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Transforming the Future of Learning with Educational Research

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Chapter 6

The Schooling Experiences of African Youth from Refugee Backgrounds in South Australia: Key Findings and Implications for Educational Practice

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ABSTRACT

African students from refugee backgrounds constitute a special group in Australian schools because of their complex lives and previous schooling and life experiences that are unlike most of their non-refugee peers. This chapter draws upon findings from a collaborative, longitudinal case study that sought to understand the education and career pathways of African students from refugee backgrounds from the perspectives of African youth, educators, service providers, and South Australian African community leaders and elders. Qualitative analysis revealed six key influences that shape these pathways: previous schooling; English language skills; Australian schooling challenges and support; family support, academic achievement; and post-school preparation. This chapter presents the case study of a single student that, although unique in its circumstances, is representative of key findings from the larger study. Implications for educational practice are then described with a view to facilitating educational participation and success amongst this particular group of young people.

INTRODUCTION

Refugees constitute a distinct group of migrants who have complex personal histories typically involving traumatic circumstances such as witnessing the deaths of loved ones and the destruction of personal property before they leave their homelands. In seeking asylum in another country,
the refugee journey is often treacherous with persistent, ongoing threats to physical and psychological wellbeing. Each year, a very small proportion (i.e., less than one per cent) of the world’s total population of displaced people is granted resettlement in one of a number of countries such as the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Australia, a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, provides a home to immigrants from all over the world and is one of the top 10 recipient countries for refugees (Refugee Council of Australia, 2006a).

In resettlement countries, participation in, and access to, education and employment are key indicators of social inclusion and integration for refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Francis & Cornfoot, 2007b). The transition from secondary school to education and employment for individuals from refugee backgrounds is, therefore, not simply about engaging in study or becoming involved in the workforce but, rather, is symbolic of integration into the mainstream community.

This chapter explores the issues that impact upon the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds by drawing upon key findings from recent qualitative longitudinal research. The case study of one African youth participant is presented and the significant influences that shape the education and career pathways of African youth are described. In presenting these findings, this chapter establishes a rationale for providing African youth with additional support in schools and offers recommendations to improve support for these young people in the Australian mainstream school system.

BACKGROUND

Who are Refugees?

In order to qualify as a refugee, an individual must meet a set of criteria as specified in the definition developed during the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Neumann, 2004). This definition, established to assist in coping with the population of displaced persons after World War II, stipulates that a refugee is:

… any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (as cited in Refugee Council of Australia, 2006b).

Globally, there has been an increase in the number of individuals in need of humanitarian assistance (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008). In 2011, the number totalled 42.5 million (UNHCR, 2012), an increase of 9.6 million since 2006 (UNHCR, 2007). According to Australia’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2011), protecting these individuals by offering them resettlement constitutes a major challenge facing the international community.

Australia has an extensive migration history, receiving over 700,000 individuals in need of humanitarian assistance since the Second World War (DIAC, 2011). Australia is considered to take more refugees than any other country relative to its population (Browne, 2006). Between 2003 and 2007, Australia’s Offshore Humanitarian Program predominantly provided protection to individuals from Africa (DIAC, 2011), the majority of whom were aged 24 years or younger at the time of arrival (DIAC, 2013). Consistent with these trends are data which suggest that Australian secondary schools receive approximately 3,000 new enrolments of young people from refugee backgrounds each year (West, 2004). These statistics, together with the challenges specific to African youth from refugee backgrounds, resulted in the decision to undertake research with and for this group of young people.
The Refugee Experience

The refugee experience is often characterised by profound loss of personal, social, material and cultural resources (Kinzie, 2007; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008). For example, when individuals become refugees, they may lose their homes, material possessions, social networks, and social standing related to employment status. These losses can obviously contribute to significant, tumultuous changes to people’s lives (Clayton, 2009).

For African people who are forced to flee their homelands, seeking humanitarian assistance often involves moving to a refugee camp where conditions can continue to threaten their well-being. In Kakuma, a Kenyan refugee camp, for example, refugees experience an arid climate and temperatures hover between 35 and 40 degrees Celsius (Marshall, 2006). Access to food and water is limited, requiring a rationing system. The food rations that are provided typically lack variety and are below the minimum recommended dietary intake of 2100 calories per day for an adult male (Browne, 2006). Refugee camps can be sites where law enforcement is subject to corruption and this can directly impact upon people’s lives (e.g., by affecting access to resources). They can also be places where women are under constant threat of abduction, rape and sexual mutilation (Marshall, 2006). Given that individuals can spend many years living in refugee camps, prolonged exposure to these conditions can have lasting, lifelong effects on their physical and mental health (Harrell-Bond, 2000).

Resettling in a new country is typically motivated by a sense of safety, security, opportunity, and freedom from the dangers of war (Benson, 2004; Wille, 2011). Yet, it often involves a series of inherently complex transitions (Cassity & Gow, 2005) which can produce novel challenges while exacerbating pre-existing difficulties (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westoby, 2003).

