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## Stopped Listening: Experiences of Higher Education Refugee-Background Learners

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the academic agency of refugee-background learners who have resettled to the United States of America and the responsibility of higher education to recognize and contest deficit thinking that devalues learners as unable to succeed due to their refugee background. This study explored how refugee-background learners' experiences demonstrate their multiple capacities to succeed in higher education. The research question was: what are refugee-background learners' lived experiences of U.S. higher education? The essence of these experiences is presented using self-reflexive collaborative speaking and writing inquiry. Three main themes drawn from the results are the capacities of refugee-background learners to adapt cultures, maintain multiple social connections, and exercise agency.

*Keywords:* refugee-background learners, academic agency, deficit thinking, higher education, first-person narratives

### Introduction

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“Once they hear my accent, they stop listening to what I have to say,” is an experience familiar to refugee-background learners navigating challenging situations in higher education in the United States. This paper discusses access to and participation in higher education, specifically highlighting the academic agency of refugee-background learners who have resettled to the United States, and the responsibility of faculty to value refugee-background learners as both knowledge creators and academic researchers. This paper collaboratively draws upon the co-authors’ varied relationships with higher education as refugee-background learners and/or educators. These retrospective accounts are catalysts to advocate for learners based on the theories of education and hope (Freire, 1968/1993; Vygotsky, 1978). The research question was: what are refugee-background learners’ lived experiences of U.S. higher education? The purpose of this study was to contribute to the discourse on the advancement of higher education for refugee-background learners.

There has been very little research on the experiences of refugee-background learners in U.S. higher education (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012; Felix, 2016; He et al., 2017; Shapiro, 2018). Researchers have identified the need for qualitative studies to understand the lived experiences of these learners as whole persons (Ferede, 2010; Sekalala, 2016; Student et al., 2017). Sekalala (2016) and Student et al. (2017) further advocate that refugee-background researchers conduct this research using first-person reflexive methods. Our research aligns with this gap. This article draws on firsthand experiences, links them to contemporary research, and articulates potential future actions to support meaningful participation in higher education by refugee-background learners living in the United States.

We situate our experiential research within three areas of published knowledge. The first area is the historic and contemporary global contexts for refugees. The second is literature leading to the development of the concept of academic agency. The third is the centuries-long history of deficit thinking within education. In turn, each of these will be explained in order to understand the lens

through which we view the firsthand lived experiences of U.S. higher education by refugee-background learners.

### **Historic and Contemporary Context**

Each decade since the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950 has witnessed a staggering increase in the percentage of the global population who are persons of concern (UNHCR, 2018). These are individuals forcibly displaced from their homes as a result of violence, conflict, or persecution, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. At the end of 2018, the total population of persons of concern was 74.79 million, representing one in every 108 people globally (UNHCR, 2020). As USA for UNHCR (2020a) reported, “new displacement remains very high. One person becomes displaced every 2 seconds – less than the time it takes to read this sentence” (para. 3).

Currently, four out of every five refugees, totalling 25.9 million, live in temporary solutions in neighbouring host countries (UNHCR, 2019, p. 2). The three types of durable solutions for refugees are voluntary repatriation to their home country, local integration into the host country, and resettlement to a third country. Resettlement of refugees to third countries is the least likely option as the total population of resettled refugees in 2018 was only 92,400 (UNHCR, 2019, p. 3). For decades, the United States resettled more refugees annually than any other country (USA for UNHCR, 2020b) and between 1980 and 2017 resettled more refugees each year than the rest of the resettlement countries combined (Radford & Connor, 2019, para. 5). In 2018, the United States fell behind Canada as the top resettlement country (UNHCR, 2019, p. 32). Planning to resettle a maximum of 18,000 refugees in 2020, the United States set a limit to admit the “lowest number of refugees by the US in a single year since 1980, when Congress created the nation’s refugee resettlement program” (Krogstad, 2019, para. 1). Our research focuses on the experiences of higher education learners who were refugees and have resettled in the United States.

## **Academic Agency**

The term *academic agency* has been a phrase used but not defined in the literature (Matusov et al., 2016). The co-authors constructed a definition using the sociological definition of agency and applying it to an individual's choice to participate in academia as learner, educator, research subject, or researcher. The work of Trowler is often cited in discussions on agency in higher education. In 2011, Trowler wrote the following:

Agency certainly is not supreme, individuals and groups are not free to decide their own futures and to 'construct' the world around them through the meanings they place on it. Clearly there are constraining forces, resource issues and forces which channel practices and meaning in particular directions while closing off other possibilities (p. 36).

