogoff’s (1995, 1997) sociocultural theory, to gain a deeper understanding — these theories proved to be helpful in making meaning of the findings. The schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students are shaped by the interactions of systems within the ecological framework, as well as by the three planes within Rogoff’s sociocultural theory. Both theories are further explored in Chapter Five, as further dimensions influencing the phenomena under study.
Current Study

In this study I use case studies of more qualitative interview and focus group data to explore the link between resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ experiences and perceptions of the school environment, and their school engagement. I conceptualize students’ school engagement along three paradigms set forth by Wang and Holcombe (2010): a) participation in school activities; b) school identification; and c) use of self-regulation strategies. As I seek to understand the relationship between students’ perceptions of the school environment, and engagement, I will also pinpoint the mechanisms by which schools influence resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ schooling performance. I hypothesize that: a) a lack of cognitive engagement, and an emphasis on performance goal structure, lower levels of school engagement for this study’s targeted populations; b) students who perceive that their teachers emphasize mastery goal structure consider their teachers to provide support for autonomy, and students who experience emotional support demonstrate a higher level of school engagement; and c) the five dimensions of school climate and school performance are influenced by their relationship with school engagement.

Summary

In summary, self-determination theorists speculate that the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are natural tendencies that lead individuals towards engaging in interesting and self-valued activities, exercising capacities and skills, and the pursuit of connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan,
Educational researchers investigating student experiences, perceptions, engagement, motivation, and attendance to school tasks, have suggested that motivated learners have a better chance of engaging in the tasks of school and, as a result, have better schooling satisfaction, school retention, and positive performance outcomes (Wang & Holcombe, 2010; Garn et al., 2010). The motivational construct outlined within the self-determination conceptual framework was felt to be of merit in examining the school experiences, perceptions and engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students because of the varied educational challenges they present in classrooms in the U.S. (Belete et al., 2008; Butcher, 2010; Davies, 2008; Kanu, 2008; Njue & Retish, 2010; Sambul, 2004). It is important to investigate how the learners in this group perceive motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. While cognitive processes are of importance, the social factors that support students’ cognitive processes in promoting motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy, are significant in their learning.

Schools can have a significant impact on the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ of their schools, consequently influencing academic motivation, engagement, and positive performance outcomes. The following chapter provides a detailed discussion of the research design and methods employed in the study.
CHAPTER 3
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Relatively little is known about the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in middle schools. Researchers have noted that the middle and high school years are crucial for engaging and motivating students, as a result informing school experiences and perceptions (Garn et al., 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). This study utilized exploratory qualitative case studies to gain a broader understanding of the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in middle school. This chapter covers the research design and methods: recruitment of the participant sample, including recruitment strategies; data collection methods; participants; interview and focus group protocols and procedures; confidentiality; data analysis procedures; and the limitations of the study.

Design and Methods

While exploring a research design appropriate for this study, it was apparent that semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups would best capture the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students in the United States. A component of qualitative research is narrating the lived experiences of others. Narratives are accounts given in the first person that are presented as stories — and stories are cultural artifacts that hold the researcher’s interest. Participants’ stories unearth cultural
influences that shape their everyday — and possibly shared — realities, consequently making stories a cultural tool to uncover thoughts and behaviors. I have purposefully chosen individual interviews and focus groups to document school experiences and perceptions as they relate to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, which inform the schooling experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study.

Multiple methods of data collection were utilized, in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study (Bloomb erg & Volpe, 2008). Moreover, this approach allowed for an analysis of the emic perspectives of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students by empowering their schooling stories. The SDT theoretical framework serves as a context for data collection, therefore providing clarity and precision for the study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggested that, “the strength of case studies is their detail, their complexity, and their use of multiple sources to obtain multiple perspectives within a given case” (p. 105). I looked for themes, categories, relationships, trends and significant factors in the transcripts, which illuminated meaningful stories about the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students.

**Case Study Methodology**

The case study methodology focuses on understanding the dynamic elements that shape the lives of individuals. This strategy can attend to single or multiple cases and can use several levels of analysis. It was selected for making
meaning of the schooling experiences and perceptions of a group that is relatively new to the educational infrastructure in the U.S. For this group of learners — resettled refugee students in middle school — optimal learning will likely occur when their learning needs are acknowledged and supported by classroom teachers and school administrators. This inquiry, with its multidimensional approach of exploring lived phenomena, examined single episodes of school experiences and perceptions in an urban setting in a southwestern state.

Rossman and Rallis (2003) have stated that, as a method, case studies “are in-depth and a detailed exploration of single examples and seek to provide an understanding of a larger phenomenon through close examination of a specific case” (p. 104). Case studies are descriptive, holistic, heuristic, and inductive; thus, they illustrate events, processes, and perspectives as they unfold the “real life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 25). It is through this context, as described by Yin, that I evaluated the educational experiences, perceptions and school engagement of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. This inquiry provided a focused and open-ended data collection strategy.

**Recruitment of Participant Sample**

To begin the recruitment phase, I distributed fliers with contact information and a description of the study at refugee resettlements. Participants for this study were recruited using both purposive and convenience sampling approaches. Purposive sampling is an appropriate method for selecting participants when a specific group of individuals is needed for the purpose of
gaining understanding of the group (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I purposefully selected resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, sought a gender-balanced sample, and did not include siblings or members of the same extended families. Beyond that, my recruitment strategy was convenience sampling, based on whom I could find who would agree to be part of the study and provide parental/guardian approval/informed consent.

I used four primary criteria for the selection of participants for this study. First, participants must have been born in sub-Saharan Africa. As already noted, the experience and perception of first-generation resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students presented differing perspectives and levels of school engagement in middle schools, thus providing information-rich cases that “illuminate the reader’s understanding” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 104), and help address the central question in the study. Participants must have lived in the U.S. between 2001 and 2011, with at least three years spent in the United States.

The second criterion was that participants be currently enrolled in middle school, and preferably in seventh or eighth grade. Four participants in the study were enrolled in 7th grade, and six participants in 8th grade. Chronologically, seventh and eighth graders tend to be mature and able to comprehend multiple perspectives. These qualities enable deeper investigation, which consequently allowed the researcher to develop informed conclusions that may represent the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005). Therefore, seventh and eighth graders were ideal subjects for this study.
The third criterion was that participants in the study be evenly split by male and female gender. Ensuring equal gender representation permitted examination of the role of gender in the phenomena under study. It was especially useful when considering gender within the guidelines of social structures, and the patterns of male and female perception of school engagement.

The fourth criterion involved regional representation within sub-Saharan Africa, ensuring political and cultural representation. Participants in this study come from a cross-section of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Somali. Thus adding a richer characteristic to the study. In addition, as noted earlier, it provides a detailed and complex perspective which empowers the reader to draw conclusions about the phenomena under study.

I chose a small sample of ten participants for this study, in order to do an in-depth study and illuminate the experiences and perceptions of this sub-group of resettled refugees who are new to the American middle school system (Creswell, 2009). Purposeful sampling of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students allowed access to information that helped in answering the research questions set forth. Ultimately, the participants’ recruitment came from a refugee resettlement agency, via email follow-up, recruitment flyers, and a consent letter to all parents of selected participants. The consent letter to families and assent information for students detailed the study, conveyed the expected length of the interview and focus group, and explained the issue of confidentiality.
Recruitment Strategies

From September 2011 through November 2011, I worked with apartment building managers, elders within the African community, and a refugee resettlement organization, to help link me with individuals relevant to the study. I was surprised by how intimately an apartment building manager knew all the families in her apartment complex. I learned that the Sierra Village apartment is one of the initial housing hubs for refugees resettled in this southwest city. The owner of the complex, who is also an immigrant from Europe, appears to be an integral part of the lives of all those who live in her apartment complex. She referred me to families, homework club coordinators, and other apartment complexes where I might find children to participate in my study. I was invited to speak to the local Liberian organization before their monthly meeting by an individual who serves as a homework coordinator for refugees. He introduced me to the group and was I allowed time to share my research question.

All the families I was introduced to knew of other families, thus I could utilize the snowball techniques suggested by Seidman (2004), which are applicable to this study. I contacted families who expressed interest to either an elder within the community, or someone intimately involved in the refugee community in this southwestern state. At the initial contact, I introduced the research study and myself, and worked to establish a rapport and remove misgivings by answering questions they might have about the research. Parental
consent forms and child assent forms were signed, and an interview was scheduled at this meeting.

**Confidentiality**

During my initial phone contact with parents and legal guardians, I identified myself as a school administrator conducting research as an Arizona State University doctoral student. I explained how I received their information and shared the purpose and procedure of the study. I further shared that all interviews and focus groups would be kept confidential, with all identifiable names removed from the transcript, and that participation was voluntary.

**Data Collection Methods**

This study utilized semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with 10 (5 female, 5 male) middle school students in the 7th and 8th grades in a southwestern state. Nine out of the ten individual interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, with one interview held in the conference room of the participant apartment complex. Interviews were conducted in English, as all participants were fluent in conversational English language. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. All interviews and focus groups were kept confidential, with all identifiable variables removed from the transcripts.

Data for this research study exploring the experiences and perceptions of resettled sub Saharan African refugees — specifically from Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Somali and Sierra Leone — were gathered through note-taking,
listening, and asking general and specific questions which allowed me to probe and collect information central to the research question. Each in-depth individual interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes, with the participants reflecting and answering questions about their schooling experiences and perceptions through their own eyes and voice. Interviewing middle school students appeared to be somewhat challenging, because their responses to the questions posed were often brief. I probed and encouraged participants to describe their experiences as middle school students. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if there was anything else they would like to share with me about their schooling experiences that I had not covered in the interview. I took notes of what I heard, saw, felt and talked about.

I revisited the participants after the interviews and shared the interview transcripts with them. I also encouraged them to reflect on the process, and asked them if there was anything else they would like to add to their responses. I clarified comments and thoughts, and revisited questions if the answers were not clear, as was the case with one student, whose voice was not thoroughly captured during the interview. During this time, I continued probing for reflection, as I wanted to capture the essence of each participant in the study and encourage them to discuss key ideas in as much depth as possible and appropriate. Two participants added more depth to their transcripts as they re-read.

One of the participant’s interviews was conducted more than once, because the tape recorder battery died during the first interview — which I
became aware of at the end of the interview when I reached to turn off the recorder. I re-interviewed this participant from the point where the recorder had stopped recording. As a result, I spent more time with this participant.

Gathering the participants in a single place for the focus group meeting presented a challenge, because of individual schedules, issues of transportation, and parental work schedules. Four participants (two boys and two girls) participated in the first focus group, which was held at the Sierra Village apartment. The apartment manager allowed the use of the conference room for the interview, and all four participants were familiar with the apartment building manager. The second focus group was held in the home of one of the participants. Three girls participated, while three participants were not able to join the interview due to parental work schedules and issues of transportation. As a result, seven out of the ten participants in this study participated in the focus group, with each focus group interview lasting an hour.

Participants appeared to freely share their thoughts about their school, teachers, and peers. I assured them of the confidentiality of my work, and my shared African cultural background was an asset in establishing a rapport with participants and their families. Parents also encouraged their children to speak-up, and one parent requested that I share the research question prior to the interview in order for her daughter to answer all the questions correctly. Four parents sat with their children during the interviews, and one sibling chimed in with suggestions and comments.
Participants

I interviewed students from five countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Table 1 provides a glimpse of the students’ demography. As promised in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, I have protected the identities of all participants who participated in this study, by asking students to select pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s African Nationality</th>
<th>Country of Transition</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Aude</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
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<td>Lamin</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Tanzania</td>
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<td>Dogo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Profiles

The following brief profiles or portraits are intended to introduce the ten focal students to the reader.
Cecilia is a 13-year-old girl who would like to become a fashion model. Cecilia lived in Zambia with her family after leaving their homeland of Rwanda. She reported that she spent five years attending school in Africa. She entered the U.S. as a refugee in January 2009, coming from a Francophone country in the eastern part of sub-Saharan Africa. She is currently in the 8th grade at a public middle school in an urban school district. She enrolled at her present middle school this academic year as an 8th grader, following her family’s move from the refugee housing assigned to them. She changed schools to comply with school district boundaries. Cecilia lives at home with her mother and father, two younger sisters and one brother. Cecilia lives in an urban community, which runs parallel to a major interstate highway. At home in the U.S., the family speaks a native dialect known as Nyaga, and English. They attend a Pentecostal church every Sunday when her parents are not working.

Aude is a 12-year-old girl who tends to meet others with a shy smile. Aude is Congolese. She entered the U.S through Mozambique in January 2009. Aude lived in a refugee camp in Mozambique before coming to the U.S. She shared that she went to school in the refugee camp for four years. She is currently in 7th grade in a public middle school located in an urban school district. She enrolled in her current middle school as a 6th grader last academic school year. Aude lives at home with her parents, four sisters, three brothers and an aunt. When asked how many people constituted her family, she related that there were eleven people in her family. Aude lives in a major urban community that runs
parallel to an interstate highway. Aude and her family speak Swahili at home, and she identifies her religious affiliation as Christian.

Lamin, a 13-year-old boy, is an 8th grader who professed his love for basketball and dreams of playing professional basketball. Lamin entered the U.S. in 2001 at age three, as a Liberian refugee through the Ivory Coast. Lamin has been a student at the school since the 4th grade. He is enrolled in a public school, which educates grades four through eight. Lamin lives at home with his biological parents and one sister. Lamin shared that his family was comprised of six people, which included an older sister and her daughter. Lamin lives in an urban community and speaks English at home, but his parents speak Liberian English, which differs from the standard English and is spoken by the general population in Liberia. He identified Christianity as his family’s religious affiliation.