When they arrive in Australia, many African youth have experienced years of disrupted formal schooling (Bethke & Braunschweig, 2004). Associated with interrupted schooling experiences are limited opportunities to develop literacy skills in any language (Ndhlovu, 2011). This can create post-migration difficulties related to processing the English alphabet and phonics which, in turn, can affect fluency and comprehension (Wrigley, 2008). English language skills are critically important because academically, they facilitate access to the curriculum. Socially, language skills can support the development of relationships with those in the wider community.

For many African youth who resettle in South Australia, their first schooling experience occurs in Adelaide at either an Intensive English Language Centre (IELC) (for primary school aged children) or a New Arrivals Program (NAP) (designed for secondary school aged children and young adults). These schools are intended to assist newly arrived students to develop English language skills and facilitate an understanding of cultural practices that promote wellbeing and a sense of belonging (DECS, 2007b). Current funding provisions enable students to attend an IELC or NAP for up to 18 months.

Regardless of their schooling experiences prior to migration, African youth can encounter challenges in making the transition to the Australian education system. For example, African youth can experience difficulties in transitioning from an ability-based to an age-graded system (Bates et al., 2005; Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). Socially, African youth from refugee backgrounds can experience issues in forming relationships with their Australian-born peers and teachers. Such relationships are, however, critical to students’ engagement in education and can aid in overcoming disadvantage associated with a lack of social and cultural capital. Social capital refers to an individual’s social networks that generate and facilitate access to emotional
and practical resources (Hebert, Sun, & Kowch, 2004; Holland, 2009; Kuusisto, 2010; Ramsden & Taket, 2013), while cultural capital refers to access to the resources needed to combat challenges and become culturally competent in mainstream society (Naidoo, 2009).

In addition to these ‘major’ transitions, young people engage in multiple, daily transitions between the home, school, and community and consequently, are involved in a process of bridging multiple worlds (Cooper, 2011; Cooper, Cooper Jr, Azmitia, Chavira, & Gullatt, 2002). Connecting these worlds and making transitions involves the navigation of sociocultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, psychosocial, gender, and structural borders, often with little support (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998).

Given the complexity of the refugee experience, together with the vast academic and social challenges that African students face, it is little surprise that these issues can have lasting impacts, affecting their post-school education and employment options. This is particularly salient given that it is well recognised that engagement in post-compulsory education and training is critical to successful integration, social inclusion, and developing a sense of belonging in a new country (Ager & Strang, 2008; Francis & Cornfoot, 2007b).

Although it is acknowledged that there is a need to examine the post-school pathways of immigrant youth (e.g., Cooper et al., 2002; Kang, Supple, Stein, & Gonzalez, 2012), little is known about the experiences of African youth from refugee backgrounds as they make the transition from secondary school to education and employment in Australia. This chapter reports an investigation of the complexity of African students’ schooling and post-school transition experiences. It discusses key influences in shaping the education and career pathways of these young people with a view to establishing areas for improved support.

Overview of the Study

The study that forms the basis of this chapter examined a range of people’s perspectives on the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. The study sought to identify factors and processes that influence these pathways over time. Specifically, it aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds in South Australia?
2. What are the key influences that shape the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds in South Australia?
3. From the perspectives of different stakeholders, how might African youth from refugee backgrounds be better prepared for the post-school transition?

Central to this qualitative longitudinal case study was extensive collaboration with a Reference Group, comprising individuals with experience and expertise in working with African youth. Collaborative relationships with those involved in the Reference Group (i.e., educators, researchers, service providers, and leaders and elders from South Australia’s new and emerging African communities) were developed and maintained throughout the study.

Following ethics approvals from Flinders University, and the South Australian Government and Catholic school sectors, data were primarily collected via 78 semi-structured interviews over a 12 month period with 38 participants: African youth from refugee backgrounds, aged 16-24 (n = 14); secondary school educators (n = 7); university educators (n = 5); Technical and Further Education staff (n = 4); service providers (n = 3); and leaders and elders from South Australia’s new and emerging African communities (n = 5).
Interviews with 11 of the African youth participants occurred while they were attending secondary school. The remaining three participants had recently completed secondary school at the time of data collection.

Separate semi-structured interview guides were prepared for each group of participants and included a range of broad, open — and more focused — questions. For the African youth participants, questions related to: their personal and educational histories in Africa; the migration process; challenges and experiences of schooling in Australia; educational and career aspirations; and hopes, dreams and fears about the future. For example:

- **Tell me about yourself and how you came to be living in Australia** (broad, open question)
- **What was your experience of starting school in Australia?** (focused question)

For educators, service providers, and African community leaders and elders, questions were focused on their experiences of working with African youth from refugee backgrounds. For example:

- **What experiences have you had in working with African youth from refugee backgrounds?** (broad, open question)
- **What challenges have you faced in working with this group of young people in terms of their language skills?** (focused question)

**The Theoretical Framework**

The study was structured by a theoretical framework which consisted of 16 assumptions. These theoretical assumptions were developed from a review of existing literature and were informed by a number of theories including Elder Jr. and Johnson’s (2003) life course principles, self- and collective efficacy theories (Bandura, 1977, 1995a; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001), situational analysis (Annan, 2005), relationship theory (Allan, 1998; Allan & Crow, 2001), Arthur and McMahon’s (2005) multicultural career counselling framework, social support theory (Rook & Underwood, 2000), and systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The reason for such a unique theoretical framework is that no single theory could adequately be applied to the numerous concepts examined in the study.

