

Exploring the Factors That African Refugee-Background Students Identify as  
Being Helpful to Their Academic Success

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## **Abstract**

African refugee-background (ARB) students achieve high standards of success, yet their lived experiences are frequently absent from educational literature in Canada. Current and past research has focused on their academic deficits, their vulnerabilities, and their maladjusted behaviour, neglecting the positive attributes they bring to their host countries. Using specific data collected from semi-structured interviews with eight male and female ARB high schools graduates between the ages of 18-25, this qualitative study employed a critical race paradigm to explore factors that ARB high school graduates identified as being helpful in their academic success. The study sought to challenge the deficit views on ARB students' education by highlighting the perspectives of academically successful ARB students in a secondary school setting. The findings from the ARB students' narratives highlighted three major themes: (a) success extends beyond the classroom and it cannot be normalized, (b) success is multifaceted and attainable by all, and (c) intrinsic motivation and resilience is a coping strategy for academic success. Additionally, the findings indicated that ARB students used a variety of coping strategies to overcome the negative and stressful environments in their high schools. Disseminating their narratives of success provides real-life examples for other refugee-background students to emulate, in pursuit of their own academic success, amidst the educational and societal barriers that they encounter. These findings add to the limited amount of research on ARB students' academic success and may provide alternative strategies on refugee education for policymakers, educational institutions, and teachers of students with refugee backgrounds.

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*Until lions learn to write their own history, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter* ~ African proverb

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## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	 1
Preface.....	1
Background .....	2
Rationale .....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	12
Theoretical Framework .....	13
Critical Race Theory .....	14
Research Questions .....	19
Significance.....	20
Organization of the Thesis .....	24
Researcher Positionality.....	25
Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter .....	35
 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	 36
Academic Success.....	37
Perceptions of Black Students in Academic Achievement .....	39
The Education of African Refugee-Background Students.....	47
The Image/Perception of ARB Students .....	49
Gaps in the Literature.....	56
Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter .....	71
 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	 73
Methodological Approach.....	73
Justification for Using Critical Race Theory .....	74
Methods.....	77
Data Analysis Strategies .....	86
Ethical Considerations .....	89
Trustworthiness .....	93
Limitations and Delimitations.....	94
Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter .....	95
 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	 96
Profile of Participants.....	97
Conceptualization of Academic Success .....	103
Factors Hindering Success .....	108
Coping Strategies .....	135
Transformative Resistance .....	145
Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter .....	152

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	154
Success Extends Beyond the Classroom and Cannot Be Normalized .....	155
Success Is Multifaceted and Attainable by All .....	160
Intrinsic Motivation and Resilience Are Coping Strategies for Academic Success .....	163
Participants' Recommendations.....	168
Implications.....	173
Conclusion .....	194
References .....	196
Bibliography .....	256
Appendix A: Letter of Invitation .....	271
Appendix B: Initial Questionnaire.....	272
Appendix C: Community Counseling and Support Agencies .....	274
Appendix D: Interview Protocol .....	275
Appendix E: Feedback Letter .....	276
Appendix F: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement.....	277
Appendix G: Participants' Additional Demographic Information .....	278

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“The law of flotation was not discovered by contemplating the sinking of things, but by contemplating the floating of things which floated naturally, and then intelligently asking why they did so”* (Troward, 2007, p. 6).

### Preface

Troward’s quotation above epitomizes the Western academy’s overemphasis on Black youth’s academic failures and the neglect of their successful narratives. Mandisa’s story, presented below, illustrates this point.

It was 2013 and Mandisa<sup>1</sup> was just completing her conference presentation at one of our tertiary institutions. There was applause everywhere. Compliments came from university students, professors, and other educational personnel. Many marveled at how far she had come from her English as a Second Language<sup>2</sup> (ESL) class to a podium in academia. There was something very unique about that moment. Mandisa and her family had fled the war in her native Africa and had been welcomed to Canada as refugees. Her presence at the podium was illustrative of the transformative efforts that had taken her from “refugeehood” with limited linguistic skills in English to the podium and to high school graduation. While in high school, Mandisa participated in leadership workshops for newcomers, organized by a local university and the African Canadian Association. In addition, she was the president of a leadership initiative, a sequel to the workshops. She has now obtained her B.A. from a Canadian University.

Mandisa is one of those African refugee-background (ARB) students whose academic

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this research are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The term English as a Second Language (ESL) is problematic due to its negative connotation. ESL is a program and not an adjective that describes the participants. Labelling the participants in the program as ESL students and isolating them in the “wings” of the school is a form of separation from their peers. Additionally, the name is a misnomer since all the participants spoke more than two languages.

achievement<sup>3</sup> has been shrouded by discourses of failure—discourses that have been pervasive in Western educational literature from the colonial days to the present. In a way, she epitomizes the transformative and successful adaptation of ARB students. Regrettably, in their host countries, African youth, like Mandisa, lack the platform to disseminate their narratives of success and to showcase their positive attributes. For Mandisa, the conference helped uncover her muted stories. The inevitable question is: How many Mandisas are out there?

### **Background**

Changes in immigration patterns and an influx of refugees have impacted the Canadian public school system in drastic ways. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2014) about 30% of the refugee claimants who were granted refugee status over the last 10 years were children (as cited in Pieloch et al., 2016). Since that time, the influx of refugees has continued. Due to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, Canada gave an enthusiastic welcome to more than 29,000 refugees from Syria from November 2015 to July 2016 (Policy Horizons Canada, 2017). Other community agencies and private groups stepped in to assist with the welcoming of the Syrian refugees. In contrast, the arrival of students like Mandisa and other ARB youth was not accompanied by any pomp and circumstance. As young children or adolescents, the participants in this study came with their parents or with other adults, from Guinea, Liberia, and Sudan, the latter two countries torn apart by civil war. In Liberia, the war began in 1999, escalated in 2000, and ended in 2003. Similarly, the prolonged civil war in Sudan started in 1983 and continued to 2000 and beyond, forcing many youths and their parents to settle in Canada.

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<sup>3</sup> In this study, the term “academic achievement” is used interchangeably with the term “academic success.”

Unlike the traditional European immigrants to Canada, the arrival of these racially diverse students with varying needs, backgrounds, and situations created linguistic and cultural challenges for our educational institutions. Their phenotype and the different values, languages, and attitudinal attributes they brought distinguished them from the “regular” Canadian immigrant intake. In the opinion of several scholars (e.g., MacKay & Tavares, 2005; Stewart, 2008) the distinctness of this population should be factored into the institutional policies and programs planned for them. Unfortunately, however, despite the increase in immigrant and African refugee students in our schools, appropriate educational and other specialized supports specifically targeted to assist the school success of these students have been inadequate (Ngo & Schleiffer, 2004). Echoing the lack of appropriate support, Kanu (2008) as well as Starr (2011) suggested that learning institutions had not created space to foster the growth and empowerment of refugee youth. Dryden-Peterson (2016) went further, describing the failure of educational institutions to account for the “pre-resettlement educational experiences of refugees, which are often hidden from post-resettlement schools and teachers by factors such as language barriers, privacy concerns, cultural misunderstandings, and stereotypes” as a “black box” (p. 133).

Yet, schools are regarded as key institutions for welcoming and educating new citizens. They are sites where young refugees can seek refuge from the upheaval of forced migration (Cassity, 2013).<sup>4</sup> They can provide safe spaces for new encounters, interactions, and learning opportunities. They also deliver literacy, the key to educational success, post-school options, life choices, social participation, and settlement (Matthews, 2008). Many refugee youths consider their educational institutions as important places where their dreams

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<sup>4</sup> The use of research material from other jurisdictions underlines the paucity of available Canadian research on African refugees and their educational success.

can be realized (Cassity & Gow, 2005). Indeed, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) report points to education as the link between socio-economic background and better life prospects. In other words, the school have the capacity to help lift economically and socially marginalized children out of poverty (Kaida, 2014).

Although this may be true for many immigrant youths who make the transition into new host countries, Ngo and Schleiffer (2004) report that there are a significant number of immigrant children who fall through the cracks. Canadian research studies on immigrant youth show that many of them do not complete high school—46% to 74% in some jurisdictions (Derwing et al., 1999; Gunderson, 2004; Watt & Roessingh, 2001). Similarly, the findings of a research study on the educational outcomes for a cohort of immigrants who arrived in Canada as children indicated that “there may be a distinct pattern in the risk of immigrant children graduating from high school according to age at arrival ... with children arriving after that age [9] appearing to face a distinct and growing increase in the risk that they will not graduate” (Corak, 2011, p. 6).

Various school boards and the Ministry of Education in Ontario have advanced policies and initiatives (e.g., Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009; TDSB Task Force Report, 2010) to curb the rising tide of immigrant education failure in our high schools. Despite these efforts, studies of school dropout rates reveal that a high proportion of African refugees are failing to achieve positive outcomes in school. Hittel (2007) writes that the dropout rate among Sudanese youth in Calgary is as high as 80%. Unfortunately, these concerns about education are not restricted to the Sudanese community in Calgary. A similar crisis exists among other refugee learners in secondary schools in British Columbia (Dykshoorn, 2009; Staddon, 2009).

The high dropout rates have resulted in a discourse of negativity relative to the academic performance of African refugee students. Extant literature on refugee youth is replete with discourses of risk, disadvantage, mental health issues, and educational challenges (Fazel & Stein, 2002) that disparage them. These deficit discourses portray the ARB students as illiterate, lacking appropriate education skills, and experiencing ongoing trauma from their refugee experience (Brown et al., 2006; Kanu, 2008; Wu et al., 2015). This narrow and negative conceptualization of ARB students lumps all of them together as one non-achieving group, regardless of their individual characteristics and other ecological factors that impact their learning. Thus, African refugee children are often grouped as “Black children” on the basis of race, and the data compiled are rarely disaggregated on the basis of any other social or ethnic identity dimensions (Vandeyar, 2010). This indiscriminate grouping of African refugee students with other Black students in the host country predisposes the ARB students to the negative Black identity that is ascribed to Black people, upon their arrival in their host countries (Ibrahim, 2004).

Notably, the educational literature on the academic success of Black students in general and African refugees in particular is silent. There is little reference to theory in the literature on the education of African refugee students and the factors that impact their learning and school success. In a way, this particular group has been underserved in Canadian research literature (Henry, 1994; Kanu, 2008). Several theorists (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Henry, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2007) point to the undertheorization of race and communities of colour in educational research as one of reasons for the paucity of narratives of academic success within communities of colour. For Codjoe (2007), the silence on Black academic achievement is

attributable to “researchers [who] have tended to emphasize the poor academic performance of Black students or issues and problems related to their academic failure” (p. 138; see also Codjoe, 2010). Their approach fails to acknowledge the disconnection between the Eurocentric definition and understanding of success, which is based on marks and quantifiable collection of symbols and the real-life experiences of Black students (Hart, 2011).

One way to unravel the successful narratives of ARB students is to bring their voices into discourses of educational achievement at all levels of education. This is consistent with the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2013) call for creating “caring, safe and healthy environment [spaces] for students to express their voice in a way that supports their learning and well-being” (p. 6). To do this, this research study employed a strength-based approach and a race-based epistemology, to highlight the positive and coping narratives of successful ARB students. According to Hammond and Zimmerman (2012), a strength-based approach “seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capabilities that can transform the lives of people in positive ways” (p. 1). A race-based epistemology, according to Ladson-Billings (1994), is an “epistemological frame that fits [one’s] social history, that emerges out of [one’s] race/culture’s social history, rather than an epistemological frame that has emerged out of the social history of the dominant race” (p. 10). Patricia Hill Collins’s (2002) *Black Feminist Thought* provides an epic example of race-based epistemology, when she places the experiences of Black women at the centre of her analysis.

In centring and authenticating the life experiences and the academic success of ARB students, the critical race theory’s (CRT) tenet of counterstorytelling serves as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told including people of

colour, women, gay, and the poor “(Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 26). Their stories stand in opposition to the master stories that have shrouded their narratives of success for too long.

### **Rationale**

It was clear from the literature that educational research has not been kind to ARB students. Discussions on African refugee students are consistent with the deficit discourses, which accompany Black students. As James (2011) notes, Black students are seen as disruptive, dropouts, fatherless, immigrants, aggressive, angry, sexually promiscuous, intimidating, and rebellious, characteristics that make them vulnerable to negative academic outcomes. In a way, Western ways of knowing and knowledge creation, as well as culturally insensitive assessment metrics, and the narrow conceptualization of success based on quantifiable symbols, marks, and IQ tests have handicapped ARB students and subjected them to deficit ideologies, which disparage and disempower them. They have been pathologized and their lived educational experiences have been turned into a single story or a universal Black experience. Stripped of their individual identities and their positive attributes, their “good news” stories have been silenced in Canadian educational literature.

The imposition of a negative image on ARB students is a relic from the days of slavery when colonialists recognized that control over images was central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination. A binary opposition, a remnant of colonial ideology of “othering” where the dominant group was “good” and the colonized or marginalized population was “bad” has served as a justification for maintaining societal and school inequities. Gorski (2011) affirms that image control made it easier “to train the mass consciousness to pathologize disenfranchised communities—to, in effect, blame them for their own disenfranchisement” (p. 155). Although various programs and policy documents

have been advanced to mitigate the ascribed negative images endured by non-dominant groups, the belief in white superior intelligence is alive today. Interestingly, John Kelly, former White House Chief of Staff, commented that immigrants who come to the United States are low skilled, poorly educated, are not ready to assimilate [because] education in their countries is usually [at] 4th and 6th grade standards (Stracqualursi, 2016). Similarly, the success of far right, and anti-immigrant political parties in Europe and even in Canada, with the Coalition Avenir Quebec's (CAQ) victory in 2018, coupled with President Trump's description of Haiti and African countries as "shitholes" (Kendi, 2019) and his affirmation that his ancestors tamed America (Le Miere, 2018), are prime examples of how discourse is controlled by the dominant group. The dismissal and the belittling of local practices and beliefs destroy any vestiges of the local knowledge, values, and customs from the historical record, thereby entrenching the epistemology and practices of the dominant group.

Recently, there appears to be a shift in the way marginalized people are represented. From the 2017 Canadian Writer's Union Write Magazine's ("Cultural Appropriation," 2017) debates of cultural appropriation (when someone presents themselves as an Indigenous creative person and their work as the product of that oppressed culture and marginalized racial group), to the elevated voices of Indigenous People, the Me-Too and the Black Lives Matter movements, marginalized groups are fighting back, demanding better representation at the decision-making table and in the way their experiences are storied. The call for validating other peoples' stories brought Mandisa's experience to mind. The silencing of other peoples "good news" in Canadian educational research must be interrogated.

There are several justifications for this ambitious goal. First, as President of the African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region, I recall the painful school narratives of

the African refugee students with whom I interacted. Upon their arrival at their new destinations, they were placed in schools where they encountered several linguistic and cultural challenges. Emotionally, they found themselves in unsafe environments where they felt different, unwelcomed, and disoriented. These challenges lead to the loss of their self-esteem and at times, to poor educational outcomes, forcing them to eventually dropout of school (Wu et al., 2015). Second, I wanted to replace the discourse of helplessness and negativity, which characterizes the refugee experience (Rah et al., 2009) with a discourse of achievement. Admittedly, African refugee youth face huge challenges (Chuang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, I support the suggestion by Major et al. (2013) that these young people (and their families) also bring significant resources and capital that contribute to their ability to build a new life in their new communities. “Recognizing and drawing on these resources and capital in education settings may foster greater education achievement for young people from refugee background” (Major et al., 2013, p. 97).

Third, ARB students have not been well served by Canadian educational literature (Kanu, 2008). Aside from the absence of empirical research on the academic success of ARB students, their educational issues have been undertheorized in Canadian educational research. The dearth of research on their educational experiences demonstrates the low priority accorded to this issue. Stein (1986) describes this area of research as “unstructured” and lacking “standards textbooks, a theoretical structure, a systematic body of data, and even a firm definition of the subject of the field” (para. 5). In fact, Stein (1986) goes further, adding, “disciplinary specialists or area experts [eschew] refugee problems [because they] are too isolated, atypical, and unpromising to distract their interest from normal, mainstream research topics” (para. 5). Even though Stein’s opinions are a bit dated, the absence of any

rigorous framework, specific to the academic success of ARB students, supports Stein's conclusion that immigrant issues are trivialized in educational literature.

Fourth, ARB students have distinct issues that require different responses from societal institutions. Several studies (e.g., MacKay & Tavares, 2005; Stewart, 2008) have affirmed the distinctness of ARB students from any other group of young immigrants. MacKay and Tavares (2005) offer three reasons why this population deserves research attention: their unique educational needs as adolescents and youth coming from war-affected and disrupted schooling backgrounds; their unique difficulty with integration due to their skin colour, ethnicity, and linguistic and religious backgrounds; and the higher school dropout rate observed among them. In fact, Kanu (2008) cautions that responses to their challenges should be based on appropriate educational theory and a system-wide implementation of research-based practices. Finally, Okitikpi and Aymer (2003) underline the need for a long-term strategy rather than the present piecemeal approach, to meet the needs of the African refugees.

A good long-term strategy to meet their needs is the amplification of the voices of ARB students in educational reform. Increasingly, it is recognized that high school students' views about learning and school experiences are important considerations in education. Students' insights are important as a basis for their active participation and improvement of their learning (Fletcher, 2005; Groves & Welsh, 2010; Levin, 2000). Support for this view comes from Rivera's (1998) organizational change model that involves students as stakeholders in participatory research to identify problems and formulate solutions. Similarly, Duwe (2017) adds that the involvement of students in school renewal, contributes to increased motivation, activism, and leadership skills development. Other conceptual support

for student voice in school improvement comes from motivation and learning theories (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Research has consistently shown that student engagement strongly relates to success or failure in school because more engaged students generally show higher achievement, while disengaged students are more at risk of school failure and dropout (Gunuc, 2014; Trowler, 2010).

Despite the need to collect and explore the stories of forced displacement from refugees themselves, Miller and Rasco (2004) state that “the voices of refugees are largely absent” (p. 343) in much of the research on refugees. In their review on the importance of voice and narrative in the Black community, Dixon and Rousseau (2005) see the use of voice as “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (p. 10). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) points to “the use of ‘voice’ or naming your reality” (p. 12) as way of unsilencing the untold stories of those considered by the dominant culture (and others) to be at the bottom—in many instances, students and researchers of colour. After all, many Black students do experience academic success, despite school, and other contextual factors that may put them at risk for school failure, and these successes need to be told.

With this goal in mind, this study positions refugee research, especially research on ARB students, as an antidote to the negativity that surrounds their education and their intellectual ability. To date, the majority of research into refugee education has not been a high priority for educational research (Major et al., 2013), and yet, education is an important aspect of the resettlement experiences of refugee families (Major et al., 2013). The consequences of not graduating from high school are well documented (Belfield, 2008; Burrus & Roberts, 2012). In fact, failing to complete high school has devastating

consequences for the individual and for the society. At the individual level, high school dropouts earn less and are more likely to be unemployed than college students. At the societal level, the subsequent loss of social capital to Canadian society is significant and many uneducated marginalized youth risk becoming involved in crime, violence, and gang activity (Wortley, 2003; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012). Indeed, the Government of Canada policy document *Unlocking the Potential of Marginalized Youth* (Policy Horizons Canada, 2013), suggests that the consequences of new immigrant youth falling through the cracks of our education, labour market, or social supports system creates significant costs now and for the future of Canada.

Considering the substantial growth in refugee children who are entering Canada and other countries around the world, there is global interest in identifying factors that are associated with risk and positive adaptation of children (Pieloch et al., 2016). In this sense, the voices of ARB students, through their narratives, could be powerful in their own learning. An understanding of the nature of their experiences and the meanings they make of those experiences would help educators create culturally meaningful learning environments for this group of students. Furthermore, such understanding would be valuable to policymakers, educational personnel, health, and settlement professionals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this research study is to explore the factors that eight ARB high school graduates (four males and four females) identified as being helpful to their academic success in their high schools in Ontario. A secondary aim is to use the personal school narratives of these ARB students to deconstruct the negativity that devalues the Black educational experience. It is no secret that research on Black students in educational research

is largely deficit-oriented, with most of the work highlighting their failures and the racial achievement gap between Black and White students (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Levin, 2007). It is also true that Black students, including ARB students, do experience challenges in the education system. However, when most of the literature on Black students only documents their failures (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Hampton, 2010) and excludes their narratives of academic excellence, a narrow and inaccurate picture of the educational experiences of Black youth is presented as the norm (Ward, 2013). Obviously, this myopic and distorted view of the educational potential of Black youth must be challenged.

In order to provide for the needs of the changing and heterogeneous group of students in our Canadian high schools, and to deliver adequate support, programs and opportunities that enhance the learning and the socio-cultural adjustments of ARB students, a thorough understanding of the meaning ARB students attach to their lived high school experiences is imperative. To meet this goal of developing a comprehensive understanding of the factors that African refugee students ascribe to their high school experience, and to advance educational practices and policies for the successful education and integration of African refugee students in Canadian schools, this qualitative study asked ARB high school graduates to identify the factors that helped or hindered their attainment of academic success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Black educational achievement, a topic that has been widely debated in the educational research literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2000; Boyd, 2002; Brown et al., 2006; Dei, 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; James & Brathwaite, 1996), has usually been framed under three negative perspectives: deficit lens, achievement gap, and the psychological (pathological). All three are derogatory and focus more on the vulnerabilities of ARB students, ignoring any positive aspects within this population. Gorski (2011)

describes the deficit approach as a remnant of imperial history and as “a mechanism for socializing citizens to comply with a host of oppressions, from colonization to enslavement and educational inequities” (p. 154). In a similar vein, Codjoe (2007) criticizes the perception that is “reinforced in the minds of some educators and the public at large” (p. 139), that Blacks are academically and genetically inferior. This negative perception blames the school underachievement on the individual and the family and fails to question the structural and systemic barriers that handicap marginalized students.

Similarly, the achievement gap, described by the U.S. Department of Education (2007) as the difference in academic outcomes of various ethnic groups, delegitimizes the academic excellence of minority and Black students (as cited in Levin, 2007) and it arbitrarily sets up the performance of White students as the norm for all to follow. Finally, the psychological approaches to refugee education tend to produce deficit accounts that pathologize students’ calls for social and academic assistance (Schweitzer et al., 2006) resulting in an undertheorization of issues relevant to marginalized communities. Several Canadian theorists (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 1996, 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Henry, 1993) have alluded to the undertheorization of race and communities of colour in educational research. Other researchers, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) as well as Milner (2007) have also found that education suffered from a lack of conceptual and analytic tools to discuss race, operationalize it, and move the field forward. Even though the latter two are U.S.-based studies, the views expressed echo the Canadian theorists’ (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 1996, 2006a, 2006b 2008; Henry, 1993) criticism about the undertheorization of race.

### **Critical Race Theory**

To fill this gap and to authenticate the counternarratives of ARB students, a critical race theory (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1997,

1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997) paradigm was used as the theoretical and methodological framework to explore the factors that ARB high school graduates identified as being helpful in their high school success. Of the five basic components of CRT (which are listed below), only three of them guided this study. Details of these tenets are discussed in the section below. Before that, however, a brief historical overview is foregrounded with a goal of providing more clarity on the CRT paradigm.

The early origins of CRT can be traced to critical theorists who were concerned with equity and justice in issues, such as race, socioeconomic status, and educational inequities. The term “critical theory” was coined by The Frankfurt School in the 1930s to signify a departure from traditional social science theory, which was viewed as supportive of the status quo, and devoid of transformational potential (Davidson et al., 2006, p. 36). In place of the oppressive social and political structures that sustained different types of domination, critical theorists believed that people could become agents of change and individually and collectively, progress toward higher levels of satisfaction and freedom. CRT also borrowed from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which challenged the laws that created and maintained the hierarchical society in which we live (Gordon, 1990), and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the 1960s and early 1970s in the U.S. Even though CRT derived its criticality on issues such as race, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexuality from these groups (Reeves et al., 2008), in the mid-1970s, it eventually rejected CLS’s slow approach to societal and legal issues (Hiraldo, 2010) and turned into a “form of oppositional scholarship” (Calmore, 1992, p. 2161) that centralized race and challenged the laws and structures that reproduce societal and educational inequalities. Derrick Bell (1980) was instrumental in moving CRT in this direction. His textbook, *Race, Racism, and American Law* and his own

opposition to the traditional liberal approach to racism have been cited by CRT scholars (Martinez, 2014; Matsuda, 1991) as central to the development of the CRT movement. Hiraldo (2010) asserts that critical race theory (CRT) was first used as an analytical framework to assess inequity in education in 1994 (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since then, the tenets of CRT have been applied to research in education as an alternative way of viewing educational institutions and the challenges facing people of colour within these institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Solórzano (1998) identified five key tenets of CRT that can be applied to inform educational theory, research, pedagogy, and policy. These involve: (a) acknowledging the central nature of race and racism; (b) challenging dominant ideologies, (c) making commitments to social justice; (d) valuing experiential knowledge; and (e) employing interdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Guided by three of the CRT tenets—namely the centrality of race, challenging dominant ideologies, and value of experiential knowledge—and the themes that emerged from the literature review, the study used CRT as a theoretical and a methodological tool to analyze the narratives of ARB students. The discussion of these three tenets is presented under the following headings: Disrupting Notions of Normality; Disrupting Deficit Discourses and Beliefs; and Valuing Experiential Knowledge.

### **Disrupting Notions of Normality**

As a theoretical lens, CRT interrogates and challenges Whiteness and the privileges that are reinforced through racial hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Warren, 1999). Shome (1999) writes that Whiteness is a “power-laden discursive formation that privileges, secures, and normalizes” (p. 108) the White body while oppressing bodies of colour. According to

Ladson-Billings (2000) this racism and oppression “[are] so enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order [that] it appears both normal and natural to people in this society” (p. 264). Describing racism and oppression as a “permanent fixture” of life in America, Ladson-Billings (2000) encourages scholars who fight for racial and social justice to use CRT to “unmask and expose racism in all of its permutations” (p. 264). Similarly, Milner (2007) urges scholars to argue for a deeper, more contextualized look at race and culture that goes beyond the dichotomy of normal and abnormal (p. 389). The questioning of the normalization of White peoples’ beliefs, experiences, and epistemologies (Scheurich & Young, 1997) suggests that people of colour do experience a different type of “normal” life and that excellence can and does emerge in multiple and varied forms (Morris, 2004).

### **Disrupting Deficit Discourses and Beliefs**

As a methodological tool for the study, CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of ARB students’ academic performance. The CRT methodology is critical to the overall redesign, from research questions to collecting, analyzing, and presenting data, because the paradigm centralizes the experiences of students of colour (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). It also generates knowledge by validating the voices of those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered (Lincoln, 1995). Recognizing that the voices, knowledges, and experiences of people of colour are critical to understanding the everyday experiences of people of colour (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Fernández, 2002), CRT scholars use the tenet of counterstorytelling as a platform for ARB students like Mandisa to “broadcast” their narratives of success. In authenticating their successful experiences and promoting a more nuanced conceptualization of their academic potential, CRT helps unpack the apartheid of knowledge, which Huber (2009) describes as “knowledge production in academia, informed by Eurocentric epistemologies and specific ideological

beliefs” (p. 639). This kind of knowledge production has normalized European ideological beliefs and popular assumptions about people of colour. The disruption of this epistemological racism allows critical race researchers to not only embrace the clarion call from scholars of colour (Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012) but also to “develop alternative spaces and methodologies for the study of their communities” (Cruz 2001, p. 658).

### **Valuing Experiential Knowledge**

The use of CRT’s tenet of counterstorytelling as a methodological tool offers an antithetical conduit for communities of colour to challenge dominant stories that have disparaged them for too long. By taking control of their own narratives and using their own voices to interpret and frame their own experiences, the ARB students attempt to control how their experiences would be recognized, given significance, or elevated (Goldberg, 2000). In fact, storytelling has been identified as a catalyst for enhancing youth resilience by giving them control over the stories they tell. In addition to the empowerment derived from the interpretation of their own experiences (Raab, 2014), storytelling allows refugee students to regain a sense of agency after being forced to migrate. The enhanced well-being, which results from this experience, promotes the “agentive activism” (Geres, 2017, p. 66) of newcomers and strengthens their sense of belonging in their new communities.

In addition to an enhanced self-esteem, the use of counterstories provides other personal benefits for ARB students, struggling to make sense of their new environments. First, it has a therapeutic effect on their life experiences. Numerous researchers have attested to the salutary effects of storytelling for youth who are placed in unfamiliar environments. For example, Nelson (2001), in *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, describes counterstories as a form of repair to identities that have been deliberately destroyed by

“those with the power to speak for them and to constrain the scope of their actions” (p. 171). In other words, the counterstory is used as a “strategy of resistance that allows the damaged identity to be narratively repaired” (Nelson, 2001, p. 171). Similarly, Rousseau et al. (2005) as well as Williams et al. (2003) suggest that narratives buffer risks as youth explore identities and retrieve a sense of wholeness after experiencing the loss of land and family. Beiser et al. (1999) and Suárez-Orozco (2000) add that storytelling helps mitigate the adjustment process by helping youth explore emotional challenges caused by trauma.

Storytelling offers broader societal benefits as well, despite the inherent painful elements experienced by the storyteller. Valuing and listening to narratives of the pre- and post-migration challenges faced by refugee youth can enhance the public’s awareness of the hardships they faced. The improved understanding of their challenges and their aspirations can improve a community’s capacity to foster youth resilience (Theron et al., 2011). Furthermore, telling stories can help make meaning of past events as well as build community and a sense of belonging (Heath, 1994; Williams et al., 2003). Additionally, the telling and writing of stories is useful for refugee and immigrant youth in terms of literacy and self-development. Williams et al. (2003) found that one of the goals of storytelling is to strengthen connection to identities, cultures, and values. With their stories, refugee youth manage “to establish a bridge between the past and the present” (Rousseau et al., 2007, p. 540) and their shared identity is transmitted through cultural narratives and mythical stories of adversity, survival, healing, and self-transformation (Rousseau et al., 2005).

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study explores the factors that eight (four females and four males between the ages of 18–25) Black ARB students from Liberia, Guinea, and Sudan identified as being helpful in their academic achievement in Canadian high schools. It employs a theoretical framework of critical race theory (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005) to explore

the students' perspectives of their academic success and the strategies they employed to achieve it. CRT is important to understanding the experiences of ARB students because it emphasizes the "centrality of experiential knowledge as [an] important source of knowledge" (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). This approach shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of ARB students' academic performance and invites a more positive conceptualization of their academic potential. Additionally, it provides a tool to "counter deficit storytelling and the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by exposing the deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 3).

To gain a deeper understanding of the factors that impacted the ARB students' educational success, the main research question is: What factors do ARB students identify as being helpful to their academic success? This main question is more fully explored through the following sub-questions:

1. What were the challenges they experienced?
2. What coping strategies did they use to address these challenges?

### **Significance**

This study aims to contribute to the ongoing policy discussions on refugee education in Ontario by bringing the voices ARB high school graduates' students into the educational discourse. The research adds a missing perspective to the general literature on the experiences of African refugee students in Canada's school systems. It moves beyond the study of Black underachievement that is pervasive in the literature to incorporate the study of African refugee achievers and their lived experiences. In addition, the study aims to identify the factors that contributed to their success in school (Codjoe, 2007, p. 142).

By grounding the research in the positive and successful narratives of ARB students,

this study moves beyond the myopic conceptualization of Black intellectual ability and advocates for a broader and a more holistic understanding rather than the narrower and a traditional analysis of refugee issues. This approach challenges models of hegemonic research methodologies that reinforce hierarchical arrangements and hegemonic power structures (Fine & Torre, 2006). Additionally, by focusing on the positive narratives of ARB students who have graduated from high school, the study helps deconstruct the traditional notion that “success” and “refugeehood” is an oxymoron.

Furthermore, by reframing the analysis of ARB academic experience, educators are encouraged to reconsider their *tabula rasa* approach to refugee students and to value the experiences that they bring to the classroom. The research asks teachers to recognize that adolescents who arrive as immigrants and refugees “possess the capacity to cope with and prosper amid the multitude of changes and hardships presented by the immigration experience, whilst simultaneously struggling with age-related development” (Berger, 2008, p. 103). Frequently, this capacity to prosper is not recognized in refugee populations even though “the study of resilient children has overturned many negative assumptions and deficit-focused models about the development of children growing up under the threat of disadvantage and adversity” (Masten, 2001, p. 227).

As Yosso (2005) explains, Black youth come to class equipped with a repertoire of coping skills described as “cultural wealth.” Construing this multicultural capital as a challenge to the traditional interpretations of cultural capital, Yosso describes it as “an array of knowledge, abilities, contacts, and skills—aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital—that students of colour bring from their homes into the classroom (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). These unique experiences and knowledge, gained during the

pre-migration stage, affect them as learners and should be considered in the learning process. Apple (2013b) cites Ladson-Billings's emphasis on the need for a curriculum that is culturally relevant and sensitive for diasporic children and other ethnic groups. In addition to encouraging teachers to become more conversant with the complexities of the home environment of their charges, Apple (1993) affirms: "A democratic curriculum and pedagogy must begin with a recognition of the different social positionings and cultural repertoires in the classrooms, and the power relations between them" (p. 232). Too often, teachers of diasporic youth live in an "epistemological fog" (Apple, 2016, p. 513); that is, they are ill prepared because they have little or erroneous background knowledge or assumptions of the students before them.

There are potential benefits for educational institutions and for ARB students as well. For educators, policymakers, and settlement personnel, the insights gained from the exploration of the successful narratives and the strategies that ARB students used to successfully overcome the educational challenges in their high-school days could inform the development of culturally appropriate programs and teaching approaches designed to replicate more successful educational outcomes for refugee students with similar backgrounds.

Additionally, many ARB students who have remained silent about their experiences (Miller & Rasco, 2004) may begin to understand that they have a "voice" in the educational issues that affect them in their schools. This will encourage them to use their voices to "name [their] own reality" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 12). Research has demonstrated the important link between the sense of belonging and student success (Strayhorn, 2012). One way to improve ARB students' connectivity and sense of belonging in their schools is to welcome

their thoughts and perceptions on school matters that involve them. The support for welcoming student voices and narratives into educational discourses is overwhelming (Levin, 2000; Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). As Levin (2000) states: “education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects” (p. 155). Similarly, Ngussa and Makewa (2014) suggest that student voice can serve as a catalyst for change in schools.