Mercy is a 13-year-old 8th grader with prominent brown eyes. Mercy is a Burundi refugee who entered the U.S. from Tanzania in 2007. She aspires to be an actress featured in African movies, preferably Nigerian movies. She laughingly shared her love for Nigerian movies, and when asked to select a pseudonym, she chose the name of her favorite Nigerian movie actress and appeared to know a lot about her. Prior to entering schools in the U.S., Mercy spent three years attending school in Tanzania. Mercy is currently enrolled in a public junior high school, which enrolls 6th to 8th graders in a poor urban community. She lives with both of her parents, two sisters, two brothers and one
cousin. She shared that her family lives in a home which runs parallel to a major freeway in this urban community. Mercy speaks Kirundi and Kimbembe at home, with a dash of Swahili. She identified Christianity as her family’s religious affiliation.

Michael is a 12-year-old boy, a 7th grader with a quiet disposition. He is enrolled in a public school which educates 4th through 8th graders. He is a Burundi refugee who attended school in Tanzania for three years prior to entering the U.S. in 2009. Michael enrolled in his current school as a 5th grader. He currently lives with his Burundian foster parents, two foster brothers, and three foster sisters. Michael shared that he has eight people living in his home, which is situated in a middle class community located in a southwest city. Michael speaks Kirundi and English at home, and his family’s religious affiliation is Christian.

Flomo is a 14-year-old boy who is an 8th grader. He presents with an athletic build, and expressed a desire to become a soccer player and an actor. Flomo was born in Liberia. He spent two years attending schools in Africa before arriving in the U.S. in 2004. He entered the U.S. as a refugee departing from the Ivory Coast. Flomo enrolled in his present K-8 public school in the 2nd grade when his family arrived from Africa. He lives at home with his parents, four sisters, and three brothers. Flomo lives in a low-income community. He revealed that his family speaks “Liberian English” and English at home. Their religious affiliation is Christian.
Lucy is a 12-year-old girl with a shy and quiet demeanor. Lucy hopes to become a heart surgeon. Lucy’s parents fled Sierra Leone for Guinea while her mother was pregnant with her. Lucy’s mother reported that Lucy was born in Guinea while they were on their way to Ghana. Lucy, her parents, and three brothers, traveled from Ghana to enter the U.S. as refugees in 2004. She reported attending school for a year in Africa before coming to the U.S. According to Lucy, her family consists of six people, and a great aunt who is visiting from Africa. She enrolled in her present public K-8 school as a 7th grader when her family moved from another section of the city. Lucy’s family speaks multiple languages at home, because her mother is a Liberian native and her father a Sierra Leonean native, but Lucy shared that she communicates in English to her parents and siblings. Lucy’s religious affiliation is Islam.

Khadija is a 16-year-old girl who presented with a defensive look yet bright smile. She listed a plethora of professional desires from being a Hollywood actress to a fashion designer with her own line of clothing. She was born in Sierra Leone and entered the U.S. as a refugee through Guinea in 2007. Khadija spent two years in schools in Africa before coming to the U.S. Khadija shared that she arrived with her aunt, who has two sons who also accompanied them. Khadija is an 8th grader who has been enrolled in her current public K-8 grade school since January 2011. She transferred while in the middle of 7th grade. She reported that her family’s move to another section of the city led to enrollment in her current school. When asked about her parents, she shared that
they remain in Sierra Leone. She talked about several of the people residing in their home, including her aunt’s husband, one cousin’s wife, and the young daughter of another cousin. Seven people share their household. Khadija’s family speaks Krio, Mende, and English at home. She shared that she speaks Krio and English, and that her family’s religious affiliation is Christian.

Ibrahim is a 14-year-old boy with a lanky frame and bright eyes. He was born in Somalia and entered the U.S. as a refugee through Botswana in 2008. Ibrahim spent four years attending school in Botswana before coming to the U.S. He would like to enter into a profession that would enable him to return to Africa and help those in the refugee camps. Ibrahim is an 8th grader enrolled in a K-12 charter school. He shared that he transferred from a public junior high school to a charter school this academic year because: “a lot of Somalis go there and they respect us”. Ibrahim lives at home with his parents, four sisters and two brothers. Ibrahim shared that his family speaks Somali and English at home, and that his family’s religious affiliation is Islam.

Dogo is a 12-year-old boy with a bright smile and a desire to become a doctor. He was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but spent two years attending school in Tanzania before coming to the U.S. in 2007. Dogo entered the U.S. as a refugee, accompanied by four sisters, two brothers, and their parents. He is a 7th grader enrolled in a 7-8-grade public school in a poor urban community. They currently reside in a southwestern city, which parallels a
highway. Dogo speaks Kirundi at home with his family, and their religious affiliation is Christian.

**Interview Protocol**

Interviews — talking to study participants both formally and informally — were the first data collection method employed. Interviews are a fundamental data collection method in qualitative research, and are often used when the researcher wants to gain in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Thus, using interview questions, follow-up questions and probes based on participants’ experience, allows the researcher to co-construct. DeMarrais and Lapan (2004) suggested that that this level of interview engagement can “only be accomplished when the qualitative interview is open ended enough for the participant to provide a depth of knowledge on the research topic” (p. 52). Utilizing this data collection method to understand the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students allowed for the discovery of the learning needs of this new population in classrooms across the U.S. This data collection method suited this study because it provided a unique opportunity to hear the voices of a group that has been silent in social science research. Each participant brought his or her personal story to the interview, and it is through this medium that their voices were heard.

I employed a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured individual interview with selected participants. The demographic questionnaire (see
Appendix C) captured the distinctiveness of each participant in this study. The interview protocol (see Appendix D) is grounded in the three major theoretical precepts of SDT, and replicates Wang and Holcombe’s (2010) study of school perception in the middle school years. Each question encompasses components of competency, autonomy, and relatedness.

**Focus Group Protocol**

Focus groups as a method of inquiry appear to be widely used in social science research. Though this inquiry method started in market research, it has been used in answering theoretical and applied problems in the field of social science (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). In this study, semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews captured the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. Though the data collection modes are similar, focus groups allowed the researcher to observe the dynamics of the group’s interaction.

I began each focus group by letting participants know what was expected of them, and that they were not expected to self-disclose beyond their comfort level. Secondly, each participant was encouraged to start the group session with a brief introduction, allowing everyone to have a voice in the group. I followed the introductions by asking the first question, with the intention of provoking a discussion among group members. Rossman and Rallis (2003) noted that the interviewer’s role is to create an open environment that encourages differing
opinions and points of view (p. 193), with the goal of promoting interactive discussions.

I facilitated two 60-minute focus group sessions, with four and three participants per group. The interviews were audio recorded, with the permission of the participants and their parents. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed utilizing techniques suggested by Seidman (2006), such as openness to the transcript, thus letting the “interview breathe and speak for itself” (p. 117). This openness allows for data mining. To ensure fidelity in this process, I shared interview transcripts with each participant and sought participant feedback.

I selected five focus group protocols (Appendix D) that answered the central question set forth in this study. I also utilized follow-up questions, and asked participants at the end of each session if: “...there is anything that has come to mind during the course of the conversation that they have not had an opportunity to add, or if they have a response to a question that has not been asked, but should have been” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 101). This closure served as an opportunity to explore questions, thoughts, and ideas that may or may not have been explored.

Utilizing individual interviews and focus groups in answering the question set forth in this study allowed the researcher to conduct cross-case analyses and draw comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis of each case builds in a respect for authenticity, and cross-case analysis allows a search for commonalities and differences between cases. Thus, the researchers readily
understood the schooling experiences and perceptions of the participants in the study. Merriam (1988) noted that case studies are good designs for practical problems, including “questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice” (p. 11). As a result, the interview questions provided each of the participants with a chance to share their experiences and perceptions of their middle school. This in turn provided explanations that perhaps serve as a resource for educators engaging resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is about narrating the experiences of others. It is through this medium that the schooling lives of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students are shared. Participants’ stories unearth the cultural influences that shape their everyday, shared realities; stories are therefore a tool to uncover thoughts and behaviors within a culture. I purposefully chose narratives to document the schooling experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study.

I approached the interviews and focus groups with an open lens, seeking meaning and structure which might emerge from the data. Then, a condensation phase consisted of reducing the data into manageable elements and synthesizing the text (Seidman, 2006). *Winnowing* is a process described by Seidman (2006), which allows the researcher to acknowledge the data by placing meaning on the text. During this phase, I interpreted the data by highlighting student responses that I believed added depth in understanding of the central question in this study.
As I read each transcript, I used colored markers to underscore student responses that were central to the research question.

Third, I used a categorization strategy to code interview sections according to relevant ideas and categories (Rossman & Rallis, p. 296). I further used both inductive and deductive analysis, being open to the interpretation of my data in the form of additional categories that emerged alongside the analyst-constructed preliminary categories. The following are the preliminary categories I constructed:

a. How do resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students view their relationships with their teachers and peers?

b. Can resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students identify a teacher or school staff member in their school community who is a resource for them?

c. What factors contribute to the challenges and successes in the school community of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students?

Following the categorization strategy, I organized my data through themes, and utilized a reflective process in the interpretation of my data. This process allowed a detailed narration of the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. Analysis and narration of the collected data depended on three criteria, as suggested by Merriam (2002): a) construction of the story; b) utilization of linguistic tools
(biographical, psychological, linguistic); and c) the cultural context. It is according to this data analysis format that I determined categories and themes within the narratives, and allowed participants to define the telling of their schooling story. In addition to determining categories and themes, Zollinger (2010) also noted that the establishment and evaluation of codes helps to “determine emerging themes within the narrative” (p. 152). Miles and Huberman (1994) identified three forms of coding in qualitative research: descriptive codes are the attribution of certain phenomena; interpretive codes are detailed presentation of phenomena; and pattern codes are the meanings the researcher attaches to phenomena. These coding strategies allow the researcher to make sense of the telling of participants’ stories. Each code noted was utilized to analyze interviews and focus groups. As a result, the data captured the richness and in-depth understanding of the bounded experiences of the participants.

Limitations of the Study

In qualitative methodologies, the researcher often acts as the instrument or tool for his or her study. Researchers “...construct understanding of their topic through the questions they ask, the contexts they study, and their personal biographies” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 35). Due to this, methodology is interactive, intimate, and interpretive. Data are filtered through the unique lens of the researcher and the researcher’s view of the world; therefore, the researcher’s “personal biography shapes the project in important ways” (Rossman & Rallis, p. 36).
In this study, my background as a sub-Saharan African immigrant from Sierra Leone shaped the study and the manner in which the story is presented. What I chose to focus on was shaped by my beliefs, culture, values, biases, education, career, and immigrant experience in the United States (Michie, 2004). Indeed, the accumulation of all these variables is undoubtedly a central part of this study. My experiences might possibly have affected the way I engaged the participants in this study, thus creating a need for reflexivity in this process. It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely eliminate my perspective, biases, opinions, and prejudices, because my reflexive capacities and abilities to question and explore shaped each participant’s voice in the telling of their story.

I ensured the integrity of this research by being exceptionally careful in the manner in which I collected my data. I frequently checked in with my dissertation chair, and worked within professional boundaries and limitations. My possession of cultural knowledge and tools of engagement was relevant in this study, but it also carried some biases that I attended to. Rossman and Rallis (2003) cautioned that “data do not speak for themselves; they are interpreted through [the] complex cognitive process” (p. 36) of the researcher. Though interpretation is necessary, I used the conceptual framework in this study to interpret the data, while avoiding subjectivity that might skew the results. Consequently, I allowed the data to speak with integrity. It is through this perspective that the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-
Saharan African refugee students in a southwestern middle school are examined and presented.

Chapter 4 reports the findings with respect to the three categories of the research question guiding this study. Data specifically answering the research question, as well as from an outlier in the study, are analyzed and reported, presenting the schooling stories of this cohort of students.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I provided brief portraits of the ten students who participated in this study. With each profile I included personal comments, in an attempt to give a personalized depiction of each participant. In this chapter, systematic categorical analyses of the participants’ narratives are used to identify broader themes across participants. While the small number of participants in this study will not allow for generalization, this exploratory study will shed light on the lives of resettled refugee students and their views of their schooling experiences. As a result, my goal was to look critically at the data, and offer insights into the schooling experiences and perceptions of the participants.

This chapter presents some of the challenges faced, and successes achieved, by resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in the southwestern U.S. I have divided this chapter into three preliminary categories, addressing different aspects of the research question: What are the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. state? 1a) How do resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students view their relationships with their teachers and peers?; 1b) Can resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students identify a teacher or school staff member in their school community who is a resource for them?; and 1c) What factors contribute to the challenges and
successes in the school community of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students?

First, I present a table (Table 2) that provides an overview of the participants, followed by a description of the research setting. This is followed by a discussion of the findings. The first two sections of the findings address teacher and peer relationships. The third section discusses relational resources at school. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sections describe factors that contribute to the challenges and successes of participants.

Table 2

*Participant Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Public</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aude</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>DR-Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Burundi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khadija</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lamin</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flomo</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Burundi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dogo</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>DR-Congo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Setting: Students’ Homes

Data collection for this study consisted of ten individual interviews and two focus groups, all held in participants’ homes, and one individual interview and one focus group in a community room of an apartment complex in a metropolitan area of a southwestern U.S. state. Three of the participants reside in resettled refugee housing communities along major interstate highways. Both refugee communities, Sierra Village and Ryland Place apartment complexes, appeared to be residential hubs for refugee resettlement in this southwestern city. Upon entering both communities, one’s entrance is greeted by barefoot children running around or playing, teenage boys playing basketball, and girls roaming from one apartment to the next visiting neighbors and friends. There were many elders seated outside in groups, talking with each other or quietly watching the children play. Patios had clothes hanging to dry, used furniture was scattered throughout the community, and the sound of laughter and the voices of children pierced the freeway traffic. In essence, both resettled refugee communities seemed to have been transfigured to resemble the places refugees come from, with a feel of a community where the lives of families are intertwined.

I worked to make the context of the interviews as confidential as possible for all the participants in this study, and utilized a community room and the homes of the participants. One noted limitation in the research setting was a need to interview two participants outside of the front doors of their apartments. This was due to three reasons. First, recruitment of participants was community-based,
thus I did not have access to schools, where I could have found physical space for all my interviews. Second, the immediate physical neighborhood of the participants’ homes lacks community infrastructure such as libraries, bookstores and parks, which would have been an option for interviews. Third, there was no quiet space in either of the participants’ apartment complexes, that would allow for an interview. As a result, Mercy and Dogo’s interviews were held outside the front doors of their Ryland Place apartments.