The history of agency is intertwined with its relationship to structure. Reacting to this, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) articulated the independent concept of human agency as a "temporally embedded process of social engagement" (p. 963) and sought to distinguish it from concepts of structure. The co-authors define academic agency as one's capacity to freely set and pursue academic goals. Exercising one's academic agency may mean embracing intentional defiance. It is not uncommon for refugee-background learners to receive academic counseling advice to lower their expectations (Griffin 2018; Liou 2016). Intentional defiance helps one make sense of an academic path based on internal fortitude, aiming higher than what is expected.

## **Deficit Thinking**

An educational system reflects its broader socio-economic and political milieu (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). Paulo Freire (1968/1993) wrote of the imbalance of power and oppression in education. One form of oppression in education is deficit thinking, which marginalizes learners based on the race or class of their families of origin (Ladson-Billing, 2006; Valencia, 1997, 2010). This marginalization assumes that a learner's socio-economic context is inadequate to support learning rather than evaluating the

failings of the educational system. Deficit thinking leads educators to set low expectations based on assumptions about the learners' motivation, ability, or family support (Liou, 2016; Milner, 2010). These actions are often unintentional, yet they create a significant social impact on individuals and society (He et al., 2017; Jimenez-Castellanos & Gonzalez, 2012). Researchers have identified the need to study deficit thinking applied to refugee-background learners (Hannah, 1999; Keddie, 2012; Student et al., 2017).

Valencia (2010) identified the racially discriminatory evolution of deficit thinking throughout the history of U.S. education as changing with the "intellectual and scholarly climate of the times" (p. 7). "Racialized opportunity structures lead to racialized academic achievement patterns" (p. 3). Research on refugee-background learners, in turn, has emphasized impediments to successfully navigating higher education (Felix, 2016; Feuerherm & Ramanathan, 2015; Sheikh et al., 2019).

This study elicited testimonies of refugee-background learners being advised to set low academic goals. These examples are provided to raise awareness (1) by those employed in the educational system to identify and reduce their deficit thinking practices and (2) by current and prospective learners to recognize and reject advice based on deficit thinking. The co-authors aim to contribute to a critical understanding of this multilayered problem.

In summary, this paper examines the contemporary experiences of refugee-background learners in U.S. higher education as it may impact being students, teaching assistants, research assistants, researchers, educators, co-authors, and authors. Education is often framed as a delivery of a service or product, and not as an opportunity for educators and learners to co-create new knowledge. Through co-creation, education can be reframed to be *with* students, rather than *for* students (Liou, 2016; Martin et al., 2018). Refugee-background learners are more likely to be subjects, not authors, of studies (Martin et al., 2018; Pittaway et al., 2010). When asked to participate in research, individuals with a refugee-background are often asked to *represent* a specific demographic. Individuals need not have their

academic pursuits defined by their identity. While there has been exciting research highlighting identity and amplifying marginalized voices to counter pseudoscience objectivist academic writing (Davies, 2012), this paper presents a different stance. The co-authors have varying rapports with higher education of refugee-background learners. Rather than continuing to constrain individuals to speak only of their individual experiences, the co-authors collaborated as co-creators, taking shared agency for this endeavour. This approach invited individuals to fully own the experience of communicating their ideas as co-creators, rather than as research-subject interviewees.

## **Methodology**

### **Paradigm**

The starting point for this research was the critical subjectivity of collaborative self-reflexive co-authorship. Our axiological position valued the authenticity of the various perspectives of the co-authors, while acknowledging the intrinsic restrictive biases. We adopted “a dialogic interactive process where research team members discuss, reflect on, and interpret their findings” (Acosta et al., 2015, p. 414). Student, Kendall, and Day employed a similar approach in their 2017 study, documenting the importance and rarity of collaborative first-person research in refugee higher education studies. They posited the strength of this method to contest dominant discourses about refugee-background learners (p. 585).