Having the courage to freely share their views and experiences with teachers and classmates may lead to improved motivation and better management of their learning (Willms, 2003). The resultant increases in self-worth and sense of belonging could enhance the ARB students’ engagement in academic and non-academic activities at their schools. The accrued benefits from this strong and enabling environment (Claxton, 2007) could help bolster African refugee students’ belief in their abilities to participate actively in their own learning, improve their academic performance, and make them more cognizant of the strengths and their abilities that they bring into the classroom.

Finally, the discourses of achievement from ARB students, who have defied the negativity and the deficit-laden conceptualization of their intelligence, will help accentuate the persistent and aspirational attributes of African refugee students. This stance helps communities of colour “create and develop alternative spaces and methodologies for the study of their communities” (Cruz, 2001, p. 658). It also supports Morris’s (2004) assertion that “excellence can and does appear in multiple forms [and] people and communities of colour can be and are successful” (as cited in Milner, 2007, p. 389). As a researcher of colour, I want to create and develop alternative spaces and methodologies that would “more fully and appropriately capture, represent and reify the lived experiences of communities of

colour” (Milner, 2007, p. 389) including African refugee students.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is made up of five chapters. Each chapter, with the exception of the last chapter, ends with a chapter summary. Chapter 1 begins with a preface that contextualizes the study, followed by the background information, and the statement of the problem, the rationale, the purpose of study, the theoretical framework, the research question, the significance of the study, and the organization of the study. Chapter 2 presents the review of the literature on various aspects of educating Black and African refugee students. Here, I examine previous research on the meaning of success and its impact on the education of ARB students. Various themes associated with their education are identified and discussed. In addition, gaps from the literature review are presented at the end of the chapter. Chapter 3 presents the research design of the study, the justification for the use of CRT as the theoretical paradigm and the choice of the qualitative paradigm, including definition of the target population, recruitment of study participants, research instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures used. The chapter closes with the ethical considerations related to the proposed study, a discussion on the limitations and delimitations of the methods. Chapter 4 discusses the key findings gathered from the participants’ narratives. The profiles of the participants are also presented. Chapter 5 begins with an overview and continues with a discussion of the findings from the research. A critique of the findings follows and recommendations from the participants and implications for educational theory, policy, and practice are presented. Suggestions for future research are added and the chapter ends with a concluding statement.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The contextual nature of qualitative study requires researchers to “describe the contextual intersecting relationships (e.g., race, socio-economic status, age, cultural background) between the participants and themselves (Dodgson, 2019). This reflexive practice and transparency increase the credibility of the study and helps validate researcher positionality in relation to what is being studied (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Dodgson, 2019). To this end, I acknowledge and share the entering personal beliefs, values, and biases, which influenced my perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This self-disclosure procedure has a dual purpose: first, it “uncovers the hidden assumptions about how the narrative accounts [were] constructed, read, and interpreted” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126) and second, “it allows readers to understand [my positionality] and [helps them] bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). The story of my lived experiences is presented from several perspectives, as a continental Black, a youth advocate, an educator, a former politician, community activist, a researcher of colour, and as a septuagenarian returning to the academy. This expansive reflexivity lens provides a clear understanding about how I arrived at the selection of the topic and the participants, the data collection and the interpretation thereof, and the choice of the data quality procedures (Morrison, 2015).

Born in Accra, Ghana, I grew up in a middleclass family. My father was a civil servant and a champion tennis player. I went to an elite secondary school, attended by students who passed a general exam and were lucky enough to win a scholarship. Those were good times. Ghana became independent in 1957 and at the age of 17, I was present when our esteemed President, Kwame Nkrumah, declared “As Ghanaians, we prefer self-government

with danger to servitude in tranquillity.” Hardly did I realize that his rallying cry would become the mantra, the *raison d’être*, and the guiding principle of my future endeavours. As a proud Ghanaian, free from colonial rule, I wore my pride on my lapel, anchored in my African personality and identity (although I was not fully aware of this identity).

Paradoxically, the contradictory nature of the attainment of freedom and the Ghanaians’ desire to emulate their colonial masters was not evident to me during my adolescent years. Symbolically, Ghana was independent, but the colonial ways continued. For example, the educational system never changed after the granting of our independence. As prestigious as the school was, we were “propped up” by a rigid school system, taught by White teachers, who objectified us and dismissed our culture. They denied our identity, devalued our history and language and replaced them with their own Euro-centric curriculum. They promoted the supremacy of European languages and the Western ways of knowing, learning, and devalued African worldviews, styles of expression and forms of description. The curriculum was so Eurocentric that I knew all the coalmines in the U.K., the names of most of the Prime Ministers of England, the fjords in Norway, and the sheep farming in Australia, but I had little knowledge of my own heritage and the history of my own country. Freire (1973) refers to this kind of education as “banking,” defining “it as an act of depositing [knowledge], in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 53). The teachers determined what was to be learned and they forced it into the heads of their unwitting students. This approach to learning was another tool of domination by the colonialists. It happened in the Indigenous schools in Canada as well (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). By whitewashing any remnants of local knowledge, values and beliefs, the process of domination, thingification, and subjectification was intensified. In fact, the

whole knowledge and learning traditions of our oral society were dismissed as backward, ineffective and unacceptable by the colonial powers. There were no physical constraints, but they controlled our minds and kept us in a perpetual state of psychological subordination in order to “civilize” us (Kanu, 2009). De Lissovoy’s (2008) observation that hegemonic powers purposefully disconnect people from their local places thereby withering their ability to see themselves as multi-faceted, or complex human beings capable of transforming themselves is apropos here.

As a young unsophisticated adolescent, I was unaware of the damaging impact of the psychological domination on our people. Having been denied any connection to my past and to any local role models, I was forced to reify the practices and the beliefs of my colonial masters. As such, my desire “to be and act White” outweighed my Ghanaian pride. Interestingly, in Ghana, I was living the colonial life (with servants, an elite school, and my ability to speak “proper English”). However, there was one missing element in my desire to act and live White. That missing piece was proximity—nearness in space, time, or relationship— with the colonial masters. One way to accomplish this was to be educated abroad—anywhere, far away from home. I started writing letters to foreign universities, desperately looking for a way to “escape” from my country. In devaluing the education in Ghanaian institutions in my teenage years, I was, unknowingly, continuing to validate the colonialists’ superiority believing that I either had to achieve within their Eurocentric model of education or live a life of poverty and ignorance (Hart, 2011). In a way, I was reifying the colonialist and imposing a negative self-image upon myself. The opportunity to “escape” came from Canada—a country of which I knew very little. Incredibly, I gave up everything in my Ghanaian life, leaving behind a caring family and my community, a community where

I felt safe, protected, respected, and regarded as one of the promising future young leaders and boarded the plane, proud as a peacock, heading to unknown lands.

The arrival in Canada on a very cold wintry day was the beginning of a racial awakening that would make me so conscious of my “Blackness.” Bluntly speaking, I became “Black” in Canada. It was the initial step into the world of “Otherness,” an unknown place filled with discrimination, suspicious stares and ridiculous and condescending questions about my homeland. The emphasis on my “Blackness” as a signifier of my identity was extremely unnerving. In my childhood, race was never an issue, even though Ghana was a country inhabited by people with different nationalities. We never used the word “Black” to describe each other. Similarly, the word “nigger” had more of a folksy rather than a pejorative connotation. Other important issues that coincided with my time of my arrival were the socio-political events south of the border. The racial issues in the U.S. during the 1960s intensified my “Otherness.” I became conscious of the pervasiveness of race and the plight of Blacks in the United States of America. My vague notions of racism and stereotyping, gained through news clips and Ghanaian newspapers, were vividly reinforced by the images I saw on the evening news from the U.S. Life at the university was spent trying to cope with new learning styles, getting used to the Canadian accent and the bitter cold. For many of my peers at McMaster, this was the first time they had been close to a Black man. The stares, the odd questions about Africa, which I surmised that they (my peers) knew very little about, created so much stress that going to classes became a huge challenge. I started feeling uncomfortable, vulnerable, and lonely. I lied my way out of classes. Unfortunately, being the only Black person in a class of 30 students, the professors commented regularly on my absence when I returned to class. In addition to being embarrassing, the comments

augmented my uneasiness and raised my stress level. I felt forced to go to a learning environment that was unsafe for me. I quickly learned how to virtually avoid this uninviting learning space by being physically present in class, but mentally “absent” at the same time. Being the only Black in most of my classes, classmates often marvelled at my ability to keep up with them in the classroom. Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) would characterize my behaviour as disidentification with learning, it was more a case of “domain avoidance”—a coping strategy, described by Steele et al. (2002) as a “defense [mechanism] of simply staying away from the domain where the threat exists” (p. 410).

Despite all this negativity, my naiveté—the unquestioned belief in White superiority and the desire to live and act like them—continued in Canada. Having accepted the European conceptualizations of academic success, which emphasize the accumulation of symbols such as diplomas and degrees (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Sackeyfio, 2006), I graduated from McMaster University in 1966, with a *summa cum laude* bachelor’s degree in Romance languages. I acquired several other degrees and qualifications, a Masters in Romance Languages and a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Toronto, and an Ontario Teacher’s Certificate, hoping to solidify my chances for promotion in my educational career. With each unsuccessful application for positions of responsibility, I felt the need to acquire more symbols as a way of making up for the deficiencies that my White school superintendents saw in me. Although I eventually became a Vice-Principal, most of the feedback received during the application process focused on my “not being ready” for a leadership position. To remedy this apparent “shortfall”, I joined over 15 different community organizations, as Board member, Vice-President, and President and as Chair for some of them, hoping to satisfy the educational authorities. This stifling environment

continued until my retirement from education.

After retirement, my participation in community agencies emboldened and liberated me from the oppressive conditions that invalidated my epistemology. Unlike the restraining educational system, community members and government agencies entrusted me with several responsibilities. They chose me as a political candidate for one of the national parties in 2003. I would ultimately run three more times, twice at the Federal level as an NDP Candidate and twice at the municipal level for the City of Waterloo. Another example of the value that others saw in me was my appointment as the National Director for the Community Capacity Building Project for African Canadians. This federal project was transformative. It afforded me the opportunity to look at capacity building from a different perspective. Instead of seeking the assistance of the monarchy to create a revolution, I realized that the people have to rely on themselves because the monarchy is too comfortable with the present situation. Incidentally, this was my last official job.

Buoyed by this new realization and the resultant confidence from these positions of responsibility, my negative self-perception started to disappear. I understood that I wasn't a *tabula rasa*, after all. Attributing this new feeling to the new insights acquired from the perspective of National Director for Capacity Building, I embarked on a retrospective analysis of my journey across the educational and political spectra. Issues and events that meant very little to me at the early stages of my Canadian life took on a new significance. These issues are re-examined through my new retrospective lens.

In Canada, the psychological instability to my personhood, brought about by the tension between the clash of cultures, resulted in critical negotiations between two incompatible identities. The one—the pre-migration identity— was characterized by

confidence, and self-assurance. In Ghana, I was a hero among my peers. Friends and family respected my athletic prowess. I felt anchored and content in my Ghanaian environment prior to my departure from my country of birth. The other—the post-migration identity—was marked by uncertainty, self-doubt, panic, confusion, and loss of community. Dangling between two cultures, the African and the Canadian way of life, I felt very insecure. Similarly, the cognitive dissonance brought about by the clash of two cultures, the African, and the Canadian way of life, chipped away at my confidence level. This downward spiral of my self-confidence continued unabated throughout my career until my foray into politics and community advocacy.

The negative experience at McMaster University was illustrative of how the sense of belonging and racial identity impacts the academic performance of learners. Being the only Black person in a class full of White students, there were times that I felt threatened, different, and concerned that I did not belong. Colleagues at McMaster University claimed that they had difficulty understanding me. As such, I rarely spoke up in class. My voice was silenced because it was dissonant from my colleagues' way of speaking. As Fielding and Rudduck (2002) note, what gets heard in the classroom “depends not only on who says it, but also on [the] style and language” (p. 2). In my case, I had a good command of the English language, but my style of language was discordant with the language of the establishment. Another unforgettable mockery of my accent occurred in 1966 at the University of Toronto. On my first day as a newly appointed Teaching Assistant, students made fun of my African accent, mimicking me with monkey sounds. The reduced sense of belonging and coping that I experienced by not speaking out in the classroom was psychologically destabilizing. When I look back on my reticence and unwillingness to participate in class at McMaster University

and the mockery at the University of Toronto, I now understand how my impugned language inadequacy impacted my identity formation and my sense of belonging. As Magro (2009) illustrates, “the link between language and identity, is believed to be so strong that language use alone is believed to be sufficient to identify someone’s membership in a given group” (p. 317).

Another big challenge in Canada and in the educational arena was the issue of race. I have already shared my uneasiness at McMaster University and the ascription of the Black identity imposed on me. Broadly speaking, racial responses from students, school administrators, and parents varied with time. During the secondary teaching years, I found myself in front of younger White students for the first time. For some of them, I was the first Black teacher in their lives. The same was true for many administrators and parents. Racial discrimination from parents, administrators, and students became increasingly intolerable, especially in the early 1990s. Negotiating these new realities was daunting and unpleasant at times. In fact, at one school, a student told me “I should be cleaning her shoes instead of sitting in the VP’s office.” I can still feel the pain as I recall one former principal’s insensitive response to my complaint about a racial incident in the school. To him, “calling someone a nigger was akin to calling someone fat.” By the way, He frequently informed me that he liked my smile “because he could always see my white teeth.”

At the community level, two additional racial incidents, 51 years apart, intensified my Otherness and added to my frayed vulnerability. The first was when I was kicked off a bus in 1962 in Hamilton because the bus driver “accused” me of “doing something” to an elderly woman who screamed hysterically when I sat beside her. The second incident, also on a bus, occurred in 2013 in Waterloo when a bus driver challenged the authenticity of my senior’s pass, hinting that I looked too young to have one, and that he never trusted “people like me.”

He used an expletive when I threatened to file a complaint against him. After making a note of his badge number, I took my seat without any further incident. Upon the bus' arrival at the main bus station, some 12 stops away, two security guards, and two police officers accosted me. Unbeknownst to me, the driver had radioed ahead, accusing me of assaulting him. I was detained, surrounded by police, and was released after a couple of hours of interrogation. Added to these unpleasant incidents was the negative reception (and the name-calling) I received as a political candidate during door-to-door canvassing.

Although this negativity and racial put-downs continued beyond my teaching days and into my retirement years, my resolve to be a change agent never diminished. After the electoral defeats, I looked for other ways to contribute to my community. With my own personal aspirations now at an end, I turned to youth advocacy, something that had been a significant part of my teaching days. Earlier in my career, as President of a local Kiwanis Club, I founded KEY CLUBS, a service club for adolescents, in five different high schools. This time though, my focus was solely on Black youths. The pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in the educational system resurfaced. A closer examination of a number of provincial committee reports, initiatives, and studies (e.g., the 1987 Provincial Advisory Committee Report on Race and Ethnocultural Relations; the 1992 Stephen Lewis Report on the "Yonge Street Riots; the *Roots of Youth Violence* Report (2008), and the 2009 Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy) that had attempted to curb the racial tensions in schools and communities in Ontario, convinced me that "despite years of government and educators knowing that Black students face anti-Black in the educational system (James & Turner, 2017, p. 7), educational institutions continued to be unwelcoming sites for racialized individuals.

As a change agent and Black youth advocate, I was not prepared to stand by and watch young students in general and Black youth in particular, suffer through the racial inequities that I endured. Having been silenced in numerous academic arenas, I felt that the voices of young Black students needed to be heard in their classroom. Many were succeeding but, like Mandisa, their narratives were absent in educational literature. Similarly, there was a complete disconnect with the parents of Black youths. Convinced of the need to expand the voices of Black youths and their participation in issues that affect them, I founded the African Canadian Youth Leadership Initiative and met weekly with selected young African Canadian students. Remembering their painful narratives of disconnection and disengagement from school, and the invalidation of their cultures, I wanted to empower them by equipping them with the leadership and the coping skills needed for the complex world of tomorrow. Their linguistic skills were minimal, but they were eager to learn. We (a professor from the University of Waterloo and I, as President of the African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region) organized three Newcomer Youth Leadership workshops for African youth in the community. Sadly, our valiant and progressive efforts for change and empowerment of African youth in our community of Kitchener-Waterloo did not amount to much. The decision-makers, the drivers of the hegemonic juggernaut, shunned us because we did not fit the profile of the “obedient and submissive Blacks” ready to accept their contrived “truths.” Frustrated, I looked for other ways to contribute to my community. Propitiously, I remembered Sears’s (2005) warning about the juxtaposition of voice to theory. Put differently, the best way to find your voice, according to Sears, was to express your self in theory. That is, advocacy initiatives should be expressed within the framework of existing and formal theories. This was an “aha” moment for me! I suddenly realized that my

community engagement practices and inputs lacked a theoretical framework, one that would at least provide an analytical perspective for success.

These thoughts strengthened my resolve to be a change agent. Empowered by Freire's belief that education was the greatest tool of the oppressor, I did not want these students to "affected" by the racial, emotional and psychological pain that I had endured earlier at the university and in the community. I felt obliged to intervene. Fortunately, Mandisa's story came to mind. Driven by a fervent desire to elevate her academic success (as well the successes of other ARB students), into educational discourse, I decided to use my newly found research and analytical expertise to disrupt the conservative, deterministic, static, and the prevailing negative thinking about the image, the ability, and identity of ARB students.

### **Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter**

This first chapter laid the foundation for the study by providing the background of the problem to be investigated. In addition, other aspects of the thesis were discussed. These included the rationale and the purpose, the theoretical framework, which guided the study. Additionally, the research questions that would inform the interview process were presented. The overarching goal of the first chapter was to provide a good rationale for the area under investigation and to emphasize the potential benefits from the findings from it. Additionally, the researcher reflexivity lens helped uncover the hidden assumptions, and values that influenced the selection of the topic of study. Chapter 2 presents the review of the literature on various aspects of the educating ARB students. Critical in this review is an understanding of how educational researchers and school personnel viewed and interacted with people who looked different from them. Gaps in the literature are presented at the end of the chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This qualitative study examined the academic experiences of eight (four female and four male) academically successful ARB students (18–25 years old) who came to Canada as refugees and who have graduated from high schools in Southwestern Ontario. The purpose of the study was to explore the factors that African refugee-background (ARB) students identified as being helpful in their academic success. In addition, the study explored the strategies used by the students to accomplish their educational goals despite an educational environment that predicted their failure. Understanding the factors that impacted the academic experiences of ARB students, may inform future interventionist policies, practices, and programs that aim to replicate the academic success of these ARB students.

In the study, successful students are defined as those with refugee backgrounds who have graduated from high schools despite the negativity that surrounds their refugee status. Although the focus of the study is on ARB students, the analysis of the literature includes the education of Black youths because the educational literature adopts a monolithic view of the Black educational experience (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). The rationale for the inclusion of Black students is due to the ascription of the “blackness” label imposed on Africans, upon their arrival in their host countries (Ibrahim, 2004). Throughout the study, references to Blacks and Black communities will be made when the issues and/or the characteristics under discussion are understood as essentialist attributes of the group. Additionally, the use of research material from the U.S. and other jurisdictions underlines the paucity of available Canadian research on African refugee and their educational success. Importantly, this approach is not a homogenization of the Black students. Rather, it follows the practice of other notable researchers (e.g., Creese et al., 2011; Kanu, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Woodgate et

al., 2017) who have included foreign resources in their studies on African refugee students.

Arguably, research on African refugee students as a sub-group cannot be completely divorced from the broader diasporic population. Nevertheless, of particular interest to me as a researcher of African descent are the distinct issues that separate them from other Black populations, the responses from the institutions that deal with them, and the way their successes, their potential, and their participation in their own learning are presented in academic literature.

There are four parts to the literature review. First, I explain the different conceptualizations of “academic success,” the factors that facilitate it and how it is measured. This is followed by an analysis of the achievement research, focusing on the education of Black and African refugee-background students, the image/perception of ARB students, and a discussion of the gaps in the literature review. The chapter concludes with a summary and an overview of the subsequent chapter.

### **Academic Success**

Although students’ academic success has always been one of the main goals of education, the literature review highlighted a lack of uniformity in the usage of the term. It is referred to as academic achievement (Johnson et al., 2001), academic performance (Farooq et al., 2011) student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Greenwald et al., 1996), and as student success (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). The definition of the term is equally unclear. The lack of an accepted definition for it led York et al. (2015) to describe “academic success” as an “amorphous construct” and “a catchall phrase encompassing numerous student outcomes from degree attainment to moral development” (p. 4). This conclusion is corroborated by Duncan (2011) whose report on how student success is defined in Ontario

argues that “no explicit operational definition of ‘student success’ can be found in the legislation or policy memoranda governing the school system in Ontario” (p. 62).

Similarly, there is no consensus on the factors that affect student success in the literature review. Factors that are identified include, the personal characteristics of learners, the environment, the school personnel, members of the families, and communities (Farooq et al., 2011); parental involvement in the child’s education (Redd, 2019); class size (Hoxby, 2000), and teacher qualifications (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Other variables generally classified as demographic factors consist of age, gender, geographical belongingness, ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status (SES), parents’ education level, parental profession, language, income, and religious affiliations (Ballantine, 1993). The institutional quantification of the term has resulted in an overreliance on measurement tools, such as standardized tests that have “very little predictive validity outside of other test scores” (Duncan, 2011, p. 65). For Duncan, achievement on provincial tests is not synonymous with student success. Hart (2011) is equally critical of the overuse of provincial tests as a marker of success declaring that it is “problematic to define success solely on quantifiable data” without considering “the various barriers that exist in the educational system” (p. 26).

Despite the different interpretations of the term and the multiplicity of the factors and measurement tools, it is important to articulate a working definition of “academic success” to guide the analysis of the narratives of ARB students. The current demand for accountability and the demographic shifts, with newcomers from different backgrounds entering our schools, compel us, as educators, to find new ways of expanding the academic success tent to make room for Others. Guided by Duncan’s (2011) admonition that success must be defined from the perspectives of both educators and stakeholders (students and parents), I will lean on Kuh

et al.'s (2006) definition of student success “as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and postcollege performance” (p. 7). However, as York et al. (2015) suggest, this study will focus more on other aspects of academic success, such as, the degree to which “students are satisfied with their experience and feel comfortable and affirmed in the learning environment” (p. 10). This approach moves beyond the traditional conceptualization of academic success with its emphasis on quantifiable aspects of classroom performance and defines student success from the students’ perspectives (Duncan, 2011). Even though Kuh et al. (2006) and York et al. (2015) examined academic success at the college level, the principles relative to academic success are applicable in the discussion of academic success at the secondary school level. Essentially, any robust assessment of academic success and the factors that facilitate it should be derived from student narratives and their perspectives (York et al., 2015, p. 10).

In the section that follows, I discuss the conceptualization of Black students’ achievement in general, but the review focuses on how ARB student’s academic success is perceived, described, and presented in educational research. Essentially, the review examines specific governmental and societal policies and programs that address refugee issues. With the focus on the academic success of ARB students, the negative comments of the deniers of Black intellectual ability will be given short shrift in this study.

### **Perceptions of Black Students in Achievement Research**

It can be argued that the education of Black students’ school disengagement has become the single most widely discussed educational issue in academic research. From the numerous perspectives expressed, two specific camps emerged from the literature review.

One camp, the deniers of Black intelligence (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1996; Jensen, 1969; Ogbu, 1987; Rushton & Jensen, 2005a, 2005b), advanced three theoretical perspectives—the biological theory, the cultural and ecological theory, and the oppositional identity theory—to justify the presumed intellectual superiority of Whites over Blacks and the second camp, the advocates of Black intellectual capacity and potential (made up of various sub-groups, from the multiculturalists, the emancipatory, and equity anti-racist, Afrocentric, and critical race theorists, as well as culturally relevant pedagogues), championed a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that handicapped Black students in their education. The section continues with a discussion of the standpoints of the two camps.

### **Deniers of Black Intelligence**

The first group, the biological theorists, ascribed the differences in achievement and social class to genetic variations in intelligence (Wiggin, 2007). This variance in intellectual ability was based on the results of intelligence-measuring tests designed by Stetson (1897). The tests evaluated Blacks and Whites on the correct recitation of four stanzas of poetry and on the correct usage of Standard English and they were administered to 500 African American and White American students from public schools in Washington, D.C. Since Whites outperformed Blacks, the test results were hailed as evidence of the genetic and racial superiority of the White race (Wiggin, 2007). This “illogical and baseless” (Hudson, 1995, p. 3) conclusion was readily embraced by some deniers (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1996; Rushton & Jensen, 2005a, 2005b) despite the charges of “scientific racism” (Rose, 1976, p. 113) that were levelled against the recourse to science to justify and rationalize hierarchical comparison between human populations.

The proponents of the cultural ecological theory (e.g., Ogbu, 1987, 2008; Pinder,

2008; West et al., 2000) echoed the assumed immutable hereditary difference in intelligence propagated by the genetic theorists. Contrary to their predecessors, however, the class and culture theorists shifted the achievement debate from biology to sociology. They argued that variances in students' school performance were attributable to differences in their home environments, social class and cultural differences. Ogbu (2008), for example, theorized that involuntary migrants, like Blacks, were averse to education. As such, their children were socialized to believe that academic learning and academic success was the “prerogative [or the property] of White Americans” (p. 594). Regrettably, the class-and-culture explanation has several negative implications for Black students. First, it presumes that the achievement gap is present even before students begin formal schooling because of limitations in their home environment (West et al., 2000); second, it predisposes Black students to lower school performance because their cultural and linguistic codes differ from those of the dominant school system (Wiggan, 2007); third, it presumes that Black students do not have the potential to become high achievers because the social class and culture they inherited are antithetical to educational achievement (Wiggan, 2007); and fourth, it dismisses Black students’ agency and their ability to play a role in the learning process.

The oppositional identity culture was one of the theoretical explanations for differences in school performances between Black and Whites students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 1988; Pinder, 2008). This apparent negative disposition led to Black students’ intentional underperformance and more importantly, to their “disidentification” (Steele, 1992, p. 9) with school, for fear of being accused of “acting White” and being ostracized by their peers and by their ethnic group. Put differently, Ogbu suggested that Black youths rejected education because they saw educational success as a

White value or trait (Fisher, 2005).

### **Advocates of Black Intelligence and Potential**

Obviously, the advocates dismissed the overgeneralization of Black youths' academic underachievement. In contrast to the myopic and deterministic genetic deficiency, and the oppositional identity theories of the deniers, the advocates focused on the "web of causality [factors]" (Toshalis & Nakula, 2012, p. 3) and a better understanding of the complexities and the interconnectedness within the social worlds of the students and how those worlds could influence educators' efforts in the classroom (Toshalis & Nakula, 2012). In other words, the advocates argued for more emphasis on the contextual factors that underlie Black youths' underachievement.

Some of the factors referenced included: the inability of the mainstream public schools to meet the needs of Black students due to the paucity of teachers of colour (Jack-Davies, 2011; James & Turner, 2017), few courses on Black epistemology and a zero tolerance code that hits Black students the hardest (Agyepong, 2010); structural racism (Dei, 1996, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; James & Turner, 2017); cultural incongruity between home and school resulting in the absence of culturally responsive teaching and equity pedagogy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003; hooks, 1984, 1994); lack of teacher support and hostile school environments (James & Turner, 2017; Solomon & Palmer, 2004); and curriculum bias (Apple, 2013a, 2013b; Delpit, 1988; Egbo, 2012; Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2000, 2009). Other institutional factors included, the absence of role models (Clark et al., 2009); low level of teacher expectations of Black students (Douglas et al., 2008; James & Turner, 2017); negative implications of teacher-bias on students' school performance (Dei, 2003a, 2003b; Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008; Rosenthal & Jacobson,

1968); the overrepresentation of Black students in non-academic programs in Canadian high schools (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007, 2010; Dei, 1997a, 1997b, 2003a, 2003b, 2008; James & Brathwaite, 1996; James & Turner, 2017); stereotyping (Codjoe, 2006, 2007; James, 2011); stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002); and racial microaggressions, described as the “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) that were directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Although the factors above provide a brief overview of the contextual issues that impact minority youths’ academic decrements, a synopsis of the interventionist approaches offered by the sub-groups within the advocates’ camp (the multiculturalists, the equity and emancipatory, anti-racist, Afrocentric, and critical race theorists, as well as culturally relevant pedagogues) is warranted.

Multicultural education, in Canada, embodied the goals of *The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988* (Aydin, 2013), which “sought to assist the preservation of culture and language, to reduce discrimination, to enhance cultural awareness and understanding” (Aydin, 2013, p. 4). According to Ghosh (1995), “the earliest multicultural programs emphasized cultural pluralism (knowledge of other cultures) and language training for minority groups, consistent with the traditional concept of education as passive learning” (p. 232). An important aspect of this pluralism was the promotion of “sarees, samosas, and steel bands”—an approach that has been criticized for “its superficial expressions of a static view of cultures” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 232). Interestingly, though, this practice of multicultural educational education, with its focus on “curriculum integration” (Banks, 1993, p. 25) was a partial representation of Banks’s (1993) notion of multicultural education. The required elements in Banks’s version of multicultural education included the following: the

knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (p. 25). Fortunately, Hopkins-Gillispie (2011) suggests that a more critical form of multiculturalism has emerged. The new approach moves beyond the mere promotion of pluralism and an appreciation of diversity to a more transformative way of providing students with the tools to critique the relationship between power and knowledge and the related discourses that hold down certain members of society (Banks, 2008; Hopkins-Gillispie, 2011).

This criticality was reflected in the works of emancipatory pedagogues (e. g., Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1980; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2000; Shor, 1996). These theorists challenged the knowledge given to students describing it as “domesticating” (Freire, 1972, p. 174) and one that contributes to the disenfranchisement of some groups in society. Instead of a curriculum and teacher practices that “mould” (functionalist notion of education) students according to the values that a given society considers desirable for social cohesion, the theorists urged educators to consider education as a form of freedom and the classroom as a location of possibility (hooks, 1984). This approach asked educators to help students: (a) develop critical *conscientization*—the process of, achieving a deepening awareness of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality and the status quo (Lloyd, 1972); and (b) to use this understanding to “critically analyze the political and social issues as well as the consequences of social inequity” (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014, p. 76). In this sense, the emancipatory classroom becomes a space where student participation is encouraged and students are provided with the “opportunity to [use] their own voices to authenticate their own experiences” (Giroux, 1980) and to create their own realities.

Similarly, the antiracist theorists (e.g., Dei, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2014; Henry & Tator,

2006, 2009) challenged the status quo and knowledge creation in academia. However, antiracism went further. It embraced more controversial dimensions of culture and all forms of racism and the intersections of social difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability; Dei, 2003a, 2003b). Through their lens of race, antiracists interrogated the power structure and the “assumed racial neutrality of schooling content and processes such as curriculum, testing and evaluation, student tracking, and teacher-student relationships for biases that negatively impact students of color while privileging the dominant group” (Solomon, 2002, p. 176). Other critical aspects of antiracism were: (a) its interrogation of what constituted merit, (b) how the limited definitions and understandings of the term “contribute to limit the chances and ability of disadvantaged groups to participate in and obtain a fair share of the valued social and economic goods of society” (Dei, 2003a, p. 4), and (c) its championing of students’ voices and the invitation to students to work for social change (Dei, 1996).

The Afrocentric approach to educational reform turned its critical gaze away from what teachers needed to do to help Black students in elementary and secondary schools navigate and excel in a racist society and moved its efforts toward programs that were run by Black people (Beasley et al., 2016). As Asante (1991) suggests, the key idea in the Afrocentric approach is epistemological centeredness, that is, an educational model that centres African people, culture, and ideas in the curriculum, and one that allows Black students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum as “subjects rather than the objects of education” (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Afrocentric theorists’ (e.g., Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996; Lee et al., 1990) emphasis on the centrality of African epistemology is also a call for authenticity, liberation, and resistance. Put differently, “it is Africa asserting itself intellectually and

psychologically, breaking the bonds of Western domination in the mind as an analogue for breaking those bonds in every other field” (Mazama, 2001, p. 172). In the Canadian context, Black parents and community members’ dissatisfaction with educational systems and the schools’ inability to adequately educate Black youth (Dei, 1996), led to the creation of an Afrocentric school in the Greater Toronto Area (Agyepong, 2010; Dei, 1996; James & Turner, 2017). The establishment of the school was an affirmation of the Afrocentric theorists’ emphasis on the centrality of Black students’ life experiences and the application of Afrocentric curricula, one in which the Black students felt comfortable in their classroom environment and engaged with materials that provided connections to their home, their realities, and community experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Although culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) embraced the centrality of the students’ life experience in the curriculum, CRP theorists (e.g., Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999) suggested that the mere infusion of ethnic content in school curriculum was not enough to meet the academic needs of nonmainstream students. To respond to the needs of diverse students, CRP scholars called for culturally sensitive teaching strategies that would utilize a student’s culture as a vehicle for learning (Howard, 2003). In the words of Ladson-Billings (1995), this culturally relevant teaching must be grounded in the following principles: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p. 160). CRP has implications for teachers as well. It asks teacher training institutions to prepare teachers as “agents of change” by equipping preservice educators with the culturally responsive knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to improve the school success of diverse students (Gay, 2002). Inherent in the

CRP ideology, is an oppositional stance that uses students' culture to counteract the negative effects of the dominant culture.

In a way, critical race theorists reflected some of characteristics of the above sub-groups, namely, the criticality of the emancipatory pedagogues and the antiracist theorists' interrogation of the racial inequities, the power structure and the definition of success; the Afrocentric and the critical pedagogues' push for the centrality of experiential knowledge, values, and cultures of communities of colour, and the development of critical consciousness and the ability to use one's voice to critique the status quo and to work for change as proposed by the CRP, the antiracist, and emancipatory pedagogues. Beyond these similarities, critical race theorists (CRT) challenged the overwhelming presence of whiteness in education and the overt nature of racism in the achievement process (Andrews, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Two significant aspects of this challenge were the use of counterstories as an antidote to the majoritarian narratives (Delgado, 1989; Yosso et al., 2009) and the delegitimization of Eurocentric research paradigms that perpetuated dominant ideologies rooted in White superiority (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

### **The Education of African Refugee-Background Students**

Despite of the plethora of research studies on immigrant refugee youth, Canadian research material on African refugee-background students and their academic achievement is sparse. I was unable to find educational data regarding the number of ARB students attending schools in the southwestern Ontario area. Shakya et al. (2012) suggest that the evidence is thin because the education sector does not collect or consider data about the students' premigration experiences or immigration arrival status. Instead, all sector level data on

educational experiences of refugees are lumped together into a single category of “foreign-born” or “immigrants” (p. 66). As noted already, Ibrahim (2004) attributes this lumping together of ARB with other Black students to the black identity ascribed to Africans upon their arrival in their host countries. The consequence of this categorization is that African refugee-background students are indescribably painted with the same deficit images associated with underachieving Black youth.