Mercy and her family of six reside in a two-bedroom apartment, with a living room and kitchen combined into one room. A 42-inch television is centrally located in the living room, not allowing space for an interview. Dogo’s family of nine resides in a three-bedroom apartment. The seven children, with ages of one-year-old through 14-years-old, did not allow for space for an interview.

Like Mercy’s apartment, Dogo’s apartment had a 52-inch television as the focal point in his family’s living room. Neon-colored Christmas decorations, seemingly used as permanent decorations, hung from the ceiling in the living room and kitchen in both apartments. Dogo’s apartment was congested, with children that appeared to have nowhere to move around, except to sit on the plastic-covered sofa in front of the television. Sitting outside for the interview did not spare us from younger siblings calling out Dogo’s name in unison. Dogo did his best to ignore his siblings calling his name. However, traffic from the
freeway, combined with the children’s voices, gradually decreased the physical proximity between Dogo and me during the interview.

Aude was the only participant in this study who was interviewed in the community room of her apartment complex at Sierra Village, also located along a major interstate highway in this southwestern city. Her family of ten shares a three-bedroom apartment. Her interview appointments were twice cancelled because she was babysitting her siblings, a task that she often does when her mother goes to work. On multiple occasions I observed her carrying a child on her hip, scolding a younger sibling, and providing other caretaking roles. Her small apartment, saturated with the aroma of Congolese ethnic food, was dimly lit by a 28-inch television and computer located side-by-side against the wall. Children appeared to maintain a constant flow between the living room, bedroom, and outside. All the children were barefoot and sparsely dressed during the interview, and on subsequent visits with Aude. I often observed them roaming around the apartment complex with other refugee children from different parts of the world, all housed in this single apartment complex.

With the exception of Michael, who resided in a 3,000 square foot home with his adopted family, who are also Burundian refugees living in a middle class community, all the other participants were interviewed in single-family homes located in low-income neighborhoods in this southwestern city. All the homes were sparsely furnished, with the aroma of ethnic food from their country of
origin permeating the air. Each aroma gave a glimpse of the stories of the newcomers.

The importance of this study lies in the voices of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees who are relative newcomers to the American educational infrastructure. The stories of their schooling capture their understanding of their middle school years. The results of this study will serve as a tool for educators to meet the educational needs of resettled refugee students. Secondly, they may assist educational policy-makers in creating comprehensive policies that meet the diverse needs of this sub-group of learners. Third, the study will add relevance to the educational needs of sub-Saharan Africans in social science research.

Results of the Individual and Focus Group Interviews

I explored 13 demographic questions, 10 in-depth interviews, and five questions for the focus group interviews, divided into three sections under the preliminary categories noted earlier in this chapter. I also probed with several additional questions to gain a better understanding of the phenomena under study. I was attentive to participants’ responses, looking for words, phrases, and non-verbal communication that described their middle schooling experiences and perceptions.

The responses of participants in this study were categorized into relevant ideas embedded within the Self Determination Theory (SDT) framework. I organized the data by clustering phrases and words that emerged in the interviews into themes. Synthesizing participants’ words and phrases exposed six themes
that emerged from responses shared in the interview: a) teachers’ helpfulness; b) positive perceptions of school; c) friends as resources at school; d) disruptive students in the classroom; e) the need for better teachers; and f) before- and after-school activities. In making these themes clear, I have utilized descriptive and interpretive terms to highlight the common ground amongst the participants in this dissertation. I attempted to capture the tone, body language and expressions of participants when quoting them, thus presenting the voice and the uniqueness of each participant.

**Relationships in the School Environment**

Some researchers suggest that teacher and peer relationships are an important element in school. As a result, indicators such as teacher-student and peer-to-peer relationships inform student perceptions of schools. These relationships are meaningful in creating positive schooling experiences for students, and often serve as an intervention for children who are at risk for school failure (Lee, 2005; McCartney & O’Connor, 2007; Stewart, 2011). The first question in the preliminary categories explored teacher and peer relationships. First, I will address the findings regarding students’ relationships with their teachers.

**Teachers’ Helpfulness: “He helps with my education with learning”**

Theorists studying SDT suggest that the degree to which “students perceive that the school context meets their psychological needs determines the level of students’ engagement in school” (Wang & Holcombe, 2010, p. 635).
Essentially, student experiences and perceptions of how schools meet their educational needs dictate their engagement, which in turn affects their performance outcome. Teachers are a critical potential source of support for resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students within the context of their schooling. In this section, I specifically explore this significant element for a group of students new to U.S. schools. Respondents portrayed their teachers within the context of teaching and learning, and their relationships inside and outside the classroom.

The respondents in this study repeatedly noted common phrases in their relational descriptions of their teachers when asked to describe them. Four of the most frequent responses were “good,” “nice,” “fun,” and “helpful.” This theme was consistent in 80% of student responses, with the exception of two respondents who shared a differing experience: Khadija, a resettled refugee from Sierra Leone, who presented an ambivalent relationship with her teacher; and Lamin, a resettled refugee student from Liberia, who described a relationship that lacks trust. But for most, endearing terms were used in describing their teachers.

Michael, who is from Burundi, commented:

She is nice {paused with whispering voice} She gives me books to read and I bring it home to read. She always allows me to borrow books from the class and bring it home to read. (Michael)

Aude, Cecilia, Dogo, Mercy and Lucy commented that their teachers were nice:

My first period teacher, she is nice, who teaches reading. She is nice because she gives us a notebook because we have to write something and see a vocabulary word and we have to write something about something about like our friends. (Aude)
Ibrahim, Flomo and Lamin’s perceptions of their teachers portrayed them as “fun” and “entertaining”. Mercy commented:

{with a smile of satisfaction} I love my science teacher and the class because it is really funny. I like the class.

Ibrahim corroborated Mercy’s view, with a smile on his face and a slight nervousness as he reflected on his relationship with his math teacher:

Okay, my math teacher is like, he makes little jokes about math questions to keep us entertained {smiling}. I ask more questions so I learn more. He is fun teacher and we want to go to his class every day. He is fun and we are learning. So my teacher gives us lots of homework and he helps us with tutoring. Mr. J. is my teacher, he is good. (Ibrahim)

The first explanation of this narrative relates to students’ ability to forge relationships with their teachers, and teachers building confidence in students’ learning, optimizing their potential for schooling success through their gestures of sharing books, providing tutoring, and making learning fun. Within the SDT framework used in this study, competence, autonomy and relatedness are critical in fostering relationships between teachers and students, and among students, as a prelude to school success. While research investigating this phenomenon is relatively recent, a significant association has been asserted between schooling success and the teacher-student relationship (O’Connor & McCartney, 2007), similar to the findings in this study. For resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students, a positive teacher relationship is an essential element in building positive school experiences and perceptions (Stewart, 2011).
Conversely, the outlier participant in this study presented her relationship with her teacher as one that is fraught with continual suspicion. Here is an exchange attempting to explore the relationship Khadija had with her teacher:

Khadija: {in a tone of agitation and a matter of fact} Sometimes we are cool and other times we are not {paused} ‘cause if other kids are chewing gum she will say, Khadija, stop it, even though it’s not me.

Adama: — why would she think it’s you?

Khadija: {with hands up in the air, she loudly stressed the name of a television sitcom in making an analogy of how she feels in class} I feel like “EVERYBODY HATES CHRIS”.

Adama: Tell me a story or a time where she has done something to you that made you feel like “EVERYBODY HATES CHRIS”.

Khadija: A time.

Adama: Yes.

Khadija: Before I got suspended last week {ammmm, finding her words and with annoyance in her tone of voice} I was sitting down, and the class was doing a group work that we were assigned to do, so one of the boys at the back was throwing paper airplanes. So she looked at me and said, ‘Who threw that?’ She looked at me, not anybody else, and I said, ‘Why are you looking at me?’ And she just stared at me, and I told her that I didn’t, and that was the last time I had problems with her.

Adama: You were suspended from school?

Khadija: I was suspended last Wednesday.

Adama: Tell me about the suspension.

Khadija: I was suspended because I was outside, playing with my friend, and we were playing a wild game ‘cause I was choking him, and I got into trouble for that.

When I took Khadija’s response into consideration, her relational experience with her teacher appears fractured and ambivalent. I had suspected
that perhaps more would share similar ambivalent experiences, but that was not
the case in this study. Khadija’s school experience is noted in the findings of
O’Connor & McCartney (2007), asserting that students with higher-quality
teacher relationships demonstrated higher levels of classroom engagement than
students with lower-quality relationships. Khadija’s lower-quality relationship
with her teacher allows her to analogically describe her level of engagement
within the context of school as “Everybody Hates Chris”.

With few exceptions, the discussion of teacher and student relationships
showed that students perceived their relationships with their teachers as amicable,
thus allowing space for learning to occur. Building learning capacity in all
students is important, but is more urgent with resettled refugees, due to the
paucity of previous schooling opportunities afforded to them. What struck me as
positive was that 9 out of the 10 participants described their teachers as “helpful.”
I explored specific examples of teacher help rendered to students when they have
experienced difficulties, and the students presented an array of responses.
Students noted instructional help during learning, support help to gain subject
mastery, and altruistic help outside the instructional arena during times of
difficulties.

With regard to subject area help, students commented on specific types of
instructional help given in the classroom. This view of instructional help in the
classroom is worth recognizing in this dissertation, because it attends to the task
of learning for a group of students whose learning may have been interrupted by
civil war, or life in a refugee camp. I found commonalities in their use of
language and expressions in response to related questions. The following quotes
demonstrate the respondents’ perceptions of instructional help in the classroom,
when asked to reflect on specific help teachers have rendered, when they have
experienced difficulties. Respondents corroborated each other’s views of their
teachers providing extra help as they gained subject mastery.

Like in my math class, my teacher was helping with math and she made it
so simple that I was able to understand it {paused} in reading {paused} for
example in reading {paused} sometimes the reading thing we are doing
have hard word {thinking and rubbing his hands together} so like she
helps me understand the words, so she makes me do it {paused} instead of
her telling me what it means, she makes me look it up and find the
meaning of the word myself. (Flomo)

If I don’t get it, the teacher help me in class and in math with decimal, and
the teacher help me {paused, trying to focus on the interview, siblings are
shouting his name, Dogo, Dogo, Dogo} she helps me with clues that help
me and it comes to my mind and I can know the answer. (Dogo)

My math teacher helps me by explaining things and giving me worksheets
and extra work to do, so that I can better understand what we are doing.
(Lucy)

{lont pause, with a low shivering voice} She helps me when I get
something wrong, and when I finish my work she checks it and tells me
what I got wrong and helps me do the work again, and then I try my
hardest in the class. (Michael)

She help me with like my social studies, because sometimes I don’t know
it {paused, picking at her nails with eyes to the floor} so she tell me to
come at lunch or after school. (Aude)

Perceived levels of teacher support may have a positive impact on several
schooling outcomes. The presence of teachers in providing support for homework
completion, giving books, and providing extra time, solidifies the relationship
with students in their school environment, and works to build extrinsic and intrinsic factors, both premises of the SDT framework utilized in this dissertation. O’Connor & McCartney’s (2007) investigation of teacher-child relationships found a correlation between higher-quality teacher-child relationship and participation in the classroom. Their main finding suggests that students with a higher-quality teacher relationship demonstrated higher levels of school engagement and success than students with a low-quality teacher relationship. Their research supposition was evident in the findings in this dissertation, with participants consistently noting their relationship with their teachers.

Therefore, the notion of participants accessing teacher help outside of instructional time potentially has meaning for the students in this study, since it shapes quality teacher relationships, and helps students build foundational knowledge for success in high school and beyond. In the present interactions, it tells students that their learning matters. All respondents but one mentioned teachers making time outside of the formal school hours. I would argue that this gesture towards students is a critical factor in the student-teacher relational dyad, creating an affirming view of their teachers, and building autonomy in participants, which in turn directly impacts classroom engagement. The following quotes illustrate the experiences of respondents in this study with regard to help offered by teachers outside of formal instructional time:

She gives us homework, and if we cannot do it she gives us time before school in the morning to help us. She can help us understand stuff. (Mercy)
My reading teacher {paused, dad enters the room} I communicate with her a lot because she helps me a lot with my reading skills. Because if I want to be an actor, and I have to do a lot of reading, so I need to learn reading so I communicate with her more. I told her that I was having trouble hearing her in class {paused, sister is pouring cereal in the bowl} she said I will move you to a smart person in class so you can pay attention. (Flomo)

Well, my math teacher he does this — he goes to students’ houses and talks to the parents …he makes sure that parents really understand what’s going on and that they are following up with their kids’ learning, and to make sure you are not hiding anything — they pulled out the homework and if you don’t do it they make you do it. That’s what my math teacher does. (Ibrahim)

SDT research has noted that connectedness to teachers in school affects academic engagement and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teacher warmth or relatedness is important in encouraging autonomous orientation for classroom activities (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994), as well as increasing academic gains (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). Students perceive that supportive help from their teachers promotes the notion that their schooling success matters to their teachers, even if that help is outside instructional time.