### **Participants**

Co-authors were selectively invited to participate. They were all known professionally to one of the co-authors and were invited to collaborate because of experience as or with refugee-background learners. The focus of the research was collectively internal to the varied experiences of the co-authors regarding studying and teaching in higher education; academic research; and multilingualism. We partnered as co-researchers to deepen our knowledge of the research problem. Using collaborative speaking and writing inquiry (Speedy & Wyatt, 2014), we aimed to contribute to the complex

understandings of this phenomenon and the positive development of academic agency of refugee-background learners.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection employed both spoken and written textual critical reflections by the co-authors. We met via a synchronous video-conferencing environment and captured reflections through audio-recording and written notes. These were transcribed and combined. Asynchronously, we set the priorities for further exploration of the topics. In the next phase, we engaged in a series of deeper reflective writings, composed individually with the collaborative guidance from one or more co-authors. These writings formed research observations from which major themes were inductively drawn. The essences of these experiences were written into cohesive narratives and collaboratively edited by all co-authors in an iterative process. As there is “no single convenient narrative of what it means to be a refugee in higher education” (Morrice, 2013, p. 654), we present multiple narratives.

### **Quality**

Quality is illuminated through the research design choices and warrants consideration when interpreting the findings. A delimiter was that all but one of the co-authors are persons of color who taught or studied in the predominantly White U.S. city of Portland, Oregon that has “perfected neoliberal racism” (Semuels, 2016, para. 6); therefore, these testimonials do not reflect all educational experiences across the United States. Another delimiter was the choice of first-person reflections as data. Their narrowness in scope strengthened the validity of this study, as reflections can “raise consciousness and thus provoke political action to remedy problems of oppressed peoples” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 325). The researchers’ subjectivity was central to this research and the collaborative critical analyses added to the methodological integrity of this study.

Internally, the strength of analysis was predicated on interrogation of the data “that is done collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers” (Acosta et al., 2015, p. 414). We followed a



research process that “deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point” (Lassiter, 2005, p. 16). Externally, we endeavoured to understand our research choices and to articulate them transparently to a wider public. Reason (2006) argued that this was fundamental to the free and open discourse of qualitative research (p. 190).

## **Ethics**

There have been risks in publishing on this topic (Bowen, 2014; Hannah, 1999; Morrice, 2013). Student et al. (2017) described the imperative of researchers to balance the “desire to tell the ‘whole story’ with ethical concern for others who may not want their story to be told” (p. 587). The very act of publishing these stories could endanger not only refugee-background learners, but also their family members across the world. For these reasons, the testimonies were aggregated. To increase readability of our text, we have employed the use of italic block quotes to indicate first-person reflections from one or more co-authors without further citation to indicate the source. The co-authors’ reasons to publish are explained below:

*In refugee camps, we were taught to respect our elders and teachers. We were taught to be kind and support one another during hard times. We were taught to be positive and hope that one day things would be better. In the camp, I remembered being taught how to develop relationships and skills to survive.*

*When I came to the United States, I built relationships with my teachers to get help with my studies. I watched my parents nurture a few friendships that ended up becoming like family. In return, these few friends have helped us tremendously. I am so thankful for everyone that helped me along the way. The main goal is to give back to the community. Our research is an act of giving back to various communities of support.*

The co-authors discussed whose story this is to tell. While our research developed, contemporary coverage of refugee stories was prevalent throughout social, popular, and journalistic

media. The journalist Rifaie Tammam (2019) wrote about being interviewed about U.S. airstrikes in Syria, a topic closely related to his PhD research. He was humiliated when the TV news segment featured him for only “a few seconds, half in tears and conspicuously traumatised while mentioning the loss of [his] brother and father. The clip then continued with a white Australian observer who gave his ‘objective’ and scholarly analysis of the situation” (para. 3). Tammam reflected that this exemplified how refugee stories were often reduced to serve an oversimplified implicit narrative logic as “objects or vehicles of inspiration and sympathy” (para. 7). Tammam encouraged researchers to explore “the challenges of young people adapting to a completely new education system” (para. 10). Our research purposefully serves this need while respecting the agency of the co-authors with refugee backgrounds to determine how and when to share their stories. Collectively, we present what we recognize and define as valued knowledge, with the aim of contributing to the readers’ understanding of the complex personhood of refugee-background learners.

### **Findings**

Three themes drawn from the results exemplify the unique relationship that refugee-background learners have with contemporary U.S. higher education. The first theme describes adapting to different cultures, with two sub-themes on being a refugee and resettling to the United States. The second theme explores maintaining multiple social connections, with four sub-themes on community, family, school, and extracurricular connections. The third theme speaks to refugee-background learners exercising agency, with three sub-themes on pursuing excellence, role modeling, and academic agency. Together, these provide insights into this phenomenon.