From the literature review, it was clear that many studies have examined the relationship between premigration trauma and mental health among refugee families (e.g., Fazel & Stein, 2002; Heptinstall et al., 2004). Such studies showed that refugee youth and their families have often witnessed various types of violence, the death of family members, and might have lived in refugee camps with deplorable living conditions and minimal services and rights. However, evidence on the relationship between forced migration and educational experiences of African refugees is thin in Canadian literature (Kanu, 2009; Ngo & Schleiffer, 2004). Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) indicate that the premigration educational disruptions and traumatic experiences faced by refugees can have serious and prolonged impacts on their educational experiences because of the reduced sense of belonging and connection to school. Some of them also suffer from post-traumatic stresses (Hyman et al., 2000). In spite of this information, there was little evidence of this delicate balance between premigration challenges and education of ARB students in the programs, curricula, and the instructional practices of our educational institutions.

Additionally, there was little reference to theory in the literature regarding the education of African refugee students and the factors that influence their learning and school engagement. Being cognizant of the multiple theories of learning as well as the extensive

literature on motivational and engagement research, I was concerned that the learning challenges—cultural and academic dissonance, fast-paced curriculum, limited English proficiency, fear of authority, and lack of academic support (Kanu, 2008)—facing African refugee students have not received the academic and literary attention they deserve. In a way, it was easy to conclude that this particular group has been underserved in educational research (Henry, 1994; Kanu, 2008, 2009). The scarcity of serious research studies on ARB students' academic success demonstrates is problematic.

### **The Image/Perception of ARB Students**

The literature review returned a list of themes regarding the education of ARB students and their social and settlement situations. These themes are discussed in the next section under the following headings: overemphasis of challenges and vulnerabilities; acculturative stress; divergent societal norms; social support; homogenization and deficit lens; low teacher expectations; higher priority for education among ARB students, and other identified factors affecting ARB students' education.

### **Challenges and Vulnerabilities**

It was clear from the literature review that the refugee experience was often characterized as uprooting, traumatic with multiple vulnerabilities. Porter and Haslam (2005) describe the magnitude of the vulnerabilities as significant, adding, however, that the African refugee experience is different from the one experienced by survivors of most isolated traumatic events because it involves various stressors that accrue over the pre-flight, flight, exile, and resettlement periods. Other theorists (e.g., Sidhu et al., 2011; Webb, 2013) have reached similar conclusions. For Webb (2013), the refugee experience is replete with “post-migration stress including marginalization, socioeconomic difficulty, acculturation stresses,

loss of social support and cultural grief” (p. 8). Similarly, research by Sidhu et al. (2011) in Australia highlights the significant pre-migration experiences of multiple traumas found among African refugees, who were granted asylum. According to Schweitzer and Steel (2008) the pre-migration traumas to which refugees are often exposed, centre on human rights violations, torture, and systematic violence. In addition to the feelings of profound loss and multiple traumas, Milner and Khawaja (2010) noted that the subsequent unplanned and often dangerous passage to seek refuge significantly exacerbates the psychological and traumatic distresses already experienced.

### **Acculturative Stress**

The complexities of acculturative stress for African refugee adolescents as they struggle with issues of reduced sense of belonging and identity formation during the early stages of the acculturation process are highlighted in the literature (Earnest et al., 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry and Ataca (2007) define the phenomenon of acculturative stress as the period when acculturation experiences cause problems for acculturating individuals. For ARB students, these challenges are exacerbated as their traditional cultures, norms, and values become incongruent with those of the host country. Berry (2006) sees this incongruence as a source of stress and concludes that it can adversely affect overall wellbeing including normal functioning and decision-making.

### **Divergent Societal Norms**

Ekane (2013) explains the incongruence as follows: the societal and familial changes brought about by globalization have not impacted the African family, because in African societies, the family still “remains a prominent nexus in the social life of Africans ... [with] considerable importance attached to the respect for elders and ancestors” (p. 1). When

Africans, whose culture is predominantly collective, hierarchical, authoritarian, and patriarchal with explicit gender roles (Ekane, 2013; Hebbani et al., 2010), migrate to countries where the mainstream culture is largely individualistic in nature and the individual is autonomous and independent, with gender balance and power mostly distributed proportionately (Milner & Khawaja, 2010), resettlement for Africans becomes problematic. It is often accompanied by a sense of isolation, uncertainty, frustration, and disempowerment. Milner and Khawaja (2010) contended that the change from a collectivistic, hierarchical, and patriarchal culture to an individualistic society is strongly associated with acculturative stress. The phenomenon can affect the physical, emotional, and mental health and well-being of individuals. Additionally, emotional outburst and reactions, adjustment issues, and tense relationships often accompany the phenomenon, which is often aggravated by a lack of social support and a sense of isolation (Berry, 2006; Berry & Ataca, 2007; Berry et al., 2006).

Given the collectivist nature of African existence, the literature review suggests that social support could be a mediator of adjustment and adaptation, whereas the lack of it might lead to feelings of isolation and stress (Ekane, 2013). African refugees, coming from a traditionally collectivist culture, rely on a strong extended kinship and look to the extended family as a form of support. It is, therefore, important to consider African refugees' perceptions of social support in order to understand its effectiveness and protective function throughout their school experience (Simich et al., 2003).

### **Social Support**

Many types of social support were identified in the literature review including being with a supportive family, belonging to one's ethnic community and building positive relationships with the wider host population (Olliff & Couch, 2005). Lee et al. (1999),

describe “social support” as the assistance provided by school personnel, classmates, and members of the family and community members to support students in their academic performance. In a study of African families from a Sudanese community, Schweitzer et al. (2006) found that social support operates at an emotional and an instrumental (described by Morelli, Lee, Arnn, & Zaki (2015), as tangible assistance for chores and errands) levels within the family and the extended family. Bernardon et al. (2011) also suggest that social support is critical in the refugees’ adjustment to their new countries because it acts as a buffer against the negative effects experienced in periods of change.

### **Homogenization and Deficit Lens**

In the literature review, Black students of any pigmentation, or geographic location and ethnicity, are usually grouped together under one heading. A number of Canadian theorists (Codjoe, 2006, 2010; Dei, 1997a, 2007, 2014; James, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012; Ngo & Schleiffer, 2004) refer to Black youths using various terms—Blacks, African-Canadians, racialized, visible minorities, and marginalized—without making the distinction between/among these youths. As Lamba and Krahm (2003) explain, because refugees are often admitted due to a collective traumatic experience, their new identities frequently and traditionally come to be defined via this collective cause. Daniel and Knudsen (1995) add that government personnel, settlement service providers, and even researchers have all been guilty of reducing groups of refugees, wherever and whatever backgrounds they come from, to a single category of needy and helpless persons.

The inevitable consequence of this reductionism is that African refugee students are labelled with the deficit and pathological epithets that accompany Black underachievement. This “blame-the victim” approach tends to justify a plethora of “fix-them” programs that

look at Black children, including African refugee students as lacking intelligence. For example, Cokley and Chapman (2008) assert that Black students often find that “their values, patterns of interaction, vernacular, and numerous other traits are in conflict with the mainstream view of the model student” (p. 352). Stinson (2006) goes further suggesting that the dissonance with mainstream norms predisposes Blacks and African refugees as well as those, outside the culture of power, to a “discourse of deficiency” (p. 477) and a “discourse of rejection” (p. 477) that lead to teacher biases in the classrooms.

### **Low Teacher Expectations**

Research on Black education has shown the role teachers’ perceptions play in the success and failure of students (Howard, 2010; Milner & Khawaja, 2010; Steele 2011; Steele & Aronson 1995). A report on the schooling experiences of Black students, entitled, *Fighting an Uphill Battle* (James & Turner, 2015), found that Black youths in Peel schools “reported feelings of isolation and marginalization in the public education system [due to] teacher’s low expectations of Black students [compared to their expectation of Asian and White students] (p. v). Surprisingly, another report on the schooling of Black students in the Greater Toronto Area, by the James and Turner (2017) also concluded that:

A pervasive sentiment among participants was that the racism of low expectations permeates the public school system, beginning in kindergarten for many Black students. It was emphasized that this racism has particular and significant implications for Black male students, whom teachers expect to be underachievers, troublemakers, and more interested in athletics than academic work. (p. 48)

Incidentally, a more recent review (in 2020) of the Peel District School Board, requested by the Minister of Education in Ontario, found that a crisis of anti-Black racism, differential

treatment of Black youth, and the feeling of not belonging were still pervasive within the Board.

Having low expectations and casting doubt on the intellectual potential of ARB students can have a powerful impact on students' self-esteem and motivation to learn. Since research studies indicate that these stereotypes inform teachers' perceptions and expectations of students (Agyepong, 2010; Avery & Walker, 1993), it is important to consider the teacher effect on African refugee students. Douglas et al. (2008) and Kohut (2014) suggest that teacher expectation is one of the most important variables in students' success. According to Weinstein (2002), the potential power of teachers' educational expectancies has more of an impact on economically disadvantaged students and Black students than on White students or students that are not economically disadvantaged. Given the fact that more Black students are being taught by White teachers (Jack-Davies, 2011) there is a pressing need to know more about the impact that White teachers have on ARB students' school outcomes (e.g., academic success). Unfortunately, this factor received scant attention in the literature review.

### **Higher Priority for Education Among ARB Students**

In contrast to the discourses and the emphasis on ARB students' challenges and vulnerabilities, the literature review provided sufficient grounds for a discourse of achievement on behalf of African refugee students. In particular, an aspiration for higher education was identified as one important issue for African refugees, as they perceive it as a means to provide a better future for themselves and their families (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009). Cassity and Gow (2005) also found that despite the variability in African cultures and languages, there is a shared set of collective values that include a respect for education, a responsibility to place, family, community, religious beliefs, and a strong work ethic.

Notwithstanding this diversity, the mutual reverence for education (with teachers held in high esteem) and the hope of a bright future arising from this, are important points of commonality across the continent (Dooley, 2009; Olliff & Couch, 2005). The respect for education is corroborated by Creese et al. (2011) who state: “the majority of African teenage girls and boys we spoke to were quite serious about their education and recognized its importance for their future prospects” (p. 1). Additionally, Krahn and Taylor (2005) found that, “the educational aspirations of 15-year-old visible minority immigrant Canadians are much higher than those of their native-born non-visible minority counterparts, even when we control for a wide range of socio-demographic, social psychological, and school performance factors” (p. 405). The motivation for education is also substantiated by refugee studies from Australia. Dooley (2009) opines that the journey to find asylum and security with the opportunity for education and work to support their families is an extremely strong African hope and value. Once they arrive in Australia and begin to resettle, education becomes one of the most critical postmigration priorities, in order to provide a better future for themselves and their families (Dooley, 2009). Finally, research by Brown et al. (2006), on the experiences of Sudanese students in two Victorian secondary schools revealed that refugee students are eager to engage with the regular academic and social practices within their schools.

### **Other Identified Factors Affecting ARB Students’ Education**

Several other factors, such as the environment and the personal characteristics of learners were identified as playing an important role in academic success. Mushtaq (2012) identifies two types of factors (internal and external) that affect the students’ academic performance. Internal classroom factors include students’ competence in English, class

schedules, class size, English textbooks, class test results, learning facilities, homework, environment of the class, complexity of the course material, teachers' role in the class, technology used in the class, and exams systems. External classroom factors include extracurricular activities, family problems, work, and financial, social, and other problems (Mushtaq, 2012, p. 18). As important as these factors are, many of them are beyond the purview of my research. My focus in this research study is on the relationship of "student social support and school academic press to gains in student academic achievement" (Lee et al., 1999, p. 2). The authors describe "social support" as the assistance provided by school personnel, classmates, members of the family and community members to support students in their academic performance. "Academic press," according to Lee et al. (1999), "refers to the extent to which school members, including students, and teachers experience a strong emphasis on academic success" (p. 2). These two forms of social assistance are crucial in the performance goals of students at school (Goddard, 2003).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

In this section, I focus on the gaps that emerged from the literature review. These gaps encompass a list of pertinent factors that must be considered in any discussion of ARB students' academic success. The discussion is presented under the following headings, overemphasis on ARB students' vulnerabilities; the static identity ascribed to ARB students; the homogenization of the Black experience; silence on the academic success and education of ARB students; missing voices and narratives of ARB students in achievement research; denial of ARB students' experiential knowledge; silence on refugee resilience; undertheorization of ARB students' issues, race and achievement; classroom practices and peer interaction and the absence of African refugee parents in their children's education.

### **Overemphasis of ARB Students' Vulnerabilities**

The extant literature on refugee youth is filled with discourses of risk, mental health, and educational challenges (Fazel & Stein, 2002) that disparage them. This view leads to a pattern of helplessness that is characterized by a lack of motivation and willingness to persevere (Hameed et al., 2018). Additionally, the label “vulnerable,” which is applied to certain categories of refugee youth, may draw attention to their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. Yet this approach risks masking specific support needs in other areas such as education. Mandisa’s story of how she “escaped” from the English as a Second Language (ESL) class is illustrative of the overemphasis on her presumed weaknesses and vulnerabilities (as a refugee student), with no attention paid to her potential and positive attributes. She felt ready to be part of the “regular” classes in her high school but her ESL teacher insisted on keeping her in the English as a Second Language classroom. As Schweitzer et al. (2006) argue, the issues facing this vulnerable group during acculturation need further exploration because the pre- and post-migration experiences of refugees are unique and complex. Failure to recognize the specific and holistic needs of ARB students leads to an overemphasis of psychological interventions rather than more measured and calculated educational interventions. Incidentally, Mandisa’s conference presentation was revelatory to her previous high school teachers. In their minds, Mandisa was and would always remain an “ESL student”.

### **The Static Identity Ascribed to ARB Students**

The teachers’ disbelief of Mandisa’s progress is typical of the crises-laden dialogues, which characterize the African experience as fixed and unchanging, failing to acknowledge the organic, varied nature and the fluidity of experience and identity development. As Hall

and Hall (1990) explain in their analysis of Black cultural identity: “We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side ... [the] significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather ... ‘what we have become’” (p. 225). In other words, Hall and Hall view cultural identities as “not eternally fixed in some essentialised past” but as a phenomenon that “undergo [es] constant transformation” because “they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (p. 225). The resultant hybridity from this continuous transformation has been identified as a coping mechanism in unknown, and unfamiliar cultural environments (Bhabha, 1994; Creese et al., 2011).

A critical aspect of my research study is a discussion on the impact of hybridity and the resultant transformative or negotiated cultural identities on the educational experiences and aspirations of ARB students in Canadian high schools. The discussion of negotiated identities and their impact on education must include the crucial role that ethnic identity plays in educational and social settings. Regrettably, the ARB students’ ability to function in two cultures was rarely discussed in the literature that was reviewed.

### **The Homogenization of the Black Experience**

Despite the changing nature of the Black experience both in issues of identity, language perceptions, and values, the homogenization of Blacks in literary discourse continues (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Henry, 1993; Nunnally, 2009). Interestingly, Fanon (1970), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, criticizes the grouping of all the regional sects of Black men [sic] arguing that putting “Antilleans, Guyanese, Senegalese, and Malagasies on the same footing creates a regrettable confusion,” one that continues the age-old “cultural problem of overseas territories...detaching cultural issues from the historical and social

reality of each country as well as the national characteristics and different conditions imposed on each of them by imperialist exploitation and oppression” (p. 150). The erasure of ethnicity and nationality is usually subsumed by race and “distinctions among people of the same race who vary in ethnicity and nationality are commonly ignored” (Mwangi & Chrystal, 2014, p. 2). This approach results in “a monolithic view of what it means to be Black in America” and reduces “Black immigrant ethnicity into a homogenous Black identity” (Bryce-Laporte, 1972, as cited in Mwangi & Chrystal, 2014, p. 16). There are inherent dangers in this “one size fits all approach” (Mwangi & Chrystal, 2014, p. 21).

First, it “minimizes the within-group diversity as it relates to ethnicity, class, language and national and geographic origin” (Awokoya & Mann, 2011, p. 24). Second, the research data on Black students is often aggregated, resulting in a merging of native- and foreign-born Blacks as a single demographic (Massey et al., 2007). At times, the merging of native and foreign-born Blacks into a single demographic often excludes Black African immigrant data altogether (Massey et al., 2007), making it difficult to obtain “a true insider’s perspective that captures the individualistic experience of race” (Harper & Nichols, 2008, p. 203) and the structural factors that impact Black African immigrants’ existence in host countries. The single demographic focus appears to be the strategy employed by Ontario Ministry of Education since race is hardly mentioned in any data collection or any ministerial documents. In a speech in 2015, addressing the concerns of Black community leaders who were complaining about their children being taken into care at rates far higher than White children, the Minister of Children and Youth Services, declared: “I think there’s a lot more receptivity to looking at (race-based data) in this sector and beyond. We’re also looking at this notion of disaggregated data, which includes Black children and youth in care, in schools,

and in our youth justice system” (as cited in Contenta et al., 2015, para. 7).

Third, the single lens approach obscures any positive attributes (such as resiliency and aspiration for education) that individuals may possess. Celious and Oyserman (2001) describe the negative consequences of the effacement of individual attributes as follows: “This system of homogenization mandates the use of stereotypes for in-group and out-group interactions, erasing the experiences of women, men, middle-class, and immigrant people of African origin from academic literature, popular culture, and, most importantly, daily interactions” (pp. 156–57). Additionally, it provides fodder for discourses of underachievement and suppresses any discourse of achievement regarding the strengths and educational performance of Black students. When Black underachievement is configured from a deficit perspective (Mehan, 2009), all the positive attributes of Black students are glossed over (Hilliard, 2003).

### **Silence on the Academic Success and Education of ARB Students**

A major gap in the literature is the non-existence of positive discourses on Black and African refugee students. Codjoe (2007) blames the scarcity of research studies on Black academic success on researchers who dwell on the poor academic performance of Black students or issues and problems related to their academic failure. This lack of any meaningful discussion on educational success of ARB students is disturbing. As Hart (2011) contends, the Eurocentric definition of success, which is nothing more than the quantifiable collection of symbols, fails to connect with the life experiences of Black students. She asserts that this limited and narrowing conceptualization of students’ success has hampered the academic achievement of all Black students. In fact, Codjoe’s (2007) was the only study that broached

the academic success of Black students in Alberta's secondary schools, but it was not clear whether he included African refugee students in his study.

The effacement of Black student achievement in Canadian literature is exacerbated by the absence of Black females in achievement research. Despite the plethora of research on academic engagement or disengagement among Black youth (Dei et al, 1997; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; James & Brathwaite, 1996), Black males have been the primary focus of these studies. What are less studied, however, especially in the Canadian context, are the experiences of Black Canadian high school females who often outperform their male counterparts (Linton, 2016). Bringing gender into the academic success discourse is crucial because there is an underrepresentation of Black women and girls in the discussion of academic success (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). With the exception of Linton (2016), numerous studies (e.g., Harper, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer & Wood, 2001) have privileged Black male students' success and "muted" Black females' high standards of success and lived experiences from educational literature in Canada" (Linton, 2016, p. 32).

### **Missing Voices and Narratives of ARB Students in Achievement Research**

The minimization and the homogenization of the life experiences of Black youth, silences their voices, making it difficult for them to freely share their views and experiences with teachers and classmates. Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that having the ability to "name [one's] reality" (p. 12) may lead to improved motivation and better management of their learning. Equally missing in the literature is a discourse on the diversity of voices within school reform. Although student voice research (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001, 2006) promotes the inclusion of all student voices in educational

reform, the assumption that all voices are equal and capable of being activated coequally, denies the contextual and mediating factors that impinge on voice activation (Yang, 2016).

The paucity of successful narratives of Black students may be attributable to the silencing of their voices and experiences in the classroom (Delpit, 1988) or to their inability to inject their issues and concerns into educational discourse. Various theorists (e.g., Fielding, 2001, 2004; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001, 2006; Rudduck, 1999; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) have underlined the importance of “student voice” and its accrual benefits. Incidentally, the term “student voice” describes the many ways in which youth have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000). At the basic level, student voice means students sharing their opinions and having a say in what goes on in their schools. Having the ability to freely express themselves on school issues empowers students to bring about changes in their schools (Fletcher, 2005). Sadly, however, some voices are privileged and the views and opinions of those with limited linguistic skills (unprivileged voices) are muzzled. This distinction was hardly discussed in the literature review on student voice. The failure to distinguish between those students with privileged voices in the class and those without, creates the impression that all youth have the “power” and the “know-how” to exercise their voice in the arena of educational reform. This approach overlooks the link between communication and cultural factors. For this study, however, this relationship is crucial because it helps determine the comfort level of the ARB students in their classroom interactions with their peers. Finding out whether these students realized that they had a voice in their classrooms and the extent to which they used that voice to enhance their learning was an important part of the study.

### **Denial of ARB Students' Experiential Knowledge**

In addition to the exclusion of ARB students' voices in educational research (Hek, 2005; Kanu, 2008), educational spaces devalue the life experiences and epistemologies of communities of colour. Drawing inspiration from the constructivist notion of knowledge creation (e.g., Cobb, 1996; Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Fox, 2001), which points to the joint and symbiotic relationship between the learner and the teacher and Delpit's (1988) assertion that "we are all experts at something" (p. 292), I suggest that what African refugee students bring to the classroom are not deficiencies but strengths that must be valued. African refugee youth come to class with their own frames of reference. Their unique experiences and knowledge gained during the pre-migration stage affect them as learners and should be considered in the learning process. Darling-Hammond et al. (2003) underline the importance of this balance between students' home experience and the school curriculum.

The importance of establishing a cultural congruity between home and school has been identified as an important element of culturally responsive teaching and equity pedagogy (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Hsiao, 2015). This involves making the classroom a place where students feel comfortable, see themselves represented in the curriculum and classroom environment, and engage with materials that provide connections to their home and community experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467). Likewise, Apple (2011) echoes the need for a curriculum that is culturally relevant and sensitive for diasporic and other ethnic children. Such an approach would replace the "largely monocultural national curriculum (which) deals with diversity by centering the always ideological 'we' and usually then simply mentioning 'the contributions' of people of color, women, and others" (Apple, 1993, p. 233). The resultant expansion of different voices in the curriculum would help

revivify the experiences of marginalized groups.

All learners arrive at school with different cultural experiences and epistemologies that must be activated equally in the learning process. Moss et al. (2009) point to a hybrid and a nomadic approach to learning, governed by rules of engagement that encourage the creation of a community of educational researchers. This collaborative approach for knowledge creation invites different voices into the discourse and encourages a cross-pollination of ideas. As Yeats (2006) notes, “pedagogy entails not only the promotion of learning in a narrow sense, but it also entails a process of negotiating identities between teachers and students” (p. 37).

As part of these negotiations, the cultural capital that learners bring to the classroom must be valued. In the case of communities of colour, Yosso (2005) argues that Black youths come to class equipped with a repertoire of coping skills described as “cultural wealth” (p. 69). This community cultural wealth encapsulates an array of knowledge, abilities, contacts, and skills—aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital—that students of colour leverage to achieve academic success (Yosso, 2005). The recognition of this community capital refutes the traditional belief of highbrow social capital as the sine qua non of academic success and asserts that minority children are equally equipped with a repertoire of multicultural coping skills that are equally crucial to academic performance.

### **Silence on Refugee Resilience**

While the resilient capacities of ARB students have been explored in literary work from other countries, Canadian literature rarely discusses this aspect of the refugee experience. In an exploratory study examining the resettlement experiences for refugee youth in Western Australia, Earnest et al. (2015), praise the resilient and aspirational qualities of

refugee youth. Similarly, a Dutch study by Sleijpin et al. (2013), criticizes the current practice of pathologizing refugees and the focus on the consequences of trauma and forced migration on young refugees; the authors conclude that “a focus on resilience in young refugees may aid in adequately representing their response to adversity [and] understanding their needs” (p. 2). Matthews (2008) also suggests that the failure to build on African refugee students’ strengths and resilience leads to an overemphasis on psychological approaches and responses that pathologize the students. Finally, Benard (1997), criticizes the deficit approach for failing to recognize the students’ capacities, strengths, and uniqueness, as well their individuality; she suggests that “common sense cautions against this deficit approach [because] new rigorous research on resilience is disproving it scientifically” (para. 2). The message here is that the intellectual ability of ARB students should not be viewed as fixed or as an unchangeable characteristic. What is needed instead is an incremental approach to learning that lessens their vulnerability to debilitating stereotypes on academic achievement (Fuligni, 2007).

My interest in refugee resiliency goes beyond an analysis of refugee responses to identified vulnerabilities. I am more focused on the relationship between culture, identity, resiliency, and school performance. Ethnic identity, according to Montrallos (2014), is one of the most important ingredients in academic success and those with high resiliency are usually able to overcome almost any obstacle facing them. The review of the literature does address the link between ethnic resiliency and school achievement in two dichotomous ways. Paul (2012) suggests that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds have resiliency deficits that impede their academic achievement. However, in a research monograph initiated by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of Ontario, Hurlington (2010) rejects this deficit

notion, stating that: “Conceptions of resilience no longer focus on some magical trait that is unique to some children and absent in others” (Contemporary Resilience section, para. 2).

Benard (1997) is equally critical of the narrow conceptualization of resiliency, warning against the at-risk dialogue and the resiliency-deficient discourse:

Even though this approach sometimes succeeds in getting needed services to children and families, it has led to stereotyping, tracking, lowering expectations for many students in urban schools, and even prejudice and discrimination. Looking at children and families from a deficit perspective obscures recognition of their capacities and strengths, as well their individuality and uniqueness. (p. 1)

Benard and Hurlington’s push for heterogeneity in the appraisal of the risks and accomplishments of individuals is empowering. It signals a departure from the limited, global, and absolute conceptualization of resiliency, to a more nuanced, and socially situated understanding of the term. Luthar et al. (2000) describe resilience as a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma. The term does not indicate a personality trait or an attribute of individuals (Luthar et al., 2000). Rather, the resilience framework recognizes the potential capacity of all individuals because resiliency is a force that drives a person to grow through adversity and disruptions (Benard, 1997). My understanding of Benard’s words is that all individuals possess an “inborn developmental wisdom” that “teachers can tap [into]” (Benard, 1993, p. 6). In “Fostering Resiliency in Children,” Benard (1993) affirms, “we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose” (p. 17).

Unfortunately, the negativity surrounding Black and African refugee students implies that they are not the beneficiaries of this innate capacity for resilience. By constantly

dwelling on their trauma and other vulnerabilities, educational researchers deny this resilience attribute to this population. In doing so, they revert to the fixed identity characterization of ARB students, forgetting that “Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (Masten, 2001, p. 235). As such, resilience is understood as an alterable set of processes that can be fostered, cultivated, and attained by all.

### **Undertheorization of ARB Students’ Issues**

The resultant deficit conceptualization of the abilities of ARB students or lack thereof, results in an undertheorization of their issues. Several theorists (Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 1996, 2008; Henry, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2007) have criticized the undertheorization of race and communities of colour in educational discourse. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), along with Cruz (2001), argue that this lack of conceptual and analytic tools to discuss race, operationalize it, and move the field forward, has forced scholars of colour to find new ways of telling their own stories. The creation of these new conversations is congruent with Dillard’s (2000) admonition to researchers to rethink the meanings of their constructs in education research, and to “reconceptualise an *endarkened epistemology* rather than an enlightened one (Milner, 2007, p. 389) for communities of colour. Okpalaoka and Dillard (2012) argue that shifting demographics and the interest in communities of colour demand a reframing of research paradigms. An *endarkened epistemology*, according to them, is the most appropriate tool for this type of research, because it disrupts hegemonic and unchallenged ideologies and articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought and inspired by culturally

constructed notions of race, gender, class, and other identities (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012).

As Milner (2007) explains,

The idea is that epistemologies need to be “colored” and that the research community may need to be exposed to theories, perspectives, views, positions, and discourses that emerge from the experiences and points of view of people and researchers of color. (p. 390)

In other words, research should be seen as a “responsibility answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012, p. 133).

### **Race and Achievement**

If the research is answerable to the subjects of the inquiry, I question the absence of any serious discussion of race and ethnicity in the educational performance of African refugee students. Admittedly, Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Murrell (2007), Packard (2013), as well as Steele (1997), identify race and diversity as significant factors in the education of racialized individuals. These scholars theorized that when minorities feel as though their group is seen as not performing as well in academics, they experience negative feelings described as “stereotype threat”—a threat that influences how they perform academically (Steele, 1997). Social environments like work or school often expose them to the risk of negative evaluation and rejection. This social evaluative threat (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004) threatens the well-being of the members of the targeted group.

Similarly, research conducted by Onsando and Billett (2009) on African refugee students’ experiences of learning at Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, concluded that students faced racial discrimination and social exclusion even

though they were in a safe environment. The students also encountered pedagogical practices that did not recognize their socio-cultural backgrounds and refugee life experiences.

Canadian theorists have reached similar conclusions (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007, 2010; Dei, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2008, 2014; James, 1990, 2011; Kanu, 2008; Solomon, 1992). For example, James (2011) found that constructing Black students as at-risk, disruptive, dropouts, immigrants, aggressive, angry, intimidating, and rebellious, makes them vulnerable to negative academic outcomes and stereotyping. Since the labels that ensue from these categorizations tend to significantly influence the ways teachers interact with Black students (Abawi, 2018; James, 2011), leading, perhaps, to teacher biases, a rigorous examination of how race impacts the learning of ARB students in their classrooms is warranted.

### **Classroom Practices and Peer Interaction**

In addition to race and low expectations from teachers, other factors that received scant attention in the literature review on ARB students and their academic success are the impact of the classroom structure and practices, the out-group peer interactions, and the characteristics of the educational personnel, especially the impact of racially different teachers. Generic classroom practices on students' motivation and learning are well documented in the literature (e.g., Burke & Sass, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

Surprisingly, however, there is little or no discussion on peer interactions between students of different ethnic backgrounds in the classroom. In a research study on the factors that impact a child's achievements at school, Gibbons and Telhajm (2012) emphasize the link between a student's background and abilities of their schoolmates, declaring that it is important to "measure the consequences of social interactions between students—[the] so called 'peer group effects'—[on student achievement]" (p. 1). Due to the complexity of measuring the

peer group effect on student achievement and the lack of consensus on the spillovers from this interaction (Burke & Sass, 2013), the discussion of the peer group effect on the experiences on African refugee students in this study was limited to the students' narratives and their perceptions on how their interactions with their classmates impacted their learning and sense of school belongingness. Mori (2000) found that international students did not gain the respect and the trust of their American classmates because of their limited English skills and unfamiliarity with the education system in the United States. Hsieh (2007), in her study of why a Chinese international student remained silent in her American classroom, explained that the participant internalized a deficient self-perception as a useless person in her group discussions and perceived that a deficient identity was attributed to her.

Although the influence of teacher and peer relationships on students' classroom engagement and everyday motivational resilience is very important (Furrer et al., 2014) too often, research studies attribute students' silence to socio-cultural influences within the students' background and underestimate the possible disempowering nature of school and classroom environment (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hsieh, 2007; Ogbu, 2003). In the case of the ARB students, the diminished sense of participation and belonging in the classroom occasioned by the teachers' inability to bring them in could have destroyed the students' enthusiasm and love of learning (Broom, 2015). When students and peers interact in the classroom as social agents, the level of classroom belongingness increases (Furrer et al., 2014). Additionally, when the peer interactions meet the students' needs, the student receives a psychological boost and becomes more engaged in the classroom (Furrer et al., 2014). An understanding of how the peer-group effect influenced ARB students could lead to the adoption of classroom practices that would optimize positive outcomes for ARB students.

### **Absence of ARB Parents in Their Children's Education**

Another neglected discussion in the literature review was the role played by the family and extended members of ARB students. Specifically, the parental role is hardly mentioned in the academic discourse on African refugee students and their academic success. Research (Brofenbrenner, 1986; Caplan, 2000; Putnam, 2000) points to the link between an individual's networks and their social, cultural, and academic development. Similarly, a policy document from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), *Parents in Partnership*, views the role of parents as crucial because they “influence and support their children's academic achievement” and “contribute to the work of our educators” (p. 2). Despite research studies that show a correlation between parental involvement and student success (Caplan, 2000; Kim, 2009), research on African refugee parental involvement in their students' education is not evident in the literature review. Admittedly, there is research on minority parental involvement (e.g., Daniel-White, 2002; Kim, 2009) but the research homogenizes and devalues minority parental participation. They are viewed as lacking interest, unprepared and less involved in their children's school. Kim (2009) criticizes this “hierarchical [and] dangerous perspective” (p. 80) of minority parents. Another shortcoming in school parental participation is the scant attention paid to ethnic differences in minority parental involvement, even though different minority children are present in most Canadian schools. Understanding the link between refugee students and parental cultural values in learning, schooling and support, may lead to new approaches for increased minority parental participation in school.

### **Chapter Summary and Overview of the Next Chapter**

In addition to the analysis of the varied aspects of the term “academic success” and

the way it is measured, this chapter presented a summary of the negative and stereotypical conceptualization of the education of Black and African refugee students. Various gaps in the literature were identified and the chapter ended with a call for a more holistic understanding of refugees and their educational issues. Chapter 3 presents the research design of the study, including details about the target population, and recruitment of study participants. The selection of the qualitative paradigm is explained, and the data collection and analysis process are discussed. The chapter ends with comments on ethical considerations, a discussion of the data quality procedures, and a concluding statement.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study explored the factors that African refugee-background (ARB) students identified as being helpful in their academic success. Selected ARB students, who have graduated from Canadian high schools, were offered an opportunity to talk about their perceptions of academic success, and the factors that helped or hindered it. The main purposes of this methodological chapter are, to (a) describe and justify the research paradigm that guided this research; (b) explain the sample selection and recruitment challenges; (c) describe the procedures and the instruments used to collect the data and the data analysis technique; and (d) discuss the ethical concerns and the data quality procedures of the research.

#### **Methodological Approach**

Since the literature review pointed to a lack of research on the academic success of ARB students, I wanted to dig deeper into the factors that ARB students identified as being helpful in their academic success. For this reason, a qualitative research design and a critical race theory (CRT) methodology offered the most suitable methods for gathering thick, rich, descriptive data on the factors that influenced the academic success of ARB students.