Ibrahim and Lamin both mentioned assistance provided to them by their teachers. Ibrahim, a Somali refugee, looking nervous, was asked to tell a story about a time when a teacher had been helpful to him. He shared a story about what he considered helpful:

{pausing with eyes looking straight ahead} when I first moved I did not know that much English ‘cause I was new to that school — I was getting late to my classes. This one teacher would stop and show me where my classes were, and every time the bell ring I have to go to this class or that class. (Ibrahim)
Lamin, a student from Liberia, stated that when his teachers heard on television about his house burning down, without him “saying a word in school,” his Science teacher — who is also his coach — came to his aid. Lamin’s relationship with his coach allowed the coach to be a resource when his house burned down, even though Lamin did not share about his house burning down with his coach or other school staff. However, the relational understanding allowed the coach to provide needed resources for him, as evident in the following quote:

And a science teacher, I had him as my basketball coach and he bought me some basketball clothes and stuff after my house burned down, and other people were buying my basketball shoes and stuff. His name is Mr. Mann. (Lamin)

Surprisingly, salient gender roles afforded opportunities for two male students in this study, even though both students view their coaching relationships as strictly task-oriented. Flomo and Lamin allude to coaching as a pathway that has allowed adult relationships. The coaching relationship afforded fluid adult contact inside and outside of the school day. For instance, Flomo, a resettled refugee from Liberia, commented on his relationship with his coach, who is also his social studies teacher:

He is my social studies teacher and soccer coach, and he knows that I want to be a soccer player. He makes me run a lot during soccer…like… he knows I really want to play soccer in the future and he knows I need practice — he just put me on the team — he really cares for me. He knows I like social studies a lot and I know about the past…I really like soccer…if I get into trouble a little bit he lets it pass, or if I make mistakes…and he understands my feeling and all that. (Flomo)
The overall perspective in the summary of participants’ views is that students appreciate the relationships and help rendered by their teachers inside and outside the classroom. Their collective and reflective view of help offered to them does affect the student / teacher relationship in the classroom. The genesis of this appreciation appears to come from students’ countries of origin in sub-Saharan Africa, where universal education is not available; as a result, schooling is held in high esteem (Njue & Retish, 2010). In the United States, quality teacher relationships are perceived as having the potential to positively change the trajectory of their students’ lives.

As such, it is not surprising that students in this study embrace their teachers’ levels of help inside and outside the classroom. Their responses suggest that teachers can impact — and already have impacted — student learning through several pathways. This not only influences learning, but ignites relationships that may shape the educational journeys of the respondents in this study. Within the context of this dissertation, the students’ views of their schools were positive, with 9 out of 10 students reporting a positive perception about school.

Though an SDT framework was specifically used in framing this study, as it relates to the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness as essential constituents for individual well-being, one can also look at systems within more sociocultural and ecological frameworks to further explain
findings in this dissertation. I will specifically look at both frameworks as tools to explain the findings of this work in the discussion chapter.

Peer Relationships: “I work with my friends”

Peer relationships and support are cited as a significant protective factor in school engagement during the middle school years, and as a way to build confidence in learning (Daly, Salders, Shin, Thakral, & Vera, 2008). As such, it was not surprising that students characterized their peer relationships in terms of the other students they can work with in the classroom, and who are a source of support during their school day. In this section, I will look at peer relationships in the classroom context. The next section will explore peer relationships as a source of support.

When given the opportunity by their teachers to select partners for group work, four out of ten students selected their friends, or other students whom they perceived would optimize their learning. In relating stories about their peers, participants used terms such as “friend” and we “get along”. The following narratives illustrate what they mean by work with their friends:

I work with my friend {paused} I have a friend in class, and she is really smart and I can work with her. There are other students in the class, and I cannot work with them, ‘cause when you work with them, you are the only one who does the work, but when I work with my friend I know that we are both working. (Mercy)

I work with my friend because he does his work, and we do it together because he works hard like me. The other kids do not like to do work, so I don’t work with them. (Michael)
I work with my friends and people I get along with, so I will get my work done with no problems. Sometimes like I will work with my smart friends and if I need help they can help me. (Ibrahim)

I work with this girl. Her name is Gloria. She is my friend {paused} I kind of like her {paused} and yeah, I work with her. (Lamin)

From these narratives, one can conclude that students select working partners in the classroom that they perceive as smart and hard working, thus keeping them focused on the task of learning. Students appeared to want to learn, and were able to identify what they needed from their peer relationships. When given the opportunity to select work partners by their teachers, they overwhelmingly opt for a classmate who can help them with their learning, and keep them on-task. An explanation for this selection of peers could be that resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students “bring with them a deep-seated desire to acquire education” (Njue & Retish, 2010, p. 366). As a result, the simple task of selecting a partner to work with in class is perceived as a pathway to acquiring that education.

The other six participants shared that their teachers assigned partners, and expressed frustration with partners they perceived as “lazy”: “you do all the work”, and “not hard working”. During the focus groups, participants affirmed each other’s frustration over classmates they perceive as “lazy”, who don’t contribute to class assignment and projects. Making education a high priority in the lives of resettled refugee students was evident in Stewart’s (2011) work with resettled refugees in Canada. She notes:

Without exception, every student that I interviewed indicated that being educated was his or her first priority in life. They all referred to getting an
education as their only hope for a better future. Many of them saw education as an agent of change. (Stewart, 2011, p. 67)

Participants’ perceptions of classmates being “lazy” and “not hard working” was prominent in both the individual interviews and focus groups, with all students expressing dismay at the lack of focus classmates exhibit towards the educational opportunities afforded them in the U.S. For the resettled sub-Saharan African refugees in this study, acquiring an education appears to be a priority. All participants in this study expressed a desire for a college education, and some talked about going back to Africa to help their communities. As such, school is perceived as the only place where this opportunity lies.

**Friends as Resources: “I only go to my friends”**

School is the primary acculturating institution where respondents in this study make contact with their new world (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). It is a place where significant social relationships are fostered. For resettled refugee students, creating relationships with both teachers and peers inside and outside the classroom is crucial in their level of English acquisition (Shepard, 2005), as well as the eventual construction of their own Americanized sense identity in their adopted country.

Within the SDT tenets, relatedness is suggested as the affiliation with and level of connection to others in a given context — such as school. As a result, relatedness refers to how students relate to both peers and teachers. Oliver et al. (2010) noted the importance of individual well-being when relational needs are fulfilled, and that thwarting these needs is likely to result in a negative state.
Among the common phrases used by respondents to describe relational school support were “feel better,” “my coach,” “friends,” and “understand”. The respondents in this study were consistent in their use of common terms and style. With the exception of Cecilia and Michael, the respondents mentioned their friends as people they go to when having a good or a bad day. The following narrative accounts exemplify their relationships with their friends:

I went to basketball tryout, and my friends were not there, and I was scared, and I called my friends and they came. (Dogo)

My friend David {smiling} If I have a good or bad day I go to him. I call him my brother because I have known him for a long time. So you understand {paused} — so we go to each other if we are having a good or bad day. I help him and I make him feel better. (Flomo)

There is a lot about my friend {paused} they are not only my friends or best friends, but they are like sisters to me, and I basically tell them everything. They are trustworthy and all of that, and they stick up for me like stuff. (Khadija)

My friend Katie — I made friends with her last year. First she did not talk to me, but then she did and we started becoming friends, and I talk to her no matter what, whether I am sad, happy, in-between. She is always there for me when I need her, and I am always there for her when she needs me. (Lucy)

Mercy, a refugee from Burundi, simply noted with a smile: “I go to my friend Mikki. She comes to me and I go to her.” Ibrahim, a student from Somalia, stayed on the continuum of going to friends with his statement:

It’s going to be my friends {paused with a smile} if I am having a good or bad day, it’s going to be my friends.

The findings above reveal that the students’ relationships with their friends served as a cornerstone of support for them. Eight of the ten students were unable
to identify an adult in their school community whom they could seek out for support. On one hand, they felt comfortable and supported in their peer relationships, and did not see their teachers as people they could go to when they were having a good or bad day. On the other hand, they saw their teachers as people who helped them with the business of learning within the confines of the classroom.

In the focus group, respondents had opportunities to further examine this relationship, in response to the question: “Do you talk to your teacher about what is going on in your life?” Respondents’ exchanges revealed a relationship that is defined by space and time. Respondents nodded in unison as the others spoke, and were eager to share their own stories. The quotes below capture students’ perceptions of their teachers:

To me they are just teachers. You don’t have to tell them everything — you know them for one year. A teacher is not a person you tell everything — because they are not really too close to you. You see them for 8 hours — so I don’t think they should know everything you do — that’s too personal. I tell them what is necessary, like stuff in life, I will not tell them everything. Is it necessary to tell them — I don’t know how to explain it though. (Flomo)

Nope!!! I don’t tell them anything about me — Like the important personal stuff. I do not tell them, and if it’s about basketball I tell them that, but nothing personal, I want that boundary. I don’t want them to be my friend — too personal, not too close. To me that’s about it. (Lamin)

No — I don’t tell them anything… I talk about school stuff. I don’t talk about my family. (Aude)

After further probing in the focus group, Lamin, a student from Liberia, used the word “boundary”. He continued: “{long pause, with downcast eyes}
sometimes it’s the way they {meaning his teachers} treat me and how they act.”

How do they treat you and act? I explored. “Like they don’t care.” He continued along the theme: “It’s hard to explain, but they just don’t care, and I want that boundary.” As an educator, I found Lamin’s statement about his perception of his teachers as not caring unsettling and disheartening.

In the second focus group, Khadija, Mercy and Lucy reiterated this perception:

{students were eager and were finishing each other’s thoughts} I don’t feel like they care. I think they are just nosey and they don’t care {paused} my teacher don’t care. She acts like she cares but no she doesn’t. She acts like she does. (Khadija).

According to Lamin and Khadija, their teachers’ lack of caring has created a clear boundary in the relationship, that has caused them to view teachers as not trustworthy or caring. Lee (2005) found that Hmong high school students shared the same perception about their teachers. In that study, students shared that: “good teachers know you and care about you — good teachers should know about the lives of students inside and outside of school” (p. 80). Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students want an authentic relationship, and for this group of students such a relationship is absent from the present relational dyad they have with their teachers. The participants continued to express this perception of their teachers as not caring:

I don’t share, and do not tell about my life. I do not share anything {paused} she tries to ask me personal question, but she is nosey and everyone knows she is nosey. (Khadija)
They are only there to teach me and to help me get a good education, but they don’t care about us. (Mercy)

It just to teach us and that’s it. (Lucy)

In the focus group interview, Mercy and Lucy revealed that they share their lives with their teachers through journaling and biographical writing prompts in the classroom. From the perspectives of both students, writing and telling are different forms of communication. For both students, telling occurs when trust is established and reciprocated:

I write to her about my life, like when I was little, in my journal on Wednesdays, and what I want to do when I grow up. (Mercy)

I don’t talk to my teacher, but I write it down on paper {paused, collecting her thoughts} we are doing a biography for our life, and I write about my life. (Lucy)

The respondents’ perceptions of their teachers as people you do not share personal stories with, but who only teach, reveal a tension in the teacher / student relationship, which is contradictory. Stewart (2011) cited the student / teacher relationship as central in building resettled refugee students’ capacity to succeed in school. The participants in this study saw their teachers as helpful and good, but not as people they can have a trusting relationship with. As a result, the respondents view their teachers through a specific lens, defined by space and time. From the students’ point of view, it is an ambivalent relationship, and the teachers seemingly do not care about their students.

It is not surprising that the participants expressed clear distinctions in their relationships with their teachers. Such distinctions may come, first, from
hierarchical structures in sub-Saharan Africa, where teachers are projected as the “ultimate authority figure and someone who should not be questioned” (Stewart, 2011, p. 63) — let alone someone to share personal stories with. Another explanation may be that participants’ relationships with teachers are not pursued or encouraged by teachers — nor perhaps their parents. Consequently, participants do not perceive teachers in their school community as people with whom they can have a trusting relationship. For participants, the teacher is perceived through a single lens, which is the charge of learning.

**Positive School Perceptions: “My experience is great”**

Interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers often shape adolescent perceptions of the school environment (Wang, 2009). As such, positive school perceptions are suggested as a key ingredient for schooling success amongst all students, but especially resettled refugee students, because they tend to negate issues of school dropout, teen pregnancy, gang membership, and other social ills often associated with this group (Lee, 2005; Stewart, 2011).

The participants’ relationships with their teachers, peers in their classrooms, and the wider school community, were explored in this dissertation. With the exception of Khadija and Lamin, the respondents all depicted a positive rapport with their teachers, and all 10 participants shared positive relationships with their classroom peers. Descriptive terms from the data include words such as “get along,” “good,” “nice,” and “my friends”. The following narratives illustrate what they meant by rapport with their peers:
Well I got — every kid in my school, we get along...we all get along with each other. So there is no drama. (Ibrahim)

It’s good. I get along with everyone. I talk to my friends and I like my friends. (Mercy)

They are nice to me. I don’t talk much. Everyone is nice to me. ‘Cause I am shy. They are nice to me...they are good but I don’t talk to them much. (Lucy)

I get along with everyone {paused} Cause I’m cool with them and they are cool with me. (Khadija)

All of them {paused with a smile} Black, White, and Mexican. I am friends with all of them {paused} we get along and stuff. (Flomo)

In my conversations with the participants’ in this study, I came to understand the need for students to feel connected with school, and the teacher appeared to be a critical force in scaffolding students’ perception of school. Khadija’s explicit language of not wanting to go to her school underscores this point, when compared to the other respondents, who utilized descriptive codes like “good,” “great,” “nice,” “busy,” and “happy” in reference to their schooling experiences. These quotes illustrate the perceptions of the majority of respondents about their middle school years:

My experience is great {collecting his thoughts} I do not have any trouble, everything is good. I can understand the teacher, and the work they give us. I do what the other students do. Everything is okay there. (Ibrahim)

It’s very good. The teachers are good, smart too, and half of my teachers are Christians {hands folded across his stomach} sometimes we talk about God {Paused} Sometimes I take my bible to school and read it to my friends. (Flomo)

It’s pretty fun in middle school. Like I’m in 8th grade and they {teachers} expect us to be like mature and everything, but I don’t like being so mature, I like having fun. {paused, lots of movement where the interview
was held} I don’t want to go to any other school besides that one. I have
lots of friends, and the teachers there are the best teachers ever. (Lamin)

With the exception of one student, the participants in this study felt that
school was a place they liked, and a place where they learned and got to see their
friends. Previous research looking at immigrants and resettled refugees from sub-
Saharan Africa (Butcher, 2010; Shepard, 2005; Njue & Retish, 2007) has noted
that Western educational influences in sub-Saharan Africa have ingrained in those
societies educational merit as a pathway to social and economic mobility.
Consequently, this perception of educational merit was found among the
participants in this study, supporting Ogbu’s (1992) examination of similar
phenomena. Although all participants attended schools in low-income urban
communities, where schools are presented with enormous social and economic
challenges (Vang, 2005), they viewed and portrayed their schools as places that
can change the trajectory of their lives — where their schooling can be success.