The assumptions were based around 16 overarching themes — context, life course, individual and collective agency, personal and family narratives, relationships, social support, culture, social and cultural identities, gender, age/life stage, self- and collective efficacy, coping strategies, resources, work, career development, and a community of collaboration. Each of these assumptions is now discussed. Where references are cited in support of an assumption, they may only be directly supportive of one particular aspect. This is because these assumptions were developed by synthesising a range of sources and, therefore, cannot be solely attributed to particular theories or researchers.

**Assumption 1: Context**

Human behaviour needs to be studied in its social, cultural, relational and historical contexts in order to understand the meaning and significance of the behaviour. This assumption is, in part, supported by the work of Elder Jr. and Johnson (2003), Clausen (2003), and Stuhlmiller (1996).

**Assumption 2: Life Course**

The pathways that people take during transition periods are shaped by personal and collective choices, lifelong learning, and previous developmental pathways. The work of life course theorists supports elements of this assumption (Elder, George, & Shanahan, 1996; Elder Jr., 1995; Elder Jr. & Johnson, 2003).
Assumption 3: Individual and Collective Agency

Individual and collective agency is important in determining the level of control that people feel they have over their own lives and the choices they make. A sense of agency is critical for a person’s wellbeing and perceived self-efficacy. This assumption is supported by Bandura’s work on self- and collective agency (Bandura, 2000; Bandura et al., 2001).

Assumption 4: Personal and Family Narratives

Personal and family narratives are self-constructed stories that integrate a person’s life experiences, interpretations of events, and interactions with others into a meaningful whole. This assumption is supported, in part, by research in various fields such as qualitative research methods and counseling (e.g., Jago, 1996; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

Assumption 5: Relationships

Relationships are a central and necessary part of the human condition, and play a pivotal role in shaping people’s lives, both in helping them to meet the challenges of daily life as well as major life events and transitions. Individuals live their lives interdependently as members of families, partnerships, clans/tribes, communities, peer groups, and social networks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder Jr. & Johnson, 2003).

Assumption 6: Social Support

Social support influences how individuals cope with stressful situations and includes: emotional support; practice assistance; the presence of a supportive other; and having an advocate. There is evidence to suggest that social support is critical in assisting individuals to cope with difficulties and has been found to play a role in promoting health and wellbeing (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Cotterell, 2007).

Assumption 7: Culture

Culture shapes people’s living patterns, their perceptions and values, notions of normality, how meaning is constructed, how they cope with different challenges, and how they interact with others. This assumption is supported by research in diverse fields including career development, and adolescence (e.g., Arthur & McMahon, 2005; Phelan et al., 1998; Poppitt & Frey, 2007).

Assumption 8: Social and Cultural Identities

Social and cultural identities shape how individuals form relationships, and interact with, support, and perceive each other. An individual’s identity is embedded within the contexts of family, community, social networks, and everyday patterns of life. Social and cultural identities are shaped by ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, behaviour, clothing, and group memberships. Elements of this assumption are supported by research examining identity, and the social inclusion of immigrants (Birman, Persky, & Chan, 2010; Čolić-Peisker, 2003; Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010).

Assumption 9: Gender

Gender is a key organising principle of social life, and shapes social interactions, roles, status, opportunities, and experiences. This assumption is supported by gender studies (Boyd, 1999; Ridgeway, 2009) and life course (Clausen, 1995) research.

Assumption 10: Age/Life Stage

Cultural and social expectations associated with age influence individuals’ roles, responsibilities, and life challenges. In many cultures, for example, teenage children are often required to adopt adult roles within the family (e.g., caring for younger
siblings and contributing financially to the family) (O’Sullivan, 2006). This assumption is supported by life course research (Alwin, 1995; Elder et al., 1996).

**Assumption 11: Self- and Collective Efficacy**

Self- and collective efficacy beliefs play a key role in influencing people’s aspirations and decision-making strategies (Bandura, 1995b). Perceived self- and collective efficacy predicts education and career aspirations, and the amount of perseverance and effort used to achieve these goals (Bandura, 2000; Bandura et al., 2001).

**Assumption 12: Coping Strategies**

During transition periods, people are often confronted with personal and social challenges. The coping strategies employed to overcome these challenges, in turn, shape an individual’s experiences and outcomes. Selecting coping strategies is critically important in influencing behaviours and outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Habarth, Graham-Bermann, & Bermann, 2009; Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998).