#### **Qualitative Design**

Merriam (1998) describes qualitative research as an “umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that helps us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). The major objective of qualitative research is to explore in order to “gain an in-depth understanding” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5) of the life experiences of the participants. With this goal in mind, the constructivist perspective of qualitative research—one that promotes learners’ active participation in the learning process, places participants at the centre of the analysis, allows

them to create to their own realities, and share their stories through qualitative data gathering methods, such as structured and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007; Knox & Burkard, 2009)—was foundational in the exploration of the factors that ARB students identified as being helpful to their academic success. Similarly, critical race theory's (CRT) tenet of counterstorytelling provides a conduit for them to articulate their counter-narratives of academic success (Creswell, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

### **Justification for Using Critical Race Theory**

In centring and authenticating the life experiences and the academic achievement of ARB students, the study leaned on CRT's tenet of counterstorytelling as a methodological tool. Counterstorytelling is an approach that allows people who are often overlooked in the academic success literature, to tell their stories in their own way (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For the participants in this research study, the use of CRT as a methodology helped them explain how they experienced and responded to the racial inequities in the educational system. Beyond this, CRT, as a methodology, was helpful in so many ways.

First, CRT's multi-centric emphasis on race, racism, epistemological diversity, experiential knowledge, and on how students of colour experience and respond to the racial inequities in the educational system, helps bring the life experiences of the ARB students from the margins to the centre of the achievement debate. As Asante (1991) postulates, "centricity locates students within their own cultural frame of reference" (p. 171) and "creates spaces in the classroom for all participants" (Dei, 1996, p. 177). CRT's push for centrality of race and epistemological diversity in educational research is a response to the undertheorization of race (e.g., Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 1996, 2000; Henry, 1993; Ladson-

Billings, 1995; Milner, 2007) and the unchallenged obedience to the “official curriculum” (Apple, 2013a, p. 224) which is nothing more than “a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). An important element in the centric approach of CRT methodology is the recognition of the experiential knowledge of communities of colour as legitimate, appropriate, and crucial to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in educational research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In contrast to the silencing of refugee narratives as indicated in our literature review (Miller & Rasco, 2004), a CRT methodology provides a conduit for the voices of ARB students, allows them to name their own reality (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and encourages them to articulate their concerns about their high school experiences.

Second, the use of CRT as a methodology, challenges age-old normalizations, and assumptions about success, meritocracy, and colourblindness in schools. This oppositional stance scrutinizes all aspects of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment and the perceived superiority of Eurocentric beliefs, values, and worldviews (Huber, 2009, p. 651). Incidentally, normalization can be viewed from two different perspectives, one that establishes White ways of living as the ‘standard/normal’ that immigrant groups need to rise up to and the other, the “normalization of poor outcomes” (James & Turner, 2017, p. 47). Both have negative effects on the academic success of Black youth. The first continues the biased colonial justification for White superiority and devalues the mores of communities of colour. The second leads to stereotyping and reinforces educators’ low expectations of Black students. As James and Turner (2017) explain, teachers’ normalization of poor academic achievement as a predictable outcome for Black students “plays out in educators’ recommendations regarding course selections and the supports provided to students in terms of their educational pursuits”

(p. 47) and helps shape Black students' perceptions of not being capable of excelling academically. In addition to problematizing the negative effects of normalization, CRT methodology interrogates the traditional notions of success and the meritocratic assumptions of a colour-blind or a raceless approach to learning—one that creates neutral constructs of sameness and assumes that race is nonexistent (Brady, 2017). Through their narratives, the ARB students demonstrate that racelessness and colour-blindness attitudes omit “the lived realities people of colour and presents a false social reality” (p. 116). Additionally, CRT's resistive stance to dominant ideologies of success and meritocracy helps substantiate the successful narratives of ARB students as counterarguments to Bourdieu's (1986) highbrow capital as the *sine qua non* for academic success and to Ogbu's (1987) notion of “Acting White,” and success as a “prerogative [or the property] of White Americans” (p. 177). To elaborate, CRT's authentication of the life experiences of ARB students as valid, allowed the students to shift the research lens away from a deficit view of their academic abilities to an appreciation of the values and the “cultural capital” (Yosso, 2005) they bring into the learning process.

The shift from traditional research methodologies to new ways of “creating and developing alternative spaces and approaches for the study of communities [of colour]” (Cruz, 2001, p. 658) was the third reason for choosing CRT as an analytical lens for the study. Prior to the introduction of CRT methodology as another approach to qualitative study, Western research and theoretical models often explained the academic differences between ethnic groups, from majoritarian viewpoints (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained, “education suffered from a lack of conceptual and analytic tools to discuss race, operationalize it, and move the field forward” (as cited in Milner, 2007, p. 390). Similarly, numerous scholars (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, 1991; Cruz, 2001; Dillard,

2000; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012) issued clarion calls for new methodological frameworks that interrogate the “deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 3). CRT methodology responds to this lacuna by offering a race-based approach to researching communities of colour. A race-based epistemology, according to Ladson-Billings (1995), is an epistemological frame that “emerges out of [one’s] race [or] culture’s social history, rather than an epistemological frame that has emerged out of the social history of the dominant race” (p. 10).

The fourth reason was the resultant empowerment that merged from the way critical race methodology reified the life experiences of communities of colour. Prior to their participation in this research study, none of the ARB students, except Mandisa, had had the opportunity to share their school narratives in any forum. In contrast to the silencing of refugee narratives as indicated in our literature review (Miller & Rasco, 2004), the qualitative data gathering methods of a CRT methodology provided a conduit for the voices of ARB students and allowed them to “talk back” (Bell & Roberts, 2010) to mainstream narratives that had always pathologized them and minimized their intellectual ability. Additionally, it opened up avenues for them to individually (a) define their understanding of academic success, (b) articulate the factors that helped that helped them achieve academic success, (c) discuss the challenges they faced in the educational system, and (d) share the coping strategies they used to overcome the challenges, from their own perspectives.

## **Methods**

### **Study Participants**

This section explains the selection criteria, the recruitment challenges, the final criteria used, and a profile of each of the research participants. In the application for Ethics Approval, the following criteria were stipulated: participants must (a) identify as Black; (b)

be between 18–25 years of age; (c) have come to Canada as refugees from Central, Eastern, Western and Southern Africa; (d) have gone directly to high school or have spent 2 years or less in a Canadian elementary school, before going to high school; and (e) have graduated from a Canadian high school. The context of this qualitative study was Southwestern Ontario. The sample for the study was to be drawn from a population of Black ARB students, who met the established selection and demographic criteria.

The recruiting process was challenging due to the lack of any official statistical demographic data on ARB students in the research area. Initially, the recruitment procedures followed the stipulations established in the REB application. A Letter of Invitation (Appendix A) was sent to the Refugee Community Network and to other Refugee Agencies in Kitchener-Waterloo, inviting African refugee youth to participate in the research study. Interested research participants were asked to contact the researcher by email. No responses were received. Appeals to local and external community agencies, colleges, universities, and student associations for recruitment purposes were equally unsuccessful. After 2 months of unsuccessful attempts for recruitment, I turned to my personal networks. As past President of the African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region, I had interacted with several local Black African Associations in the research area. Through personal conversations with the Presidents of two ethnic Associations, Liberian and Somali, a list of potential participants was established. Informed Participant Consent Letters, explaining the nature and the expectations of the research and an Initial Questionnaire (Appendix B), were sent to potential participants. Upon receipt of the completed questionnaires and the consent forms, it quickly became apparent that only three of the potential participants met the established criteria.

The other students met three of the five criteria, namely (a) identify as Black, (b) be between 18–25 years of age, and (c) have graduated from a Canadian high school. However,

their immigration status and the number of years spent in elementary school before transitioning into high school were problematic because almost all of them were unable to provide specific dates about this issue. In discussions with Refugee Agencies, there was considerable confusion about the “refugee” label. Some of the participants claimed that their parents came as refugees; others denied ever being labeled as refugees.

Consequently, several changes were made to the original research design to accommodate these unexpected circumstances. First, the phrase “African Refugee-Background” (ARB) students replaced the “African refugee students” designation. The change in nomenclature reflected the students’ dissatisfaction with the pejorative connotation inherent in the label “refugee.” Second, the search was extended to other localities, including Burlington, Brantford, Guelph, Hamilton, London, and Windsor, with Windsor being the farthest at 242 kilometers from the original research location. Third, criteria (c) which stipulated that participants “must have come to Canada as refugees” and (d) which stated that participants must “have gone directly to high school or have spent 2 years or less in a Canadian elementary school, before going to high school” were re-worded. Instead, participants were asked to self-identify as refugees, in accordance with Haines’s (2007) conception that “predetermined categories of identification could inhibit many participants from revealing their [true feelings]” (p. 305). The number of years spent in elementary schools was removed because some participants were unsure of the number of years spent there. This particular change proved useful because it shifted the focus from the date of arrival to a more holistic exploration of the factors that impacted the academic success of ARB students.

So, the final criteria read as follows: participants must (a) identify as Black; (b) be between 18–25 years of age; (c) must be from Central, Eastern, Western and Southern Africa;

(d) must have arrived in Canada as refugees or in the company of an adult(s) who were fleeing from their country as a result of war; and (e) must have graduated from a Canadian high school. Informed Participant Consent Letters explaining the nature and the expectations of the research and a Questionnaire (Appendix B) were re-sent to potential participants. Only two completed documents were received. Consequently, the five students (three from the first attempt and two from the second attempt at recruitment) were asked to recommend friends and relatives.

In the end, a multistage sampling design was used due to the challenges in recruiting participants for the study. Based on the recommendations received from community members and associates of the researcher, participants were selected using *opportunistic* and *purposive* methods, to ensure the selection of participants who were well positioned to share their high school experiences. Patton (2002) suggests that opportunistic or emergent sampling gives the researcher the option of “adding to a sample to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities” (p. 240). Three more students were added from this process. A total of eight students (four females and four males) eventually qualified for the research study.

All the participants attended different high schools in Ontario. After the participants were identified, each was comprehensively re-informed about the purpose and the expectations of the research. Additionally, each was informed of his or her rights and responsibilities regarding the project, including the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. They were advised that the interviews would be recorded with their permission. Furthermore, they were assured that the information collected would be confidential and would be subsequently destroyed, seven years after the completion of the dissertation.

### **Data Collection Protocols**

Research participants were informed via the Informed Participant Consent Letter (Appendix B) that they had the right to withdraw at any point without any consequences and

that the information they provided would be recorded, with their consent and would be kept confidential. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym as part of the confidentiality process. Only one participant complied, and names were therefore selected for the others. They were advised that all potentially identifying information would be coded (and if necessary, altered or removed) so that any identifying features (e.g., country of origin, arrival dates) would remain confidential. In other words, names and any identifying information would not appear in any verbal or written materials related to this study, (e.g., notes, memos). Instead, anonymous quotations would be used with the research participants' permission. They were told that a transcriber would complete a Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix F) and all written records, audio recordings, notes, and other materials related to this research would be kept in separate and protected files (to avoid any possible linking of information and identifiers), on the Principal Student Investigator's personal, password-protected home office computer and in a locked filing cabinet. The data would be retained for a period of 7 years and it would be restricted to the Principal Student Investigator, Edwin Laryea and Faculty Supervisor, Dr. Denise Armstrong. The master list linking participants' names and pseudonyms would be destroyed after participants had received a final copy of the research report. Seven years after the completion of the dissertation, all paper material would be confidentially destroyed. Similarly, all digital and electronic materials would be wiped from memory after seven years.

### **Data Collection Methods**

To explore the factors that influenced the academic success of ARB students in Canadian high schools, the original design called for multiple forms of instruments, namely two sets of interviews and a focus group session, for data collection. Additional data was also drawn from governmental policies and community initiatives, and questionnaires. In this

section, I explain the ancillary methods used, followed by a discussion of the main data collection tools, an explanation of the relevant modifications made to accommodate unexpected challenges and a description of the interviewing procedures. Next, I present the data analysis and the data quality procedures for the study - triangulation and trustworthiness. I conclude with a discussion of the ethical consideration, limitations, and delimitations.

First, I examined government initiatives and other interventionist programs intended for newcomers and refugees. For example, an Ontario Ministry of Education (2016a) monograph, *Supporting Students with Refugee Backgrounds*, which offers a framework for the successful integration of students with refugee backgrounds in the school community and an Ontario Ministry of Education (2016b) memorandum entitled *Syrian Newcomer Settlement in Ontario* were analyzed. Both documents address the adjustment challenges faced by newcomer youth in their new school environments. Teachers are asked to adopt a “responsive [teaching] practice” by working “creatively and strategically to meet the literacy and numeracy needs of large numbers of students with interrupted and sometimes limited prior schooling” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 1).

Even though the policy documents focused on the vulnerabilities of refugee students by advising teachers to become “trauma informed” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 1), the Ministry did not ignore the positive attributes of these students. The following statement, taken from one of the policy documents, supports this point:

There is one group of students who bring both very specific challenges and very special gifts. These are students who, with their families, have fled war, conflict, and environmental catastrophe and arrive in Ontario as refugees. They model perseverance and resilience, gratitude and a desire for education. (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2016a, p. 1)

Second, I explored the *Pathways to Education Program*, a tutoring and mentoring initiative, started by a local Counselling Agency, with a goal of improving educational outcomes for at-risk students. The program, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2017, supports about 600 students. Its key objective is to break the cycle of poverty by helping youth from low-income communities graduate from high school and transition to postsecondary education, training, and meaningful employment. Third, each participant completed an Initial Questionnaire (Appendix B). The information requested included students' name, address, age, education level (completed in Canada), and country of origin, status and length of residence, in Canada, mother tongue and other language(s) spoken. The information gleaned from the completed questionnaires informed the modifications in the selection criteria and adjustments to interview questions.

Fourth, formal open-ended interviews served as the primary data collection technique. Creswell (2013) describes interviews as one of the most valuable and useful ways for thoroughly investigating certain issues. They are an effective data collection method, and they allow participants to describe their experiences in full detail. The face-to-face process helps create rapport and also allows researchers to observe participants' non-verbal communication, such as their use of gestures (Moriarty, 2011, p. 9). For this reason, two open-ended interviews were designed and conducted to allow each of the eight participants to share their high school experiences. Each interview lasted 60 minutes.

For the first open-ended interview, an Interview Protocol (Appendix D) was used for each of the eight participants. At the beginning of each interview, details of participants' demographic information submitted by the participants, were confirmed. Participants received a copy of their signed Informed Participant Consent Letter (Appendix B) at the

beginning of each interview. Contact information for Community Counselling and Support Agencies (Appendix C) was redistributed and the interviews proceeded along specific protocol guidelines. At the end of the interview a debriefing period followed. Participants were asked to bring up any comments or ask questions. They were thanked for their participation and follow up procedures were explained.

The Interview Protocol (Appendix D) contained open-ended questions about ARB students' perceptions of academic success, how their identity impacted their learning and the adaptive strategies used in their high school experience. The main purpose of the interview protocol was to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. However, the inherent flexibility in qualitative questioning, allowed the researcher to individualize questions when responses needed further clarification. Interviews were conducted at different sites to accommodate the date, time and location of each participant. As such, interviews were conducted in Burlington (70 kilometers from the researcher's location) and in London, (113 kilometers away). One participant drove from Windsor (242 kilometers away). In all, the interviews were held at times and in locations that accommodated the preferences of research participants and assured their safety.

Student no-shows and lack of punctuality impacted the planned face-to-face interviews for the second phase of the data collection process. The second interviews had to be done by phone due to scheduling and availability issues. They were completed over a two-month period and they were all recorded. The questions were extracted from the themes that arose from the first interviews and were uniquely designed for each participant. This approach added some variability to the questions asked.

Only six of eight students completed the second interview. Two male students were unavailable. One was working out of town for the summer and the other did not return phone

messages and emails. Another student refused to do the second interview and withdrew from the research study, citing personal issues. Subsequently, her records from the first interview were destroyed. The search for her replacement was however successful and two interviews were conducted with this new participant. The planned Focus Group session was cancelled for the following reasons. Several attempts were made to bring all participants together from their various locations. Unfortunately, the geographical distances between the participants were problematic and transportation costs to bring them all to one location were exorbitant. A Skype and a group telephone conference call session were unsuccessful because some participants lacked the necessary electronic equipment to allow for their participation. For others, summer work schedules got in the way. After several months of delay, the likelihood of having the proposed focus group became doubtful. Consequently, I decided to concentrate on the data from the two sets of interviews.

In doing so, it became apparent that the participants' responses to the interview questions were adequate and detailed enough to allow for conclusions to be drawn from the data they had provided. With little chance of obtaining new insights and additional information from the participants, the focus group session was justifiably cancelled. The evidence from the literature supported the justification for the stoppage in data collection. According to Russell and Gregory (2003), when the data gathering process becomes "redundant, minimal, or [with] no new information to further challenge or elaborate the conceptual framework or in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon" (p. 37), then "informational redundancy" (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 875) has been reached. When and how researchers reach data saturation varies because 'there is no *one-size-fits-all method* for data saturation [and] study designs are not universal' (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409). Guest et al.'s (2006) suggestion that saturation may be attained by as little as six interviews depending on the sample size and the richness of the data collected,

provided further justification for the data stoppage. Interestingly, Fusch and Ness (2015) explain the distinction between “rich” and “thick” data as follows: thick data denote quantity whereas rich data indicate “quality, layered, intricate, detailed, and nuanced” (p. 1409) information. The rich data from the participants’ interviews provided a good detailed and quality material for the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

This study used Miles and Huberman’s (1994) three-pronged model for thematic analysis, namely, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions from the data to give an overview of the themes that were extracted. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to determine precisely the relationships between concepts and compares them with the replicated data (Alhojailan, 2012). The process begins with the identification of unit segments of data that seem important or meaningful in some way (Olamosu, 2018, p. 75). According to Maxwell (2012), this identification can be based on the researchers’ ideas of what is important (p. 107). Furthermore, thematic analysis offers the flexibility for starting data analysis at any time during the project, where there is no association between the data gathered and the result of the process itself. With this flexibility, researchers can handle the data research patterns in two ways—that is, inductive and deductive (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe the two primary methods in thematic analysis as an inductive or “bottom up” way or in a theoretical or deductive or “top down” (p. 12).

Inductive analysis (or “bottom up”) is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data driven. However, it is important to note, that it is difficult for researchers to free themselves from their theoretical and epistemological commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). In contrast, a theoretical or deductive (or “top

down”) thematic analysis is analyst-driven because it is congruent with the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area under study. The choice between inductive and theoretical/deductive approach depends on the coding objectives. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, researchers “can either code for a quite specific research question (which maps onto the more theoretical approach) or the specific research question can evolve through the coding process (which maps onto the inductive approach)” (p. 12). What follows is a detailed analysis of the thematic model and how the model was applied to this study.

### **The Thematic Analysis Model—Overview**

There are four stages in the thematic analysis. Organizing and reading the data is the first stage of the process. At this stage, researchers familiarize themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcribed data several times to “get a feel for the text by handling [the] data multiple times” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, as cited in Alhojailan, 2012, p. 43). This process allows the researcher to “appreciate the full picture and make connections between the participants’ thoughts, ideas and the data collected through observations” (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 43). In the second stage, the colour-coding phase, the researcher “paws through texts and marks them up with different coloured highlighter pens” (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 44). In this way, all relevant and interesting features of the data pertaining to a particular code can be grouped into categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The establishment of themes is the third stage of the thematic analysis process. Here, the researcher combs through the categories searching for potential themes. All data relevant to each potential theme are gathered together. For each theme, the researcher returns to the text in order to “compare, contrast and/or search for missing information that [has] not appeared in the first level of the themes” (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, as cited in Alhojailan, 2012, p. 44). Data display,

described as “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action” (Williamson, 2005, p. 8), is the final step in stage three. Here, all the data that has been organized on the basis of the research questions are entered into conceptual clusters for analysis. This allows the researcher to explore any differences, similarities and interrelationships. It also promotes transparency of the process of analysis that is helpful to readers and researchers alike (Williamson, 2005, p. 9). The fourth stage, the conclusion drawing stage, refers to the publication of a final report, which summarizes the themes and meaning that emerged from the interview data. Kvale (1996) suggests that an interview report should have the following elements:

- An introduction that includes the main themes and contents,
- An outline of the methodology and methods (from designing to interviewing, transcription and analysis).
- The results (the data analysis, interpretation and verification); and
- A discussion. (As cited in Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 42)

The next section explains how the thematic model was applied to the current research study.

### **Application of the Thematic Model to Current Study**

Upon collecting the data, I first organized each interview, and read the notes made during the interview process. Organizing the interviews involved uploading files unto my laptop computer, and properly filing them. A professional transcriber transcribed the data. For the data reduction phase, I then read the transcribed interviews, for accuracy to familiarize myself with the participants’ responses. Following this, I organized the data by research question and looked across all respondents and their answers to identify consistencies and differences. I then jotted down thoughts or ideas creating margin notes as I

read through the data (Creswell, 2013). For the second stage, I reread the data thoroughly to make sense of it. The data was then disaggregated and coded (Creswell, 2009) to identify common and recurrent themes and to distinguish characteristics that enabled the African refugee youth to succeed. Categories were assigned to elements that were similar. For the third stage, common themes were extracted from the categories. These were then arranged together and ordered into issues, themes and sub-themes (Bazeley, 2009). To check for accuracy and congruency between the themes and the purpose of the study and the research questions, I went back to the transcribed data and reviewed the data analysis and themes in order to find a commonality of themes (Bazeley, 2009). The findings comprised the main body of my report.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The concept of vulnerability, according to Bracken-Roche et al. (2017), has held a central place in research ethics guidance since its introduction in the United States Belmont Report in 1979. It reminds researchers and research ethics boards about the potential of exposing research participants to higher risk of harm or wrong. As Jacobsen and Landau (2003) suggest, ensuring scientific rigor in research on vulnerable populations is an ethical responsibility of the researchers because of the importance of the issues and the need for valid data that can inform intervention efforts (p. 156). In Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada have issued a policy statement to help identify ethical issues in the design, conduct and oversight of research and to point the way to arriving at reasoned and ethical responses to these issues. *The Tri-Council Policy Statement* (TCPS2, 2018), mandates specific protocols that address the fair inclusion and equitable

treatment of individuals, groups and communities, whose situation or circumstances make them vulnerable in the context of a specific research project. Article 4.7 of the Policy Statement states: “Individuals or groups whose circumstances may make them vulnerable in the context of research should not be inappropriately included or automatically excluded from participation in research on the basis of their circumstances.”

As a vulnerable community, the ARB students in the study deserved special consideration for research purposes. To ensure the total protection of all participants and in accordance with University regulations, an application for ethics approval was submitted to the Brock University Research Ethics Office Board. Once the REB application was approved, Letters of Invitation (Appendix A) were sent to all potential participants through Refugee Networks and Refugee agencies. What follows is a discussion of the steps taken to guarantee participants’ privacy and safety.

Privacy issues relevant to the participants’ participation, data gathering (interviews), and the storage of information, the issuance and use of the final report were discussed. Research participants were informed via the Informed Participant Consent Letter (Appendix B) that they had the right to withdraw at any point without any consequences and that the information they provided would be confidential and would be recorded, with their consent. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym as part of the confidentiality process. They were informed that all identifying information would be altered, removed, or anonymized so that any identifying features (e.g., country of origin, arrival dates, school and graduation dates) would not be linked to participants. In other words, names and any identifying information would not appear in any verbal or written reports related to this study, (e.g., notes, memos). Instead, anonymous quotations would be used with the research participants’

permission. All written records, audio recordings, notes and other materials related to this research would be kept in separate and protected files (to avoid any possible linking of information and identifiers) on the Principal Student Investigator's personal, password-protected home office computer and in a locked filing cabinet. The data would be retained for a period of seven years and it would be restricted to the Principal Student Investigator and the Faculty Supervisor. The master list linking participants' names and pseudonyms would be destroyed after participants had received a final copy of the research report. Seven years after the completion of the dissertation, all paper material would be confidentially destroyed. Similarly, all digital and electronic materials would be wiped from memory after seven years.

On the issue of safety, it was felt that some participants might feel hesitant based on learned cultural norms about youth-adult relationships, which often cause some hesitation and a reluctance to open up in the company of adults. As Willis (1992) as well as Dixon et al. (2008) suggest, teachers and adults are always right, and they are held in high esteem in the African culture. Respecting, obeying, and learning from elders in the kinship network and community are highly valued. Any deviation from this adult control and domination is accompanied by severe punishment. Despite the possibility that some participants might have adapted to Canadian adult-child cultural norms and their interactions with adults, since they came to the country, protective measures were built into the research design to accommodate ARB students who continued to adhere to their African adult-child relationships. Drawing from CRT's principle of the equalization of voices in the research process, several steps were taken to minimize the power differential between the researcher and the participants.

The first set of measures encompassed strategies to reduce any potential psychological risks and to make the participants feel comfortable with the process. Questions

that may potentially cause any negative reactions or recall were avoided. Procedures were in place to stop all interviews and to give participants time to re-group, when discomfort was expressed or noticed. A list of contact information for Community Counseling and Support Agencies (Appendix C) was provided to participants, at the beginning of each interview.

Place selection, pre-activity instructions, and interviews were intentionally set-up and organized to create a safe and a welcoming environment. To reduce the power imbalance, the researcher established a trust-building relationship during and after recruitment, through relevant self-disclosure (e.g., sharing our common cultural backgrounds, and interests with one another prior to the research activities). Every effort was made to provide opportunities for participants to “voice” their high school experiences by actively listening to them, and by encouraging them to speak freely through the process. Having the freedom to use language in their own way without being corrected, interrupted or forced to organize their ideas into comprehensible segments helped reduce the tension in their interaction with me, an adult figure, who looked like the other adult members in their communities. This empowerment strategy resulted in an effusive accounting of their experiences. Another useful strategy was the emphasis on ARB students’ experiences of success. In contrast to traditional discourses of underachievement and failure, ARB students were encouraged to focus on their positive experiences, their potential, and on the successful strategies they employed to achieve success. Being asked to share their true feelings about their high school experiences was a welcome relief from the negativity experienced in their environments. The invitation to bring their issues into the educational discourse has several benefits for the ARB students.

First, it makes them realize that they have a “voice” in the educational issues that affect them in their schools. Second, having the courage to freely share their views and

experiences with teachers and classmates may lead to improved motivation and better management of their learning (Willms, 2003). This could increase ARB students' self-worth, their sense of belonging, and could encourage them to engage more actively with academic and non-academic activities at their schools. Third, the accrued benefits from this strong enabling environment (Claxton, 2007) may lead to the following: increased classroom engagement for ARB students, improved academic performance, enhanced confidence in their ability to learn how to learn, and greater students' awareness of their strengths and their ability to manage them (Claxton, 2007).

### **Trustworthiness**

Validity and reliability in qualitative studies are determined by trustworthiness. "Trustworthiness enables a naturalistic study to lay claim to methodological soundness" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 131). Trustworthiness for this study was established by researcher triangulation, and member checks (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researcher triangulation involved the researcher reading and re-reading the transcripts several times to gain an accurate understanding of the data. Member checks, however, were the main validation tool. Creswell and Miller (2000) list member checking as one of the validity procedures in qualitative research. In fact, Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314) in a qualitative study because it consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and the narrative account. Similarly, Creswell and Miller (2000) urge researchers to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by "taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account" (p. 127). One important aspect of the member-checking strategy is that it provides participants with the opportunity to have a say

on how their voices and opinions would be the represented (Midgley et al., 2014). For this study, a transcribed copy of each participant's interview(s) and researcher's summary of it were sent to each participant for editing, feedback and comments. Only six of the eight participants provided feedback.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study has several limitations, including time-lapse challenge, absence of pre-migration narratives, and homogenization of participants, representativeness issues, and access challenges. First, the time lapse between the participants' experience of war, as well as their departure from their homeland and the participants' telling of their stories was problematic. Participants hardly touched on their premigration experience and some had difficulty remembering details about their experiences. Another limitation was the failure to attend to the cross-cultural variations within individuals and within countries. In a way, by failing to recognize the individualistic and the collectivist aspects of the ARB students' countries of origin, the study 'homogenized' the participants. As Super and Harkness (2002) note, more careful attention should be paid to the role that culture plays in childhood personality and personality development since this offers important insight into what may be the most important environmental influence on personality trait. Similarly, Sweet et al. (2010) suggest that other Canadian studies (e.g., Abada et al., 2008; Thiessen, 2009) point to countries of origin as "a salient factor in understanding the academic performance of immigrant youth" (p. 7). Access difficulties stemming from logistics (participant recruitment, appropriate venues for interviews, and scheduling) also hampered the process. The inability to recruit from a broader sample beyond the researcher's known circle of acquaintances and colleagues (despite numerous efforts to sign up ARB students from other cities in Ontario)

was a huge limitation. Finally, the absence of an established local community network and list serve for the local refugee community complicated the selection process.

Even though, the focus of the study was the academic success of African refugee-background students who had graduated from high schools in Ontario, student participants were selected from only three specific African countries, Guinea, Liberia, and Sudan. This was done to limit the scope and to ensure the manageability of the research. Consequently, the study provides no grounded reference point for the academic performance of other ARB students in other jurisdictions. As such, findings from the study cannot be generalized.

### **Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter**

In this chapter, I presented an overview of the qualitative design of the study, including details on study participants, research instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures that were used. Relevant ethical issues regarding participants' safety and protection were added and data quality procedures, limitations, and delimitations were included. Chapter 4 starts with an introduction, followed by a profile of participants and the findings from participants' narratives and the key findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the key findings and results from participants' narratives. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that eight African refugee high school graduates (four males and four females) identified as being helpful to their academic success in Ontario high schools. While there is considerable body of literature on the vulnerabilities of refugee students, there is significantly less information that specifically addresses their successes and the ways in which they manage to achieve this level of education. This study addresses this lacuna by highlighting the agency of ARB students and the strategies they employed to overcome their challenges. The research study was guided by the following three questions: (a) What factors do ARB students identify as being helpful to their academic success? (b) What were the challenges they experienced? (c) What coping strategies did they use to address these challenges? The questions allowed the participants to frame the discussion of "academic success" from their own perspectives (Duncan, 2011).

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Participants' responses were interpreted through the lens of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which served as an alternate epistemological framework that placed the counterstories of the refugee students at the centre of the analysis. Too often, their narratives are "overshadowed by majoritarian accounts that often draw upon and perpetuate deficit views of people of color" (Allen, 2015, p. 13). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told. In doing so, CRT "gives voice" to marginalized groups and recognizes that the experiential knowledge of students of colour is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field

of education. In fact, critical race theory views this knowledge as strength and draws explicitly on the students of colours' lived experience (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 473). Analysis of the data revealed that students saw themselves (their "self-regulation"), their heritage ("Africanness") as well as the individuals within their ecological surrounding ("internal and external support"), and the school ethos ("characteristics, beliefs and practices") as significant influences on their academic success. Findings were grouped into three major themes: (a) conceptualization of academic success, (b) factors hindering success (c) coping strategies used to address these challenges. The chapter continues with profiles of the participants, followed by an elaboration on the main findings.

### **Profile of Participants**

In this section, I present a profile of the participants. These descriptions serve as backdrop to an understanding of the character and attributes of the eight African refugee-background students who participated in the study. Four of the participants were male and four were female. Countries represented included Guinea, Liberia, and Sudan. Pseudonyms (Akono, Barika, Gowon, Kenyatta, Lutalo, Makeba, Nana, and Patience) were used to protect the identity of the participants. Participants had all graduated from high school in Ontario. Three participants graduated as Ontario Scholars, that is, they obtained an average of 80% or greater in their six best Grade 12 courses. Additional demographic information about the participants is presented in Appendix G.

#### **Akono**

Akono came to Canada with his parents at age 9 because of the war. According to him, "There was a civil war in [his] country for multiple years, and it was not peaceful; so, [he] came here as a refugee for a better life and a better education system." Schooling was

challenging in Canada. Peers made fun of his English. He felt confused, describing himself as being “in a little bubble while they [peers] were all at a different level than me.” He disliked the independent and the competitive learning style in the classroom, adding. “From my homeland, we were more cooperative; we did things together as a group. So, everything was within a setting of sharing or being together, whereas here everyone is separate, doing everything independently.” Akono graduated with a business degree from one of the Canadian universities in 2018.

### **Barika**

Barika’s situation was a bit different. She lived with her Mom and brother. She came to Canada as child and attended elementary school. As such, she had White students as peers very early in her life. This proved advantageous for her because she felt comfortable with her peers during her early school days. Only her English skills set her back from her Canadian peers. She was placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) class in elementary school and did not move into the “regular” until Grade 7. She described her transition to high school as follows, “I felt more confident like everyone else. I didn’t need help and stuff like that, so, it was different.” Race (aside from the occasional slurs) was not an issue for her, but she was conscious of her Black identity. There were times, though, when she wished she were in a predominantly Black school but, as she added, “I think as the years went on, it didn’t matter to me what colour you were.” In other words, she paid less attention to race, as she grew older. Barika obtained her bachelor’s degree in 2019.

### **Gowon**

Gowon grew up on a farm, helping his parents grow crops. His family fled the civil war in West Africa and was admitted as refugees into Canada. Strangely, Gowon hardly spoke about his parents in his narrative. He never went to school back home, but he was

placed in a secondary school upon his arrival in Canada because of his age. The challenges were obvious. “[School] was amazing, but also challenging; just coming here without speaking any English, without knowing anybody.” He did admit that things got better as the years went by, but at the beginning it was really tough. Learning was a challenge for him because he couldn’t study out of textbooks. Just reading from a book didn’t mean anything. He was the type of “person who liked to learn face to face.” He explained his dislike for school as follows: “I was wearing my African traditional clothes and stuff like that, and kids used to knock on that, they’d laughed at me. Also, I used to bring back home food (African food) because kids made fun of it in the cafeteria.”<sup>5</sup> Although he felt unwelcome in the school, he managed to graduate from high school, and went to college afterwards. He now has a college degree.