However, Khadija is an outlier in this study, not only with respect to her
experience and perception of middle school years, but also her age. At 16 years
of age, she should be a high school student, according to the American age-based
educational model, however she is in 8th grade. Khadija’s response to the
question about her experience in middle school was deliberate, angered, and
somewhat agitated: “No, I don’t feel like going to school.” I probed about her not
wanting to go to school. “{with her voice raised} ‘Cause, well, my teacher
{paused, in a reflecting manner} I don’t like her.” I asked what she did not like
about her teacher, and she responded: “{with her hands up in the air and a feeling
of dejection} “I feel like I am being treated differently ‘cause I am the only black
in the classroom and it really stinks.” This exchange continued:

Khadija: I am happy and stuff, but as soon as I walked in the class my mood change.

Adama: When you walk in your class, your mood changes…tell me about that.

Khadija: I will be happy…like we have recess and lunch. But I have to stay with her for the whole 8 hours. It’s not like middle school when you change periods with different classes. It’s like elementary, where you have one teacher. It’s like I am stuck with her. So as soon as I walk in class I keep a straight face. Like I won’t smile or anything.

This exchange with Khadija paints a portrait of a student who has resigned herself to an estranged relationship with her teacher. Her mentioning being treated differently due to the color of her skin, and her level of relational frustration with her teacher, informs her mood in the classroom and places her in an ill-situated direction of disengagement from school. Using the SDT framework to examine school motivation, Guardia (2009) specifically focused on how teachers influence childhood and adolescent development as it relates to school motivation. According to Guardia, the relationship students have with their teachers influences school perception and school engagement/disengagement, which appears to be the case with Khadija’s perception of her teacher, and consequently her schooling experience. Students’ relationship with their teachers, though not the only source for schooling success, is a relevant source for building positive school perceptions (O’Connor & McCartney, 2007). Khadija aspires to become a fashion designer, actress and a singer. However, the
negative relationship with her teacher may serve as a barrier to her future aspirations.

In describing their middle school experiences, and contrary to some of my expectations, two students in this study referenced their schooling in Africa within the context of comparison. Both students compared their schooling experiences in the U.S. to their prior schooling experiences in Africa. This was the case with Ibrahim:

{pausing, rubbing his hands together and looking a bit nervous} My experience is a little different than back in Africa {paused}… we slightly do things different here {paused} like the way they learn stuff is way different {paused, and appeared to be gathering his thoughts} we have lot of schoolwork in Africa. Lot of homework, way {rubbing his hands} more homework. I think America schools is a little bit easier than {pause} it better here and it is easier {paused} they serve food and everything. So, but the work and based on work and what you learn {looking towards his mother} like you learn science and teaches you about how things work, and back then we just learn mostly math and English. So science, we never got to learn science. (Ibrahim)

Respondents referenced learning that was not available to them in their countries of origin. Michael reiterated the same comparison when asked about his experience in middle school:

{paused, looking down to the floor with hands tightly held together and in a quiet voice} It’s good, and I am learning things that I didn’t know in Africa. I go to school every day. (Michael)

Researchers (Njue & Retish, 2010; Stewart, 2011) examining the schooling experiences of resettled refugees and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa have mentioned the scarcity of schooling opportunities there. Some resettled refugees, who may have spent time in refugee camps, may have never
attended school. As a result, students comparing schooling in Africa and the U.S.
seemed to be aware of the educational disparities between their countries of origin
and their adopted country.

In summary, the respondents in this study seemed to have developed
relationships with their teachers and peers, and in so doing they have come to
view these relationships as impacting their schooling experiences. Outside of
Khadija, all the other participants appeared grateful for the privilege of receiving
an education in the U.S., and seemed mindful of the privilege given to them.
Stewart (2011) noted this perception of gratefulness in her work with refugee
students in Canada, in which students expressed gratitude to be able to access
Canadian education. Another explanation for this gratefulness derives from the
participants’ thirst for educational opportunities, shaped by the scarcity of
schooling resources in sub-Saharan African prior to migration.

As a result, any schooling opportunities afforded to resettled sub-Saharan
African refugee students that attend to the task of learning are viewed favorably.
Njue & Retish (2010) cited Ethiopia as an example of a place “where a salary
system … turned education into an end in itself… because salaries of employees
are based on educational merit rather than on the nature and complexity of the
job” (p. 366). Education, therefore, is a highly priced commodity that is sought
after by resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, and translates to the positive
school experiences shared by participants in this dissertation. Yet the
relationships that the respondents have formed with their teachers and the overall
school community have not transferred, to allow students to perceive their teachers as sources of support as part of a trusting and authentic relationship.

**Disruptive Students in the Classroom: “He needs to get control of his students”**

This emerging theme relates to the daily disruptive behavior of peers in the classroom. Exploring this question with the participants revealed their classroom environment as one that is fraught with daily behavioral disruption, and teachers unable to contain disruptive behavior, which participants perceive as “ruining” their education. The frequency of the references by all ten participants to classroom disruption is an important theme worth discussing, because it points to formidable challenges sub-Saharan African refugee students are confronted with in their schools in low-income urban communities.

Descriptive terms used when exploring this phenomenon were: “screaming,” “kids don’t respect,” “cannot control class,” “students don’t listen,” and “terrible”. Nine of the ten participants continually weaved student disruption into their responses, and seemed frustrated by the daily disruptions. Lucy noted that her teacher is “okay”, yet she wishes her teacher had better classroom management skills, to contain the behaviors that take time away from students who want to learn:

But I think he needs to get control of his students. He is trying really hard to get control, but the kids are taking power over him, and he lets them. There is this one kid, her name is MM and she doesn’t listen to the teacher. She tells him {the teacher} to shut up and tells him to sit his butt down. (Lucy)
Echoing this perception, Lamin shared:

He screams, because the kids in there {classroom} that like to touch their teachers patience and make him mad all the time, and it’s not fun when the teacher is mad. (Lamin)

Khadija, with agitation and annoyance in her voice, simply stated: “She cannot control her class.” When asked to explain, she stated:

She is like {paused} sometimes she is nice, but she is too nice to the other kids and they take advantage of that. The kids do whatever, and she stands there like she is retarded and stuff. I keep telling her to control her class, but whenever I try to help her out I get into trouble. She cannot control the kids and they don’t respect her. Like she picks on me, but I at least give her the respect she deserves, but those other kids do not respect her. Anytime I try telling her that she gets the kids under control, she calls the principal on me and gets me in trouble. She thinks I am talking back at her. (Khadija)

When asked to elaborate, with the question “What does lack of control look like?”, with exacerbation in her voice she stated:

Like the kids will be yelling at her… and all she says {lowering her voice to imitate her teacher} Oh guys, please stop. She does not make her voice to command the kids {pause, with hands up in the air and annoyance in her tone} she does not raise her voice for the kids to know that somebody is right there. (Khadija)

This view was consistently referenced by all the participants in the study, with Dogo simply stating: “It’s terrible.” Asked to clarify what he meant by “terrible”, he stated:

Like people talk a lot, and they don’t pay attention to the teacher {paused} kids get into trouble a lot. The principal has to come like everyday {paused, with disbelief in his voice} when the teacher say not to do something the kids still do it. They don’t listen to the teacher. The kids yell in class and bring food in class. (Dogo)
Aude commented on the theme of student disruption:

There is one boy who never listens in that class {language arts} he always walks around. He talks a lot {paused} and he sits in front of me in class and he spits on me {paused, rubbing her fingers with a downcast gaze} and I tell the teacher and she says don’t worry about it. (Aude)

These examples illustrate some of the dealings resettled refugee students encounter in their classrooms, and are similar to Stewart’s (2011) findings in her work with resettled refugee students in Canada. Students explained that peer disruption, and teachers lacking control, takes instructional time away from their learning. Lucy captures this with her comments:

{with an assured and frustrated voice} I don’t think she {a peer who disrupts the learning of others} is being fair to the students, because some of us want to learn, but she is making that difficult because she is bothering the teacher. The teacher always calls the office and she gets suspended. And that is too much. (Lucy).

The theme of students’ disruptive behavior, and its overall impact in the classroom, was sharply echoed in both focus groups, with students nodding in agreement with responses made by group participants. As Khadija commented:

She gets frustrated with other kids, she takes it out on the people in the class. She takes her anger out on everyone. For example, I am frustrated today, she takes it out on you. Every single thing you do, yeah. (Khadija)

Mercy and Lucy nodded their heads, and Mercy chimed in: “That is the same thing my teacher does.” Asked what she meant, she stated: “When she is frustrated, she gives us a lot of notes to write,” and Lucy jumped in with:

“{gesturing with her hands and a tone of frustration in voice} he does not teach us, ‘cause the kids distract the teacher.” When asked what the distraction looks
like, all three girls shook their heads in unison, and Lucy, corroborating this perspective, stated:

Not really good {paused with hands under her chin} my education is disrupted and others that want to learn.

Ibrahim’s response to the question differed slightly from that of the other participants. Yet he noted that, prior to moving to his charter school this school year, his experience in his other school had been fraught with daily student disruption. He encapsulated his present 8th grade teacher classroom practice with:

My math teacher’s classroom is a nice environment to learn in, and it’s safe. If we give him respect he will show us respect. If we disrespect him like talk {pause} like misbehaving he will do the same things back to us. He will tell us, stop, by giving us two chances, and whatever we don’t get done in class we have it for homework, so we usually get more homework. (Ibrahim)

The students appeared dismayed by the level of disrespect their American peers afforded their teachers. Their disbelief was noted in the manner in which they shared their stories; they clearly found it incomprehensible that students could yell and scream at their teachers (Stewart, 2011) without consequences, such as expulsion. As a group, the participants expressed frustration with the daily challenge of peer disruption, and their teachers’ inability to manage the disruptive behavior. They are yearning for learning to occur in, as Ibrahim, a refugee from Somalia eloquently stated, “a nice environment to learn, and it’s safe”. The respondents watch their peers undermine their learning, with teachers desperately trying to contain the disruptions. The students’ responses highlighted
the ambivalence between their perceptions of viewing their schools as good, and their irritation with their peers’ classroom disturbances. As a result, the teacher’s role in the classroom cannot be overemphasized. The respondents’ request for better teachers was a reflection that was telling in this study.

The Need for Better Teachers: “We need teachers to challenge us”

The education of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students is influenced by a multitude of contexts, including peer groups, teachers, and the institution of schools. To gauge how participants fare in school, it is extremely important to comprehend how teacher context affects the overall schooling experiences and perceptions of students (Stewart, 2011). In the analysis of this study, teacher quality has a direct impact on the schooling outcome of participants (Lee, 2005), because many, if not all, enter school with an array of educational needs. Therefore, the role of teacher quality in meeting these needs is invaluable (Kanu, 2008).

The call for quality teachers has been noted by other educational researchers examining schooling for poor students residing in low-income urban communities, who are often joined by immigrants and resettled refugees in under-resourced schools (Conchas, 2001; Davis, 2008; McBrien, 2005) with colossal challenges. I found the same request from a group of students with varied schooling needs; thus, I addressed the emergent theme of having good teachers, as consistently suggested by all participants when asked what factors contribute to
their school success. I rephrased the question so that respondents could provide appropriate responses.

The perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students are of importance because they shed light on issues that may have a long-term impact on their schooling experiences. Common terms used were “new teachers,” “scream,” “better teachers.” The following quotes capture the students’ pleas for teachers who they perceive can make their learning more meaningful by possessing: a) mastery over a content area; b) experience; and c) better classroom management skills. Lamin simply stated in the focus group: “I need better teachers.” When probed, he continued with frustration and a note of plea in his voice:

{Teachers} been there more than two years teaching. The teachers we have now are new teachers, and I don’t know or understand what they are saying, because it takes them a long time just to get to the point. In math or reading it takes a long time to get to the point. That’s what makes me want to talk in class. I had algebra last year and I already know what they are talking about. Just to get to the point, it will take them two to three weeks. That’s what I am talking about. We need better teachers. (Lamin)

Like to have an older teacher to actually know what they are doing — my teacher is young and this is her first year teaching. I don’t think she knows how to control kids in class so that those who want to learn can learn, like older teachers. (Khadija)

Mercy echoed Lamin’s plea for better teachers, and for a classroom where learning is central. She became agitated as she described the following excerpt:

They can teach us more by getting teachers who can explain things better to us. You know, teachers who can help us. Also, to separate the kids in class. Lots of kids don’t want to learn, and because five kids are bad, the whole class is punished, especially in language arts… Like I am in honors
math and science, and those kids want to learn, so we don’t talk but listen to the teacher, but the other class it is noisy. (Mercy)

Mercy, Khadija and Lamin’s responses were emotionally charged, as they continued their assertion for schools with ‘better teachers.’ I found the participants’ requests for ‘better teachers’ troubling, because schools in low-income communities often have difficulties attracting and retaining good teachers. As such, teachers in low-income communities tend to be recent college graduates, who can lack the essential skills that experienced teachers may have.