#### **Adapting Cultures**

Understanding the impact of past experiences of individuals with a refugee background is essential to developing an informed practice to work with them along their academic journey. The first sub-theme focuses on being a refugee; the second, on resettling to the United States.

*I wish that people knew how hard it is to be a refugee. It doesn't matter who you were. Once you are a refugee, you start from scratch. You become jobless, houseless, friendless, countryless... Just imagine losing everything you had. The hardest thing is that your education is most likely not acceptable, especially if you learned it in another language. Hard to believe! Imagine the stress, in addition to the trauma, that they carry on.*

Being a refugee is never a choice. Many refugees live in camps. Refugees new to a camp often expect to return to their country within a couple of months. Yet, the UNHCR (2017) reported at the end of 2016 that two thirds of persons of concern were displaced for more than five years, 4.1 million for more than 20 years, and 2 million for more than 30 years (p. 22). Both refugees and humanitarian organizations have framed refugee camps as temporary solutions despite the reality of protracted displacement.

*The living conditions in refugee camps are horrible. Our houses were made out of bamboo and leaves. Every year, during the rainy season, I watched houses be swept away in the flood, and often the school was destroyed as well. I had to walk to school for miles every single day even during the rainy season. It was very dangerous and risky to walk through the camp during the rainy season. Being a refugee means relying on the UN to bring you food that was often not enough. Often, adults and children would have to go days without having anything to eat. There were no jobs in the camp that can help support families.*

With long-term encampment, refugee identities change, as refugees often feel trapped, isolated, and forgotten (Martin, 2018). Critical despair settles in, as they perceive having no control of their lives (Martin, 2018). Many refugees find themselves in long-term encampment with no end in sight.

For many years, refugees have rated the United States as their intended resettlement destination (Blizzard & Batalova, 2019). Accepting refugees and other immigrants has changed the demography of the United States and, in turn, the conceptions of what it means to be an American (Tsai

et al., 2002, p. 258). Ethnic diversity has contributed to the preference to seek refuge in the United States.

*To a refugee, this country was the beacon of hope. I was too afraid of having this hope. Moving to the United States was a blessing. At first, I was shocked by the diversity of this country. Before moving here, I had lived around only people who looked like me. It was very interesting to walk into an American classroom that had so many different races. I was surprised but also loved it because I knew that I could learn a lot from others who weren't the same as me.*

Cultural diversity arises from the presence of differences. These can ignite various forms of culture shock for refugee-background learners (Felix, 2016). Multicultural identities develop as the refugees navigate from what they know and are, to a place of unknown.

*Being a refugee means that I had to constantly adjust my identity, within a refugee camp, and again when resettling to the United States. Everything here was so different from the refugee camp that I had a hard time adjusting to it. For example, in my own country, we lived in an open society with my immediate family members and close neighbors taking care for each other. We had to adjust to living in the United States where we hardly knew our neighbors.*

Culture-clashes can negatively impact refugee-background learners' self-concept development (Shapiro, 2018, p. 3).

*We try hard to fit in and put our struggles behind us. For many, the word refugee marks feeling defeated, lesser, or mistaken for terrorists. Refugee background learners come from different walks of life. Some are treated similar to their American peers, while others are completely left behind ignoring their intelligence. In school, we hated to be placed in a different category from other students. When asked to "represent" a group, we agree that we cannot speak for a whole community. Some of us are afraid of what others think about our accents. Most of the time it is*

*because when we speak, all students in the classroom turn their attention to us. They stare at us with the "I'm sorry face."*

In educational settings, refugee-background learners have often been tasked with representing their community or all refugees. Outside formal education, these learners represent their parents and family in dealing with housing, work, medical, school, or legal matters. Together, these responsibilities can lead to untenable situations for learning, if learners are not recognized beyond being a refugee.

*I believe every human being desires to not be seen as a stranger. I know this was and still is a big challenge for me. My accent, the way I act and live, and even the food I like makes me different. The United States is a safe haven for many refugees. Becoming a U.S. citizen gives one a place to call home.*

Many children of refugees tutor their parents in preparing for the U.S. citizenship test. Becoming a U.S. citizen is a significant step away from the status of refugee. This requires renouncing prior citizenship (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 1952, para. 1). While not dual-citizens, refugee-background individuals develop multicultural identities, torn between cultures, often not identifying with any single culture.