### **Kenyatta**

Kenyatta had some prior school before coming to Canada as a refugee with his parents when he was 11 years old. He lived with his parents when he arrived in Canada but had to leave home, at age 19, because of differences in the parent-child relationship. Kenya was the most philosophical of the interviewees. His level of analysis and usage of metaphors and biblical references, when discussing his school experiences, were beyond my expectation, considering the prevalent deficit thinking ascribed to Black youth. For example, in explaining his departure, he stated, “because of the war, nothing was steady and there was no consistency in learning; so, one never knew when class was going to begin or when school was going to end.” Kenya saw education as a process of self-actualization, saying, “when you are educated, you are able to self-actualize yourself” and “education gives you the right

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<sup>5</sup> To give voice to the participants whose narratives have been suppressed during their high school experiences, their words have been presented as they were spoken, with minimal or no alterations whatsoever.

to govern yourself, because you can think, you can plan, and you can move forward, but without education, you don't know what to think." Admittedly, my surprised reaction to his nuanced explanations belied my internalized acceptance of the deficit ideology surrounding Black youth. Arguably, though, my response was a form of marginalization and homogenization through language use. In other words, I did not expect this level of sophistication from Kenyatta, because the language level of the participants interviewed before him had been at the intermediate level. This admission on my part, illustrates how I inadvertently subscribed to the majoritarian negativity about the ability students of colour. On a more positive note, my reaction was a momentary weakness, and it did not distract me from the positive characteristics of Kenyatta. He had an optimistic attitude, as the following biblical quotation attests: "The Bible says mercy before judgment; meaning, before you judge somebody, whatever they have done, you first build them up and then let them know that wherever the challenges or downfalls, they can do better." In short, he believed in the potential of others.

However, behind this positive thinking, there lurked a huge disappointment for the plight of Africans living in Canada. "[As Black people] we come here with the mindset that this country is better" and that things are "going to be better than our life over in Africa; but things are not better." Using the prison metaphor, Kenyatta described the Black existence in Canada as a form of imprisonment, explaining the Black entrapment as follows, "the biggest prison in life is the one you can't see, touch, smell, or taste, because you don't know you're in there. And if you don't know you're a prisoner, how can you think about getting out?" Regrettably, Kenyatta had not attained his college degree by the time that this dissertation was completed.

## **Lutalo**

Lutalo had very little formal education before coming to Canada. He and his family fled their country and came to Canada by way of England. He lived with his mother and sister. Prior to his arrival here, he expressed his romanticized and a magical notion of “America “as follows: “every time they talked about America, I always had the impression that it was paradise.” It was “like you’d press a button, and you’d be served food or [have] a drink or anything like that.” He arrived in August and started school in September. He felt lost in middle school due to the strange and negative environment, stating, “It was very challenging. I had no idea what I was getting myself into” and it was “hard to adapt”. Nevertheless, he described himself as academically successful intimating that the graduated as an Ontario Scholar (a secondary school graduate with an average of 80% or higher in his or her six best ministry-approved Grade 12 courses). He graduated with as a business degree from a local university.

## **Makeba**

Makeba arrived in the winter and was “more fascinated with the lights, the streetlights; there were lights everywhere.” Her family left because of the second civil war in her country. She lived with her father and three sisters. Her limited linguistic skills hindered her progress and her enjoyment at school, but she worked hard to overcome them. Eventually, she graduated with honours from her high school. The following quotation attests to her pride and resilience at graduation: “I wanted to be recognized for my academic accomplishment because that would prove to me personally, that I did it for myself, not for anyone else, not for my mom or for my family, but for me.” In school, she described herself as being in a place she had never been to before. She was in a system that she didn’t know anything about

but as she explained, “my goal was to beat everybody else at the end of 4 years. So, throughout high school, I did a lot of schoolwork.” She never worried about being popular, and she never made it to any of the dances. But she participated in a lot of clubs and volunteered at the YMCA and other places, taking advantage of any volunteering opportunities that came her way, just to improve her communication skills, learning, and her intellectual skills. As she said, “Yes, I joined anything that could possibly help me advance my academics.” Now, Makeba has two degrees, a BA and another one from a community College in Ontario.

### **Nana**

After the war erupted in their West African country, Nana came to Canada with her mother. She was unsure of the family’s immigration status upon their arrival but she self-identified as a refugee for the study. Unlike Gowon, she had gone to school at home before coming to Canada. Nevertheless, school in Canada, was challenging initially until Grade 7 when she found herself. She graduated with 34 credits, four more than the required number needed for graduation. In her native country, Nana, at the age of 9, handled adult responsibilities such as taking care of her sibling and going to the market on her own to buy produce for the family. The driving source behind Nana’s survival was her root culture. She was proud of her African ancestry and encouraged other African youth to be equally proud. “Don’t forget your roots,” she admonished. Nana is in her final year at a university in Ontario.

### **Patience**

On the surface, Patience appears to have adjusted well to her new environments. She arrived at age 6, with her refugee parents and her brother. Her father obtained his BA in Canada. Her experience in school was nerve-racking. She described it as “Oh my god. I was

scared honestly because I didn't speak proper English: I mean, I spoke English, but my English was broken English." She stayed in ESL until Grade 4. By the time she went to high school, she was comfortable with her English language skills. She did experience some bullying in elementary school and in high school, but she never reported the bullying to her parents because she did not want to be a "snitch." She was proud of her Black identity and her African ancestry. As she explained, "We have suffered a lot as Black people; slavery and everything, but honestly, it takes a very strong person to really acknowledge that. Yes, I am Black and I'm very proud of that. I don't have to explain it." Patience completed her studies at the college level.

The next section presents detailed discussions of the findings, namely, (a) students' conceptualization of success, (b) students' perception of challenges, and (c) coping strategies used to address these challenges.

### **Conceptualization of Academic Success**

Since "varying constituents view success, and thereby academic success, differently" (York et al., 2015, p. 4), it was important to decide on a framework to guide the study. Consequently, the study started with respondents' understanding of the term "being academically successful." Initially, participants were hesitant to describe themselves as "academically successful." When probed further, they spoke purposefully and powerfully about their perceptions of academic success in general, their own successes in particular, and how they achieved them. Out of the eight students, only four (Akono, Barika, Lutalo, and Makeba) considered themselves "academically successful." Barika felt good about her grades and Lutalo added that he was awarded an Ontario Scholar Scholarship and "that is why [he] felt like [he] was successful." The participants' emphasis on marks as a measure of success

was consistent with the institutional conceptualizations of academic success, which emphasize the accumulation of symbols, diplomas, degrees, as a marker of academic success (Kuh et al., 2006; Sackeyfio, 2006). One student, however (Gowon) did not see himself as academically successful because he did not obtain the skills and the experience that he needed in high school. He understood “success” as being more than a piece of “paper.” According to him, “going to school and having a paper that says congratulations, you have a degree, that isn’t going to make you successful.” What counted, in Gowon’s view is “having the skills, the life experiences, and the respect from the people.”

In addition to the respect from others, personal satisfaction and personal pride from academic success ranked high in the participants’ narratives. For example, Makeba described her “overwhelmingness” when she completed her studies, “I graduated with honours from high school, so 85 and above, but that comes second to how proud I was of myself to actually graduate.” Similarly, Akono was very proud of how far he had come because when he came to Canada, he had “zero experience in English literature” but, he added, “I learned English, I learned literature, and I pulled those two together and became very good academically by demonstrating how well I could perform in the specific tasks that I was given.” For Barika, her personal gratification came from being the “first person to get a certificate from [her] family.” Of all the responses, however, Makeba’s definition of academic success, as “challenging myself to see how far I could go and making it” underlined Bostock’s (2014) notion that success is very “intensely personal” (p. 71).

The personalization of academic success allowed the respondents to set their own parameters for the attainment of their goals. Barika, for example, believed that “everyone has their goals; so, no one can dictate what other peoples’ academic goals should be.” Kenyatta

echoed Barika's idea, saying, "I feel like everybody has a kind of range that they feel could make them academically successful." This perspectival rubric for measuring academic success (Duncan, 2011) was supported by most of the participants. Put differently, they felt that the degree of satisfaction or a students' comfort level within the learning environment (York et al., 2015, p. 15) as well as "the persistence ... and the personal development" (York et al., 2015, p. 10) of the individual student should be the benchmarks for academic success. Interestingly, participants' insistence on defining success in their own way is supported by Linda King's (one of the U.K. Cambridge professors, whose careers were chronicled in Bostock's *The Meaning of Success*), observation that "success is measured in many ways - the most important of which is how you feel about yourself" (Bostock, 2014, p. 9).

From their comments, it was clear that all participants viewed academic success as an ongoing activity. Having the power to define their own success did not mean that they could rest on their laurels. In their narratives, institutional notions of academic success or graduation as arrival points or endpoints were replaced by the metaphor of a journey, to underline the notion of life-long learning. Makeba's notion of challenging herself to see how far she could go with her education, which she described as her "personal future passport," reflected the theme of movement—a theme that was supported by Lutalo's description of academic success as "whole" and "a journey that keeps going." Similarly, Kenyatta's portrayal of an educated person as "someone who does not stay in one place" demonstrated that success (learning) is ongoing and does not stop at graduation.

Kenyatta expanded on the life-long process of learning by citing Leonardo da Vinci, who as "an artist, doctor, architect, and a painter" was an example of a person who "never stopped learning." In Kenyatta's opinion, "an educated person embarks on a journey to learn

about his [her] surroundings, to learn about the cause and effect of situations, to learn about himself or herself.” This learning allows the individual “to unfold himself [sic], to learn all the scenarios that are going on. It’s not about math, science, physics, it is about learning all these things, and how they can be applied to life.”

This elastic and expandable notion of academic success surprised me because as students, imbued with the colonial banking system of education (Freire, 1970) with its emphasis on quantification of knowledge and the acquisition of symbols, I expected the participants to blindly accept marks as indicators of academic success and the acquisition of a diploma, degree or graduation as endpoints to the academic journey. Instead, all the participants viewed academic success as “what you do with that diploma” (Kenyatta). In the words of Akono, “graduation alone is not enough; just because you passed doesn’t mean you have actually achieved something in life.” Like Akono, many of the participants felt that success should lead to something tangible. Lutalo, for example, emphasized the practical application of success stating, “Success is applying what you learn.” Kenya, in his metaphorical way, used a bridge to stress the link between academic success and the “broader aspects of life.” As he explained it, “the architect who graduates, has not done anything yet; so, his [sic] success is not complete until he constructs the first building.” Put another way, academic success has a serviceable or a social purpose and until you accomplish that goal, you only have “a piece of paper” in your hands upon graduation (Gowon interview).

For many of the participants, the serviceable component of their academic success was their commitment to their immediate family. In a way, they believed that their successes should have a social purpose. Gowon and Lutalo wanted to use their success “to change the

lives of everyone in [their] families.” Specifically, Gowon hoped that his success would convince his young daughter that “[he] did do something good for himself.” Makeba also explained why she achieved success as follows:

I wanted to please my Mom and to make up for my brother’s poor performance in school. So, I worked so hard to succeed. I wanted to do everything I possibly could to make her proud, so it became my personal goal to achieve in school.

While others focused on families, Kenyatta’s reasons for achieving success went beyond his family. He held individuals who used their success to benefit the community, in high esteem because “at the end of the day, riches and fame, they go away, but what you do to change your community stays.” Furthermore, “helping others, makes you feel good inside and it makes you feel like you are part of something higher.” Kenyatta went on to explain his investment in the welfare of his community as follows: “Individual success weakens the group” because “you can be successful as an individual here and there, but as a group, we’re collapsed [sic] and we become joined. Collective thinking strengthens us all.” The emphasis on the collective rather than individual success was equally important to Akono. Using the team concept, he explained that in a team “you’re treated as one, as a united front. If one person is late, the entire team is late. So, the mindset and the way things are seen are much different. If one person makes a mistake, it affects everyone.” Unfortunately, he added, “The classroom base here is all individual. They teach you how to function as an individual. But when you’re in a team base, they teach you how to be together collectively.”

This altruistic aspect of academic success was significant in two ways. First, it proved that despite the claim by researchers (e.g., Konig & de Regt, 2010; Theron & Theron, 2013) of an apparent loss of community bonding, cultural norms, kingship, spirituality, collective

beliefs, and practices, when Africans leave behind their relational, interdependent, and collective cultures and move into individualistic and competitive new environments, the participants in the study kept their traditional values and norms. They continued to align their personal goals and successes with their familial and communal obligations. Second, participants demonstrated their ability to control their lives by deciding what and how they wanted to do or could do with their academic success.

In summary, participants' understanding of "academic success" was expressed as having a sense of personal competence, contribution to one's community and earning the respect of others. Collectively then, it was clear that they had evolved from the banking system of education (Freire, 1970) which prioritizes and quantifies knowledge as markers of academic success. The following statement from Barika is a strong testament of this evolution. "I don't think academic success is about grades because it shouldn't be about grades all the time, because you can test really badly, but you can still be a very smart and educated person." Despite their positive views on academic success, evidence from their narratives pointed to numerous factors that hindered the desire of participants to realize their academic goals. These challenges are discussed in the following section.

### **Factors Hindering Success**

In describing the barriers (the terms factors, barriers and challenges are used interchangeably) before them, participants highlighted their initial admiration and expectations for life in Canada and in Canadian schools. Their expectations did not match the realities they faced. Lutalo, for example, described the experience as a paradise: "So, coming here, I had really high expectations of how the lifestyle would be here, and I was really excited, 'cause I thought I would be in heaven, pretty much." Similarly, Akono felt that his

“potential could be reached in a more efficient way and more effectively in Canada.” For Kenyatta, school in Canada was “consistent, without any unnecessary distraction” unlike schooling in his home country where “schooling was a very on and off thing because of the war.” Despite their optimistic feelings, participants quickly realized that there was a huge disparity between their expectations and the reality on the ground. Akono’s description of “being in a bubble” captured the pre- and post-migration dissonance experienced by many of the participants. In his words, “Coming in as an immigrant, I wasn’t too accustomed to the things that were here, the activities, and all the things like that. So, I was in a little bubble while they were all at a different level than me.” The frustrations they encountered ushered in a series of challenges. These perceived challenges are examined under the following headings, discrimination and racism, academic challenges and exclusion, language discrimination, incongruent learning style, reduced classroom participation, low teacher expectation, reduced sense of belonging, dissonant home environments.

### **Discrimination and Racism**

Several refugee youths spoke about the discrimination they faced in their schools. Interestingly, however, only two of the participants mentioned race in their narratives. Lutalo made a passing reference to it stating, “the race thing, that was overwhelming for me because society kinda looks at race in a negative way here in Canada.” In contrast to him, Barika declared, “race was not an issue in high school. I did not notice it and I was not aware of my Blackness in high school.” However, Barika grudgingly acknowledged its presence admitting that, “it could be an issue in the future for me.” The absence of a robust discussion of race did not mitigate the negative experiences of the participants. With the exception of Barika and Patience, who arrived as children, the rest of the refugee students’ experiences supported one of the CRT’s tenets that racism is not aberrant but rather normal and omnipresent in

school environments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They reported racist and discriminatory acts, ranging from physical (as in the case of Patience, who was bullied by her White classmates after school), to microaggressive acts, described as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66).

Gowon and Lutalo’s high school experiences were illustrative of the hurtful and demeaning microaggressions the participants encountered. Recalling the mockery, he endured, Gowon added,

I was wearing my African traditional clothes and stuff like that, and kids used to knock on that, they’d laugh at me. I used to bring back my African food back home from school because kids would make fun of my African food in the cafeteria. It made me feel like, whoa, I was not welcome here.

Gowon’s experience is supported by Kanu’s (2008) report of anecdotal evidence in Canada and in the United States of discrimination against new refugees from members of the host culture “because of the stigma of Islam, often made conspicuous by the wearing the hijab (the Moslem head scarf), or fasting during the month of Ramadan, or finding secluded places for ritual prayers during the day.” Although the target groups here were Muslims, it can be extrapolated that a person, whose attire, or food differs from the norm, could be subjected to this same abuse. Gowon’s experience supports this conclusion. For Lutalo, the condescending and discriminatory behaviour of his peers, as evidenced by the “lowering of their language” when addressing him, was extremely painful: “When peers lowered their language to help me understand, I felt pretty bad, sad, and depressed about the whole thing. I also felt dehumanized.” Although Lutalo’s peers may have acted with the best of intentions, they were completely unaware of how their words, actions, and attitude unintentionally

discriminated against him.

Other participants (Gowon, Akono, Lutalo, and Makeba) spoke about their invisibility in the classroom and on how the mockery of their accents (Lutalo and Gowon) demeaned them. Makeba's account of her exclusion from group work due to her peers' refusal to include her is illustrative of the microaggressive behaviours present in the school. The mockery of the accents of ARB students was so pervasive that it forced the ARB students to internalize the presumed inferiority of their language use. Hearing Patience apologize for her "improper use of the English language" and Akono admit that some of the words he spoke did not "come out right" demonstrate how people of colour often co-opt other peoples' presumed negative stigmas about their self-worth and turn into their own (Reid, 2017). Another example of this dilemma is Lutalo's reference to himself as "just an immigrant kid" (because his peers criticized his accent); even though he felt that he had a better grounding in the English language than his peers. Corrigan, (1998), describes this self-devaluation, shame, and withdrawal, which is triggered by applying negative stereotypes to oneself as a form of "internalized stigma." Similarly, Mason and Rieser (1990) explain it as the way, "we [those who are oppressed] harbor inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears, and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives" (p. 27).

Patience also shared four stories that made her feel uncomfortable as a Black student in her school. One was the differential treatment from school administrators when her appeals for help regarding the bullying she endured, were dismissed, because the incidents occurred off campus. The second was the number of times her peers asked, "Oh, you're African? Do you have Ebola, too"? In the third one, she described an incident at her school during the celebration of Black History Month:

I remember this one time we watched a movie called *Blood Diamond*, or we were talking about slavery or something, and everyone just looks at you. It happens all the time when you're the only Black student in the class. During Black History Month, the topic comes up, and everyone's continues to look at you. This makes you feel so uncomfortable and you're just like, why am I being put on the spot right now?

It is a "horrible thing" she added, "Because it's in your head and you're like, I get it. I'm the only Black person here." In the last episode, Patience referenced H&M's image, which appeared on the company's online store showing a Black child model wearing a hooded sweatshirt (Stack, 2018) that said, "coolest monkey in the jungle" and added, "I just feel like that Black thing and slavery, it's something that's always kept in the back of our minds. We are reminded that we went through it, and it will never go away." Even though the above incident occurred off campus, Patience related it to what was happening in her classroom and in her school.

When participants were asked if they identified as Black, all participants responded positively; yet they all had different reactions when asked to explain what "being Black" meant to them. Kenyatta had the most negative reaction to "being Black." First, he explained his dislike for the word "Black" and second, he shared his feeling about "being Black":

The only reason I say Black man is because I was taught to say Black man. It's something that was, pretty much, I would say, for lack of better words, was indoctrinated into me. It basically started when I came into Canada. From where I am, you call people by where they are from. Ethiopians are Ethiopians. Sudanese are Sudanese. Liberians are Liberians, you know? Guyanese are Guyanese. You don't refer to them as Black, or purple, or light skinned. But when you come into a part of the world that is not of your own, people in that area, give you a title, they label you.

So, in a way, you feel like you have to conform to their way of seeing life, which is, of course, an illusion. It's just something that you are trained or forced to accept.

Being seen and being made "Black" in Canada was a painful experience for Kenyatta.

Explaining why skin colour was never a problem back home, Kenyatta added,

It felt kind of degrading in a way. Not in a sense that I don't like the colour Black.

Black is the most powerful colour. It absorbs every other colour. But it was because I was now defined by something different. I mean, when your parents give birth to you, one of the things that they do to define you is they give you a name. And you cling to that name because that's what defines you, but if society gives you a name or a title, you could be a lawyer, or you can be a criminal. These titles have a psychological effect on you. Nobody wants to be a criminal.

After a momentary pause to recollect his thoughts and continued:

The thing is, to be honest, even for myself, I did not know what that term Black meant because, it's a stereotypical aspect of this side of the world that has been forced on let's just say, Black people or Mexican people. The society, the culture has a certain view on a particular ethnicity, and it affects us psychologically because we feel as though we are inferior in some sense because the world looks at us that way, and especially for those of us who are not educated enough to self-govern themselves, you know? And that's what education does.

Again, Kenyatta employed a prison metaphor to concretize the challenges he faced as a Black person. Explaining why, in his opinion, many Black people are unaware of their own imprisonment, he added,

The biggest prison is life is the one you can't touch, and you can't smell, and you can't taste because you don't know you're in there. The fact that you don't know why

you are in there is what makes it a prison. If you know that you are a prisoner, you can deal with it. But if you don't know that you're a prisoner, how can you ever think about getting out?

In contrast to Kenyatta, other participants, such as Makeba, reacted differently to “being Black. As she proudly exclaimed,

I want people to look beyond my race, to be able to recognize me as a human being, as an individual who has her own mind and can make her own choices. I am not just in a box; I am not what the media labels us to be. Besides, I am a freeborn individual and I'm nobody's slave. Black, that's not my name. I'm not going to give this individual the power to upset me.

Patience was equally proud of her Black identity: “I'm very proud. I love being ‘Black’ she said, and “I think it is the only thing that makes me feel different, and I like that a lot.” Nevertheless, she did acknowledge having self-imposed challenges about being Black, admitting that,

I always feel like I have to work 10 times harder, not because of what everyone's doing, but in my head, just because of everything we've been through, as Black people. In my head it's just like, ok, I know I'm in class and I know I'm doing well but I still feel like I have to push myself and work 10 times harder.

All of the narratives above indicate how race, a construct that was hardly discussed or taken seriously in their countries of origin, began to take on a different significance in the lives of the ARB students. Not only were they defined by this construct but surviving the discrimination, racism, and “othering” and exclusion engendered by this construct also became a challenge for the participants.

### **Academic Challenges and Exclusion**

Academic exclusion was the next factor identified as a challenge to the participants'

academic success. This consisted of tensions experienced earlier in their English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Of all the participants, only Barika had a positive feeling about her ESL class, saying “nobody ever made fun of me or anything like that about ESL.” Other participants were dissatisfied with the program. Akono felt “caged and unproductive” because he was “not really doing that much in the class.” Similarly, Lutalo described the class as “degrading” adding, “I didn’t want to be in the ESL program. I wanted to be a part of the people.” For Kenyatta, his anger was directed, not at the class, but at the disrespect of ESL students by the regular students. As he explained, “they [regular students] actually saw us as a different entity” because the ESL classes were housed in portables “which made us [ESL students] feel like we were not part of the school.” Makeba’s views on ESL were more restrained and ambivalent. First, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the classes, saying,

I was very eager to learn so I wanted to *escape* from the ESL classroom. I wanted to get into the mainstream classes. I wanted to challenge myself. I felt that I was capable of doing so much more than what I was being given in ESL. I guess I just wanted to be a regular high school student.

Then, she praised her ESL teacher because “she was approachable” and she “pushed me and tutored me even after the transition to regular classes.”

The positive and negative experiences notwithstanding, Makeba’s reference to tutoring belied the lack of preparation in the transition from the ESL class to regular classes. The transition was stressful for some of the participants. Makeba, for example, described it as “terrifying” and Akono characterized it as “overwhelming.” Reflecting on how unprepared he was, he added,

It was definitely not comfortable. It was like me being in a comfort zone and then going to somewhere that is not as comfortable as the other place was. It was hard. I

was tossed into academic classes that were by far more difficult. In a sense, based on my ESL level, it was hard to understand what was going on.

Other academic challenges ranged from inappropriate placements. Akono and Patience, who were displeased with Canadian assessment practices that relied on students' ages (rather than their level of education) as a rubric for class placement. They were equally dissatisfied with different approaches to learning - different from what they were used to back home. Akono objected to being "put in a different grade than what he was in back home" and Patience added,

[They] need to understand that we're not like that, in my country, we don't do grade by age, right? It's like, how smart you are. So, you could be a 6-year-old girl in grade five or something because that's how it worked back home.

Sometimes, the misdiagnosis of their abilities and the class misplacements, delayed their progress. Patience described the situation as follows: "Sometimes, you are placed in courses you don't need. By the time you begin to understand how things work, it might be late; and you have to start everything thing all over again."

Academic exclusion also played out in the form of infrequent participation in class due to language discrimination, incongruent learning styles, diminished interaction with peers in group formation and in cooperative learning activities, low teacher expectations, discomfort with the racial identity of teachers and counsellors, and inadequate academic support both at home and at school.

### **Language Discrimination**

Even though all participants, with the exception of Gowon (who had spent most of his life with his family on their farm back home in Africa before migrating to Canada), had a

smattering of English before coming to Canada, participants identified linguistic barriers as one of the key challenges in the pursuit of their educational goals. Of particular concern was the mockery of the participants' accents. As Akono explained,

Some of the words I kept pronouncing didn't come out right [laughter]. Even now, I still have an accent. If you speak multiple languages, as long as you don't get rid of that accent when speaking English, it will still be there, and people will laugh at you.

Similarly, Lutalo commented on the disparaging comments about his accent, despite his apparent good grounding in the English language, saying, "A lot of them [peers] kind of looked at me as that immigrant kid who just came. Even though I knew better English, I still had an accent, and they kinda of like picked on that." When asked to explain what "picking on" meant, he added, "For others, hearing me with the accent, it makes them think that I'm not fully knowledgeable in the English language, and so they kinda of communicated differently with me, not the same as they would amongst themselves." Regrettably, instead of speaking from a position of strength, Lutalo allowed the oppressor to define him.

Unlike Akono and Lutalo, Makeba's reaction to the perceived language inadequacy was more sarcastic. According to her,

There is always going to be someone who just thinks they know everything, or they are better than you because your English back then was not the best or you just didn't answer questions the way they expected you to answer them.

Makeba's response underlies the link usually made between English language proficiency and intelligence. For example, research by Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) has demonstrated how the speakers' accent impacts their credibility. Munro (2003) as well as de Souza et al. (2016) has also conducted studies on how accents are viewed as a major

identifier that separates newcomers from the residents in the country. Similarly, a report by Creese and Kambere (2003) provides a clear demonstration of how language or more specifically accents are used as tools for domination and social exclusion. In a focus group report, entitled “What Colour is Your English” the authors provide an insight into the racialization of African accents in a Vancouver suburb. In the report, 12 women of African descent in Vancouver recounted the discriminatory responses they received as they tried to use their “good English” (p. 2). As one woman put it:

When you come here, you come from a continent or a country that was originally colonized by the British. You had your education; you were taught by the British. You speak your good English, but somehow they ask you “What Colour is Your English? (Focus Group, August 1997, in Creese & Kambere, p. 3)

A further evidence of this linguistic discrimination is provided by Adebajji et al. (2014), who postulate that, language is seen as the entry point of negotiation, and when the level of linguistic integration is low, this “perceived language inadequacy might be the barrier that inhibits the interaction of immigrant children and their peers” (p. 514). There were other disadvantages as well.

### **Incongruent Learning Style**

The lack of specific direction from their teachers and counselors was another major obstacle. Coming from the banking system of education, defined as the “act of depositing [knowledge], in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1970, p. 53), with teachers determining what is to be learned and forcing that knowledge into the heads of their unwitting students, the participants expected their Canadian teachers to lead the way. As Patience explained, “coming from a different

background, you understand things differently, and then you come here, and you don't know how things work." Three others, Gowon, Akono, and Makeba, voiced similar concerns over the teaching and learning styles in their classrooms. For Gowon (who had never been to school), his learning style was not compatible to the Canadian way of learning. "I wasn't used to it," he said, adding: "I can't study out of textbooks. I don't understand what is in the textbooks. Just reading from a book doesn't mean anything. I'm the type of person who likes to learn face-to-face." Akono also shared his dislike for the competitive and individualistic approach to learning in Canada. Instead of the classroom environment being "a single entity" where everyone was treated the same, he noted that his peers preferred to act individually. You could have your friends here and there, in school but by the end of the day, he added, "you were all separate and you acted independently." Akono then provided a glimpse of the learning environment back home:

From my homeland, we do things together in a group, or we share things within a group. So, everything is within a setting of sharing or being together, whereas here everyone's separate, doing everything independently. So, in the classroom setting, it's almost like an individual setting, whereas in the sports setting, you're treated as a group with a united goal.

The absence of a collaborative and encouraging environment coupled with the fear of being mocked made some of the participants feel invisible in their classrooms.

### **Reduced Classroom Participation**

Lutalo's words, "I still had an accent, and they kind of [sic] mocked me even though I knew better English" underlined the racialized assumptions about language proficiency, intelligence, and the reduced classroom participation. Gowon had a similar experience. As he

explained,

I wasn't opening up in class. I had good ideas but I wasn't sharing them with others because I didn't know how they were going to respond or how they were going to take it; whether they were just going to laugh and just turn their backs on me. The fear of being mocked shut me down.

Interestingly, Fielding and Rudduck (2002) describe a similar situation encountered by Mitra (2001) in an American school where a group of working-class students felt powerless in their classrooms because of their perceived inability to speak and be conversant with the language of the establishment (the language being used in the school). This is a classic case of how the dominant linguistic capital is normalized to the exclusion any other way of speaking.

The link between language proficiency and cognitive ability is well established. For example, research studies by Jones (2010) and Bauer et al. (2006) argue that good language ability is crucial to the development of critical thinking skills. Others (e.g., Falahati, 2003; Sandel, 1998) assert that language, thinking, and learning are inextricably tied together. Similarly, Cummins's (1984) threshold hypothesis argues that "bilingual" children, who demonstrate a low level of proficiency in one or both languages, may be more likely to experience negative outcomes. The evidence above notwithstanding, the ARB students' narratives of success deconstructed the purported link to diminished outcomes due to language inadequacy. However, they did acknowledge that their low fluency in English limited their ability to participate in classroom activities. For example, Lutalo was afraid of being seen as "dumb or something" because he did not know "how to speak properly." In the words of Kenyatta,

You feel that you are not good enough; so, your participation is limited, you don't

raise your hand; and if you're not raising your hand all the time, it gives you this stress in your mind that you're not good enough.

Akono also explained his reticence in class as follows: "I wasn't connected to the people because we didn't have a common language that we could connect to, and one of the most important ways that people connect is with language." Other participants recounted unpleasant experiences, when called upon by the teacher. Patience recalled her embarrassment because she "spoke a different kind of English." "Oh my god," she exclaimed. "I was scared honestly, because for once I didn't speak properly. I mean, I spoke English, but our English was broken English."

### **Low Teacher Expectations**

Given, their low proficiency in English, it was not surprising that the participants were framed by the deficit ideologies usually reserved for marginalized youth. As James and Brathwaite (1996) explained, "the social construction of Black students, as academically incompetent, operated as a barrier to the realization of their educational goals" (p. 16). Participants reported the dismissive attitudes of some of their teachers. Akono's disappointment with his counsellor's negative reaction to his desire to become an engineer was illustrative of a teacher's ingrained low expectations for marginalized students. As Akono explained,

I've always wanted to do engineering, but my guidance counselor was always discouraging me, because he said the language barrier was the number one obstacle. He kind of figured I wouldn't be successful in that field. Basically, he was saying that he didn't think I would be capable of doing it.

Nana also recounted her experience of teacher bias as follows:

For the elementary one, it was very difficult because I felt like I was behind most students. At least, that's what they kept telling me: you're behind most students. So, I felt that I had to catch up even though we did more work than the regular kids.

Sometimes it was discouraging because they would tell us that we were not going to get a good grade. At times, they laughed at us when we misspelled words and they would look at us like we were dumb. So, yeah, it was very challenging.

The research on the detrimental effect of low teacher expectations on student outcomes is overwhelming (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Dee, 2004; Dei, 2008; Oates, 2003). Evidentially, lower-class students of colour suffer the most academically from low teacher expectations (James & Turner, 2017). As Avery and Walker (1993) indicate, "Teacher perceptions and expectation of racial minority students are formed before they reach the classroom" (as cited in Agyepong, 2010, p. 43). Additionally, scholars and educators (Abdi, 2005; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008; Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016) have argued that many of the learning inequities faced by minoritized students are attributable to different assumptions, attitudes, low teacher expectations, and teaching techniques. The participants' narratives demonstrated how teacher expectations or lack thereof influenced their class engagement. Arguably, there is research on how the White teacher factor impacts Black student success in the class (e.g., James & Turner, 2017; Solomona et al., 2005). However, given the acknowledged distinctness of the ARB students, very little is known about how White teachers' racial identity affects African refugee-background students.

### **Reduced Sense of Belonging**

Considering the totality of all the above stressors, it is not surprising that the participants experienced a reduced sense of belonging in their schools. Participants shared

their frustration with the ESL label and their sequestration in specific “wings” in their school buildings. They felt disempowered and alienated with no sense of belonging to their school. In fact, the emotional, psychological, and, to some extent, physical effects of racism on Blacks are well known. For example, Carter’s (2007) study of *Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury* presented cogent examples of the emotional stressors caused by racial and discriminatory encounters. These negative experiences left the participants with feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem, as well as a constant feeling of uncertainty about their self-esteem (Sue et al., 2008). Kenyatta’s description of his frustration as he tried to fit into his new environment is illustrative of the emotional strain he faced:

Well, for me, it is very frustrating because, even to this point, I don’t really have a friend because a friend is someone who can really stand as an equal to you in all things, but the people that I have, I feel like I have to dumb myself down to be around them in order to have fun. But whenever I hang out with them and I sit down and I see what I want and what I need, they don’t align with one another. The things that I do with my friends, I don’t appreciate them. I don’t like them.

This fractured peer-relationship was often accompanied by a sense of uncertainty, and disempowerment. As Kenyatta explained,

First of all, it makes you feel lonely because if you don’t have people that you can fully express yourself to or things you can relate to, that can put you down. Also, when you see that your friend or somebody who is Black and he has a White friend and they’re having fun and this and that, but he, because they’re having fun, he doesn’t take the time to come and say, “he’s my brother” and that makes me very sad.

The consequences of this loneliness and disempowerment were obvious. For Kenyatta, it led

to what he implicitly described as self-loathing in his high school experience. “Back home,” he explained,

I was comfortable there because in a way, there was no kind of self-loathing in your learning process. You were learning with people at the same level as you or other people that you viewed as the same as you. Over there, there was no race or segregation. Nobody said, “Oh, White people are smarter than Black people” or “this guy is smarter than this guy.” No. It was not like that. The worst thing one could hear was, “this guy has got a better lifestyle” or “he’s richer than you.” That’s it. But other than that, everybody was equal in the classroom, you kind of felt like you had the same potential, and the same chance to be whatever you wanted to be. But in countries where we have Black people, when you travel, to Russia, America, to wherever, you always have this sense of not belonging there. It might be subtle. It might not be straight to your conscious, but it’s still working on your foundations. Akono expressed a similar uneasiness about his status in Canada, saying, “coming to this country makes us feel like we belong but technically it is not ours. The people here are the *core foundation of the country* and *we are foreigners*.”