Teachers to challenge us and listen to us and to take the kids who are ruining our education {paused} give us more work that is meaningful {paused} the teachers can control the bad kids so that we can learn. (Mercy)

Some of the kids don’t pay attention to her {Math teacher from Brazil} because she does not know English {paused} I will say to put kids who don’t want to learn in a different math class, and put kids who want to learn with her {paused} because when the kids are not paying attention and disrupting the class, affect my learning {paused} kids are always playing around and throwing papers and stuff. (Flomo)

For them to be there every day instead of getting substitute teachers every day {paused} Teachers should take time only if it’s an emergency, and if it is not they should be in class so that they should control those kids. (Lucy)

Other respondents in this focus group, nodding in agreement with Lamin, echoed similar needs, with Aude commenting: “I need better teachers.” Flomo immediately jumped in:

I need a new math teacher, ‘cause the one we have came from Brazil and we do not understand her. (Flomo)

Teachers that don’t scream at us. Teachers who don’t scream but who find ways to work with us {paused, rubbing his hands together with eyes cast down}. Screaming at me won’t make me do something for you. You
have to be kind and stuff. {paused in a reflecting manner} That is not the case with the new teachers but with the old teachers they have it down. (Lamin)

This was also the case in the second focus group, as students built upon each other’s stories, collaborating and giving credence to experiences and perceptions shared by group members. What struck me in both focus groups was the collective experience and animation of the participants as they shared their need to have experienced teachers who “have it down” (Lamin). Competency, a tenet within the SDT framework, which conceptualized this study, refers to knowing how to achieve results, and feeling efficacious in doing so. I would argue that the participants’ requests for “better teachers” are connected to them not feeling efficacious in schooling, and having linked that feeling to the lack of quality teachers in their schools. Rather, their teachers subject students to collective punishments as a way to garner control over behavioral challenges presented by disruptive students. This methodology of curtailing behavior, as described by Khadija in the following excerpt, robs students of valuable instructional minutes in their school day:

She is busy yelling at us, then we cannot learn more. One time she stopped the class because somebody sent a spitball at this boy, and she stopped the class. She said, “Well, I am not going to teach until someone tells me who did it.” {paused, with hands up in the air} she stopped the class for almost 30 minutes to an hour {paused with a tone of disbelief} I wouldn’t stop the class. I will call the principal or something — so one kid ruin the education for the whole class. I know it’s a spitball but she cannot stop the whole class for that. (Khadija)

In summary, the participants agonizingly brought forth complex issues that continue to confront students enrolled in schools located in low-income urban
communities in the U.S. In many of the individual and focus group interviews, the respondents wished that their teachers had the content knowledge, classroom management skills, and teaching experience to meet their learning needs. As a result, they expressed that their schooling is continually compromised, because the key ingredient needed for schooling success — quality teachers — is missing.

**Before- and After-School Activities: “Stay after school and work”**

The literature investigating the schooling experiences of resettled sub-Saharan African refugees or immigrants clearly portrays a group who possess a thirst for an education (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011; Traore, 2006). This thirst for an education, coupled with a desire for college entrance, was also evident in the participants in this study. The desire for a college education, whether attainable or not, is a goal for all participants, and was echoed throughout the interviews.

The findings in this section focus on another factor that may contribute to the success of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. In the previous section, I discussed participants’ requests for “better teachers” as an ingredient for their school success. In this section, students referenced before-and after-school tutorial support and enrichment activities as a resource that would help them succeed in school. Among the common terms students used were “stay after school,” “activities,” and “helps us with homework.” Ibrahim, a student from Somalia, articulated in his response:

> Well, it is giving students who need the most help, like tutoring after school, in the morning before school … if you need help with math or science — being able to come in for help and teachers always being available to you {paused, collecting thoughts} help you get close to
classmate {paused, rubbing hands} give me a little bit — like doing something different to catch up with all the other students, and give you different work where you are at in your learning and at your reading level, like work if you don’t understand…. Sometimes they think it is lack of effort, but you don’t understand it. (Ibrahim)

Giving us activities after school {paused} engaging us in our learning and providing more activities {paused} tutoring during and after school. (Lucy)

This articulation from Ibrahim is telling: the participants are aware of the educational gaps between them and some of their American peers. As such, providing students with before- and after-school academic support and enrichment activities may help them close these gaps. Participants followed with a claim that their lack of understanding may be conceptual and contextual, but does not represent a lack of effort. Thus, schools setting in place support programs that address students’ academic challenges was shared by participants as an opportunity to cultivate schooling success. This finding in support of after-school academic and enrichment activity is similar to prior research findings by Davis (2008) in her investigation of resettled Sierra Leone refugee students in New York City Public Schools.

It was found that the perceived need for before- and after-school activities as a resource in closing the educational gap, was more prevalent among the newly-arrived resettled refugees than resettled refugees who arrived earlier. This suggests that recently-resettled refugees need more support in “catching up” — as stated by Ibrahim in the aforementioned quote — than refugees who resettled in early childhood.
In conclusion, the dichotomous voices of the participants in telling their schooling stories were striking. First, participants perceived their teachers as helpful, but not trustworthy with respect to forming authentic relationships. Second, participants perceived their schools as good, yet disruptive students interrupt their school day. Third, with the exception of Khadija, all participants shared that they liked their teachers, but a majority wished for better teachers. A plausible reason for such dichotomies could be that participants come from a society where schooling opportunities are not free and universal, unlike in the U.S.; as such, education is perceived as a prized commodity. Yet, in the U.S., resettled refugees from sub-Saharan Africa are overwhelmingly enrolled in schools located in low-income urban communities with enormous social and economic challenges. The intersectionality of the students’ deep-seated desire for an education, and the challenges faced by students enrolled in schools in low-income urban communities, can be perceived as the genesis for the contradictions noted.

Thus, it is not surprising that the participants in this study expressed a strong desire for schooling success, and were able to tell that their schools are not adequately meeting their schooling needs. The participants yearn to have a school environment where learning can occur, with experienced teachers who possess classroom management skills, can challenge student learning, and can seek to form authentic teacher/student relationships. Moreover, the participants want additional resources that will support their schooling, via enrichment activities
and tutorial support, before and after school, to help them gain valuable schooling skills.

The following chapter begins with a brief overview of the dissertation. It also situates the findings presented in this chapter in theory and additional related literature, to draw conclusions and implications for further research, policy and practice. It also discusses the limitations and conclusions of the study.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the dissertation, and the second section discusses the study’s findings regarding resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students. The third section revisits theoretical framings that best fit and help make meaning of the data and implications and suggests alternative theories that may provide more nuanced interpretations of the findings. The fourth and final section discusses implications for practice and further research.

Discussion of Findings: Common Threads

Findings in this study revealed that the study participants liked their schools, teachers and peers, but also that they consistently contradicted these perceptions, creating another portrait of their schools as places where relationships with teachers were absent, the school day fractured by behaviorally-challenged students, and teachers lacked classroom management and content knowledge, compromising their learning. Although a majority of the respondents perceived their schools as “good,” the consensus was that experienced teachers with good knowledge of content and strong classroom management skills, who are able to form authentic relationships with students, were — through the eyes of the participants — absent in their schools. In analyzing the data from the individual and focus group interviews, three main themes emerged: a)
contradictions of schooling perspectives; b) a thirst for an American education; and c) authentic relational engagement with teachers. Implications of these broad findings conclude the chapter.

**Contradictions of School Perspectives**

An interesting emergent finding in this study was the tension in participants’ perspectives regarding their middle school experiences and perceptions of their relationships in their schools. This tension presented itself in the form of dichotomous or contradictory voices, which reverberated throughout the individual and focus group interviews. First, all but one of the participants described finding their teachers helpful, and only one described not finding them helpful. Eight respondents shared that they did not trust their teachers in forming relationships, while two explicitly described trusting their teachers. The respondents’ relational interpretations about the teachers in their schools are troubling, because of the critical role positive teacher/student relationships have on overall school engagement and in building autonomy and competency during the middle school years. Khadija and Mercy’s comments illustrate the relational interpretation:

I don’t feel like they care. I think they are just nosey and they don’t care {paused} my teacher don’t care. She acts like she cares, but no, she doesn’t, she acts like she does. (Khadija).

They are only there to teach me and to help me get a good education, but they don’t care about us. (Mercy)

Second, all respondents described liking their schools, yet nine respondents reported that their school day was constantly disrupted by
behaviorally-challenged students, and participants felt that their schooling was compromised by the daily behavioral infractions of their peers. Only one student reported a non-disruptive school day, due to his transfer to a charter school.

Third, nine respondents described liking their teachers, however eight respondents requested teachers with better content knowledge and classroom management skills. Ladson-Billings (2007) noted that “we {meaning the United States} have consistently under-funded schools in poor communities where education is needed most” (p. 321). The contradictory perspectives demonstrated by the participants support Ladson-Billings’ finding, and reveal that respondents want their schools to provide a learning environment that will allow them an optimal schooling experience. This finding supports other findings by educational researchers specifically examining education of resettled refugees (Davis, 2008; McBrien, 2005), and reaffirms the difficult learning environment resettled refugees have to navigate in low-income communities.

Within this dichotomous frame, one has to understand that students often come from countries where schooling opportunities are limited. As a result, students who have access to schools often tend to perceive that access and attendance as a privilege. Though the students who participated in this study arrived in the U.S. as refugees, the perception of the U.S. in sub-Saharan Africa is that U.S. education is the best in the world, and that students are appreciative and grateful for the opportunity given to them to access free education (Sambul, 2004). Underscoring this point, this study revealed that the majority of the
students said they like going to school, and only one expressed not liking going to school. The findings revealed that students liked their schools in the U.S. and the opportunities afforded them. However, students entering schools in low-income urban communities are faced with formidable social and economic challenges and, as such, are inheriting school systems that are often marginalized due to these challenges (Conchas, 2001; Ogbu, 1992, 1998). The intersectionality of the study participants’ thirst for learning, and their enrollment in school districts mired in their own historical social and economic challenges, could be the first explanation of the contradictory findings noted throughout the data.

Another explanation could be provided through the lens of Ogbu (1992), who referred to the differences that existed before a group became a minority as, primary cultural differences, which may result in an individual cultural frame of reference that leads one to “interpret the cultural/language differences they encounter in school as barriers to overcome in order to achieve their goals” (p. 289). This cultural frame of reference allowed the participants in this study to have a positive perception of their schools, even though the schools are socially and economically marginalized within their communities. For resettled sub-Saharan African middle school students, regardless of their schools’ location, schools are still perceived as a source of upward mobility (Njue & Retish, 2010), and resettled refugee students are prepared to work within the challenges posed, as observed in Stewart’s (2011) study.
A third explanation could be the lack of awareness of respondents as it related to their socioeconomic realities. I would argue that many of the students were unaware that their schools are marginalized within the socioeconomic context of their communities in the U.S. Yet, respondents were mindful that the schools in their communities cannot be a norm for all schools in the U.S. There seemed to be a relationship between respondents’ positive perceptions of their teachers and peers, and their overall school experience. On the other hand, all of the respondents asked for teachers with content knowledge and classroom management skills, while simultaneously expressing a strong desire to build trusting relationships with their teachers. In essence, respondents were requesting a learning environment where optimal learning can take place. Teachers sharing their time, books, and support with students to help them gain content mastery within and outside the classroom, and their interactions with their peers, were viewed as tools in helping respondents gain the education that will allow them to become contributing members of our global community. In her work with resettled African refugees in Canada, Kanu (2008) noted the importance of teacher support due to the academic dissonance experienced by resettled refugees. As such, having structured academic and social resources to meet the many complex needs of resettled refugee students is important in their schooling success.
A Thirst for an American Education

The second major theme or thread in the study was students’ desire to do well in school. All participants expressed a desire to do well in school. This desire has been noted by educational researchers studying resettled refugees and immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world in the U.S. (Kanu, 2008; Ogbu, 1992, 1998; Stewart, 2011; Traore, 2010), and was present amongst the participants in this study. Ogbu (1992) cited this positive expectation as influencing respondents’ perceptions of schools in the U.S. All respondents in this study expressed the desire to pursue higher education, with aspirations to pursue professional degrees, even though many were unsure of the names of the professions, and may lack the foundational academic skills. Stewart (2011) supports the findings of this study on students’ thirst for an education and the social realities that confront them:

School emerged as one of the most important systems for the students. Unfortunately, for many of these students, their insatiable appetite for education was impeded by numerous personal, organizational and systemic challenges. (Stewart, 2011, p. 67)

The intersectionality of the systems, and the formidable challenges experienced by resettled refugees, were also noted by Kanu (2008) as robbing students of the aspirations of higher education. Some of the challenges include: academic gaps due to disrupted schooling; limited English language proficiency; and fast-paced curriculum and academic dissonance. It is within this context that resettled refugee students aspire for higher education and professional degrees.
Two respondents reported being in honors classes, with one respondent slated to go to a prestigious private boys’ school for his high school career. One respondent transferred from a public school to a charter school. Regardless of the challenges faced by students in their schools, all believed that “hard work” would help them in school (Ogbu, 1992; Stewart, 2011). The respondents in this study perceive that having a good education guarantees a way out of poverty and allows social mobility. They all described possessing a strong personal determination to change the trajectory of their lives, and perceive education as the only pathway which will allow them to do so.

It is noteworthy that nine students reported liking their schools and saw their teachers as helpful in assisting them with schoolwork. Two respondents were able to identify tangible actions by teachers outside of school to solidify their perspectives. Ibrahim reported that at his charter school his math teacher goes to students’ houses to meet with parents when students are not performing in class. Ibrahim perceives this help as supporting his learning, and appeared grateful that his teacher cared enough to do a home visit. This finding may simply reflect the fact that resettled sub-Saharan African middle school students’ perceptions of their schools and teachers is higher due to their thirst for an education. Njue & Retish (2010) noted a positive teacher expectation of sub-Saharan African refugees and immigrants.

Teachers generally regard the students highly and expect them to do well. They feel that these students work hard and perform well in their classes despite the challenges they face. (Njue & Retish, 2010, p. 365)
Despite the national variation among participants in this study, their common experiences revealed remarkable parallels in their desire to get the best education in the U.S. Therefore, the aforementioned quote probably works in favor of the students, if their teachers perceive them as hard working, and suggests they will get the schooling support needed for academic success.