**Assumption 13: Resources**

Education and career pathways are shaped by educational, economic, cultural, and social resources. These resources include English language skills, knowledge and skills, finances, relationships, transport, and cultural knowledge. For African youth from refugee backgrounds, a loss of resources as a consequence of displacement and resettlement can complicate access to education and employment opportunities (Cobb-Clark, Connolly, & Worswick, 2005; Hobfoll, 1989; Ryan et al., 2008).

**Assumption 14: Work**

In Australian society, work fulfills a number of important social and personal functions for individuals and their families. It provides resources that shape a person’s lifestyle, relationships, wellbeing, and health. Work also provides a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging. This assumption is supported, in part, by research which has examined education and employment outcomes amongst resettled refugees (Blom, 2004; Casimiro, Hancock, & Northcote, 2007).

**Assumption 15: Career Development**

Career choices are shaped by the dynamic interaction between interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental factors (Arthur & McMahon, 2005). This includes factors that shape the development and evolution of education and career aspirations, choices, and post-school pathways.

**Assumption 16: Community of Collaboration**

In order to capture the complexity of the refugee experience, research requires a collaborative approach involving the active engagement of numerous stakeholders (Castles, 2003). Collaboration can promote the development of contextual conclusions (Annan, 2005). This study established a ‘Community of Collaboration’ in the form of the Reference Group (discussed earlier).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was an ongoing, recursive process involving thematic analysis to identify commonalities and differences across the entire data set. To structure this process, a data analysis framework was developed using the study’s 16 theoretical assumptions. Participants were invited to become involved in the process of data analysis, by providing feedback on the themes that were generated from the researcher’s interpretations. The outcome of data analysis was the identification of six key influences that were found to shape the education and career pathways of African youth (viz., previous schooling, English language skills, Australian
schooling challenges and support, family support, academic achievement, and post-school preparation). Following this, 10 recommendations were developed and were informed by the study’s findings in conjunction with collaborative discussions with Reference Group members. These recommendations are intended to enhance the support that is provided to African youth from refugee backgrounds in secondary schools and as they prepare for the post-school transition.

The recommendations that emerged from the analysis of all the data that were collected will be presented later in this chapter. But first, in order to illustrate the key factors and processes that shape the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds, the story of Belee1, an African youth participant, is presented. Although this case study is unique in its circumstances when compared with the other 13 African youth participants, it does illustrate some common themes. A commentary then follows before the overall recommendations are discussed.

CASE STUDY: BELEE

Belee was born in Liberia but grew up in the nearby country of Ghana. Consequently, she has very little memory of her homeland. In Ghana, Belee lived in a refugee camp with her older sister, Miata, her only known relative.

Belee considers her childhood to be dissimilar to those of other children who lived in the refugee camp. She stated that Miata “never treated [her] right.” For example, while they were living in Africa, Miata “had the money” to send Belee to school, “but she didn’t.” Instead, Belee “had to go to other people’s houses and help them clean and look after the kids.” In some instances, she was paid for her work.

In 2006, when Belee was 15 years old, she and Miata migrated to Australia as refugees. As soon as they arrived, Miata asked Belee “to leave her house.” It was also at this point that Belee learned the truth about her family. Miata told her, “You are not my sister. I just found you during the war … You’re not my relative. I just looked after you.” This information “played” on Belee’s mind “a lot.” She said:

*Sometimes, I [think] … Where are my family? ... I’m just alone in this world and my family are somewhere in this world. Why does she keep telling me I’m not her sister? She found me from somewhere. I don’t understand … how to get over it …*

Belee remained living with Miata, feeling confused about her family situation. Over the next few weeks, Miata accused Belee of lying and stealing from her. It was at this point that Belee decided to leave Miata’s house, stating that she “had to leave” in order to “make a life for [herself].” Initially, Belee was homeless and relied upon friends to provide her with a place to sleep. Eventually, she secured independent housing. Upon reflection, living independently was “one of the most challenging things” that Belee has done. During this time, Belee continued to ponder Miata’s words about her family. Belee did not seek support from anyone at the time, explaining that she does not like “to be a burden.” Instead, she sought strength from her belief in God in order to cope with the situation. Belee stated: “I was being strong because I had hope. I always prayed to God … He’s always there for me.”

In 2006, during this time of upheaval, Belee began attending the Adelaide Secondary School of English, a school that offers the New Arrivals Program. Belee attended this school for 18 months before enrolling in Year 10 at Fairview High School, a mainstream secondary school, in 2009. She believed that being placed in this year level was beyond her capabilities and this impacted upon her ability to study:

*I didn’t really go to school in Africa … My problem [was that] I went straight to Year 10 and I was*
like, oh my God! Can I do it? ... I’m still so, so tired … and feel like I can’t do it.

In addition to academic challenges, Belee struggled to make friends with her peers because she perceived that she was much older than other students in her class. She also cited different “ways of understanding” as a barrier to forming friendships with her peers, citing a preference for interacting with her teachers.