Kenyatta described the negative long-term effects of this diminished sense of belonging as follows:

A lot of things work in your self-conscious that you’re not aware of and affect you over time. It is what is called an inferiority complex. It is established in us as Black people when we leave our homeland and come into foreign places where, even when we land there, we feel the place is better than our own. When we do this, we start to deny ourselves. We might not know it right away, but it is a function that starts to

take place inside of you, and then the next thing you see, you start to pull the short straw. You start to sell yourself short, you know, because you feel like these people are more entitled to better things than you are. It's a subtle thing, but once you sit down and reflect upon how is affecting you, you begin to see the patterns and the cause and the effect. That is when the inferiority complex comes up.

Makeba also spoke about her loneliness in the “regular class” and of her experience of rejection when a colleague refused to work together with her: “Sometimes, I had to work alone since others refused to work with me; at times, I actually did school projects on my own ‘cause nobody wanted to work with the new kid in the classroom.” Patience also spoke about having few friends:

My circle of friends was really small. I was friends with Black people, like Nigerians or with Black people in general, because I connected with them more. We ate the same food, and we were more similar. We understood each other better and we shared the same joke.

The reduced sense of belonging also manifested itself in the participants’ social distancing with their peers, their Caucasian teachers, and with other Blacks. Makeba recounted a terrible experience with a White student who was supposed to help her. He was impatient and acted as if

His time was being wasted. From that time onwards, I never asked for help from my peers, because I just felt like they would not help me the way I wanted to be helped.

So, I preferred going to the ESL teacher instead of asking my peers.

Another aspect of the reduced sense of belonging was the participants’ inability or discomfort in interacting with teachers from different racial backgrounds. Describing her

uneasiness with Caucasian teachers, Makeba said,

I was more comfortable talking to them [African American teachers] than talking to a Caucasian person. Because when I start talking to Caucasian teachers, it is as if they don't understand what I'm saying, then it's just going to sound like a bunch of mumbo jumbo.

Makeba also regretted not having a teacher who looked like her. As she explained,

I don't remember ever having an African American teacher at my school when I went to high school. I don't remember it. It was all Caucasian teachers. Being that young, and as a young African, if I had seen an African person, that would have been great.

Patience's exuberance while working with a Nigerian teacher who organized a Black History event at her school helped explain Makeba's craving for, and disappointment in not having, a Black teacher:

She made me feel really good because we were doing something and actually being acknowledged. All the school, everyone would be so excited to come see us perform. We were wearing different African attires and it was so exciting. It was crazy and I was like, we're doing something, and people are actually noticing. I really enjoyed that.

Patience's positive reaction to a Black teacher is worth noting. Indeed, earlier and later research studies (e.g., Carr, 1997; James, 1994; James & Turner, 2017) have demonstrated the important role that Black teachers play in the socialization of students and in student outcomes. For example, Carr (1997) lamented the absence of Black teacher role models, saying, "Although student diversity in Ontario has greatly increased in recent times, racial

composition of the province's teaching corps has altered only slightly, remaining predominantly White" (p. 69). Similarly, James and Turner (2017) shared Black youths' disappointment of having only one or two teachers who looked like them in their high school experience. Another study of Canadian teacher workforce diversity suggests that "the number of elementary and secondary teachers and school counselors of colour have not kept pace with the phenomenal growth in the number of citizens of colour, and by extension, the number of students of colour" (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 596). The overrepresentation of White teachers is evidenced by a 2018 study on Ontario teacher diversity gap which found that, despite the 2017 publication of *Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan*, a document that provided support for school administrators in their recruitment of more diverse teachers—only "9 per cent of elementary school teachers and 10 per cent of secondary school teachers are racialized" (Abawi, 2018, p. 4).

The reduced sense of belonging was not limited to the classroom. Participants pointed to the fractured and strained relationships with their parents, after their arrival in Canada, as a contributory factor in the challenges they faced. They expressed their discomfort with the unchanging behaviour and the overbearing practices of their parents and elders. As Akono explained, "There are certain things back home that individuals don't do. For example, when your parents are talking, you don't say anything. You just listen. Here, it's different. With my Canadian friends, when their parents talk, they are yapping." For the ARB students, their parents' inflexibility and unwillingness to adapt to new ideas exacerbated the participants' reduced sense of belonging. Quoting Akono,

It is difficult for the older people to change when they come to Canada. It's harder for them because, as I told you, when you are old, you have more fundamental things

installed in your head, and it's hard to eradicate those things. They have core values from their countries that cannot be erased. It is culture based.

Similarly, Barika's frustration arose from her parents' blind attachment to their traditional way of living: "It's actually pretty challenging when your parents have such old ways, 'cause they come here and instead of automatically changing into this new culture, they stay the same." Faced with this new reality, Kenyatta explained the frictions caused by the fractured parent-child relationship as follows:

With family, like I said, when Black people come to this country, a lot changes, home changes, home situation change, the kids, mother and father also change. They no longer bond together. Everyone begins to live apart. In a sense, parents are no longer able to guide us and keep us in line. When the chain is no longer connecting, it's not a chain anymore. So, there were difficulties at home because of that.

Kenyatta was equally critical of "the harshness of the elders in the African community." He justified his reluctance to interact with them as follows: "There are many elders, but I am reluctant to approach them; they are harsh! Too direct! They showed little flexibility and understanding when giving advice. They were unsympathetic and authoritarian." Gowon expressed similar reservations about community members and elders:

No leaders. No communication. No help. I've called out to them. I've asked for help, but they are all judgmental. They never want to put the effort in. They never want to see you become someone better than them. They just want to see your downside.

Akono's view of his community's lack of structure and inability to work collaboratively was even more devastating. Pointing to the absence of an African community in his area, he added,

Every community, let's just say whatever country you're from, has a base in Canada. They have Ukrainian, Russian communities, right? They have programs to help those individuals who come. Africans? What core foundation do they have to help them integrate into this society? We have none. And the community we have here, they are all scattered. They all think they can do things separately or individually to achieve something, but that is all false premises. It cannot happen. If they all came together and united as one and created something, a core value that all the African immigrants could use as a platform that would be very helpful.

It was clear from the participants' narratives that they needed and wanted an adult presence in their lives. However, the clash of cultures and expectations, created unstable environments that was not conducive to the educational success of some participants. When they reached out for family and community support, they realized that the familiar family construct, with its established parental, and filial responsibilities and expectations, was no longer tenable in Canada. As Kenyatta explained, the arrival in Canada transformed the family and the "chain" was broken. The *chain* referred to the accepted traditional roles and the male hierarchy in his home country. In the new country, children became more independent and less reliant on their parents. Women, such as Kenyatta's mother, felt liberated. They gained confidence in their own ability and started adopting new roles, such as going to work and becoming more self-reliant and assertive. These newly found family configurations broke the chain of command and wrestled power away from the male patriarch, the father, in the family. Faced with this sudden status diminution—loss of authority and control—some fathers were unwilling to change their ways. Incidentally, the contradictory aspect of the desire to be free and the adherence to African values cannot be ignored. On the one hand, the children and their mothers want to be free and independent. At the same time, both parents and to some

extent, the children want to preserve certain aspects of their African values—their pride in their heritage and their collective consciousness. Herein lies the double-consciousness or the complex feeling of two-ness, multiple identities, competing thoughts struggling to “occupy one place” (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015, p. 56).

### **Dissonant Home Environments**

Left mostly on their own, with their parents struggling to manage their own lives, with no love and with little time for parental interaction and guidance, Kenyatta developed “this sense of freedom to do what [he] wanted to do, rather than what [he] needed to do.” For him, freedom translated into “hanging out with my friends, drinking, and smoking.” He saw this behaviour as a way to block out loneliness, unhappiness, and struggles. As he explained, “when I was with my friends, my mind was not on what was going on.” Similarly, Barika shared her quandary:

You want to change but you also want to please your parents. You want to fit into this new culture, but you also don’t want to disappoint your parents and disobey their ways and the way they were brought up.

Kenyatta’s metaphor of “blowing in the wind like a leaf” summed up the in-betweenness and uncertainty experienced by the participants:

You become like a leaf blowing in the wind. You are no longer functioning under your law or under your way of thinking. Some outside force is now controlling you. When you lose control, we’re no longer in charge. It is the friends who are in control, the TV that is in control. It is what other people think is cool that is in control, and all these things are driving us like the wind *blowing a leaf*. It just takes us anywhere it wants to go, and by the time we realize what is happening, it is too late.

The instability caused by the dissonant home environments in which the African

refugee students existed forced them to lead a double life, trying to balance home (the old) and the school (the new). Barika's quandary regarding her allegiance to her parents and her desire to fit into her new culture compelled her "to act in two different ways." As she recounted,

My mom didn't let us go out for Halloween because it was against our cultural, religious norms. So, she's like, stay home. You're not going out, but my friends are like, Oh! Come out with us! So, I would hide my clothes in my friend's house and go out there and dress up.

Similarly, Makeba's words echoed the dilemma of double consciousness, the Du Bois' (1903) notion of "one's identity being trapped in an already framed discourse in which one's value of oneself is defined [from the exterior] by others" (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015, p. 57). According to Makeba, "when you are home, there are certain rules you have to abide by, but at school, you are trying to fit into that Canadian way of life." To help explain her point, she told the story of a Muslim girl she knew:

She was Muslim, and she wore hijab. Her father would drop her off in the morning and she would be all dressed up, and the moment her father would leave, she would run to the bathroom, completely change her entire outfit, so there's that double life going on.

Sometimes, the desire to "fit-in" was a painful experience. As Kenyatta explained,

People have this view of you, and sometimes because of your need to fit in, you let your guard down, and you let their view of you become your reality. It's like, you'll do anything to fit in with the group now, because you don't want to be alone. You see your own *kind* [Black people] spreading around, pretending, and kind of trying to escape from this stereotyping, you know? And you now, regardless of what you want, you feel

like you've got to try and fit in, and sometimes for us to fit in, we do things that we would not naturally do. We go steal, we'll go drink, and we'll go hang with a gang. Looking back on his past behaviour, Kenyatta regretted "trying to please his friends" and "force fitting" himself into a box that might or might not have been the "right size" for him. His greatest lament was the way his "African brothers" allowed others "to take control of their way of thinking" upon their arrival in Canada. In so doing, he added,

We start to look at ourselves like we are not important. When we arrive, we change ourselves, our lives, the way we view life. Yes, we change all these things just to fit the image that has been defined for us. We end up embracing a culture here that is defined as better than ours. In doing that, we commit this great crime that I call *disrespect*, and it's a disrespect towards yourself, because you start to disrespect yourself and you start to respect the value that other people here describe as good. And for me, one thing that I noticed is that my friends started to influence me more.

Interestingly, Gowon, who had never attended school before his arrival in Canada, was the only one who stood his ground and refused to fit in. Explaining his reasons for not hanging out with his peers, he said:

They would go and steal, do drugs, things that I never thought about, you know? That would get you into trouble with the law and stuff like that. And, for me, I didn't see them as friends. I saw that as my downside.

Another downside of the desire to please friends, according to Kenyatta, was the "deteriorating relationship at home" due to the parental inability to provide direction and the much-needed support in the new country. As he explained,

A lot of our parents, as immigrants, don't have the tools to direct us in this modern world. They do not know how to regulate us in the way that would allow us to grow firm and strong in this new society. They just say go to school, but they don't sit down with us as the children, out of love to really speak to you as an individual. They don't explain why. They just demand. When you are told to do something, you have to do it. You don't get that freedom to say, I will think about it.

Despite their dissatisfaction with the lack of parental support, participants never disrespected their parents. Contrary to the intergenerational conflicts identified by Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) within refugee communities, the participants showed great admiration and respect for the accomplishments of their parents. As Akono and Patience explained,

Part of this was from how I saw my parents working so hard and going through certain things. I always wondered what kept them going and succeeding. So, that motivated me. When you see that stuff when you are young, it gives you aspirations and stuff.

Similarly, Patience was so appreciative of how hard her parents worked to provide for her and her siblings that she reciprocated by working hard in school to please them: "All I wanted to do was obviously, to make my parents proud. They worked so hard to get us here to make our life better."

Regrettably, this respect did not translate into a trustful relationship between the participants and their parents. The traditional African divide and distancing between adult and children persisted. Participants described their reluctance and unwillingness to share their concerns with their parents. Interestingly enough, research by Burns and Radford (2008) on parent-child interactions in Nigeria blames the divide on the dominant and overbearing aspects of this interaction. The failure to connect with their parents made participants crave

for the presence of an adult figure. Gowon, for example, explained his longing for a role model as follows:

I didn't have anybody to look up to. I didn't have a role model. I didn't have someone like a father figure to support me. I didn't have someone that believed in me. I was just a kid. I'd get up in the morning and, yeah, I just went to school because I needed that diploma.

Of course, they had their parents (as adult figures in their lives), but Barika, Gowon, Lutalo, and Makeba understood the challenges faced by their parents in their new country.

Consequently, they avoided burdening them with their own challenges by hiding their concerns from their parents. For example, Patience never told her parents about the bullying and the microaggressions at school, Gowon handled his own issues because his mother was preoccupied with her job. Makeba missed her dad at parents' night in the school but forgave him for not attending because he was working two jobs to keep the family alive. Explaining why she felt forced to attend parent-teacher interviews by herself as a young student, Makeba added,

Parents of other kids showed up, including Black parents. However, I think that they knew more or were used to the system more than my dad. They were African parents too but some of them had been here for at least decades. Besides, some have two parents, so if one of them couldn't make it the other one came. But like, when we got here, my dad and my stepmom separated, and I lived with my dad, so if my dad couldn't make it, that was it for me. Obviously, it would have made me feel like he knew what was going on with me academically, like he knew where I was at, if he had come, but that never happened.

Makeba's insistence on attending Parents' Night on her own, in the absence of her working father, was illustrative of the participants' determination to overcome all odds and the maturity they demonstrated in order to achieve their academic success. Some of the coping strategies they adopted are discussed in the next section.

### **Coping Strategies**

Placed in unknown contexts with several challenges facing them, participants employed several coping strategies to overcome the barriers. Their resolve to succeed was attributable to their desire to take advantage of the educational opportunities in Canada and to use their educational success for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their communities. The coping strategies they employed are described below and are clustered under the following headings: a high regard for education, a fervent desire to succeed, centrality of the "self" (self-regulation), taking advantage of the support network, creating hybrid identities, cultural frame switching and adherence to their African heritage. A special section, entitled Transformative Resistance, is devoted to a series of oppositional coping strategies that helped redefine the ARB students' academic potential.

#### **High Regard for Education**

The study results revealed that participants understood their educational success as an antidote to the negativity surrounding them and as a way to assist their community and family members. Akono, for example, described his education as "part of the capital that [he] could put to work". "At the end of the day", he continued, "Knowledge will surpass everything. You can read, read, and read and read; that will help, but the core knowledge you have in your head, is better than anything else." The high regard for education has been identified as one of the important issues for African refugees, because they perceive it as a

means for a better future for themselves and their families (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009). Other researchers corroborate the respect for education. Creese et al. (2011), for example, found that “the majority of African teenage girls and boys [they] spoke to were quite serious about their education and recognized its importance for their future prospects” (p. 1). Similarly, Cassity and Gow (2005) concluded that despite the variability in African cultures and languages, there was a shared set of collective values that included a respect for education, a responsibility to place, family, community, religious beliefs, and a strong work ethic.

Indeed, Kenyatta’s statement below is reflective of the value that the participants placed on education: “Education gives you the right to govern yourself, because you can think, you can plan, and you can move forward; but without education, you don’t know what to think.” Similarly, Gowon, who had never gone to school before his arrival in Canada, echoed the value of education:

Education will help you. It’s not a guarantee that you’ll be 100% successful, but it’s a step to it. I have to find something I can at least show my daughter or my mom that I did to let them know that I am doing ok. That may not be great, but at least they can look up to me as a role model, as a father, as a brother, as a son. Graduating from high school and going to college, it’s a step in the right direction.

### **A Fervent Desire to Succeed**

In addition to the respect for education, participants’ narratives revealed a fervent desire to succeed at all costs. Contrary to studies that emphasize Black students’ disidentification with education (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003), evidence from the participants’ narratives pointed to a determination to stay in school. There was a sense of confidence and optimism in their voices. “I can excel at anything,” Lutalo exclaimed.

“Besides,” he continued, “I wanted to show myself that, not only was I a great player in this specific setting, but that I could be a great player at a higher setting, world-wide, if I kept working.” Other participants expressed their resolve to succeed in different ways. For Akono, it was all about his ambition: “You can have the ideas and all the support you want, but if you don’t have the ambition within yourself to do something for yourself, it would not happen.” For Gowon, it was his determination and his passion to learn: “Nothing stopped me from learning,” he declared. “I knew that if I put in the work, the effort, I knew I could learn.” In describing how he survived in school, Gowon added,

You’ve got to believe in something. When you have passion for it and you believe it, you can do it. You may not get it right now. You may not get it for years, but as long as you have the motivation, and you’re leaning, that it is okay. People are going to laugh, they are going to call you out, you may even fail, and you may go upside-down. Whatever happens, just don’t put down your head; don’t let them bring you down. Keep your head up and keep moving forward. So, for me, that’s what helped me.

### **The Centrality of the “Self” (Self-Regulation)**

Of all the responses, however, Makeba’s comments really stood out because she clearly demonstrated her belief in her internal locus of control. As she explained,

I never focused on popularity or being liked. Honestly, I never paid attention to being popular. I just wanted to learn. Oh yeah, I was eager to learn. I never really cared about anybody and I never let anyone, or anything get in my way. I inspired myself because looking up to somebody, limits your capacity. I have my own personal view of things and looking up to someone could limit what I could do for myself. Besides, I knew that if I put my mind to it, I could be more than that, so I didn’t want to set that

limitation on myself.

Makeba's comments pointed to the confidence that all the participants demonstrated in their own ability to make a difference in their lives. They showed an uncanny understanding of their own strengths and an awakened awareness of their potential for academic success.

"Awakened" because this perspective, according to some of them (Patience, Barika, and Kenyatta), was incrementally developed as they became more accustomed to their new environments. This awakened realization forced them to change their mental perspectives and behaviour patterns. Patience, for example, became more vocal:

When I came into high school, it wasn't as bad. That is when I realized that I needed to be strong for myself; I was not going to allow people to walk all over me. So, I became really mouthy.

For Barika, her response was more cognitive:

As I grew older in Grade 11, things kind of changed, like my mindset kind of changed, and what I wanted to accomplish was different, and my grades started to turn around and then I just started to focus more.

Kenyatta's change of attitude resulted from a deep analysis of the conditions around him.

When I saw myself going down the [sic] hill, I felt it in every fiber of my body; I really felt it. That made me feel bad and I'm like, that's not who I want to be.

Unfortunately, some of us try to fit in because we want to be accepted. And yet the need to be accepted cannot exceed the need to self-actualize yourself, meaning, you don't give yourself away just because you want to be accepted by somebody. After all, you are the most prized possession that you have.

The increased usage of the pronoun "I" in the participants' responses underlined the awareness of their personal responsibility in their own successes. To achieve their goals, they acquired new attributes, competencies, and behaviours, hitherto unknown to them. Attributes

such as, ownership of one's destiny (Gowon), self-regulation (Patience), enhanced language skills (Kenyatta), and self-reliance (Makeba) were highlighted as necessary skill sets for academic success. Gowon's statement below captures the essential aspects of this personal responsibility. "It was about *Me*. Yes, it was all about who you are and what you show yourself out there to be and what you give out there to yourself to make you become who you want to be." Patience explained her self-regulation as follows:

I needed to be strong for myself; I needed to do things to make myself better. You can't let anything bring you down. You've got to wake up in the morning. You've got to know exactly what you're doing with your life.

Kenyatta owed his improved classroom performance to his enhanced language skills:

As the years progressed, the overwhelmingness of the situation kind of eased off; it became less and less, regarding my communication. I was able to be more talkative, and I was able to understand what was going on. Eventually, I also became more aware of what the requirements were in school, and how the people were communicating around me and how the environment was.

For Makeba, it was all about self-confidence and self-reliance. As she stated:

I like working for things that I have in my life. I don't want them to be handed to me. I want to be part of it. I want to work for it so at the end of the day, I can be proud of myself for doing what I've done. I inspired myself because looking up to somebody, limits my capacity.

Despite the reliance on their own internal locus of control regarding their academic success, participants understood that they could not do it alone. Accordingly, participants made use of the resources available to them as secondary sources of motivation.

### **Taking Advantage of the Support Network**

Participants highlighted the support they received from various sources as a

contributing factor in their academic success. Parental and other forms of support helped them overcome the negative stereotypes and isolation in their schools. Although the support was non-academic, participants reported that the emotional encouragement and the safe environment provided by their parents helped improve their self-confidence and self-esteem. Other motivational drivers included their parents' own academic achievements. This was the case with Akono, Makeba, and Patience, all of whom derived their motivation to learn from their own parents' successes in education. For Barika, Gowon, and Nana, however, the support they received was indirect and more vicarious. The more pleased their parents were with their academic success, the harder they worked to make their parents happier. In a way, the positive expectations of their parent boosted their academic performances. As Makeba commented, she wanted to graduate to please her Mom. For Gowon, his motivation came from his desire to be a good role model to his young daughter.

Support also came from other external sources, from teachers, who were willing to assist as in the case of Gowon, to peers who, worked collaboratively with Patience.

Describing his teachers, Gowon said:

I had two teachers who actually took their time to tutor me because I had to get my academics to stay in the sports. They took their spare time off just to take me through some of the subjects. I had no idea how to do it. When I graduated, I went back to school to say thank you to them. I have nothing to give them but love and respect.

And Patience explained the support from her peers as follows:

I had a few friends, maybe four multicultural friends that I keep around because those four individuals were actually motivating. One of my friends was Asian, and then I had an Arab friend, and a Congolese friend, and a Caribbean. We're really a mix of everything but it was good because we learned so many things. We called each other, we supported each other, we were there for each other, we knew what we wanted, and

each of us was working toward that. I remember one of my friends, and she came over to my house and she ate African food, and she loved it!

Another useful strategy was the ability to ask for help. As Kenyatta put it, “In life there are people out there to help you, and my ability to reach out to them helped me a lot.” He lauded the teachers at the *Pathways to Education Program* (a community-based program that assists youth from low-income communities with resources they need to graduate from high school and break the cycle of poverty). According to him, the teachers were

able to not just teach you but also to see what talents you have. This was good because everybody needs that external view once in a while. Since we live in our minds, we only see what’s in us, but when somebody comes from the outside and kind of says, what you did today, that was very good. It gives you that encouragement to move forward. So, those were the things that really helped me focus on school.

As vital as these external supports were, participants relied on other strategies for survival.

Their ability to juggle the culture at home and the one at school proved helpful.

### **Creating Hybrid Identities**

In the social domain, participants’ narratives showed how they straddled the two cultures in which they lived. On the one hand, they wanted to be free and on the other hand their filial responsibilities held them back. Barika’s description of the tensions and disappointment with her parent’s adherence to their traditional way of living was illustrative of this dilemma. To bridge this in-betweenness, the students developed dual identities as a coping mechanism to handle their challenges. Earlier, Makeba described the double life led by a Muslim friend as she “tried to fit into a Canadian way of life in which every high school teenage girl is freer and has privileges” (Makeba interview). As dishonest as she might have been, the Muslim girl learned how to survive in two different arenas. The hybrid identities

that result from these negotiations (the creation of dual identities) cannot be overlooked in the analysis of the factors that influence the academic success of ARB students in school. In fact, the creation of hybrid identities as a situational strategy is supported by evidence from the literature review. Creese et al. (2011) demonstrated how Sudanese adolescents utilized situational and racialized hybrid identities as “strategies to overcome difficulties and as they negotiated belonging” (p. 90). Similarly, Ibrahim’s (2015) study found that a group of Somali students owed their academic and acculturated success to their ability to keep their “Somaliness” while at the same time actively adopting American cultural values, skills, and practices. This approach challenges the traditional view of culture as uniform, monolithic, and unchanging (Berry, 1998) and promotes the belief that individuals can possess dual cultural identities and engage in active cultural frame switching, a process that allows them to navigate effectively in two cultures. As convenient as this acquired ability is, its downsides cannot be ignored. First, it forces the ARB students to lead a double life, thus keeping part of their life away from their parents, and second, it prevents them from having a close relationship with their parents.

### **Cultural Frame Switching**

As bicultural individuals who have internalized two cultures, the participants learned to “switch between different [cultures] and [adopt] culturally appropriate behaviors” (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002, p. 493) in unfamiliar environments. The fact that all participants graduated from high school, despite the tensions they faced, demonstrates how well they functioned despite their initial unfamiliarity with school protocols. Barika’s balancing act, in trying to please her parents and herself, and Kenyatta’s resolve to graduate from high school despite the pull from outside forces (Canadian peer groups) are consistent with individuals’

ability to adjust their behavioural repertoires in a given situation (Berry, 1997). This “cultural frame switching” ability emerged as one of the main strategies employed by all the respondents. Hong et al. (2000), refer to the process as “frame switching” (p. 709) and describe it as an approach to understanding identity formation among immigrant populations. Put differently, the two internalized cultures take turns in guiding peoples’ thoughts and feelings in a given situation. This view challenges the ascribed and deterministic stereotypes of African refugee students’ behavioural and intellectual functioning. Despite their adopted hybrid identities, participants anchored themselves in their African heritage.

### **Adherence to their African Heritage**

The pride in education was accompanied by a similar pride in their ancestral roots. In fact, all the participants spoke proudly of their African heritage. There was a strong sense of patriotism and nationalism in their responses. Unlike much of the literature that talks about hyphenated identities (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, 2004; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2012) none of the respondents described themselves as African Canadian. In fact, they distanced themselves from other diasporic groups, especially, African Americans. In the words of Akono,

Although I feel like I am Americanized, I am still African. I still belong to Africa, because that is where I was born. Africa is one of the greatest nations in the world. Being African makes you stronger. Denying it or trying to eradicate makes you weaker. It means that you don’t acknowledge yourself or your identity.

Barika was even more forceful: “I’m 100% African. Even though I’ve grown up here, I would never consider myself, like this is my home, you know what I mean? I was born there [Africa] and I grew up a little bit over there.” This is a significant comment from Barika.

Obviously, her arrival in Canada at a very early age hardly altered her affiliation to her motherland. For Nana, being African was very comforting. As she exclaimed, “I like being African because honestly, when I look at other races, I’m like, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. I’m happy where I am from and being who I am.”

Unfortunately, the pride in their African roots created a wedge—social distancing—between the ARB students and other students from the Diaspora. Research indicates that despite their common ancestry, Africans and African Americans remain separated by myths, misperceptions, and negative stereotypes of Africans perpetuated by African Americans (Iheduru, 2013; Traoreé, 2003). It was therefore not surprising when the ARB students distanced themselves from students of the same complexion. Barika, for example, disliked being called African American: “I just correct them. I’m like, I am not African American.” To clarify the social distance between her and family members living outside of Canada, Barika added, “Even though, I have siblings in the USA, they just have a completely different culture. They just have a completely different mindset. *They talk funny and actually accept or live up to the negative way people describe them*” (emphasis added). Nana was even more emphatic when she distanced herself from the African Americans nomenclature: “American or African American?” she asked rhetorically. “No, I don’t even want to be African American,” she responded, adding,

We are the same colour, but they don’t think we are the same. They think of us as Africans, jungle Africans, those barbarian Africans slaves. Besides, they think that just because they were born in the USA, they are African Americans; therefore, they are better than us, Africans. Funny though, at times, some of them claim they have roots in Africa.

Of course, Nana was unconvinced about this apparent claim to their African lineage. In

explaining why, she did not want to be like them, she addressed her comments to an imaginary African American:

I see how you are on TV; I see how you guys act. I've been to the States. I've met some people from there, but you know; I like where I'm from. I like my food. I like my culture. Like, we're beautiful. I like my African land. I don't want to be anything else. I'm happy with who I am.

In a way, this ethnic pride was the cornerstone of the participants' resistive efforts against the negativity and the tensions that they encountered in their high school experience. Indeed, Nana's words could be interpreted as an act of resistance—an attempt to deconstruct the essentialist portrayal of the Black experience. Some of these resistive acts and strategies are discussed in the following section.

### **Transformative Resistance**

Among the helpful strategies employed by participants, resistance, knowingly or unknowingly, ranked very high in their repertoire. Their narratives were replete with “resistance stories” described by Bell and Roberts (2010) as stories that “offer ways to interrupt the status quo and work for change” (p. 9). In fact, critical race theorists Solórzano and Bernal (2001) coined the term, transformative resistance as a framework to describe the way Latina/o students “negotiate and struggle with structures and [end] up creating meanings of their own, from these interactions” (p. 315). Correspondingly, Cerecer, Ek, Alanis, & Murakami-Ramalho's (2011) study on how a group of tenure-track Chicana/Latina faculty negotiated and “transform[ed] academic spaces by cultivating a social class consciousness and redefining notions of success through transformative resistance in teaching, research, and service” (p. 76) highlighted the value of social consciousness—the ability to consider one's social condition—as an asset “in the scholars' motivation and commitment to engage in

transformative resistance in an environment” (p. 72). Guided by these manifestations of how racialized individuals use their social class as a transformative tool to create spaces for survival, I argue that the ARB students’ social class consciousness and the affirmation of their African identity should be viewed as significant factors in their achievement of academic success.

In their effort to reenvision their social stratification and to interrogate the dominant and oppressive forces in their schools, for the betterment of themselves and their communities, the ARB students utilized several transformative strategies to accomplish their goals. These strategies are presented under the following headings: academic identity and success as resistance, rejection of microaggressions, one-upmanship, self-actualization, adherence to the root culture, and resistance through community uplift.

### **Academic Identity and Success as Resistance**

Despite the challenges they faced, none of participants considered dropping out of school. They were determined to complete their high school at all costs. As Lutalo explained, “Any hardships were just temporary. Whatever the setback, it was just temporary, and you can still get to your desired destination.” Their persistence and their belief that success was achievable with hard work was a significant aspect of their academic resistance. Drawing from Allen (2015), the participants’ academic identity and success was “an emancipatory act of racial uplift” (p. 222), in that, they used their acquired knowledge, skill sets, and enhanced self-reliance to critically interrogate the deficit ideologies promoted by majoritarian narratives and to advance the image of refugee students. Examples of their academic identity and success as resistance include their ability to compete with their peers, stand up to the microaggressions and to complete their education, despite their linguistic challenges. Being

able to develop a failure-is-not-an-option and a can-do attitude in the face of mounting academic challenges is a testament to their resistive stance.

### **Rejection of Microaggressions and Labels**

Part of their transformative resistance was the rejection of all negative labels and microaggressions. While some, like Patience shrugged off the labeling and remained silent, others, Akono, Barika, and Makeba reacted differently to the name-calling. Akono's response was oblique:

I am in a setting and someone is trying to distract me by calling me a name. You know, I don't even pay attention to them, so, so they get annoyed [he laughs]. That's how I take this [abuse] off my mind. I just sit there and just refuse to listen.

Barika, on the other hand, was more direct. She considered those who used negative labels as "ignorant":

Because they just don't understand that there are lots of people who are refugees who come here to get a better life and not everyone starts at the same level. There are people who have advantages and there are people who have disadvantages.

Makeba reacted to the racial putdowns with an in-your-face response, saying,

I reject the labels from the media. After all, I am not in a box! I want people to be able to look beyond my race, to recognize me as a human being, as an individual who has her own mind and as a person who can make her own choices. I'm a freeborn individual and I am nobody's slave.

Although the label nigger or the "n-word," euphemistically speaking, came up infrequently, resistance to the word was fundamental in their narratives. Gowon reacted physically, by fighting. Makeba's reaction, as she recounted in the following incident, was more rational:

I was going to the grocery store after school with my best friend who is from Afghanistan, so she's Arab. And there were these three Caucasian teenagers, and one of them turned around and called me the n-word. Of course, my best friend was really upset. She wanted to go up to this person and pick a fight. But I looked at her and I was like, why are you worked up about it? *That is not my name*. I'm not going to give this individual the power to upset me. If he is going to play ignorant and call me a word that he knows is offensive, I'm not going to give him the opportunity to upset me, because there are better things I can do with my time than to play that game with him. This calmness and assertiveness were equally present when Makeba turned the tables on those who denigrated her race. Referring to the negative ways Blacks girls were usually portrayed, she added,

[The stereotyping] did not distract me. I never considered it as a negative thing. I considered it as a positive thing because it pushed me harder. It made me a stronger and a better person. It motivated me more to prove to them that I could be better than them. I just needed time. And of course, by the time I graduated, I had one of the highest marks.

These are very powerful words from a refugee student who arrived in Canada with limited English skills and with limited academic support in her academic journey. Indeed, her words underline the transformative changes that were occurring in the lives of the participants. In contrast to research studies on the stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and disidentification theories (Fordham & Ogbu 1986) that plagued Blacks in situations where they were underrepresented, all the refugee students displayed a form of resistance by sticking to their academic goals and by turning negative situations into positive ones. Their attitude was consistent with critical race theory's oppositional stance that encourages

communities of colour to use their counterstories to “talk back” to majoritarian narratives.

### **One-Man Upmanship (One-Person)**

In trying to prove her distractors wrong, Makeba employed the *one-upmanship* strategy as a defence mechanism. Her refusal to kow-tow to the White peer, who was supposed to help her and her desire to prove that she could be better than them. This “one-up” strategy is described as a way “to appear successful and make the other fellow feel ‘one-down’ or feel that somehow something has gone wrong and you have bested him [sic]” (Sykes, 1978, p. 44). As a control strategy, one-upmanship served as a tool that allowed the participants to shake off all unwanted putdowns and microaggressions from their peers. Evident in their narratives, were several examples of one-upmanship - situations where the participants turned adversity into triumphs. Yosso (2002) in her study of Chicana and Chicano students described this desire of “proving [others] wrong” (p. 59) as a transformational resistance strategy with a dual purpose: to confront the negative portrayals and ideas about Chicanas/os and to provide a motivational boost for their academic success. Similarly, the participants employed this strategy to their advantage.