### **Maintaining Social Connection**

The collision of cultures between U.S. culture and one's culture of origin can be seen through the multiple social connections of refugee-background learners. This theme has four sub-themes addressing community, family, school, and extracurricular connections. The magnitude of these multiple commitments differentiates these learners from their school peers.

*As a college student I was seen as a prominent member of the community; therefore, many people would rely on me to make sense of their legal matters.*

The personal obligations of refugee-background learners extend to their old and new communities (Sheikh et al., 2019). Bonds are strong to loved ones left behind in their country of origin or

the refugee camp. The learners often contribute financially to friends and relatives in their old and new communities. Members in a learner's new community might request help with a visa, booking a ticket to their home country, or legal matters. Refugee-background learners might be asked to advise on finding resources to deal with tragedies, such as mistreatment in the workplace, sexual assault, or death of a community member.

*When we moved to the United States, none of my family spoke English. I see highly educated refugees emotionally struggle working entry-level jobs, because their overseas education and skills are not recognized or they have poor English skills. I knew that I had to learn English because my parents were depending on me. My siblings and I knew that it was our responsibility to take care of our parents, and we would never forget the sacrifices that they made to bring us to this country.*

*I had more chores than my classmates. I cooked, cleaned, and took care of my three younger siblings. I was taught these since the age of 5 in the refugee camp. While working in paid and volunteer employment and pursuing my higher education, I managed family responsibilities, such as translating parent's medical appointments and mail, filling out applications, signing rental agreements, and helping with citizenship tests and application. I was distracted from my studies, worrying about how bills were being paid at home and thinking about giving up on college.*

The pressure of multiple responsibilities differentiates refugee-background learners from other higher education learners in the United States. Oznobishin and Kurman (2016) studied immigrant family obligations and noted the shift in instrumental and emotional roles, language and culture brokering, and perceived unfairness.

The third sub-theme, school, can be a cultural bridge or barrier (Sheikh et al., 2019). Language acquisition is pivotal to these processes (Browder, 2018). Success or failure in formal education parallels

the struggles in bridging multiple cultures. Failure can have poignant consequences, as one co-author reflected, “some kids end up in street life using drugs to alleviate the stressful school life that they could not handle.”

Refugee-background parents can have unrealistic expectations of the higher education curriculum taught to their children. One result can be a parent defaulting knowledge acquisition to the child, even where queries are not the area of study of the child. One co-author reported frequently being asked in disbelief by a parent, “Didn’t you learn this in college?” Another barrier may develop due to a difference in acculturation between parents and children. Parents can have an idealized conception of school as a safe haven, yet one co-author reflected feeling, “always behind, bullied by classmates, the need to shorten first names to make it easier for teachers, or not being understood because of accent.” For some co-authors, enrollment in separate English as a Second Language classes fueled their desire to excel in English in order to be moved into classes with the regular learners. To a refugee-background learner with many non-academic responsibilities, the curriculum being taught can, at times, feel irrelevant.

Education is seen as a vehicle for social mobility, adding pressure on refugee-background learners to succeed (Li, 2018). Learners with extensive obligations of school, family, and work may see extra-curricular activities as leisure they cannot afford.

*I wanted to go to college. But I wanted to go to college just like other boys in my varsity soccer team. I wanted to fit in, live in dorms, wear shorts in the fall, be just a college student full time, and be treated the same as everyone else.*

Hirano’s (2018) research highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities to refugee-background learners’ persistence in higher education by fostering a sense of belonging. Considering the intensive multiple responsibilities of these learners, many limit their choices to extracurricular activities that relate to their career paths. One co-author described this as feeling like “having missed out on being a

teen, who was just having fun and hanging out.” Another co-author viewed extracurricular activities as a time to “try things out and dream.”