In contrast to the struggles that she had with her schooling, Belee eventually sought support from the Liberian community in South Australia, which she refers to as her “family”. Associating with the community has assisted Belee to fulfil her passion, which is working with young people. She described her voluntary work with the community as “a duty” which she “should perform.” Since becoming involved in the community, Belee has joined the African Communities Council of South Australia, become involved in Youth Parliament, and is a youth leader in her church community.

In 2010, when Belee was enrolled in Year 11, she struggled to attend school regularly, which was a cause for concern amongst her subject teachers. In Semester 1, she was absent for a total of 42 days, the equivalent of nearly an entire school term. In Semester 2, Belee’s attendance improved slightly, recording 31.5 days absent.

In 2011, Belee was enrolled in Year 12 and her school attendance was again sporadic. During the first semester, Belee was absent for a total of 40 days. These absences affected her academic performance in the subjects that she studied: the Research Project, Community Studies, Workplace Practices, and English as a Second Language. In Semester 2, Belee dropped a number of subjects; her Term 3 report revealing that she was undertaking English as a Second Language and Community Studies. Unfortunately, neither of these subjects was graded given that Belee was absent from school for 48.5 days during the 10-week term. Over the course of the 2011 school year, Belee was absent from school for 140 days and the majority of these absences were attributed to family reasons ($n = 59$) and illness ($n = 60$).

In discussing her attendance and academic performance, Belee questioned why she was “so weak on [her] education.” She described “a spirit of weakness” that prevented her from engaging in her education. This ‘spirit of weakness’ is very likely depression. For example, the school’s special education teacher, Kerri, recalled a recent conversation with Belee where she suspected that Belee might be depressed, and urged her to speak to her counsellor. Similarly, Rob, her English as a Second Language teacher, attributed her “virtue drop out [of school] halfway through” to a depressive illness.

Although Belee did not describe a specific career path in discussing her post-school aspirations, her ultimate goal is to support the youth in her community. She believes that she will achieve this goal by engaging in voluntary work with the South Australian African community. Kerri stated that Belee is “linked with the Migrant Resource Centre … She sounds like she’s on a good pathway.” In the future, Belee would like to complete a Technical and Further Education course and obtain a university degree in the area of community services or social science.

In 2013, Belee became pregnant, beginning the transition to motherhood. Unfortunately, the child’s father, an ex-boyfriend of Belee’s, is currently in another relationship — with Belee’s best friend. The couple already has one child together and Belee is, therefore, likely to raise her child as a single parent.

**Education and Career Pathways: The Key Influences**

Data analysis identified six key influences that shaped the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds. These include: previous schooling; English language skills; challenges and support in Australian schooling; family support; academic achievement;
and post-school preparation. As discussed, data were analysed from a developmental perspective. Consequently, the identified influences interact with one another and have cumulative effects that impact upon the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds. Schooling experiences prior to migration were found to shape the development of English language skills. These two influences were seen to affect African students’ experiences and challenges as they engaged in schooling in Australia. Students’ schooling experiences were also influenced by the availability and extent of family support they received. As would be expected, African students’ Australian schooling experiences influenced their academic achievement. This, in turn, was found to shape post-school preparation. These influences and their interactions are presented visually in Figure 1 and are then discussed with reference to the case study of Belee.

Belee is one of many young people from refugee backgrounds to have experienced significant formal schooling disruptions, lasting many years (Bethke & Braunschweig, 2004). As Belee’s case study has demonstrated, interrupted education can pose significant schooling challenges in resettlement countries (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006) and can affect overall educational attainment (Peek & Richardson, 2010). The doctoral research (King, 2014) found that access to formal schooling in Africa was a critical resource in shaping the education and career pathways of African youth by providing a foundation for when they entered the Australian education system. This is evident in comparing Belee’s situation with another participant, Fatuma, who had opportunities to access formal schooling while she lived in a Kenyan refugee camp. For Belee, access to further education was not possible given her limited academic skills. In contrast, Fatuma made the transition to university, where she began studying medical science.

Figure 1. Key influences on the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds
Like all of the African youth participants in the study, Belee’s educational opportunities were expanded following her migration to Australia, at the age of 15. Her first experience of formal schooling occurred in Australia in a New Arrivals Program, where she studied for 18 months. Although engagement in such a program can aid in overcoming limited knowledge of assumed cultural understandings and expectations of schooling (Brown et al., 2006; DECS, 2007a), Belee, like many of the other African youth, encountered difficulties in making the transition to mainstream schooling.

In contrast to Belee, Jurup, a young man from South Sudan, made the decision to transition directly into mainstream schooling, without first attending a New Arrivals Program. This decision was made based on his perception that he already had a strong educational foundation, developed from his schooling experiences in Uganda, prior to migrating to Australia. Jurup’s teachers, however, believed that this was a mistake because of difficulties Jurup experienced in mainstream secondary school. For example, Jurup described an altercation that he had with his mathematics teacher, which resulted in his suspension from school. Jurup explained that this altercation arose because Jurup was unaware of the manner in which to interact with teachers in the Australian context. This supports the notion that New Arrivals Programs can support students from refugee backgrounds to acquire cultural understandings and expectations of schooling in Australia.