**Authentic Relationships with their Teachers**

Educational researchers have continually asserted that the teacher-student relationship is an important factor in forming students’ schooling experiences (O’Connor & McCartney, 2007). The participants’ conflicted perceptions about their teachers were, therefore, among the most surprising finding in this study, because it points to an inconsistency in the manner in which teachers relate to resettled refugee students. On one hand, all but one of the students reported liking their teachers, and saw them as helpful and caring in providing educational resources that make a difference in their schooling. Khadija’s experiences, however, contradicted those of other respondents, due to her difficulties relating to her teacher. Respondents within the nine who reported liking their teachers noted caring gestures demonstrated by their teachers, including providing support for homework completion, providing their time before and after school, and giving books — perceived as helpful and caring within the context of learning.

One can argue that the care reported by students derived from their gratefulness in having an opportunity to go to school, and appreciation for the gestures of care afforded to them by their teachers. Another possible explanation
could be that the students come from the sub-Saharan Africa cultural frame, where teachers are held in high esteem and revered (Butcher, 2010; Stewart, 2011) — with public critiques of teachers a virtual taboo in many African contexts. Two respondents described altruistic help provided by teachers, including providing clothing when the home of one of the respondents was destroyed in a fire, and a teacher who helped a student find his way to class when he first moved to the U.S. and started school.

On the other hand, eight participants perceived their teachers as not trustworthy or caring. As Lamin noted, “it’s about the relationship we have with them — they are strangers even though they teach us.” Half of the study participants expressed being astounded by their teachers’ negative attitude towards them. Lamin stated that “…is the way they treat me.” When asked to explain, he continued: “It’s hard to explain.” Mercy and Lucy noted: “You just know that they don’t care.”

Again, this dichotomous and contradictory perception of indifference of teachers towards students, presented during the interviews, was more evident during the focus group interviews, as students built on the experiences of other participants. The fact that eight of the resettled refugee students in this study said that their teachers cannot be trusted indicates that more needs to be done to build confidence between teachers and such students. Only two participants reported a relationship of trust with their teachers.
The respondents within this study come from sub-Saharan Africa, where human relationships are valued and respected. The desire to have genuine relationships with their teachers is therefore culturally embedded in respondents (Butcher, 2010). As such, the finding of a relational contradiction revealed an alarming situation that needs to be remedied, because a majority of the resettled refugees reported a relationship of some suspicion with their teachers. It was also surprising that students who reported that their teachers have been helpful to them in the past shared this perception of lack of trust, which again could point to the teachers’ lack of self-awareness, an inconsistency in how they relate to the students, and a lack of understanding of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students’ cultural frame of reference.

Another explanation could be that in many sub-Saharan African contexts, teachers are perceived to be a part of the students’ community and extended family, and reside in the community in which they are teachers. This is not the case in the U.S., where teachers tend not to reside in the communities in which they teach (Gahungu, A., Gahungu, O., & Luseno, F., 2011). Resettled refugees in this study described their teachers as strangers, thus creating a perception of mistrust, as noted by one of the respondents in the study:

To me they are just teachers; you don’t have to tell them everything — you know them for one year. A teacher is not a person you tell everything — because they are not really too close to you. You see them for 8 hours — so I don’t think they should know everything you do — that’s too personal. I tell them what is necessary, like stuff in life. I will not tell them everything. Is it necessary to tell them — I don’t know how to explain it though. (Flomo)
The combination of teachers’ lack of awareness about the complex lives of their students, and students’ perceptions of their teachers as strangers, teachers may also lack the sociopolitical knowledge about the acculturation process of resettled refugee students, and their own ethnocentric worldview (Gahungu et al., 2011), which differs from the worldview of resettled refugees. This diversity between students and their teachers complicates the building of an authentic teacher/student relationship.

Reexamination of Theoretical Framework

In this study, the psychologically-based Self Determination Theory (SDT) framework was originally used as the conceptual framework for understanding the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students. However, there are limitations within the theory, namely, that it does not explicitly look at the intersectionality of systems and sociocultural concepts that may influence an individual experience. School is a system, and from an ecological perspective it is essential to form vital linkages with the systems of home and community to address the schooling challenges facing students (Stewart 2011). School, parents, students and peers are all part of the microsystems that are responsible for providing support to resettled refugee students need to meet their schooling needs.

Conversely, within the sociocultural frame, the students’ worldview is framed by their cultural context, just as their teachers’ cultural context is framed by their worldview. Both cultural frames exist in the classroom and interact with
the microsystem and mesosystem. One has to examine the psychological framework as suggested by SDT, the environment framework as noted by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, and Rogoff’s sociocultural theory, to provide a holistic understanding of a cohort of students with complex educational and social needs.

I have come to draw upon these two additional theoretical frameworks that specifically examine ecological systems and sociocultural concepts in order to understand the phenomena under study. The two frameworks are Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory and Rogoff’s sociocultural theory.

**Ecological Theory**

Social development theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggests that human development is nested in ecological systems in which the developing person experiences emotional, physical and cognitive growth. These contextual systems influence human development because of the interactive and fluid nature of environmental systems.

Therefore, a discussion of the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students — which are often nested within a multiplicity of systems — provides another context for understanding the phenomena in this study. Due to the pluralistic nature of schools in the U.S., it is relevant to examine the contextual influences which follow from the nested and overlapping arrangement of subsystems in the ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), which creates the perception of schools for participants
in this study. Here I briefly describe Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) five subsystems that have been suggested to influence human development.

**Bronfenbrenner’s Five Subsystems**

*Microsystems* describe the complex relationship between the developing person and their immediate ecological environment, such as home and school, where personal interactions are heightened (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and experiences and perceptions are formed. Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students have relationships with teachers and peers that inform their experiences and perceptions about school.

The *mesosystem* is the “interrelationship among major settings containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Primarily, mesosystems encompass the Microsystems and the interconnections the resettled refugee student has with family, school and peers. The mesosystem for the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee student includes communication between school and home, which can affect the relationship between the two systems, depending on the types of communication that may or may not have an adverse effect on the developing person. In the U.S., communication between home (resettled refugee parent) and school (teachers of resettled refugee) appears to be limited, due to parental lack of education, language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and some parents’ beliefs that formal education is the responsibility of teachers alone (Gahungu et al., 2011; Lee, 2005; Njue & Retish, 2010). Resettled refugee students straddle two different Microsystems with a lack of coordination between
them. The failure in communication between home and school disrupts a critical linkage between two systems that need to share initiatives to address the schooling needs of resettled refugee students.

An exosystem is a subsystem that consists of two or more settings, where one of the settings does not include the developing person. The activities of the exosystem indirectly influence the immediate environment of the resettled sub-Saharan African refugee student; a parent’s place of employment is an example of such a place.

A macrosystem is an overlapping of several microsystems, mesosystems or exosystems in the developing person’s cultural reference (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The macrosystem is an overlay of beliefs embedded in a developing person’s culture. Sub-Saharan African culture influences the manner in which resettled refugee students view their family, friends, teachers, and their perceptions of school.

A chronosystem entails consistencies over time in the developing person and in their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Resettled sub-Saharan African refugees’ experience of normalcy in their homes in sub-Saharan Africa, bearing witness to war, followed by life in a refugee camp and consequently life as a resettled refugee, is void of the consistencies suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1977). Thus, the pre-migration experience for resettled refugees disrupts this system. Each sub-system describes how a developing person’s growth is interconnected and also affected by their cultural beliefs.
Examining the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students through the framework of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977; 1994) ecological theory showed resettled refugees negotiating themselves in school systems fractured by several challenges. These challenges, coupled with the students’ cultural frame, can be an explanation for the contradictions in this study. The students’ desire for school success could possibly be swayed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological factors, since their environment and cultural beliefs about education in sub-Saharan Africa regard accessing and attending school as a privilege.

Findings show that peer groups and teachers are most prominent in a student’s school day; thus, these microsystems in the immediate environment influence the personal, social and academic development of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students. Stewart (2011) argues that school is a central force in students’ microsystems because schools have a considerable influence on their lives, future goals and aspirations.

For the resettled sub-Saharan African students who participated in this study, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory helps to conceptualize how ecological factors influence an individual’s perception about school, and the future aspirations of respondents. For the respondents in this study, the disruption in their social development in their environment in Africa continues to have a ripple effect on their lives in the U.S. Khadija’s chronological age — 16 years old — mismatched her 8th grade U.S. schooling placement, to meet her learning needs.
This inappropriate social placement may influence her lack of desire to go to school (Gahungu et al., 2011), impacting the systems within her microsystem and influencing future schooling.

**Sociocultural Theory**

Barbara Rogoff’s (1995, 1997) sociocultural theory examines the process of human development within the domains of individual, social and cultural levels of interaction. It focuses on change along the developmental continuum as it relates to the relationships between the personal, the interpersonal, and the community. Thus, the framework suggests three planes of analysis for observation of human development, and may serve as an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. The analysis explores how schools and interpersonal relationships inform the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in the U.S.

Within Rogoff’s (1995) framework, sociocultural activities are utilized as units of analysis, allowing the examination of the triangulated relationship between the individual and their social and cultural environment. Therefore, in this study the unit of analysis is the schooling experiences and perceptions of the students who participated. Rogoff (1995, 1997) describes the three planes in sociocultural activity: *apprenticeship, guided participation*, and *participatory appropriation*. These planes communicate with the personal, interpersonal and community in ways that are inseparable and non-hierarchical. The term *participation* is used by Rogoff to merge the individual with his or her
environment: individuals {personal} participate with others in their surroundings, informing the interpersonal relationship within the community, therefore keeping the three planes connected. Participation is further presented through the personal, interpersonal, and community, with the individual’s cognitive and social context intact.

The personal plane centers on how individual change transpires through participation in a given activity. For example: how does Flomo participate in math class with a first year math teacher? The interpersonal plane focuses on the ways in which activities in the classroom are communicated and coordinated among individuals, and how they encourage or discourage participation. For example: are classroom norms communicated to encourage or discourage participation with classmates? The community plane focuses on systemic practices and cultural norms that may have developed over a period of time. For example: what is the teacher focus in the classroom/school? How does that focus influence students’ school experiences and perceptions? It is within this focus that students form their perceptions of teachers and overall schooling experiences.

Rogoff (1995) described her three planes of sociocultural activity as inseparable. Within her framework, school is a community plane, which coexists with the personal plane (the resettled refugee student), and that of others (interpersonal). Thus, resettled refugee students participate in a school system, by means of sociocultural activities with their own historical norms, which influence the schooling experiences and perceptions of the students, who consequently
inherit sociocultural school norms not originally intended for them. For example, resettled refugee students inherit the daily learning disruption caused by behaviorally-challenged students. Culturally, a student overtly exhibiting disrespect towards a teacher is outside of their African cultural frame of reference, but in their schools in low-income communities, resettled refugee students by proxy inherit this school norm and, as Rogoff (1995) noted, these activities are inseparable and intact. Therefore, resettled refugee students learn to negotiate their learning within a disruptive classroom environment, while maintaining a disbelief of their peers’ attitudes of disrespect towards their teachers (Stewart 2011).

**Conclusions and Implications of the Study**

This section of the dissertation draws implications for practice, policy, teacher preparation, professional development, and further research. This study constitutes foundational, exploratory research conducted in the United States. It contributes to a small body of research that specifically looking at the school experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. It is an attempt to document the lived experiences of a segment of America’s new resettled refugees, who are relatively new to the immigration and educational landscape in the U.S. School is the main venue that thrusts immigrant children into the American experience (C. Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Therefore, documenting the stories of the schooling experiences and perceptions of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students contributes new ideas to existing literature in the field of
social science. These findings are not specific to resettled sub-Saharan African refugees, but are consistent with the broader literature on resettled refugees residing in the U.S. and other industrialized countries.

Results of the research showed that respondents in this study perceived their schools as good, but that they all sought teachers with better content knowledge, classroom management skills, and a desire to form authentic relationships with them. Students wanted their teachers to demonstrate a caring attitude towards them, consequently seeing their teachers not only as resources within the classroom, but also as people with whom they can build trusting relationships. Those students who attended school in sub-Saharan Africa pre-migration do not necessarily want to replicate the relationships they had with their teachers in their countries of origin. Rather, they would like to have relationships with teachers that fulfill both their social and academic needs. In another instance, all respondents wanted a classroom where learning can occur without daily behavioral disruption and/or led by teachers with the skills to control negative behavior.

Consistent with the findings of this study about the schooling experiences and perspectives of resettled sub-Saharan African middle school refugee students, focusing on refugee education, Jan Stewart (2011), in her book *Supporting Refugee Children*, called on schools to make a concerted effort to make meaningful connections with resettled refugee students, because “apart from the family unit, the people within the school system have the most interaction with
students,” (p. 132) consequently making schools an important ecological system and support mechanism for the resettled refugee.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study serves to provide a voice to disempowered groups who are recent immigrants to the U.S. Given the results of this study, educators are urged to look at the complex educational and social needs of all resettled refugee students. Schools must seek to understand the multitude of challenges and difficulties that these cohorts of learners are faced with in schools across the U.S. Such needs relate to teacher reflection on practice, building student capacity through inclusive curricula, peer ambassadors, and relationships formed with resettled refugees. The implementation of these recommendations will undoubtedly require financial and human resources implications for school districts, as additional budgetary funding is needed, as well as a commitment to the education of all students.

In recommendations for practice, there are important issues that all educational stakeholders should be made aware of. As discussed previously in this chapter, the notion of contradictions within the student experiences and perceptions is ongoing, and reverberates throughout the study. First and foremost, school administrators and teachers must intentionally build and cultivate a culture of trust, in order to engage all students, but especially resettled refugee students, because of their often traumatic pre-migration experiences. Clearly, the contradictions reveal that respondents are willing to engage in the educational
process within their schools, although their schools are saddled with enormous challenges.

Second, school administrators and teachers must consistently engage and relate to these students, with the distinct understanding that they are not African-Americans, nor immigrants, but resettled refugees from Africa. This is not to say that this is the sum total of their identity, nor to essentialize their experiences and ignore individual differences. Rather, teachers and administrators must have sensitivity to the pre-migration histories of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students, and their varied educational, psychological, and social needs, thus helping them to become ideal students so that they can self-actualize and attain their best educational goals.