### **Exercising Agency**

*In Swahili, they say, “njaa ufundisha kula.” That translates as “when hungry you would know how to eat.” This can mean that if you have struggled, you will look for a way to overcome it. This is how I see refugees. They have struggled enough. Failure is okay, because it demonstrates having tried. Refugees have gone through a lot of failure in their lives. Refugees learn from it and work hard to sustain their families. Losing everything as a refugee means starting from scratch. Since we don’t have much to lose, we aren’t afraid to reach for the stars.*

Refugee-background learners have rich histories of learning from struggles to inform action. The third theme has three sub-themes: pursuing excellence, role modeling, and academic agency. Sometimes the goal for a refugee-background learner is to continue educational studies that were interrupted by displacement. Sometimes it is to fulfill their parents’ dream for them to be college educated in the United States. Other times it is to honor the sacrifices made by their families and give back to the community (Hannah, 1999) by being the best they can be. Higher education learning can be informed by the refugee struggle for survival.

*We were told previous degree credits would not transfer; don’t apply to university, try college instead; college was for other kids; college is too difficult; quit school and work to support the family.*

*As a refugee, sometimes it’s easy to give into being disregarded by the society, when people we respect such as counselors, teachers, or family friends undervalue our ability to perform and achieve. For me, I stopped listening. I wholeheartedly believed that I could handle college, and I wanted to be a top student. I believed setting the bar high for myself was going to*



*bring winning results either way. I graduated as a valedictorian from my high school and got over \$50,000 in scholarships for a full ride at Portland State University.*

Hannah's (1999) study similarly documented that the encouragement refugee-background learners received was negatively correlated to the prestige and popularity of the higher education institution (p. 159), meaning the more prestigious the institution, the less encouragement the institution gave.

## **Discussion**

### **Central Contributions**

The testimonies in this article serve two goals. One is for prospective learners to see themselves reflected in these stories and to recognize the strength and transferable skills of refugee-background learners to excel in American higher education. The other goal is to encourage educators to confront deficit thinking by undertaking a deep introspection; to incorporate multicultural responsive practices in their instruction, curriculum, and research; and to co-create spaces that allow learners to share on their own terms. Educators can co-develop academic spaces for refugee-background mentorship and advising (Hirano, 2018).

*My parents are my heroes and my role models in life but when it comes to education, I had nobody. My parents never had the opportunity to finish their schooling, so they didn't really understand my struggles. I had to work extremely hard for every achievement. There is nothing in life that I got for free, and that taught me a great lesson.*

*Since coming to the United States, I finished high school and two university degrees and never had a teacher or professor from my background. I wonder what my experience could have been if I had a professor who looked like me.*

Without educational role models, successful learners have needed to adopt effective help-seeking behaviours. Self-advocacy was identified as a positive influence on the success of refugee-background learners in U.S. higher education (Felix, 2016, pp. 156-157). Locating responsibility for academic success

and failure as an individual, not institutional responsibility, can lead to higher education institutions blaming refugee-background learners for their academic setbacks (Keddie, 2012; Student et al., 2017).

Forcibly displaced individuals have experienced a lack of agency in accessing security, food, water, housing, education, employment, friends, family, their language, their culture, and their country. Deficit thinking applied to refugee-background learners further restricts their agency. We posit that refugee-background learners bring to the academy strengths and knowledge that differ from other U.S. learners.

*I am always amazed by the problem solving that happens in the daily life of a refugee in a protracted context. I believe that resettled refugees often bring ingenuity and innovation with them in order to thrive, learn, and make a better situation for their family.*

The substance of each refugee's story differs. The types of transferable knowledge that stem from their survival often focus on conservation and collectivism, valuing elders' knowledge and community knowledge. These are innovative, realistic, and action-oriented. Resettled refugees are hardworking staff, resourceful managers, and inspired leaders. They exhibit perseverance and self-starting behaviors to overcome challenging circumstances.

### **Contemporary Milieu**

Curriculum and instruction geared towards White normative values may exclude refugee-background learners. One co-author recounted an example of having no relationship to a university English assignment to write personally about events of September 11, 2001, due to not living in the United States at the time. An inability to fit into Whitewashed education can be perceived as performance or disciplinary problems. Felix (2016) identified that being a refugee-background learner "does shape navigation of the postsecondary environment" (p. 164). By partnering with refugee-background learners and their communities to understand the context of their lived experiences, education programs can be more culturally responsive, sensitive, and relevant.