Lack of prior access to education significantly impacts upon experiences and challenges in the Australian school system. In the larger study, participants described the need for African youth to develop English language skills for multiple purposes, findings that support other research. Academically, literacy skills are needed to facilitate academic achievement (McBrien, 2005; Sarroub, 2007) by enabling access to the school curriculum, supporting the development of subject-specific language (Grant & Francis, 2011), and increasing facility with different genres of writing. Belee faced difficulties with English literacy and reported issues in meeting the academic requirements of Year 10, given her limited educational history. This is consistent with research that has found that English language skills are a strong predictor of school achievement (Anlezark, 2011; Cooper, 2002; Hargreaves, 2011). It also supports the connection that researchers have identified between English literacy skill development and prior schooling experience (Brown et al., 2006). For example, Ndhlouv (2011) noted that English literacy challenges amongst newly resettled refugees from Africa are compounded by a lack of prior formal education.

Socially, Belee found it challenging to establish relationships with her peers, citing age differences and dissimilar interests as barriers to friendship development, challenges that were also described by other participants. Limited social connections probably contributed to Belee’s feelings of isolation, loneliness and marginalisation (Pittaway & Muli, 2011), impacting upon her educational engagement (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). In the broader study, educators cited the need for African youth to develop conversational English skills to help them to form relationships (McFarlane, Kaplan, & Lawrence, 2011) and become integrated into mainstream society (Milner & Khawaja, 2010), significant issues that shaped Belee’s experiences.

When students feel disconnected from school, they often cope by truanting (Cotterell, 2007). Frequent absences can impact upon academic achievement (Barry & Reschly, 2012), as was the case with Belee. During 2011, Belee recorded 140 absences, equating to nearly three quarters of the school year. Her educational disengagement was compounded by issues beyond the school, which is consistent with findings in the research literature. For example, Sarroub (2007) identified factors such as needing to financially support the family, and engage in family roles and responsibilities as impacting
upon success at school. Belee reported limited access to support as a result of her family’s disintegration following migration to Australia. Research by McMichael, Gifford, and Correa-Velez (2011) has illustrated how family support can be constrained by significant resettlement challenges such as communication and financial difficulties, living arrangements, and changes to family members’ roles and responsibilities. Given the complexity of the resettlement process, it is not surprising that family issues are common amongst newly arrived refugee families in Australia (Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009; Westoby, 2009). In the broader study, Belee was not unique in her housing challenges. Two other students also discussed the challenges of transitioning to independent housing within the first few months of resettlement.

It is well recognised that during periods of civil conflict, many individuals experience traumatic events (Trani & Bakhshi, 2013; Živčić, 1993) and for many refugees, these experiences unfold as a chain of events (Kinzie, 2007). Traumatic events can occur in the homeland and in countries of asylum including refugee camps (Kinzie, 2007). In addition, events in the country of resettlement can reactivate traumatic symptoms which can affect the long-term psychological and social functioning of individuals by creating or exacerbating mental health issues (Abi-Rached, 2009; Benson, 2004). Belee reported experiencing mental health difficulties, which she described as “a spirit of weakness.” She explained that these issues affected her schooling in Australia. This is consistent with research that has noted that post-traumatic symptoms can affect engagement and participation in education in the host country by affecting concentration (Banks & MacDonald, 2003; Grant & Francis, 2011) and memory (Brodie-Tyrrell, 2009). Childhood trauma has also been identified as a risk factor in school dropout (Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011).

Belee’s disengagement from school contributed to her poor academic achievement and eventual departure from school altogether. This supports research which suggests that school disconnection is a factor in early school leaving (Cotterell, 2007). In turn, disengagement from education has been associated with limited post-school options (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker, & Lenoy, 2004; Lenton, 2005). In Belee’s case, lack of regular school attendance is likely to have limited her access to school-based career guidance and counselling. This is important given that newly arrived African youth and their families often have limited knowledge of post-school options in resettlement countries as a consequence of limited social and cultural capital (Francis & Cornfoot, 2007a; Refugee Council of Australia, 2009). For example, newly arrived African families may have restricted knowledge of the Australian education system and culturally appropriate job-seeking approaches, and limited social networks from which to develop this knowledge.

In addition to understanding the challenges facing African youth, the findings of the larger study revealed that teachers of African students face difficulties in meeting the needs of these students. As discussed throughout this chapter, a key challenge facing African students is the development of knowledge and skills in the context of disrupted schooling experiences and associated limited literacy skills. In addition, they can experience communication difficulties if teachers and peers speak too quickly or use Australian colloquialisms. Teachers can also encounter communication issues. For example, they may not be able to understand students with heavy accents or those who have a limited English vocabulary. In addition, not all teachers have had access to professional development opportunities that aid them in meeting the needs of their African students. Teachers may, therefore, be unaware of the unique and complex challenges facing this group of students, or how
to best support them in the classroom. This is coupled with practical issues that can affect their ability to support African students such as limited time, heavy workloads, and accountability in meeting curriculum requirements.

