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Standing up, reaching out and letting go: Experiences of resilience and school engagement for African high schoolers from refugee backgrounds

Abstract

The significance of engagement between Australia and Africa is gaining increasing attention, and few groups represent the future of this engagement better than the many young people born in Africa who have resettled in Australia on humanitarian visas. Educational attainment is one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence, and is valued by adolescents of refugee background, their families and communities, and the wider Australian society. However, secondary schooling places high demands on humanitarian entrants who arrive with low levels of prior education. These young people encounter these demands when they are already facing challenges presented by adolescence, the refugee experience, migration, and acculturation. Through a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, young African-Australians told their stories of resettlement and schooling, discussed the challenges they faced, and the ways in which they sought to overcome those challenges. Qualitative analysis identified themes relating to identity, resilience, optimism and the ongoing task of engaging with an Australian education.

Introduction

The refugee experience is a central component in the story of 21st century migration from Africa to Australia. Over the past decade, African migrants have made up a significant proportion of the offshore resettlement component of Australia's humanitarian program. This peaked in 2003/04 when African nations represented 70.5 % of offshore resettlement over that period (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010; Hugo, 2009). African migrants through this program have come from a diverse range of West African, East African and Central African nations, primarily Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005; Hugo, 2009). Compared to prior waves of African migration, the majority of which arrived from South Africa and Zimbabwe, this population is notably more 'visible' as a migrant group in Australia society, being visibly different in appearance (i.e. of Non-European ancestry), and less likely to speak English as their first language (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). The increase in arrivals from African refugee-source countries has contributed significantly to the raised profile of immigration from Africa in Australian social and political discourse (Robinson, 2011).

The comparative youth of resettled refugee populations is an important characteristic to recognise when addressing the issue of resettlement outcomes. In 2010/11 42.6 % of offshore resettlement visa recipients were under 18 years of age, and 67.0% were under 30 years of age (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011). This group is less likely than other migrants to arrive already possessing formal educations and recognised job skills (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). Therefore educational opportunities and successful engagement with the Australian school system are crucial to the resettlement process and future success of young people from refugee backgrounds.

This paper aims to situate the experiences of resettled African high school students within the broader context of the engagement between Africa and Australia. At an individual level, these students are attempting to engage with the Australian education system in order to achieve the best outcomes for their futures. The barriers to their engagement, and the ways in which they cope with the day to day challenges of schooling, represents one important facet in the ongoing story of African immigration to Australian.

Resettled young people in the Australian school system

Typically the formal education of young people from refugee backgrounds has been interrupted or prevented over the course of their refugee experience (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007). For those who have participated in schooling, the nature of educational methods and curricula in African nations are often very different, and adjustments must be made to the expectations of the Australian school system (Cassity & Gow, 2005). A six to twenty-four month intensive English-as-a-Second-Language curriculum, separate from the mainstream school system, is provided to non-English speaking new arrivals in recognition of the adaptation required by migrants students. This curriculum introduces students to the expectations and structure of the Australian education system, to different ways of learning and to the tools and skills that are required in the mainstream school system. Students are placed into this program according to their prior educational experiences and academic capacity (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2010).

After graduating from the specialised migrant curriculum, students enter the mainstream school system. This allows a greater opportunity for integration into Australian society and provides the standard of education that is expected for success in Australian society. However, there are significant barriers that must be overcome for students to integrate successfully into the new school environment (Kirk & Cassity, 2007). This is particularly so for students entering the secondary (high-school) education system, where they are placed by age rather than years of prior education, and fewer resources are available to assist in the transition process (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Sidhu & Taylor, 2007).

Students in the mainstream high-school system must adapt to the higher academic expectations and the greater autonomy expected of secondary students. For resettled African students with limited experience of the Australian school system there is a steep learning curve to follow in order to adapt (Cassity & Gow, 2005). The mainstream school system can also be an environment of discrimination. Students' social identity, as former refugees and as 'visible migrants', can become a source of discrimination both from teachers and peers (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Cassity & Gow, 2005). These barriers to engagement with the school system must be overcome in the ongoing process of acculturation and adaptation to a new country, and despite the erosion of old social networks and support structures. It is in this context that this paper considers the ways in which resettled African high school students discuss their own resilience and their engagement with the education system.

The importance of resilience and engagement

The concept of resilience discussed in this paper has been informed by a framework utilised in developmental psychology to understand the processes by which individuals and groups develop their own resources to manage stress and adapt positively to challenging

circumstances (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). For young people from refugee backgrounds, adaptation can refer both to external adaptation to the demands of resettlement and schooling, e.g. through making academic progress or building new social networks, and to internal processes that establish good mental health outcomes, a stable sense of self identity and the ability to regulate emotion (Masten, et al., 1999). Resilience can be influenced through a number of sources including social support networks, personality, values and the individuals' capacity to cope with challenges (Halcón, et al., 2004; Montgomery, 2010; Riollo, Savicki, & Cepani, 2002).