This strategy manifested itself on the sports field as well. Some participants, such as Akono and Gowon used their prowess in sports as an antidote to the racial putdowns in their schools. Akono excelled in sports because he wanted to prove to his peers that he was good for something. This excellence in sports meant a lot to him, because “if you’re good in sports, most likely, people will be there to back you up.” Similarly, Gowon’s sports abilities propped up his fading self-esteem, in the early days of his high school experience. As he explained it:

When it came to athletics, it was all about your ability as an individual, and I had pretty many good [sic] abilities as an individual in the sports I played. So, I excelled.

I relied on that. By excelling, they couldn't say anything bad about me.

For Lutalo, his indulgence in a sport (football) that he had never played before was for the sole purpose of being recognized as “a somebody”—a person to be taken seriously—despite his apparent language challenges and cultural dissonance. His exact words were:

So, my way was to just show that even though it was a new sport to me, I had an interest in it. I wanted to show that I was great at something, regardless of the language barrier or the culture difference. I knew I could still do well in it.

This personality trait—the African refugee students' ability to survive in environments where they had minimal supportive school-based support—deconstructs the claim that supportive school-based relationships are indispensable to academic engagement and school performance (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009), and calls attention to the ARB students' failure-is-not-an-option attitude as a compensatory factor in their academic success.

### **Self-Actualization as Resistance**

Lutalo's words above, demonstrated his strong sense of self-determination and agency—feelings that were expressed by all the participants. As Kenyatta explained, “motivation comes from the individual and it can be accomplished through self-actualization.” In fact, self-actualization, a term coined by Kurt Goldstein (1934/1995) and then developed by Maslow (1973) is at the top of Maslow's “hierarchy of needs”: It describes persons' ability to realize their potential, “fulfilling themselves” and “doing the best they are capable of doing” (p. 150). Arguably, only one participant in the study articulated this concept, but it was clear from their narratives that self-actualization was a goal for all of them. They understood self-actualization as the idea of being what you want to be and doing everything to get there. As an example, Kenyatta stayed in school because he

realized that “when you are educated, you are able to self-actualize yourself [sic].” Of course, Kenyatta did acknowledge that the road to self-actualization was not easy for the participants because,

One of the main motivations when anybody comes from outside Canada, is that you want to be accepted, but we fail to realize that the need to be accepted cannot exceed the need to *self-actualize* yourself, meaning, you don’t give yourself away to be accepted. You have to find a way to become what or who you want to be.

### **Africanness—Adherence to the Root Culture as a Form of Resistance**

The transformative resistance was equally present in the participants’ strong adherence to their African heritage. The frequent stress on their “Africanness”, during the data gathering process, was their way of “marking their identity [and] grappling with issues of race ... and critiquing unfair practices in and out of school” (Park, 2017, p. 12). In a way, this approach helped buttress them against the negativity in their school surroundings. As Akono recounted, “Knowing yourself, you can do anything, but if you don’t know what or who you are or what you stand for, it’s very difficult. Maintaining my African pride makes me stronger.” Nana’s transformative resistance was clear in the way she described her evolving mental perspectives:

I still notice it [stereotyping] here, but now I am defining it differently. Earlier, when I was younger, back then, it was like, oh, I’m Black. I am going to just sit in the corner and mind my own business and be with whom I’m supposed to be with. And now, it’s like, yes, I’m a Black woman, I’m a successful Black woman, I’m doing well in school. I am successful. I’m doing things like regular people. Yes, I’m Black. So what? But I don’t let my Blackness define me.

This stance is another example of how the ARB students used their awareness of their social positioning to transform academic spaces, and to reconceptualize the pervasive deficit ideology about Black students' intellectual ability.

### **Resistance through Community Uplift**

As transformative agents, the ARB students' desire to go against the prevailing vilification of communities of color and to focus on making them better was an act of resistance. Arguably, the participants did not have any community achievement to their credit. Nevertheless, the desire to uplift their communities to a better future was uppermost in their understanding of academic success. Gowon and Lutalo wanted to use their success to change the lives of everyone in [their] families, Makeba achieved success to please her Mom, and Kenyatta's long-term goal was to invest his newly found skills in his community and to advocate for change. In attaching a "utilitarian value" to academic success and viewing it as catalyst for change beyond the walls of the classroom, the ARB students underlined the importance of academic success an act of resistance that can uplift both the individual and the community at large.

### **Chapter Summary and Overview of Next Chapter**

In this chapter, anonymized demographic information was added with a goal of providing context for the reader. Findings from the study were presented. There was a detailed discussion of African refugee students' perspectives on academic success, how it is achieved and measured. In addition to a thorough examination of the factors that hindered the ARB students' academic success, the coping strategies they used were highlighted. Chapter 5 presents a critical analysis of the findings from the study, paying particular attention to the voices and the views of the participants. Recommendations from participants and

implications for educational personnel, students, and parents are suggested and the chapter ends with a conclusion.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the study, including a statement of the problem, gaps that emerged from the literature review, the purpose of the study, and the methods employed. A brief summary of the findings is then presented followed by a discussion that interprets and describes the significance of the findings. Implications, and recommendations that could enhance our understanding of the academic success of ARB students have also been added. The main purpose of the study was to explore the factors that ARB students identified as being helpful to their academic success and it was guided by the following questions: (a) What factors do ARB students identify as being helpful to their academic success? (b) What were the challenges they experienced? (c) What coping strategies did they use to address these challenges? Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with eight ARB students and were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Participants' responses were interpreted through the lens of CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which served as an alternate epistemological framework that placed the counterstories of the refugee students at the center of the analysis.

As a prelude to the discussion, however, the differences between the words 'resistance' and 'resilience' should be foregrounded. Although the two words are usually connected, resilience has a different connotation. Evans and Reid (2013), for example, describe "resilience" as the individuals' understanding of life "as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which are said to be outside its control" (p. 85) and "resistance" as a "reactionary impulse aimed at increasing the capacities of the subject to adapt to its dangers and simply reduce the degree to which it suffers (p. 85). The "reactionary impulse" inherent in the word "resistance" is corroborated by Bottrell's (2007) suggestion

that resistance usually expresses opposition to rules and norms including critiques of social relations from lived experience of marginalization. Since the participants' responses and coping strategies were in opposition to rules, norms, and prevailing practices, they are described as "resistance acts." There were, however, behaviours and responses that were more congruent with "resilient acts" described by Masten et al. (1990) as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation, despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (p. 426). Following the above explanation, the terms 'resistance' and 'resilient' will be used accordingly in the upcoming discussion.

Guided by the following tenets of CRT: (a) the centrality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, and (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solórzano, 1997,1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) the following three themes were derived from the findings: (a) success extends beyond the classroom and cannot be normalized, (b) success is multifaceted and attainable by all, and (c) intrinsic motivation and resilience are coping strategies for academic success.

### **Success Extends Beyond the Classroom and It Cannot Be Normalized**

Embedded in this finding are four very significant interpretations: the interrogation of notions of normality, a reconceptualization of academic success, the contestation of deficit-oriented ideologies, and the commitment to social justice. Although the data from the literature review showed that notions of normality, where racialized and cultural "others" were portrayed in deficit and deficient terms (Cole & Bruner, 1971), the successful counterstories of the respondents unmasked the ideology of Whiteness and the privileges that are normalized by majoritarian narratives. By rejecting the notions of normality, the ARB

students proved that people of colour do experience a different type of “normal” life and that excellence can and does emerge in multiple and varied forms in their communities (Morris, 2004). With this perspective, they shifted the research lens away from a deficit view of refugee students’ academic performance and unmasked the prevalent biased methodologies used to disparage communities of colour (Moore, 2013, p. 33). In doing so, they compel administrators, teachers, and policymakers to re-examine the concept of success by designing more effective school curricula, environments, intervention models, and culturally appropriate assessment measures that are appropriate for students with refugee backgrounds (Winfield, 1994). A significant aspect of this new reconceptualization of success should include measures that allow ARB students to assess their learning from their own perspectives. This self-evaluation would lead to a better awareness and understanding of their own strengths as learners. Additionally, their revelations and conclusions would invite researchers into the “new and unfamiliar world” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 41) of marginalized people, asking them (researchers) to imagine what life would be like from the new perspectives of people of colour. This approach encourages the acceptance of a “new normal”—one that may be significantly different from the majoritarian narratives.

This new perspective of African refugee students’ academic success might start with an appreciation of the participants’ courage in narrating their experiences in their own voices. As Ladson-Billings (1998) postulates, “the ‘voice’ component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, the *first step* [emphasis added], in understanding the complexities of racism” (p. 14). The notion of using voice, as an emancipatory tool for unsilencing muted stories, is supported by Miller and Rasco (2004) who found that there is a substantial need to collect and explore the stories of forced

displacement from refugees themselves. In fact, student voice researchers (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001) have continuously championed student input in educational reform. To hear the respondents' narratives in their own voices, literally "naming their own realities" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12) attests to the power of marginalized and silenced voices when given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in educational change. Indeed, the participants demonstrated that they were ready to express their well-articulated views and concerns about their own learning and school experience. All they needed was a chance to express their insights and opinions openly (Groves & Welsh, 2010). That is exactly what Mandisa did at the conference.

In authenticating their successful experiences, the participants promoted a more nuanced conceptualization of their academic potential thereby unpacking the apartheid of knowledge, described as "knowledge production in academia, informed by Eurocentric epistemologies and specific ideological beliefs" (Huber, 2009) and by Bernal and Villalpando (2002) as an "Eurocentric epistemological perspective that creates racialized double standards" (p. 171) by falsely claiming to "produce 'legitimate' knowledge, in contrast to the 'illegitimate' knowledge that is created by all others" (p. 177). As more students like Mandisa come to our schools, expanded notions of educational success must be identified. Embracing alternate notions of success and worldviews widens our understanding of academic success and acknowledges the complexity and the amorphousness of the term "academic success." From the research participants' perspectives, this broadened conceptualization of the term should encompass a "utility value" or a social justice component (described below), that extends beyond the classroom walls.

## Social Justice

Inherent in the participants' thinking, was a commitment to social justice - a tenet of CRT. This social engagement dimension and serviceable component of their understanding of academic success was clearly articulated by many of the participants. In their study on "The Role of Utility Value in Achievement Behavior," Shechter et al. (2011) describe "utility value" as the "connection between course material and their [students'] lives outside of the classroom" (p. 303). Similarly, Wigfield and Eccles (2000) note that "utility value refers to how a task fits into an individual's future plans" (p. 72). In the study, participants' description of their academic goals, underlined the utility value in their desire to be successful. Specifically, Gowon and Lutalo wanted to use their success "to change the lives of everyone in [their] families" and Makeba achieved success to please her Mom. In Kenyatta's case, investing in his community and advocating for change made him "feel good inside." The significance of this perspective cannot be overestimated. For, their stance was a departure from Émile Durkheim's (1961) functionalist concept of education, which "saw students as blank sheets, *tabula rasa*, or passive, ready to be [primed] with common social goods by the agents (teachers) of the society" (Sever, 2012, p. 652). Rather than being subservient to the dictates of their new society, the participants stuck to the traditional values inculcated into them in their home countries and strongly believed in their capacity to make a difference in their communities. They demonstrated that they were "experts at something" (Delpit, 1988, p. 292) and signaled that the qualities, knowledge, and experiences that they brought into the classrooms were not deficiencies but strengths that must be valued.

In doing so, the participants were unconsciously suggesting that their frames of reference, i.e., the unique experiences and knowledge gained during the pre-migration stage,

affect them as learners and should therefore be considered in the learning process. Nana's complaint that "Canada made [her] more lazy" is illustrative of this point. As she tells it, her previous leadership responsibilities—taking care of four brothers and sisters, working at her mother's pastry shop, managing it at times on her own, at a very young age, and going to the market alone as a child—were responsibilities and skill sets that were completely ignored when she came to Canada. To the school personnel, she was just another ESL student (like all the other refugees, regardless of their countries of origin and the capacities that they brought with them), who needed the one-size-fits-all treatment, usually designed for them. Fortunately for Nana, one of her ESL teachers recognized that "she already knew this stuff" and recommended that she be moved to a higher class. The change of placement for Nana is indicative of how a student's prior knowledge or experience should be factored into the assessment process. Yosso's (2005) "community cultural wealth" model (which is explained below), makes it explicitly clear that the accumulated assets and capital, that students of colour possess, should be leveraged to foster academic success for this population.

Evident in Nana's experience is the tendency of Western research (Haffejee, 2015; Thomas, 2016), to homogenize immigrants and African refugee students regardless of the "push factors," described broadly as the unfavorable conditions" (Parkins, 2011; Thet, 2014) that forced individuals out of their countries. Educational institutions are often guilty of this practice. As Banjoko (2015) points out, "institutional entities sometimes attempt to dictate how minorities should identify or categorize themselves" by "homogenizing minority students with groups they do not identify with" (p.1) on the basis of race. This approach has established race as the most important aspect of minority identity, even though the participants in this study did not consider it to be a primary dimension of their identity

(Banjoko, 2015). Indeed, their rejection of this categorization was a significant aspect of their transformative resistance. For them, culture, not race, was central to their identity.

As discussed in Chapter 4, it was the participants' adherence to their African culture that underpinned their unwillingness to identify with groups they were homogenized with, specifically, with African Americans and African Canadians. They wanted to avoid guilt by association. As disconcerting as this stance might be to some, it has to be understood that participants viewed race differently than other groups with similar backgrounds. As individuals from majority cultures, where their values, languages and ways of living were not "minoritized" or homogenized, their disassociation from other Blacks was their way of dismantling the false assumptions and the negative essentialism ascribed to Black students in Western education.

### **Success Is Multifaceted and Attainable by All**

One way the participants reaffirmed their distinctness was to wrestle the appropriation of academic success away from the grasp of hegemonic groups. Traditionally, performances of 'whiteness' have been privileged and normalized within schools and have been reified relative to the performances of other racial groups. Put another way, success was seen as the property of Whites (Harris, 1992). With their academic successes, however, the participants demonstrated that communities of colour have the capacity to succeed as well, as long as people remained focused on their educational goals. In placing academic success in the hands of individuals and allowing them to define it in their own way, participants personalized success and externalized it beyond the walls of academia.

Participants' critique of the traditional conceptualization of success was consistent with CRT's tenet of interrogating the dominant hegemonic rhetoric of meritocracy—the

notion that whatever your social position, society offers you enough opportunity “to rise to the top” (Littler, 2017, p. 2). The totality of their academic challenges stood in opposition to the belief in equality of opportunities, that is, the idea that “people get out of the system what they put into it based on individual merit” (Littler, 2017, p. 4). Equally, their narratives of success laid bare the fallacies in numerous hegemonic ideas, namely, the assumption that talent and intelligence are innate qualities that are passed on genetically, the hegemonic discourses and the deficit-laden theories such as the “stereotype theory” (Steele, 1999, p. 390) and the “acting White” theory propagated by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). In addition to the dismissal of the homogenizing intent inherent in these theories, the participants’ narratives urged researchers to re-conceptualize what African refugee students bring to academic spaces. Implicitly, they interrogated the “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh, 1998) that has been used as a pass-partout by members of the dominant society. Referring to this self-acquired magical wand wielded by Whites as *cultural capital*—the resources, knowledge and connections - that individuals can leverage to their advantage, Bourdieu (1986) suggests that it is a *sine qua non* factor in the attainment of academic success. In succeeding, without the benefit of this highbrow capital as advanced by Bourdieu, the participants were obliquely championing the adaptive strategies they had developed to navigate the academic obstacles, as viable approaches to the attainment of academic success. In fact, Yosso (2005) characterized the capital possessed by these students as “cultural wealth” (p. 69), an array of knowledge, abilities, contacts, and skills—aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital—that students of colour bring from their homes into the classroom. The emphasis on the “cultural wealth” as a significant factor in the participants’ learning, points to the importance of the congruity between home and school, a factor that was significantly

absent in the students' narratives. Their concerns about the absence of family, adults, role models, and community members as well as teachers with similar racial backgrounds, attested to their understanding of the constructivist notion of learning and the synergistic relationship between home/community culture and the school community.

The awareness of this symbiotic relationship between learners and their environment marked a significant evolution in the participants' understanding of the creation of knowledge and the purpose of education. Too often, refugees' identities are characterized as "fixed," an approach that contradicts what is known about identity formation. As Hall and Hall (1990) postulate, identity formation is a production which "is forever changing [and] it is never an accomplished fact" (p. 222). With their successful academic stories, the participants validated the evolutionary nature of their identity formation. They shed their pre-migration vulnerabilities and uncertainties and altered their mental perspectives as they went through the school system. Their ability to transform themselves from their passive and domesticated education endured back home (and the challenges during their earlier school days on their Canadian school experience), to more authentic and assured individuals, by the time they graduated from high school, attests to the fluid and dynamic nature of their identity formation (Phinney, 2000).

The significance of this evolution cannot be denied, especially from a group of students who arrived in Canada with minimal English language skills and a rudimentary knowledge of the Canadian educational system. Their successful journey from refugee-hood to being hooded is testimony to the high educational aspirations within refugee communities (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009) and the resiliency often exhibited by them. In contrast to the anti-racist framework that advocates changes in institutionalised structures, teaching practices and

pedagogy as a way of increasing student engagement by putting the onus on educators (Shapiro, 2002), the participants in this study, relied on their own “grit” described by Bashant (2014) as “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (p. 14). Like Stanton-Salazar (1997) they acknowledged the importance of external support for students’ success in school. Nevertheless, as gritty individuals, they “approached success as a marathon” (Bashant, 2014, p.14), worked hard, and stuck to their long-term goals “even when they [were] not getting any positive feedback” (Bashant, 2014, p.14). In a way, they humanized academic success and located it within the purview of the individual.

In acknowledging the perspectival nature of academic success, the students demonstrated that the road to achieving it has to be planned. Put differently, it cannot be done haphazardly. To achieve resiliency, certain factors and characteristics are needed. Supportive social networks, academic intervention, and stable environments were identified at the macro-level and at the individual level, a strong work ethic, with the ability to set one’s own goals, passion, perseverance, and pride in who you are and where you have come from, the ability to survive in two cultures, and a high dosage of self-esteem were highlighted.

### **Intrinsic Motivation and Resilience Are Coping Strategies for Academic Success**

The coping strategies deployed by the participants spoke volumes about their resiliency and the power of their internal locus of control. Although resilience is viewed as an adaptive coping strategy, possessed by all individuals (Benard, 1993), minoritized students, including refugee students are not always credited with this positive strength in the literature review. Paul (2012), for example, suggests that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds have resiliency deficits that impede their academic success. Borman and

Overman (2004) have also advanced similar views, claiming that minority students from low economic backgrounds are exposed to greater risks and fewer resilience-promoting conditions. Fortunately, the participants repudiated these claims with their successful academic narratives. Additionally, they rejected the self-defeating resistance approach (i.e., dropping out of school or being antisocial in school) and chose to demonstrate their transformative resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) through their resilient acts. In doing this, they demonstrated that resilience was a fluid rather than a static concept within the grasp of all, including non-dominant individuals. This broader conceptualization of resiliency encourages new and multiple perspectives on ARB students' ability to cope with their academic challenges.

First, their resiliency stance positions them as agentic and “self-actualizing individuals” (Bennett, 2008) who are focused on changing negative societal perceptions of ARB students. With their strong sense of personal responsibility, their refusal to conform to accepted notions about them, and the desire to achieve their goals, without any substantive macro-level assistance, the ARB students demonstrated a strong willingness to control their own destiny. Arguably, the strategies they followed may not be unique with this population. Nevertheless, their responses to their vulnerabilities present a more positive side of their character. Second, their narratives of success compel educational personnel to re-examine what it means to be resilient, how it is assessed and most importantly how it could be taught, nurtured, and leveraged in the education of refugee students. Nana's earlier comment about “Canada making her lazy” points to the urgency of operationalizing the cultural wealth possessed by incoming refugee students (Yosso, 2005). Her comment obliquely criticizes the educational personnel at her school for their failure to recognize the *capital* she brought with

her to the classroom. Of particular interest is how the prior experiences of refugee students are factored into the policies and practices geared to them. How, for example, are they assessed? Are the schools aware of the participants' backgrounds and experiences? If the answer is yes, how does this knowledge inform the policies and practice of the school? Critical for this study is the appropriateness of the assessment rubrics for determining resilient attributes of refugee students. Assessment, as we know it, is a cornerstone in the placement of students and all educational organizations have several measures in place for assessing students. A good assessment tool gathers and considers multiple and diverse information about the student in order to adequately place the student in the school. As such, knowing and understanding the personal attributes of ARB students could influence the creation of more targeted assessment practices for the better placement of these students.

Too often, assessment methodologies have viewed other cultures through Western lenses, thus viewing non-dominant groups as anomalies. As Collinge et al. (2002) found, methodologies, that have been conceptualized and developed primarily in Western society, have not been validated against non-Western indigenous beliefs of what it means to have quality of life. Fortunately, this imposed etic strategy, described as "the strategy of applying foreign instruments and constructs in the local culture" (Berry, 1989 as cited in Cheung & Cheung, 2003, p. 3) is evolving. Questioning the applicability of current Western evaluations and assessment methods on non-Western populations (Hollifield et al., 2005) is a valid exercise. Incidentally, in certain fields, such as psychology and in mental health (Cheung & Cheung, 2003), alternative approaches for assessing indigenous personality traits are being implemented by practitioners. In the field of education, similar adaptive approaches to teaching and learning have been instituted. Examples include, a *Policy Program*

*Memorandum No. 119*, released by the Ministry of Education in the spring of 2013 and several language assessment memoranda from the same Ministry. What is missing, however, are the tools for adequately assessing the “overall package”—that is, the sum total of the knowledge, skill sets and experiences—that newcomers bring to the educational arena. As Klotz and Canter (2006) postulate, assessment methods in educational aptitude and achievement need to be modified in ways that recognize the unique experiences and educational history of newly arrived refugee students.

The results from these kinds of assessment may alter certain configurations in the school system. Consider for example, the placement of refugee students in gifted classes. Indeed, Sanchez’s (2017) U.S. study on ESL learners found that “even when ... students are identified as gifted, the impulse is often to keep them out of accelerated programs despite evidence that they would benefit from more challenging work while they're learning English” (Gifted ELLs section, para. 3). Makeba’s attempt to escape from the ESL class comes to mind. In the absence of any references to refugee giftedness in the Canadian context, it could be conjectured that the situation described above is the same in our Canadian institutions. Although the juxtaposition of “refugeehood” to giftedness appears to be an oxymoron in present literary reviews, it cannot be completely dismissed. For, if we follow Gardner and Hatch’s (1989) multiple intelligences theory, which postulates that individuals have distinct and multiple profiles of intelligences and giftedness, the probability of the existence of these characteristics within refugee populations cannot be dismissed. To take advantage of the multiple intelligences that refugee students may possess, Gardner and Hatch suggest that assessment methods have to be developed to unearth each intelligence profile. Gardner and Hatch’s call for a fresh and an expanded approach to assessing intelligence echoes the

inclusive notion of success articulated by the participants in this study. His push for understanding intelligence from the participants' perspective invokes another dimension in the discussion of resilience, namely the link between ethnic identity, resilience, and school. Coming from different backgrounds, with their own sets of values, beliefs, and practices and succeeding academically in Canada, the inevitable questions that must be asked are: (a) what is the link between their ethnic identity, and resilience; and (b) how and where did they develop their resilient attributes?

Although there is a conceptual distinction between race and ethnicity, these terms are often used interchangeably or as synonyms, with race referring to biological homogeneity as defined by a few phenotypical features. Ethnicity, on the other hand, denotes shared origins or, shared culture or tradition that are distinctively maintained between generations, a sense of identity and belongingness to a group; and a common language or religious tradition (Agyemang et al., 2005). As indicated earlier, participants, in this study, were more focused on their ethnic identity rather than on their race. They anchored their resilience in their African heritage. This embrace of Mother Africa was a huge boost to their self-esteem and resiliency. Regrettably, though, the participants never explained how this resilient ability was developed. This lacuna is problematic because it makes it difficult for educators to expand and replicate the resilience that ARB students and people with similar backgrounds, bring to the learning environment.

Despite their failure to share the origin of their resilient attributes, participants did make recommendations for the creation of more emotional and holistic support systems that could enhance their sense of belonging and relatedness in their high school as well as their academic success.

### **Participants' Recommendations**

The interventions/suggestions proposed by the participants were, for the most part, directed at improving the school contexts and assisting youth from refugee backgrounds. These included (a) better assessment and placement practices, (b) improved transition programs and better teacher support, (c) a stronger home/school partnership and an adult presence, and (d) enhanced sense of belonging for ARB students.

#### **Better Assessment and Placement Practices**

Participants called for better ways to assess refugee students' academic abilities and placements. Specifically, Akono and Patience were frustrated with their Canadian school's age-specific assessment and placement practices. As Akono explained,

Here, [in Canada], it's based upon your age and you're assembled into that specific level because of your age. The system back home is based upon pure intelligence or how well developed you are. So, based on how intelligent you were, you are placed in the appropriate grade.

Patience echoed Akono indicating that, "back home, we don't do grade by age. It's like, how smart you are. So, you could be a 6-year-old girl in grade five or something because that's your ability level." In doing this, participants were encouraging the creation of more appropriate assessment strategies that would recognize the unique experiences and educational history of newly arrived refugee students. Obviously, the confusion caused by these misplacements made the participants feel uncomfortable and unprepared for subsequent grades.

#### **Improved Transition Programs and Better Teacher Support**

To combat their unpreparedness, participants advocated for better between-grades transitional strategies. In the words of Akono, "Don't [just] cast us to the wolves [class] and

hope that we survive.” In his opinion, addressing several factors before the transition period would greatly assist the students. For example, understanding what is needed at the next level in consultation with the receiving teachers, and providing the extra help, extra learning packages, a buddy system and above all, an adjustment of pedagogical strategies (including pace of presentation), to meet individual needs—all this would increase participants’ readiness for the next academic level. One student, Kenyatta, asks teachers to be more attentive to the “needs of African refugee students” and Lutalo would like teachers to be more focused “by showing students how things work and explaining the culture and how things are done here.” Two students, Gowon and Patience recommended a change in pace, with the latter adding, “things could be taught at a slower pace to really get a person to really understand what was being taught in the classroom.”

Aside from the academic support, participants wanted other kinds of assistance from their teachers. They urged teachers to be more understanding, helpful and perceptive to their newcomer needs. Makeba hoped that “teachers would understand the double-life dilemmas in the students’ lives by taking the time to get to know the students and their backgrounds.” One way to do this, according to her, was for teachers to patiently explain “what was going in the classroom” to students from countries where the educational system and cultures are different. Another student, Akono, wanted teachers to be more enthusiastic about the success of foreign students. All these suggestions point to a crying need for external support to boost their sense of belonging, success, and relatedness in their schools.

### **Stronger Home/School Partnerships and Adult Presence**

One critical aspect of the support system they wished for was a stronger home and school partnership. Although the connection between participants’ parents and the school

was tenuous, albeit nonexistent in their narratives, Makeba's lament of her father's absence at parents' night, points to the significance of parental presence in school performance. Additionally, the participants' comments about achieving success to please their parents, family, and daughter, position these members in the ARB students' inner circle, as active agents in the participants' pursuit of academic success. This being the case, school could promote the congruity between home and school by drawing refugee parents, extended family members, and community members into the learning process. Creating safe and inviting spaces for refugee parents increases their participation in their children's education (Kim, 2009) and encourages the sharing of information between home and school. This information exchange and interaction could help explain the behavioural and attitudinal changes going on in the lives of their children, thereby minimizing any potential intergenerational conflicts. Additionally, the home-school congruence would also create a welcoming learning and supportive environment for the participants and their parents.

A significant part of the home school relationship was the craving of an adult presence in the lives of the participants. Both Gowon and Kenyatta regretted not having a reliable and a trusting adult as role models. They wanted a face-to-face communication with someone who not only cared about them but who was also willing to build a relationship with them. As Gowon explained, "I did not have anybody to look up to. I was just a kid and I didn't have someone that believed in me." For him, having someone like Drake (a local kid from Toronto who worked hard to become a rapper, singer, record producer, actor, and entrepreneur) or Kobe Bryant (a great American basketball player who worked hard on and off the court to motivate young people) in his corner "would have been nice." He saw Drake as a person "who knows what he wants and works hard, day and night, to get it." Kobe had

the same disposition, but Gowon's was attracted to him because "he was a leader who put a lot of energy into whatever he did to accomplish his goals." Kenyatta, on the other hand, wished for good role models who could nurture the potential in others by providing proper guidance and support. All in all, the participants' call for stronger home-community-school partnerships was their way of harnessing the collective power of their micro and macro-levels support for their academic success.

### **Enhanced Sense of Belonging for ARB Students**

In addition to the support above, the ARB students identified other factors that could have boosted their academic engagement, in and out of school.

**At School.** Participants highlighted the importance of school belongingness and encouraged schools to foster closer relationships between all the different actors in the school. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2009) underline the significance of relationships in academic engagement and achievement, suggesting, "relationships play a crucial role in promoting socially competent behavior in the classroom and in fostering academic engagement and performance" (p. 712). For some of the participants (Barika, Gowon, and Kenyatta) this relationship was nonexistent in their high school experience. Barika, for example, mentioned her discomfort with "Asian language kids sticking together" and with African Canadian Blacks associating with their own kind just because they were born here, and they understood one another. She suggested that "schools should help students mix together" (integrate with other groups) rather than concentrating only on education and making the kids feel that they were just there to study. Other student recommendations for increased sense of belonging included: (a) having more teachers who looked like them, and (b) orienting newcomers to non-athletic and other leadership activities. One participant, Patience, felt that her fears, lack

of confidence and the belief that she was not a leader, prevented her from participating in the leadership activities offered by the school. This was not unique with her. Akono, Gowon, and Lutalo were actively involved in athletic activities but showed no interest in non-athletic events such as, clubs (the leadership club, foreign language clubs, drama clubs, debating clubs) or participating in student council activities and musical groups.

**Outside of School.** Outside of the school walls, educators could help establish closer relationships between students and their wider ethnic community by actively reaching out and including parents and community members in school activities. The majority of students implicitly expressed this wish. Gowon and Kenyatta's rebuke of the African community's absence in their life experience brings the responsibility of the wider community into focus. Barika felt that parents' adherence to African values was an albatross around the necks of the participants. Put differently, making ARB parents, other adults, and community members, whose pre-migration relationship with the educational system back home might have been distant and hierarchical, feel safe, wanted, and welcome in schools, could add another layer of support for the refugee students. Being on the same page and understanding what is happening in school, these members within the ARB students' social circle might (a) feel less worried about living in chaos and losing control of their children (El-Khani et al., 2016); (b) understand how their typically strict parent-child relations might impact student learning and behaviours; and (c) become more involved in their children's education.

Drawing on the findings of the study and on the recommendations of the ARB students, implications for, policymakers, educators and future research are presented in the following section. A brief summary of the findings precedes the presentation of the recommendations. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

## **Implications**

While this study provides the first steps toward an understanding of the factors that influence the academic success of African refugee background students, there were some underlying concerns in the findings that merit the attention of future researchers and educational personnel. Specifically, the findings pointed to several instances of loneliness, isolation, disappointments, tensions, and regrets in the high school experiences of the respondents. The reasons given were different. Gowon and Kenyatta regretted not applying themselves well as they could have done. Akono and Kenyatta were disappointed that they did not learn as much information as they could have done. Likening their life experiences to a leaf blowing in the wind and comparing it to being in prison was indicative of their uneasiness and the in-betweeness that characterized their lives. They regretted their minimal interactions with parents, community members, teachers, and peers. Some of these feelings were overtly expressed, others, such as the inferiority complex, were covertly touched upon. In addition, the frequent references to their peers as “regular” students during the data collection, attests to the participants’ collective feeling of not belonging or being less-than their Canadian counterparts. In short, their academic success belied the discomfort and the insecurity in their lives. This dichotomy between their positive academic self-concept and their dissatisfaction with their high school experience needs further investigation.

The following key implications for educational theory, policy, and practice emerged from the findings of the research study. In addition to the above implications, suggestions for future research regarding the education of ARB students have been added.

### **Implications for Educational Theory: Social Capital and Deficit Theories**

Considering the new and expanded knowledge on the educational experiences of ARB students, the need for new educational learning theories that would govern the learning,

the acquisition, and the creation of knowledge for non-dominant populations is imperative. As Austin et al. (2001) postulated, “modern learning theories incorporate the role of culture and other influences on experience in views of how people construct their understandings and develop their abilities” (p. 9). Regrettably, data from the literature review underscored the undertheorization of the educational issues of Black and ARB students (Codjoe, 2006, 2007; Dei, 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Henry, 1993). Although a detailed discussion of learning theories is beyond the purview of this study, two specific areas, social capital and deficit theories need to be re-conceptualized. Many of Bourdieu’s (1986) discussions on capital theory were predicated on what individuals from majoritarian societies brought to the learning environment. His normalization of *White capital* [emphasis added] “as a status-reproducing agent, explains how [the ideology] perpetuated the domination of Black society and schooling, historically and in the present” (Morris, 2004, p. 102). Going forward, a rethinking of a different form of capital, otherwise known as “cultural wealth”, (Yosso, 2005, p. 69), the capital that non-dominant students bring to the learning environment should be equally valued in the learning process. The enhanced understanding of this kind of capital—a set of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital skills—may inform the development of better policies and practices for ARB students.

Similarly, a reconceptualization of the images of ARB students with a focus on their strengths and capabilities and an understanding of what made them successful could lead to new instructional approaches in the education of ARB students. Specifically, their academic successes could serve as benchmarks for the potential, which is inherent in the refugee populations. In order to replicate and perhaps increase similar successes, educational personnel must highlight the factors that helped the students succeed. Too frequently, studies (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) have focused on unsuccessful ARB students and their vulnerabilities with little attention being paid to those who have been successful. As McGee

(2009) pointed out, in her study on high achieving Black mathematics and engineering students, the powerful stories of achieving Black students should be a motivator to other aspiring Black students. Similarly, Thomas Troward (2007) suggested that the best way to understand why ships sink is not to look at the ones that went down but rather at the ones that stayed up. Correspondingly, repositioning [the participants] as subjects and architects of research, with valid knowledge (Fine & Torre, 2004) and hearing directly from them, should be one of the first steps in the planning of future successful academic programs for other ARB students.