Recommendations

As previously discussed, the processes of collecting and analysing data in this study were highly collaborative, in particular, involving a Reference Group. In addition to regular meetings to discuss issues that arose during the course of the research, the Reference Group collaborated to develop a series of 10 recommendations. These recommendations were developed from the key influences that emerged from the data analysis in addition to incorporating the rich experiences and insights of those involved in the Reference Group. The recommendations are designed to improve support provisions for African youth during their time in the South Australian education system.

Although the recommendations highlight perceived areas of need, they have not been designed solely to emphasise deficits. Rather, it is important to recognise and appreciate the capacities and resilience that people use to aid in overcoming challenges and barriers (Coventry, Guerra, MacKenzie, & Pinkney, 2002; Gifford et al., 2009). In addition, these recommendations are presented with the view that addressing issues early and utilising collaborative problem-solving approaches can aid in ensuring that African students receive appropriate support. The study’s recommendations are summarised in Table 1.

Although 10 recommendations were developed, this chapter will discuss those pertaining to educational and cultural mentoring, and academic and English language support (Recommendations 3-6, Table 1). These recommendations were selected because they are particularly relevant to the case study presented.

Ongoing Educational and Cultural Mentoring

Belee’s case study revealed a lack of social and cultural capital needed to facilitate positive schooling and post-school transition experiences. Acquiring this capital by developing knowledge of Australia’s cultural norms, services and supports constitutes an important challenge for African youth from refugee backgrounds. The larger study found that African youth do not always receive access to support that could otherwise promote the development of this social and cultural capital.

Table 1. Summary of recommendations for working with African students from refugee backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Development</th>
<th>1. Provide teachers of African students with cultural awareness training and opportunities to discuss their needs and facilitate access to identified areas of professional development.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Incorporate cultural awareness training into Australian pre-service teacher education courses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational and Cultural Mentoring</td>
<td>3. Provide ongoing educational and cultural mentoring to African students throughout their schooling, as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and English Language Support</td>
<td>4. Identify school-based supports that facilitate the educational engagement of African students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Identify academic support provisions that aid in addressing the learning needs of African students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Identify support provisions that facilitate English language and literacy skill development amongst African students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support and Communication</td>
<td>7. Promote a welcoming, culturally inclusive school culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Identify strategies that facilitate home/school communication for African students and their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Career Counselling</td>
<td>9. Identify approaches to education and career counselling that facilitate the education and career development of African students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Provide African students with opportunities to engage in multiple, diverse work experiences.</td>
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</table>
Consequently, one of the main recommendations arising from this study is the need for schools to ensure that all African students receive educational and cultural mentoring support. Educational and cultural mentoring involves: the provision of personal support and encouragement; education and career counselling involving the dissemination of information about schooling in Australia; monitoring social and emotional wellbeing; providing assistance in clarifying educational needs; and enlisting the support of others when needed (e.g., facilitating access to cultural role models and service providers). Participants with roles in education, service provision, and community leadership considered such mentoring to be most effective when it is provided throughout a student’s schooling experience in Australia. Questions offered for consideration include:

- What educational and cultural mentoring is available and how is it provided to African students?
- What opportunities are available for enhancing African students’ access to educational and cultural mentoring (e.g., enlisting the support of individuals in the community and/or service providers)?

Data analysis coupled with Reference Group discussions revealed that effective educational and cultural mentoring is vital in supporting African students at school and in preparing them for the post-school transition. This process was believed to be essential in equipping students with the social and cultural capital that is needed to facilitate integration into Australian society through engagement in post-school education and employment.

Support to Address Learning Needs and Facilitate English Language and Literacy Skill Development

As discussed, many African students from refugee backgrounds face significant and complex academic needs in the Australian school system as a consequence of severely disrupted schooling and limited English language and literacy skills. Belee’s case illustrates the severe, long-term implications that school-based social and academic challenges can have in limiting education and career pathways.

Recommendations are made with a view to improving school-based support provisions to address students’ learning needs and facilitate the development of English language and literacy skills. Suggestions included the establishment of greater flexibility within school systems and structures such as timetabling, curriculum differentiation, and the provision of additional homework and assignment support. In addition, Reference Group members and study participants cited the need to provide general as well as subject-specific English language and literacy support to offset difficulties associated with classroom participation, the development of relationships with teachers and peers, and access to the curriculum. Questions offered for consideration include:

- How are African students’ knowledge and skills assessed when they enter mainstream school, and how are students allocated to year levels and classes?
- How might the process of assessment and placement of students into classes be improved?
- What academic support structures are available for students (e.g., flexible timetabling, curriculum differentiation) and what additional supports could be provided (e.g., after-school homework centre, learning support centre accessible throughout the school day)?
- What specialist English language and literacy support is available (e.g., support to develop subject-specific language) and what additional support is required?
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Given Australia’s cultural and linguistic diversity together with its extensive migration history, conducting research in order to better understand the social inclusion of migrants is warranted. In addition, given the relative infancy of this particular research area (i.e., the education and career pathways of young people from refugee backgrounds), undertaking further studies can aid in understanding the factors and processes that shape the post-school pathways of newly arrived young people.