Third, school administrators are urged to recruit, hire, and retain high quality teaching faculty that possess teaching experience and a commitment to work with diverse student populations in low-income urban communities. While this recommendation requires financial resources that schools may not have in an era of budget cuts, school districts and teacher education programs must find innovative ways to ensure that teachers in low-income communities possess the skills to meet the diverse learning needs of students.

In terms of respondents’ thirst for an American education, teachers must shift their pedagogical practice to one that is culturally relevant (Bartolome, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995b) to the lives of resettled refugees. School administrators and teachers must utilize books and other educational resources in the classroom
that are reflective and affirming of the sociocultural realities of resettled refugees. Consequently, this cultural affirmation can go far in creating a positive frame of reference, which is imperative in sustaining resettled refugees’ thirst for an American education.

Half of the participants in this study shared that their teachers helped them with homework before and after school. Based on the findings of this study and previous research reviewed earlier, resettled refugee students consistently need this level of support for both conceptual and contextual understanding; the respondents were able to identify enrichment activities as a resource that would allow schooling success. It is crucial for teachers to nurture and emphasize students’ strengths and build on their social capital. School administrators and teachers must do all they can to support all resettled refugees by providing academic support inside and outside the classroom. This focused support will close the academic gap, thus assuring career or college readiness for all resettled refugee students upon high school completion.

With respect to students having authentic relationships with their teachers, Stewart (2011) noted that “...teachers must strive to first create a relationship with each student and then to proceed with assessment and more formal educational activities” (p. 50). Without this relationship, Stewart (2011) further argues, teachers have nothing. A pedagogical sensitivity that allows teachers to sincerely open themselves to learning about the history and journey of their students is essential in giving meaning to the notion of school. Bartolome (1994) named this
pedagogical approach *humanized pedagogy* and argues that it is a framework that builds a foundation for learning. Second, teachers must take time to foster and nurture genuine relationships with students, to build trusting relationships that are void of the contradictions noted in this study. These relationships are important because evidence shows that the pre-migration experiences of resettled refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa include incomprehensible abuse, as noted in the United Nation High Commission for Refugee Machel report (1996):

> War creates a space devoid of the most basic human values; a space in which children are slaughtered, raped, and maimed; a space in which children are exploited as soldiers; a space in which children are starved and exposed to extreme brutality. (Machel Report, 1996)

Resettled refugees from sub-Saharan Africa come from countries where warfare is not between countries, but rather *within* countries, and is often religious and ethnic. Consequently, children witness battles fought in their neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities. According to the Machel (1996) report, war victims have increased from 5% to 90% civilians, and half are children. Several researchers (Gahungu et al., 2011; Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Stewart, 2011) have noted the brutality of war and its impact on the psychosocial development of resettled refugee students. In her study on the educational needs and barriers of African refugees, Kanu (2008) noted:

> African refugee youth are more likely than other recent refugee children and youth to be forced into becoming child soldiers with lingering memories of committing or incurring terrible atrocities, or to become sex slaves carrying scars of their experiences. (p. 917)
Today, some of these resettled sub-Saharan African refugee children, who may have witnessed and/or participated in atrocities, are in schools in the U.S. and other Western countries that receive refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. Schools are gatekeepers, and places where resettled refugees have contact with the larger society in the U.S. (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Thus, relationships formed with teachers and other adult school staff are vital in building student capacity for schooling success.

As such, school administrators and policy makers must acknowledge the enormous educational and social needs of resettled refugee students, making a commitment to create a school culture that is inclusive. In the era of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal mandate, schools are forced to ensure that all students meet state standards, creating an environment that fails to consider the exclusive nature of the law. For all resettled refugees, these standards complicate their fragile academic dissonance. Therefore, requesting school districts to provide structured school resources that extend the learning experiences of resettled refugees via field trips, enrichment activities, and before- and after-school tutorial support, is significant, and may close the learning gap between resettled refugees and their American counterparts.

Policies that promote students’ highest potential should be at the forefront in the education of all resettled refugee students. Making a commitment to provide ongoing professional development for teachers and support staff that promotes understanding of the history and culture of resettled refugees allows for
sensitivity and a knowing that creates empathy within school faculty towards this cohort of students. Professionals with expertise in addressing refugee families, issues of culture and identity, mental health, language acquisition, and acculturation must be embedded in school district professional development courses. Resettled refugee students, regardless of their country of origin, cannot be seen as ‘regular students’ because of their pre-migration experiences; as such, school administrators must provide additional support resources for them outside of the formal school day that will help them to close the learning gap with their peers.

Policy makers and refugee advocacy groups are urged to revisit the notion of placing resettled refugees in poor, low-income urban communities where schools are under-resourced and understaffed. I propose a radical shift in the placement of resettled refugees to communities where school systems are not overwhelmed by economic and social pressures and, as a result, are able to meet the varied schooling needs of resettled refugees. This recommendation requires a paradigm shift, because communities with resources may reject refugees due to those communities’ perceptions of others and the overt diverse differences (Mott, 2010) between sub-Saharan African refugees and communities outside of the inner cities. Resettled sub-Saharan African refugees enter the U.S. without financial, educational and social resources. Consequently, inner city communities are viewed as a stepping stone by resettlement agencies, due to their proximity to entry-level jobs, public transportation and affordable housing (Mott, 2011). As
such, they inherit living in communities where schools are historically faced with a multitude of challenges in educating students.

Resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students are likely to become the fastest-growing resettled refugee population in the U.S. due to the ongoing unrest in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Stewart, 2011), and schools must be prepared to engage them and meet their diverse educational and social needs. It is hoped that data gleaned from this study will engage teachers, pre-service teachers, school administrators and policy-makers to acknowledge, reflect, and make a commitment as it relates to the schooling of resettled sub-Saharan African refugee students. Further research should explore multiple systems within the microsystem — i.e., teachers, parents and students — and compare their perceptions of resettled refugee education in the U.S. Second, deciphering the issue of trust between resettled refugees and teachers is another area of research. A third important research area is investigating the appropriate education for students whose schooling — if any — was disrupted. Fourth, the issues of parent involvement as it relates to barriers in open communication between home and school should be explored.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Regardless of the challenges and difficulties faced by resettled refugee students in the classroom in this southwestern state, the respondents in this study expressed an appetite to acquire an American education and to form authentic relationships with their teachers. They desire a schooling experience that is
supported inside and outside the classroom, that will extend their learning as a result, closing the learning gaps caused by interrupted formal education in refugee camps and their countries of origin. Therefore, enrichment activities and structured tutoring programs must be an integral part of school districts with resettled refugee populations.

Secondly, school districts are urged to engage in collaborative planning between schools, teachers, parents, and the community, in assisting resettled refugee families, and to provide academic assistance programs for parents, thus empowering them to create partnerships with teachers. Furthermore, teachers must demonstrate humanistic concern for the schooling, as well as the social and cultural needs, of resettled refugee students. Gahungu et al. (2011) suggested that:

It is necessary to stress that refugee resettlement, especially as it includes school-age children, should not be left to refugee resettlement agencies alone. Schools must evaluate their readiness to accept the new students in relation to the educational contexts of the countries involved. (p. 17)

Schools must strive to construct a community of learning by creating orientation centers for newly-arrived resettled refugees to orient students to U.S. culture, study skills, and other learning tools necessary for schooling success. Educational programs that teach parents of resettled refugee students U.S. child-rearing practices, school expectations, discipline, children’s rights, and ways to form partnerships with their children’s school, are essential in building a trusting relationship with students. The need for financial resources to implement these
recommendations should not negate the fact that for resettled refugees to succeed in their host countries, a genuine commitment by all stakeholders is critical.

As I reflect on the process of this study, there were three pivotal background stories that I would like to share, though they did not directly relate to my research questions. The first story relates to homework completion by children whose parents lack the educational and language resources to help their children with homework. During the data collection phase of this study, I often found myself helping younger siblings of participants in this study with their homework. One of the younger brothers of a study participant asked for my phone number in order for him to call me so that I could help him with his homework. Parents often shared with me, “I don’t understand,” and offered me a nod of appreciation. These interactions raised several questions for me related to my role as a researcher.

The second story relates to parents who aspire to return to school but are deterred by the English Language Learner (ELL) programs they’ve attended, which they perceive as tailored to the linguistic needs of Hispanic immigrants, rather than African refugees. One participant’s mother asked me, “Can you help us get our GED?” When I explored the issue, she noted: “We want to go to school and get better jobs, but we never finished high school and it’s hard in America when you don’t understand English.” I shared that community colleges are the best place to start for adult learners, but she dismissed ELL programs at
community colleges, stating that they are for Hispanics. The plight of this mother, and others like her, was noted.

As an educator, listening to the children as they described their school day, their perceived relationships with their teachers, and their childlike desires to gain higher education against the daily challenges posed to them, was difficult to comprehend emotionally and intellectually, because I know we can do better. As a nation, we have the financial and human resources to meet the schooling and social needs of the newest citizens who are arriving with unimaginable and traumatic histories, disrupted schooling, and a host of other difficulties. We must ensure that they too can actualize their dreams.

I hope that this work will be a beginning of educating stakeholders in the education of children in the U.S., especially the newcomers who are arriving, and will continue to sit in classrooms hoping to gain the best America has to offer them — a quality education. I was touched by the stories of the participants and their families in this study. Their stories have impacted my personal and professional journey, as I continue to make a difference in the lives of children. Cecilia’s mother expressed a wish that one day her daughter will grow up to be like me. In me she saw an actualized dream that young girls from Africa can earn a doctoral degree. I carry each child in my heart, and join their mothers in their hopes and dreams that their children also can acquire an education.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER
Recruitment Flyer
Key Informants

Schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwest U.S. state

I am a graduate student in Education Leadership & Policy Studies, under the direction of Professor Beth Swadener at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore the schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee students in Arizona. I am recruiting individuals on a first-come-first-serve basis who:

- Are refugees
- From sub-Saharan Africa
- Currently enrolled in grades 7 and 8
- Have lived in the U.S. anytime within the years of 2001-2011
- Have the time to participate in an individual interview session and a focus group discussion each of which will take about 60-90 minutes.

Your responses will be confidential. I would like to audiotape all interview/focus group discussions. You will not be recorded unless you give permission. If you give permission for to be audiotaped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. The recordings will be kept electronically on password-protected files for the duration of the study and data analysis, and will subsequently be deleted once they have been transcribed. Those transcripts will also be destroyed within two years of completing the study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study, or if you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (623) 202-3716 or my advisor, Dr. Beth Swadener, at (480) 965-7181.

Adama Sallu
APPENDIX B

PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION
Schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in Arizona

PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION

Dear Parent:

My name is Adama Sallu and I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Dr. Elizabeth Swadener in the Department/Division/College of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore the schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in Arizona.

I am inviting your child's participation, which will involve an individual and focus group interviews and a follow-up interview, which will last about 1 to 2 hours. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty it will not affect your child's grade, treatment/care at school. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, used in reports, presentations or publications but your child's name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, the possible benefit of your child's participation is teachers understanding the learning needs of refugee students from sub-Saharan Africa. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your child’s participation.

Pseudonyms will be used in identifying information and numerical coding will be used to protect the privacy of your child. Responses will be anonymous and confidential.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please call me at 623-202-3716 or Dr. Swadener at 480-965-1452.

Sincerely,

Adama Sallu

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child --------------------------
Child’s name ( ) to participate in the above study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Printed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.
APPENDIX C

CHILD ASSENT FORM
Child Assent Form

Schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in Arizona

I have been informed by my parents (mom, dad, and guardian) have given permission (said it’s okay) for me to take part in a project about the schooling experiences and perceptions of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in Arizona.

I will be asked to participate in a 1:1 interview and a focus group with other middle school students who are also refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. The interview and focus group will take about 1-2 hours.

I am taking part because I want to. I know that I can stop at any time and it will be okay if I want to stop.

______________________________
Sign Your Name Here

______________________________
Print Your Name Here

______________________________
Date

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Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your birthday?
2. Where were you born?
3. Where did you live before you came to the U.S.?
4. How many years did you attend school in Africa?
5. What year did you come to the U.S.?
6. Who do you live with at home?
7. How many people are in your family?
8. What city do you live in?
9. What language do you speak at home?
10. What religion do you practice?
11. What year did you enroll at your present school?
12. Is your school a public or charter school?
13. What is the name of your middle school?
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

Main Research Question

What are the schooling experiences and perception of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. state? Related protocol questions: 1a) How do they view their relationship with their teachers and peers? 1b) Can they identify a teacher or school staff in their school community who is a resource for them? 1c) What factors contribute to their challenges and successes in their school community?

1. Tell me about your experiences as a student in your middle school. A1
2. Tell me about your teachers. A2
3. Who do you work with during partner work and why do you work with that person? A3

Competency

1. What do you think about your teacher’s classroom practices? C1
2. How often do you try to relate what you are learning to other things you know about? C2
3. How can your teachers and or school staff make your learning experience more effective and successful? C3

Relatedness

1. Do you feel that your teachers really understand how you feel in his or her class or at school? R1
2. What specific thing has your teacher done to help you with your learning especially when you are having difficulties? R2
3. Tell me about a person you go to at your school when you are either having a good or bad day? R3
4. What is your relationship with other students? R4
APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
Focus Group Protocol

1. Does your teacher understand how you feel in class

2. Do you talk to your teacher about what is going on in your life?

3. How often do you try to relate what you are studying to other things you know about?

4. Who do you work with during partner work and why do you work with that person?

5. What is your relationship with other students?
To: Elizabeth Swadener  
EDUCATION

From: Mark Roosa, Chair  
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 08/26/2011

Committee Action: Expedited Approval

Approval Date: 08/26/2011

Review Type: Expedited F7

IRB Protocol #: 1108006755

Study Title: What are the schooling experiences and perception of sub-Saharan African refugee middle school students in a southwestern U.S. State?

Expiration Date: 08/25/2012

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.