### **Implications for Policy**

**Divergent Hiring Policies.** One important policy implication is the racial identity of teacher(s) placed before ARB students. The findings of the study highlighted a need for a significant presence of Black teachers in the schools. Participants in the study expressed their discomfort with White teachers. References to them were minimal. With the exception of Makeba who received a lot of help from her ESL teacher, the participants hardly described teachers from the “regular” classes as being helpful. Their detachment from White teachers was attributable to numerous factors: fear of being seen as dumb, language inadequacy (the fear of being incoherent before a White teacher), and the inability to relate to the teachers. This physical distancing from teachers, who are supposed to assist students, had negative consequences for the ARB students. First, it limited their consultation with counselors who could have guided them in the course selection process. Second, it deprived them of valuable and much needed academic assistance and lastly, it created unequal power relationships in the classroom, a situation that disempowered the participants in the learning process. The hiring of more racialized teachers and counsellors to reduce the race incongruence between the increasing number of students of colour and the teaching staff is an area that needs to be considered. Unfortunately, the call by various scholars (e.g., Abawi, 2018; Egbo, 2012; Ryan,

Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009), for more inclusive classrooms has not resulted in more teacher diversity in Canadian classrooms. One way to address this underrepresentation of realized teachers in Canadian education is to increase the pool of minority teacher candidates in Teacher Education courses. Obviously, the presence of more racialized teachers in schools is not a guarantee of academic success but it would surely enhance the sense of belonging for ARB students and other racialized students.

Equally important is the hiring of teachers who are social justice oriented. As the student population in Canada becomes more diverse, there is a need for teachers who not only have a good understanding of the sources of inequities and privileges, but who also see “difference and diversity as an opportunity to enhance learning by using the diverse strengths, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of students and parents from various cultural groups” (Guo, 2012, p. 122).

**Enforcement or the Revision of the Mandated ESL Standards for Teachers of Refugee-Background Students.** Another way to enhance learning opportunities for refugee students is to review and to strictly enforce the mandated minimum standards for programs, curricula, and teacher credentials. Indeed, the following curricular documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education: a) *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 9-10: English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), b) *Supporting Students with Refugee Background* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a) and 3) a Memorandum on Syrian Newcomer Settlement in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b), offer a general framework for the successful integration of students with refugee backgrounds, into schools in Ontario. However, there are troubling consequences to this generic approach: first it overlooks the inherent variables within different refugee and immigrant populations, and second, it justifies the adoption of homogenizing policies and

interventionist programs by governmental and other instructional agencies. The failure to target interventions to the particular needs of specific immigrant populations creates difficulties down the line. For the ARB students, language proficiency was definitely, a neglected priority.

Data from their narratives identified language proficiency as one the biggest stumbling blocks in academic success. Considering two of the stated goals in *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 9-10: English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), namely, to help students a) become successful English language learners who can use English to achieve academically in all subject areas, and b) integrate confidently into mainstream courses (p. 6), the failure to prioritize language mastery for ARB students is even more puzzling. This is worrisome in the face of the growing emphasis on the right to and the benefits of education for young people within refugee camps. Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2004) minimum standards are designed for refugee camps, their applicability in issues affecting ARB students in Canadian educational contexts makes sense. In fact, the authors of the UNESCO document suggest that minimum standards should be used by educators in crisis situations and by those involved in the education of refugee young people, in their country of settlement. Another justification for enforcing the mandated standards comes from the organizational principle that "a firm becomes exactly what it seeks to measure" (Hauser & Katz, 1998, p. 23). To elucidate, if educational institutions want to help English language learners develop the skills and the proficiency in everyday English and, most importantly, the proficiency in academic English that will allow them to integrate successfully into the mainstream school program as stated in *The Ontario Curriculum*:

*Grades 9-10: English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), proper metrics that measure mandated standards for language proficiency, curricula and for teacher qualifications for ARB students' education, should be in place. Obviously, critics of this recommendation would argue that the document above establishes a detailed progress flow chart, "Pathway to English" (p. 14), illustrating the pathway from ESL to mainstream English courses, and an "Achievement Charts" (pp. 36-37) for the assessment and evaluation of ESL and ELD students' achievement. That may be true but it is also important to note that the ARB students' frustrations with their language challenges point to a huge gap between the stated goals in the documents and the reality on the ground.

From the participants' perspectives, their lack of proficiency in the English language was a corollary of the inadequacy of the ESL programs in their schools. Akono, Lutalo, and Nana's forthright comments about their dislike of the language program were revealing. With other participants (Kenyatta and Patience), uttering oblique comments about the shortcomings of the ESL program, the suitability of the program, offered to ARB students, must be interrogated. Roessingh's (2004) study of ESL programs in Canada, argues that ESL students are not being well served by the delivery of supports meant to facilitate their development of English language acquisition, a skill that would enable them to participate in mainstream classes. Arguably, this study is a bit dated. Regrettably, though, no other Canadian corroborating evidence on the efficacy of Canadian ESL programs was found. However, research from other jurisdictions, such as Sanchez's (2017) study on English Language Learning in the U.S., has described the programs there, as "suspect" (para. 8). Woods's (2009) Australian research on pedagogy for recently arrived refugee youth also

argued that the “sole reliance on traditional ESL pedagogy is failing this vulnerable group of students, who differ significantly from past refugees who have settled in Australia” (p. 2). Miller & Windle’s (2010) study came to a similar conclusion. Admittedly, these are foreign-based studies, but the critical comments expressed therein, mirrored the participants’ disapproval of the ESL programs in their Canadian schools. Akono felt “caged and unproductive,” Lutalo described the class as “degrading,” and Nana characterized it as a “waste of time.” When asked to elaborate on their comments, participants explained that the rudimentary nature of the ESL programs made it difficult for them to integrate into mainstream classes. This apparent lack of transitional planning and the language inadequacy have serious implications for the academic success of ARB students. As such, the quality of the language learning programs for African refugee-background students must be questioned. After all, any effort to authenticate and validate ARB students’ voices in educational discourses should start with better language training for these students.

The opportunity to learn English is, of course, influenced by the characteristics of the learner, the scope and content of language support services provided to the students. Regrettably, however, data from the students’ narratives underscored the failure of educational institutions to take some of these factors into consideration when dealing with ARB students. The class misplacement challenges for Akono, Nana, and Patience, were a clear indication that decisions were made regardless of the characteristics and learning needs of individual students. Interestingly, evidence from the studies on the quality of language programs for ESL (Miller & Windle, 201; Sanchez, 2017; Woods, 2009) indicates that, in some jurisdictions, these important decisions (placement of ESL students, the level of language and the length of time needed for the proper acquisition of language skills) are

rarely based on the progress that students have made (as measured by valid assessments) in the acquisition of English language skills and grade-appropriate subject matter. Obviously, it is possible that these revelations may be extraneous to Canadian ESL programs, but the shortcomings identified by the participants warrant an evaluation of the appropriateness of the programs offered to ARB students.

**Competencies for Teachers of ARB Students.** In addition to the supports and accommodations that should be made in the schools to help ARB students integrate successfully into advanced classes, pre-service and in-service teachers must have the competencies needed to understand students' pre- and post-migration backgrounds and the skills to adapt instruction to effectively accommodate English language learners. As commendable as the recommendations in the Government of Canada's What Works Monograph, entitled, *Supporting Refugee Students in Canadian Classrooms* (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2017) and the above-mentioned documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education are, the focus on program delivery and instructional strategies rather than on specific linguistic competencies for the teachers standing in front of African refugee-background students, is problematic. Equally concerning, is the failure to add prior language training or qualification as a recommended prerequisite for the additional ESL qualification courses (Parts 1 & 2), offered by various universities and Teachers' Federations in Ontario to teachers who want to teach English Language learners. Since ARB students with interrupted schooling "lack the topic-specific vocabularies of academic subjects, understandings of register and genre, cultural background knowledge to scaffold their understanding and learning strategies to process content" (Miller, 2009, p. 573), there is an

urgent need for competent English language teachers, who can help them learn complex content in a new language.

### **Language Competency.**

The need for language competency for teachers is corroborated by a 2013 Council of Ministers of Education (Canada)’s document, *Speaking for Excellence: Language Competencies for Effective Teaching Practice*, which points to “language proficiency [as] “among the most important characteristics contributing to quality teaching” (p.6). Further evidence comes from Freeman, Katz, Garcia Gomez, & Burns (2015) who argue that “new conceptualizations of English and the expansion of English teaching in ... education systems [have increased] demands on English language teachers and how they are trained” (p. 1). They argue for “a reconceptualization of teacher language proficiency, not as general English proficiency but as specialized subset of language skills required to prepare and teach lessons” (p. 1). Freeman, (2017), goes further, asserting that these new conceptualizations of English are challenging traditional norms of what the language is, as well as how it is taught and by whom. Arguably, the notion of overall teacher competency—what teachers need to know and do to be effective in the classroom—may be debatable, considering the impact that numerous variables (cultural, personal characteristics, attitudinal competence, level of commitment, environmental) might have on the development of such a standard. In the language domain, however, the establishment of a “threshold proficiency level” (Richards, 2017, p.3), that is, a level that a teacher must reach in the target language in order to be able to teach affectively in English (Richards, 2017) is possible. Considering the linguistic competency challenges that ARB students described in their narratives, it is incumbent on educational authorities working with refugee-background students, to clearly define the specific linguistics standards

for teachers of students with very limited knowledge of English. This policy recommendation is critical to the success of ARB students. For, language has power and status and because it is socially constructed, the voices of those with “polished” logistic skills in English dominate educational discourses and educational change. As Fielding and Rudduck (2002) note, what gets heard in the classroom “depends not only on who says it, but also on [the] style and language” (p. 2). Furthermore, Banjong’s (2015) suggestion that lack of fluency in spoken English affects the students’ self-esteem, their personal life and their academic achievement, compels educators to develop effective strategies to minimize the negative effects of this language inadequacy.

**Multicultural Competency.** Another way to increase the level of ARB student’s interaction and belongingness in their classrooms is the recruitment of teachers who are multiculturally competent (or culturally proficient), that is, teachers who teach in a culturally responsive manner. This approach, also known as culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), “recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills of diverse learners” (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017, p.23) and asserts that student differences and “cultural congruence of classroom practices increase students’ success in schools” (p. 25). Considering the ARB students’ discomfort, their reluctance, and uneasiness when interacting with their White teachers, teacher-training institutions should recognize the high priority of preparing pre-service teachers for diverse classrooms. Indeed, several Canadian, and foreign scholars (Banks, 2008; Egbo, 2012, Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999) have emphasized the benefits of multicultural competence for pre-service teachers. Mandated internship programs in minoritized communities and professional development training to enhance teachers’ awareness and understanding of the “worlds” of the diverse students before them,

could help minimize the cultural incongruence between teachers and diverse students.

Knowing the background of students and experiencing the socialization process of one's potential students could inform a teacher's attitude and interaction of with non-dominant students. Additionally, prospective teachers of ARB students should be required to provide evidence of their cultural competence or proficiency, described by Lindsey and Lindsey (2016) as the ability "to serve the needs of all students, with a laser-like focus on historically underserved students [and] in a culturally proficient manner, to help them gain access to educational opportunities intended to result in high academic achievement" (p. 50).

**Better Rubrics.** Considering the participants' criticism of their ESL programs, their overall unpreparedness for mainstream classes, and Patience and Akono's dissatisfaction with their placement in school, educators of ARB students are obligated to review the validity of their ESL programs, as well as their assessment and placement strategies. End results of ARB students' language proficiency should be clearly defined by concrete indicators that show the effectiveness of the ESL courses offered to them. Rubrics that assess the effectiveness of the ESL programs (quality of classroom engagement, level of interaction with other pupils, the rigors of the program, belongingness), from the ARB students' perspectives, should be established. Arguably, the validity of students' feedback on their teachers' performance is questionable due to the students' lack of expertise in curricular matters and classroom management. Nevertheless, their feedback should be added to the ESL teacher evaluation process. At a minimum, their comments would encourage ESL teachers to "listen" and to "look" at themselves from a different light.

## Implications for Practice

**Language Instruction.** The findings of the study interrogate the “Macdonaldization” (Fielding, 2010, p. 66) of ESL language instruction and advocates for an effective differentiation of instructional practices to accommodate the diverse background of newcomers. Additionally, it promotes a more intense language training to help refugee students prepare for the complex subjects in the higher grades. Participants commented on how language deficiencies impacted their selection of courses. For example, Lutalo wanted to do Math and engineering but his councillor dissuaded him because of his low language skills. For Akono, language rather than his ability was a determining factor in the courses that were offered to him. In the end he felt that some of the courses were not the ones he wanted to take.

Since the two examples above demonstrate how language proficiency becomes a disqualifier for entry into certain courses, future research must find ways of enhancing the linguistic skills of ARB students. This will require a shift in how language is taught, from emphasizing grammar to pragmatics (the branch of linguistics dealing with language in use and the contexts in which it is used). Canagarajah (2014) explains the shift as follows: “the diverse communicative practices and social relations in globalization [asks scholars to] define English as constituting socially constructed situational norms in specific contexts of interaction, and not as a *homogeneous language* [emphasis added] or even discrete varieties of English” (p. 767). Similarly, Robinson (1988) suggests that, the interactive nature of lexical negotiation requires language instructors to focus as much on procedures (learning how to negotiate meaning) rather than on the more narrowly defined declarative meanings of words (building a bank of definitional meanings). Equipping non-English speakers with the

procedural language tools to handle higher-level academic courses takes time. In fact, Cummins (2000) suggests that basic interpersonal communication skills in English may take two to three years to acquire but the cognitive academic language proficiency that is necessary for successful content-based learning takes from five to seven years to develop. As an aside, participants' level of language usage, during the data collection period, was noticeably at the intermediate fluency level.

**Other Instructional Practices.** Creating optimal learning environments for all students is vital. It is even more so for ARB students whose identities, language, values, skin colour, differ from their peers in the Canadian classroom. Acknowledging and factoring in the distinctness of ARB students into instructional delivery could lay the foundation to a successful high school experience. This would entail a modification in the way certain issues, such as, slavery, marginalization, discrimination, and stereotyping, are presented in the classroom, especially, in the presence of students whose experiences are devoid of any of the above issues. Regrettably, the homogenization of Black students' responses to issues that affect them creates the false notion that shared complexion equals shared cultures and ideas. Fortunately, Glover (as cited in Reddick, 1998) refutes this correlation, stressing that some Africans react to issues of race and slavery in a way that is different from African Americans because they (Africans) cannot relate to the degradation of slavery and its inimical effects. Frequently, though, the homogenizing practices and the erroneous assumptions that a shared complexion translates into the same behaviours and responses, prevent educators from appreciating the variability in the experiences of Black students. Participants in this study categorically rejected the Black identity and surprisingly downplayed the impact of race. Like the Caribbean students in Rong and Brown's (2001) study on the effects of immigrant

generation and ethnicity on educational attainment among young African and Caribbean Blacks in the United States, participants in this study emphasized their cultural heritage (being African) and de-emphasized their race—being Black. In doing so, they ‘wanted’ to distance themselves from African Americans and the presumed disadvantages of being Black in America. The deliberate use of the word ‘wanted’ underscores the inevitability of colour by association. In other words, the mere adoption of a colourblindness attitude, by both the ARB and the Caribbean Black students, cannot be used as a magic wand to wave away one’s phenotype and the attendant negativity directed at this population.

Despite the weakness in their reasons for social distancing, however, good instructional practices require educators to meet their students “where they are” on the educational trajectory and to try to “address their needs, passions, and interests in real time” (Rudenstine et al., 2017, p. 2). Put differently, teachers should address the elephant in the room by paying attention to the way emotionally laden issues are presented in the classroom. Patience’s embarrassment as the film on slavery was presented in class, attests to the need for a more sensitive approach to emotionally charged subjects. Similarly, it is advisable for educators to appreciate the within-group differences among the Black students in the class or the school. Failure to do this homogenizes Black students and culminates in a one-size-fits-all instructional approach for all Black students.

Giving ARB students’ voice in the classroom and having students participate in curriculum development is another way of empowering African refugee-background students. Beyond the classroom, teachers should establish programs that encourage student integration. Teachers who know and understand the backgrounds, values and culture of their students are in a better position to factor this knowledge into creating opportunities for students to

intermingle. As products of the “banking” of education, ARB students’ learning style is teacher controlled. As such, Canadian teachers need to incorporate new study habits and skill-building strategies to ensure the academic success of their new charges. Being able to meet students at where they are at is a good place to start. Let’s not forget that the interruption of schooling makes some ARB students unprepared for schooling. Gowon’s comments that he “never went to school back home” are illustrative of the need for this up-skilling.

### **Implications for Further Research**

In this section, implications for future research are suggested and they are presented in the following order: a strength-based approach, refugee students as transformative agents, exploring the link between ARB students’ individual agency and academic success, the role of hybridity in academic success, the impact of the expectancy-value theory on the academic success, the impact of race and ethnicity in the classroom, the imposed Black identity, expanding the study sample, and the link between academic self-concept and environmental factors.

The first implication urges researchers to replace their deficit-oriented gaze on communities of colour with a strength-based perspective. After all, the Pygmalion effect holds that “people do better when more is expected of them” (Boser et al., 2014, p. 1). Additionally, the strengths perspective demands a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities. It stresses capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, and hopes and de-emphasizes the vulnerabilities of refugee-background students. Imagine how the academic performance and the images of ARB students could be re-conceptualized if educators were to focus on the resources and the capital possessed by these students. The

point I am trying to make here is that educators' views of African refugee-background students should transcend the traditional, limited and, and fixed identities ascribed to this population. Consider, for example, a framework that highlights their positive attributes and values the positive changes they want to make in their communities. Giftedness may suddenly be "discovered" within this population.

Second, educators should view the participants in this study as "transformative agents". Usually, researchers (e.g., Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010; Giroux, 1985; Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013) associate the word transformative with teachers who engage in work within their institutions and professions in order to challenge inequitable practices, policies, and structures (Rhoads & Black, 1995). However, guided by Mezirow's (1978) description of transformative learning as "a structural change in the way we see ourselves [our views], and our relationships" (p. 100) and by Cranton (2006) who found that transformative learning happens when an "individual critically examines [her] view[s], opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, ... and makes meaning out of the world" (p. 2), I suggest that the actions of the ARB students fall within the zone of transformative acts in that, they pushed back against the injustices and tried to work for change - using their behaviors and voices (Chen & Rhoads, 2016) as well as their academic success as tools for this transformation. Admittedly, participants might not have been aware of their acts of resistance, but this unawareness does not diminish their accomplishments as transformative agents. All in all, their academic successes may have helped them transcend the taken-for-granted negative frames of reference, usually reserved for refugee-background students.

Relatedly, the third implication encourages researcher to investigate the link between participants' individual agency and their academic success. The interest in this human

capacity to exercise control over one's thought processes, motivation, and actions to produce certain results beneficial to the individual (Lerner et al., 2015; Skinner et al., 2009), stem from the manner in which the participants came to acquire this ability. Additionally, Bandura's (2001) agentic view of individuals as, "People [who] devise ways of adapting flexibly to diverse geographic, and social environments ... [by figuring] out ways to circumvent physical and environmental constraints and redesigning and constructing environments" (p. 22) to create styles of behaviour that enable them to realize their goals, made me realize how the participants' agency could inform future programs and practices. Delving more deeply into the origins of the agency-resilience factor in the lives of the participants and furthering our understanding of how the strategies deployed by agentic students, could contribute to the replication of future successes for other refugee-background students.

Fourth, an investigation of the link between ethnic identity and academic success should focus more on the hybrid identities developed by the participants rather than the fixed identity ascribed to them. Researchers, in their analysis of Black and African refugee-background students, have overlooked this evolutionary nature of identity formation. For example, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) as well as Steele et al. (2002) consider ethnic identity as fixed and problematic for groups that are negatively stereotyped. However, participants' narratives deconstructed this concept by displaying multiple transformations of their ethnic identity. Their evolution from their initial passive and obedient selves upon their arrival in Canada to their authentic selves by the time they graduated from high school challenged the deterministic aspect of their identity formation. Put differently, the inceptive feelings of rejection, due to their phenotype and inadequate linguistic skills, was replaced by a confidence, pride, and a strict adherence to their African heritage. In the process, the

participants developed “cultural switching” abilities, described by Benet-Martínez et al. (2002) as the ability to “switch between different culturally appropriate behaviors” when one is exposed “to multiple cultural meaning systems” (p. 493). This ability to function in between two cultures, with no previous preparation, opens the door for a more focused investigation of how the participants used their hybrid identities as a tool to challenge the essentialism ascribed to Black youth and to create borderless environments around their existence. Borderless, because they appear to have established their own rules, beyond those established by the two cultures in which they lived (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

The fifth recommendation centres on the impact of the expectancy-value theory on the academic success of ARB students. This theory suggests that achievement and achievement-related choices are driven by both the expectancy for success and the value assigned to the task (Wigfield et al., 2009). Other identified psychological predictors for academic achievement are the students’ expectancies for success and beliefs in their ability (Eccles et al., 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Johnson & Sinatra, 2013; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). In view of the increased diversity in the classrooms and the different conceptualizations of success across various ethnic groups, an understanding of how the expectancy-value theory impacts refugee-background students’ motivation, selection of courses and achievement of goals, may be important when designing interventions to promote utility values in academic success for refugee-background students.

Future research on refugee-background students should also focus on how ethnicity and race affect classroom dynamics and academic achievement. Admittedly, the link between ethnic identity and academic success has been broached (e.g., Montralloy, 2014). Similarly, other researchers (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; James, 2011; Murrell, 2007; Packard, 2013; Steele, 1997) have identified race as a contributory factor in educational success. In Canada,

numerous studies, (e.g., Abada et al., 2009; Dei, 2006, 2007, 2008; Gérin-Lajoie, 2012; James & Turner, 2017; Ryan et al., 2009) have reached similar conclusions. James and Turner's (2017) study on Black youths in Toronto, Canada, provides one of the best insights into the subject. However, what is missing in educational research is *how* and *why* race and ethnicity affect ARB students' learning and academic performance. As indicated earlier, their distinctness and specific needs require this special attention. Exploring the *how* and the *why* these two constructs impacted the participants' academic success, broadens educators' understanding of what works and what doesn't in unknown and unfamiliar educational contexts. As such, further research on the classrooms' diversity impact on students with refugee-backgrounds should encompass an analysis of the coping strategies adopted by the participants. Findings from Schenke et al.'s (2017) study on the "Differential Effects of the Classroom on African American and non-African American's Mathematics Achievement" advocate for the structuring of learning environments to accommodate the different learning styles of students. Without these nuanced adjustments to match the varied levels of ARB students' interactions and responses to their teachers, their peers and to the school curriculum, the traditional notions of the universal Black Experience would prevail, and researchers would continue to harbour homogenized and deficit-laden images of refugee-background students.

Inherent in the re-conceptualizing of how ARB students are viewed, is a re-examination of the imposed Black identity on Africans when they journey to North America. According to Ibrahim (2004), this categorization lumps all Africans with the same phenotype together and paints them with the same deficit brush used to describe underachieving Black youth. Participants rejected this ascribed identity and distanced themselves from other Blacks.

In doing so, participants were signaling their distinctness from other Blacks in the Canadian society. Indirectly, they were also affirming their objection to the imposed Black identity and the “refugee” label. Having come from a majority status, albeit, as citizens of their countries, to becoming “Black” and being labeled as “refugees” in Canada, was a new experience for them (Ibrahim, 004). They regretted that their distinctness was not reflected in any of the programs in their high schools. As more students with refugee backgrounds enter Canadian schools, their distinctness has implications for teacher training and pedagogical practices in the classroom and it must be factored into the learning process.

To counteract this monolithic response to refugee issues, and to gain a greater understanding of the values and perspectives of the African refugee-background students, future researchers could build on this study by increasing and expanding the study sample. Including pre- and post-particulars of refugees, such as, the participants’ countries of origin, ethnicity, gender, academic preparation and preparedness, social status, and other variables (e.g., personal characteristics, parental education, employment, etc.) could yield valuable data on how the situational self-control strategies of refugee students were developed. Self-control is viewed as a self-initiated way of manipulating our surroundings to our advantage (Duckworth et al., 2016). As Baumeister et al. (2007) explain “self-control [is] the capacity for altering one’s own responses, especially to bring them into line with standards such as ideals, values, morals, and social expectations, and to support the pursuit of long-term goals” (p. 351). Investigating how this concept benefitted the ARB students is a task worth pursuing. The results from such a study would enhance educators’ understanding of how self-control strategies—described as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions held by students about their academic skill sets and performance by Lent et al. (1997), could be leveraged to

replicate academic success for future ARB students.

A final area that needs more scrutiny is the link between the refugee-background students' academic self-concept and the environmental factors in which they are embedded. In their narratives, participants appeared to be "achieving their successes on their own" with little help from their micro and mezzo systems of support. As praiseworthy as their accomplishments were, the palpable absence of their parents and significant others in their academic journey was disconcerting. This sink or swim approach contradicts Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological system's theory which argues that the layers in a child's environment have a considerable influence the child's development. Similarly, it flies against the African adage; it takes a village to raise a child, which places the child's development in the hands of parents, family members and the broader community (Van Roekel, 2008). Many researchers (e.g., Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Guardino & Fullerton, 2010; Kanu, 2008) have also analyzed the impact of the classroom environment on refugee students' learning. Surprisingly, though, the literature is silent on the contribution of parents, extended families, ethnic communities, and other individuals in the refugee-background students' circle of influence, even though several authors support this collaboration between home and school. Ekane (2013), for example, suggests that African refugees, coming from a traditionally collectivist culture, rely on a strong extended kinship and look to the extended family as a form of support. Similarly, Bernardon et al. (2011) as well as Webb (2013) consider this kind of support as critical in the refugees' adjustment to their new countries because it acts as a buffer against the negative effects experienced in periods of change. Finally, Rah et al. (2009) argue that the unique social, cultural, economic, and linguistic positioning of ARB families compels school leaders and educators to be more sensitive to the specific

challenges and needs of the parents. Considering the importance of this relationship, future research needs to examine the refugee experience through an ecological lens that views parents and the participants' surrounding family members as active partners in the ARB students' education. This would entail changes in the manner teachers perceive the parents of refugee-background students, since research from Codjoe (2007) blames teachers' expectations of poor academic work from Black students on the low opinions, teachers have of Black parents and their lack of interaction with them. Obviously, more constructive and collaborative home-school partnerships would provide much needed optimal support for the ARB students as they tackle the academic, social, psychological, and emotional challenges in their new school environments.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this study has been to explore the factors that African refugee-background students (ARB) identify as being helpful in their academic success. Qualitative researchers have for the most part, focused primarily on their vulnerabilities and less on their positive attributes. The scarcity of literacy research on the academic success of ARB students is a contributory factor to this negative discourse. In the study, I argue against this deficit ideology and suggest that deeper and more nuanced sociological approaches are vital to educators, policy makers, and administrators' understanding of the obstacles that handicap ARB students in their educational settings. The significance of this study is four-fold. Firstly, it questions who gets to define academic success and suggests that new paradigms for defining and measuring academic success are needed to recognize the diverse needs of all students in Canadian classrooms. Secondly, it authenticates the academic successes of ARB students and elevates their issues and concerns into contemporary educational discourse. Thirdly, it compels researchers and educators to abandon their researcher and educator biases

and to develop alternate spaces and bias-free methodologies for the study of communities of colour. Fourthly, the study calls for adequate supports and accommodations (better transition programming; curricula and cultural program adaptations; more diversified placement and assessment practices; improved language acquisition strategies; an understanding and integration of students' pre- and post-migration backgrounds; mandated multicultural training and multicultural competency (proficiency) for pre-service and all teachers of ESL students, and stronger home-school partnerships) to help ARB students become more academically successful.

As innovative (in that, it went against the prevailing negativity and focused on successful ARB students), as this study might be, more theoretically and methodologically diverse empirical research is warranted to construct a deeper understanding of the different aspects of the ARB students' identity, presence and their social functioning in Canadian schools. Indeed, much could be learned from successful ARB students like Mandisa, when they are given a chance to tell their stories of academic success, in their own voices. Consider the heightened sense of belonging and the boost to their self-esteem, if their voices were heard, and their psychological and educational needs were met in the classroom. Imagine what the impact would be if educators were to adopt a renewed conceptualization of African refugee-background students' academic potential. New understandings of the refugee experience and novel pedagogical practices for the equalization of opportunities—the authentication of refugee-background students' voices and their perspectives of academic success, the validation and inclusion of their lived experiences in curriculum planning and teaching practices—would become a reality. The resultant transformative approaches to teaching and learning hold the possibility of creating safe and welcoming places for future refugee-background students, to realize their fullest potential.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Invitation

#### African Refugee Research Participants Wanted

Please accept this invitation to participate in a research project entitled **Exploring the Factors That African Refugee Students Identify as Being Helpful to Their Academic Success**, being carried out by Edwin Laryea, a doctoral candidate at Brock University.

**In this study, I wish to explore the high school experiences of African refugee youth who have graduated from a high school in Ontario. Participants will be asked to share the factors that helped them succeed in high school.**

Participants must (a) identify as Black; (b) be between 18-25 years; (c) have come to Canada as refugees from Central, Eastern, Western and Southern Africa; (d) have gone directly to high school or have spent 2 years or less in a Canadian elementary school, before going to high school; (e) have graduated from a Canadian high school. This research will involve 3-5 hours of your time over a two-month period. You will have an opportunity to share your experiences and ideas during the individual interviews and the focus group session that will be part of this study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (file # REB 17-043). If you have any comments or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Brock's Research Ethics Office, at (905) 688 5550 x 3035 or by email at reb@brocku.ca.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the attached Initial Questionnaire and return it by (insert date) in the self-addressed and stamped envelope to Edwin Laryea or by email to el12zq@brocku.ca or to Denise Armstrong (darmstrong@brocku.ca)

Thank you in advance,

Edwin Laryea  
Doctoral candidate  
Faculty of Education

Dr. Denise Armstrong  
Professor  
Faculty of Education

## Appendix B

### Initial Questionnaire

Dear (Participant)

Please answer the following questions and return the form by (insert date) in the self-addressed and stamped envelope to Edwin Laryea or email it to el12zq@brocku.ca.

Remember that you have the right to refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Thank you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ : City \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email: \_\_\_\_\_ : Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_ (insert date)

#### Questions

1. Are you? ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. In what year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
3. In what country were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
4. In what year did you arrive in Canada? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How old were you when you arrived in Canada? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Why did you leave Africa?
  - ☐ War
  - ☐ Job related
  - ☐ To be with relatives
  - ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. What was your legal status when you arrived in Canada?
  - ☐ Canadian Citizen
  - ☐ Refugee
  - ☐ Landed Immigrant
  - ☐ Student Visa
  - ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. When you came to Canada whom did you arrive with? Select any of the following options that apply:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Mother and/or Father	<input type="checkbox"/> Friends
<input type="checkbox"/> Brothers and/or Sisters	<input type="checkbox"/> No one
<input type="checkbox"/> Aunt and/or Uncle	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Cousins	

9. Who do you live with now? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What is your first language? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What language do you speak at home? \_\_\_\_\_
12. List all other languages you speak. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. How many years did you go to school before arriving in Canada? \_\_\_\_\_ years.
14. How many years did you attend an elementary school in Canada? \_\_\_\_\_
15. How old were you when you graduated from high school? \_\_\_\_\_

**ALL INFORMATION PROVIDED IS CONFIDENTIAL AND IT WILL BE KEPT SECURELY  
IN A SEPARATE CODE-PROTECTED FILING CABINET**

Thank You.

## Appendix C

### Community Counselling and Support Agencies

1. Mosaic Counselling - Carizon Family and Community Services  
519-743-6333

**Open: Mondays –Thursdays 8 am– 9 pm and Fridays 8 – 5 pm**

400 Queen St. S.

Kitchener, ON, N2G 1W7

519-743-6333

[www.mosaiconline.ca](http://www.mosaiconline.ca)

**Free Walk-In Clinic – Tuesdays 12 – 6 pm**

2. KW Counselling Services (KWCS)  
519-884-0000 (Extension 222)

**Open: Mondays – Thursdays 8:30 am– 8 pm and Fridays 8:50 – 5 pm**

480 Charles Street, East

Kitchener, ON, N2G 4K5

[www.kwcounselling.com](http://www.kwcounselling.com)

**Free Walk-In Clinic - Thursdays 12 – 6 pm**

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. In what country were you born?
2. In what year did you arrive in Canada?
3. How old were you when you arrived in Canada?
4. What city did you go to?
5. What schools did you attend?
6. What school did you graduate from? When did you graduate?
7. Graduation means that the student has been academically successful. Do you consider yourself “academically successful”? Why?
8. What does the term “academic success” mean to you?
9. What were the factors that contributed to your academic success?
10. What other school conditions and classroom experiences helped increase your motivation to learn and to succeed in school?
11. What supports do you wish you could have had to help with your schooling?
12. How do you define yourself?
13. Does the way you define yourself affect you academically (in your studies)?
14. Describe any other factors or person(s) that contributed to your academic success.
15. Describe any other thing(s), factor(s), or person(s) that hindered your academic success.
16. Is there anything else you wish to share or talk about regarding your experience in high school and your academic success?
17. In your opinion, what can be done to help African refugee students succeed in high school?

Thank you

## Appendix E

### Feedback Letter

#### Exploring the Factors That African Refugee Students Identify as Being Helpful to Their Academic Success

**Principal Student Investigator:** Edwin Laryea  
Email: el12zq@brocku.ca

**Supervisor:** Dr. Denise Armstrong, Faculty of Education  
905-688-5550 ext. 5166  
Email: darmstrong@brocku.ca

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to thank you for participating in my study on (insert date). Your knowledge, perceptions and opinions provided important information on the experiences of African refugee students in high schools in Ontario. For your convenience, we have enclosed a copy of the summary report with this letter. You may also access the full dissertation via this link:

If you have any further comments, questions, or concerns about the study and/or the results, please feel free to contact us.

This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through, the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (file # REB 17-043). In the event you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at 905-688-5550 ext. 3035.

Your time and effort are very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Edwin Laryea  
Doctoral candidate

Dr. Denise Armstrong  
Professor

## Appendix F

### Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

#### Exploring the Factors That African Refugee Students Identify as Being Helpful to Their Academic Success

I, \_\_\_\_\_, the Transcriber, have been hired to transcribe the data from the interviews and the focus group sessions for the research study listed above.

I agree to -

1. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, and transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher(s)*.
2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, and transcripts) to the *Researcher(s)* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. Erase or destroy, after consulting with the *Researcher(s)*, all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher(s)* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

**Printed Full Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date (YYYY/MM/DD)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date (YYYY/MM/DD)** \_\_\_\_\_

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (file # REB 17-043). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or the ethical conduct of this research, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