This study had some limitations that could be addressed by future research. Firstly, the perspectives of family members and employers were absent due to practical issues such as recruitment and communication difficulties, and restricted funding. Future research could address this limitation by adopting a similar methodology to that used in this study. Involving family members could aid in developing a better understanding of the role that families play in shaping the education and career pathways of their children. Incorporating employer perspectives could facilitate a greater understanding of workplace experiences and challenges.

Secondly, this research was defined as a qualitative longitudinal study. The ‘longitudinal’ nature of the research was, however, limited by time constraints. Future research could, for example, involve a longer period of engagement with student participants, beginning with their enrolment in a New Arrivals Program, for example. Participants could then be tracked over a number of years as they transition into and out of mainstream schooling. Such a study could aid in understanding how experiences and challenges unfold over time, and how the educational needs of young people evolve over the course of resettlement.

Thirdly, the focus of the larger study was African youth from refugee backgrounds. Future research could adopt a similar research design and involve young people from different cultural backgrounds who arrive in Australia under different visas such as asylum seekers and refugees. This research could aid in identifying both common challenges and culturally specific factors that shape their experiences in Australia.

This research found that cultural mentoring played a vital role in shaping African students’ school and post-school experiences. Cultural mentoring, therefore, constitutes a crucial area for further research with young people from refugee backgrounds in the Australian context. Such research could explore different models of cultural mentoring and trial and evaluate their effectiveness in practice.

CONCLUSION

Navigating post-school education and career pathways is inherently complex for all young people in Australia, irrespective of their cultural background. For African youth from refugee backgrounds, however, it is particularly challenging given the multifaceted, diverse challenges they face. Many of these young people have witnessed horrific atrocities and made difficult journeys to foreign lands in search of freedom, safety, and a strong sense of hope and optimism for a brighter future. Amidst the process of rebuilding their lives, African youth encounter school-based challenges as a consequence of missed years of schooling, limited English language proficiency and literacy skills, limited social networks, and a lack of social and cultural capital that facilitates engagement in the Australian school system and society more broadly.

This chapter drew upon the central findings of a collaborative, longitudinal case study. The purpose of the research was to develop an understanding of the experiences and challenges that shape the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds in South Australia.

Using a single case study from this research, this chapter explored the six key influences that
The Schooling Experiences of African Youth from Refugee Backgrounds in South Australia

were found to shape the pathways of this group of young people: previous schooling; English language skills; challenges and support in Australian schooling; family support; academic achievement; and post-school preparation. Following the commentary on the case study, the recommendations that were developed in collaboration with the study’s Reference Group were presented before directions for future research were offered. These recommendations were presented with a view towards achieving equity for this group of young people to facilitate greater engagement and participation in Australian society through education and employment.

This research has contributed to a growing body of evidence that outlines the challenges and experiences of the education and career pathways of one particular group of young people from refugee backgrounds in South Australia. Further research can assist in improving our understanding of the experiences and challenges facing this group of students, their educators, and those who support them. Knowledge of the issues that affect African youth from refugee backgrounds can enable us to devise strategies to aid in overcoming these challenges. In turn, this will equip us with the necessary skills to improve African students’ post-school experiences and outcomes and, indeed, their sense of belonging and identity as Australians.

REFERENCES


The Schooling Experiences of African Youth from Refugee Backgrounds in South Australia


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**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Educational and Cultural Mentoring:** Personal support and encouragement; education and career counselling including the dissemination of information about schooling in Australia; monitoring of social and emotional wellbeing; assistance in clarifying educational needs; and enlisting the support of others when needed (e.g., facilitating access to role models from students’ ethnic communities).

**New and Emerging Communities:** Newly arrived communities in Australia with little or no previous migration history.

**Post-School Transition:** The process of preparing to leave, and leaving, secondary school and embarking upon education and/or employment pursuits.

**Refugee:** A person who is outside his/her country of nationality and cannot return due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

**Resettlement:** A five-year process involving migration to a new country in which to live.

**Student with Disrupted Schooling:** A young person who has experienced years of interruption to his/her schooling and, consequently, has difficulty with literacy and numeracy as well as other areas of academic development when compared to his/her peers.

**Youth from Refugee Backgrounds:** People aged between 12 and 25 years of age who have a history of refugee or refugee-like experience.

**ENDNOTES**

1 This, and all other names, including the name of the school, ‘Fairview High School’, denotes a pseudonym that is intended to protect the identities of participants.