In 2020, the gerund *adulting* continued to increase in use to mean youth doing mundane life tasks that adults usually do, in an era when youth were criticized for not being responsible (Fry, 2019). Refugee-background youth living in the United States take on responsibilities for their family, friends, and communities that exceed mundane *adulting*. After learning English, they transition between their cultures of origin and U.S. culture. They help their parents to study for citizenship tests, negotiate legal and medical communications, move to new states for better work, and buy homes. They are resilient, self-starting, self-advocating, multilingual, financially responsible individuals. Contrary to the deficit thinking that learners are unable to succeed due to their refugee background, we view their experiences as demonstrations of multiple capacities precisely suited to higher education.

### **Methodological Integrity**

The rigor of this qualitative study is in the collaborative iterative analysis shared between the co-authors. The thick descriptions were intended to contribute to the critical discourse on U.S. higher education for refugee-background learners. The chosen method was appropriate for exploring the phenomenon by moving “beyond what is already known about the experiences of refugee students engaged in higher education” (Student et al., 2017, pp. 599-600). Our chosen methodology meant “giving authorial voice to marginalized and muted subjects. It has the potential to provide unique insider perspectives into structures and relationships that both oppress and empower them” (Student et al., 2017, pp. 584-585).

### **Conclusion: Knowledge is Spoken in Many Accents**

*I wish people would focus less on my accent and more on the knowledge that I have and want to share.*

Keddie’s (2012) research warned of the problematic impact of deficit thinking as the “re-inscription of disadvantage” of refugee-background learners (p. 1298). We acknowledge that refugees are a heterogeneous group with a multitude of demographics, experiences, and capacities that exceed

the scope of a single article. The findings of this study are intended to challenge deficit thinking about refugee-background learners in U.S. higher education, in order to recognize the learners' capacity to freely set and pursue academic goals.

### **Future Research**

As academic agency includes the decision whether or not to participate in academic pursuits, future research is warranted into the lived experiences of refugee-background individuals who did not pursue higher education. Sheikh et al. (2019) also identified this as a gap in current research. The incorporation of future study participants from racially diverse cities would broaden the understanding of this phenomenon. We present our research as positive examples of academic pathways. We encourage educators to reflect on their practices of inclusion and address any deficit thinking they have towards refugee-background learners. Further, we encourage refugee-background learners to embody intentional defiance when receiving deficit-thinking advice and to stop listening if it lowers learners' expectations of themselves.

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Wilson Kubwayo (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1019-8466>) is an adjunct instructor at Portland Community College and an entrepreneur. Originally from Burundi, Wilson lived in a Tanzanian refugee camp for over ten years. At age 13, Wilson and his family resettled to the United States as refugees. Growing up in the disempowered environment of extreme poverty, Wilson faced academic struggles as a teenager. He later discovered practices that influenced personal change and reconfigured his life trajectory. Today, Wilson runs his own consulting firm, Wilson Inspiration, and is a sought-after public speaker on change-management. Wilson helps organizations and schools overcome obstacles to reach full potential. Wilson's entrepreneurial passion has led him to become a real estate investor, the founder of Our Growth Project and co-founder of Simple X. Wilson is also a Portland Business Journal 2020 Forty Under 40 honoree.

Chablue Wah is a student at Portland State University majoring in Social Work. She was born in Myanmar but due to civil war fled to Thailand with her family. They lived in a Thai refugee camp for

seven years until they had an opportunity to live in the United States nine years ago. Because of circumstances of the civil war neither of her parents were able to attend school, and she sees her own academic pursuit as a fulfilment of their dreams. Starting at the age of sixteen Chablue has balanced schoolwork with paid work to help with her family' finances. In high school, she did this while maintaining a 4.0 GPA and earning some college credits. On the negative side, she felt that she missed becoming a teen, and just having fun or hanging out like regular teenagers because her schedule was always tight. She maintains that tight schedule during her university studies working as a shift lead at Panda Express.

Salome Nanyenga (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9363-8462>) has been working at The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) for over a decade. She started as a case manager for housing and stability for low-income families and now the Operations Manager for IRCO/ Africa House. Salome, with her family, sought refuge in Zambia for seven years after fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo. After moving to the United States, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work degree from Portland State University. Her personal academic persistence informs her work and activism for the educational rights of refugees. That activism led to her receiving the New Portlander Leadership awards in 2011 and 2013 for participatory democracy. Salome was one of the advocates who successfully stood to fight for the passing of the Oregon State Bill HB2508: *Relating to refugees in Oregon; and declaring an emergency*. Salome has been on the board of St. Philip Neri Parish since 2016 as well as a New Portlander Policy Commissioner since November 2019.

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