In the context of education, engagement can refer to a variety of ways in which students involve themselves with their schools and their schoolwork, and the extent to which there is emotional and behavioural investment in schooling (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students develop a sense of belonging within the school environment, as social connections and a positive sense of being a valued member of the school community form (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Engagement also refers to the degree to which students participate in school activities, view themselves as being able to meet the academic and behavioural expectations set for them by their schools, and place value on the outcomes of their schooling (Willms, 2003).

Utilising these concept of resilience and engagement, this paper will focus on three themes that emerged through discussions with resettled African students: their social identity in the school environment, the ways in which they coped with barriers to their education, and the ways in which their experiences were situated within ongoing personal narratives that emphasised opportunities for achievement and growth.

Method

The interviews discussed in this paper were undertaken as part of a larger study exploring stress and coping in students from refugee backgrounds resettled in Australia. A purposive sampling strategy, utilising service provider networks (e.g. youth groups, and refugee support services) was applied to recruit participants. This was supplemented by snowball sampling through participants' informal networks, in order to reach out to students who did not rely on these services.

Data from the 20 participants (12 females and 8 males) who had been resettled from African nations were extracted from the total data set and coded for this paper. These participants had all lived in Australia for a minimum of six months before being interviewed and were enrolled in, or had recently graduated from, mainstream high schools. Their ages ranged between 13 and 19 years old. Sixty percent (12) of the participants identified themselves as Sudanese, with other participants identifying as Sierra Leonean (4), Liberian (3) and Congolese (1). However, as is typical for young people from refugee backgrounds, their nominated nationality was not necessarily the country of their birth or upbringing, and some participants also described themselves as 'coming from' Ghana, The Gambia, Kenya and Egypt.

The interviews were conducted either as focus groups, or one-on-one interviews, depending on the preferences of the young people being interviewed. Both approaches have merit; one-on-one interviews permit the participants to explore individual experiences and meaning in depth whilst focus groups provide an opportunity to develop ideas through group interaction, and explore similarities and differences of opinion within groups

(Kitzinger, 1995). Interviews were conducted in a range of settings, including youth centres, public libraries, and participants' homes.

Results

Themes discussed in the current paper comprise a preliminary analysis of this data, focusing on the complexities of participants' individual lived experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005), specifically in this case, their experiences as young, resettled Africans in the social and educational contexts of their schooling.

Being African students in Australian schools

Although the participants came from a range of different countries and cultural backgrounds, most discussed some sense of an African social identity that impacted on their experiences of and engagement with their schooling. Often this identity was the product of perceived stereotyping by teachers and peers, and some students viewed this as denying African students an individual identity.

"You know how like some African groups are doing drugs, stealing, having been arrested and then like when people see us they think we are all the same. It's like they just think of us all as one, they don't separate us. Cos like, I know that there are some bad Africans that make us look bad but we are not all the same, we are all different people and everyone is entitled to be different in their own way, but they see us as one."
Congolese Female, Age 16

Participants who reported this pattern described ways in which it was used to discriminate against and ostracise African students. They gave examples of discrimination from both teachers and classmates. Many described incidents when this practice distracted them from their schoolwork and caused emotional distress and anger.

"Like they will start saying things that you don't want to hear, like about where you come from and everything you know like, they will see all these ads on TV about poverty in Africa and everything, you know and then they will come to school and start using it against you and everything, like you have to walk 80 miles to get water and everything. Like those are things you don't want to hear and like you have to deal with it."
Sudanese Male, Age 15

The lived experience of this African identity was spoken of mostly in stories of discrimination. Participants reported feeling that teachers expected less of them in terms of their academic ability and behaviour, and were less inclined to motivate African students or recognise their strengths and abilities. They also felt that teachers were more likely to give African students low marks and punishments regardless of their behaviour or the quality of their work. It is important to note that not all participants believed that they were discriminated against, but for those who did perceive discrimination it reduced their motivation   to   participate   and   strive   at   school.

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"Yeah, so basically I had three friends, one of them was Liberian, two were Sudanese and one of them she was the type, she didn't think, like the other two were telling me 'Oh, there's no point in us trying, we'll never be as good at writing as them', this and this, this and that. She was more 'Well we might not be as good but I'm gonna work really hard I wanna make something of myself.' So, whenever an assignment came up she would really try. The others thought 'What's the big deal?' They would hand up assignment and all get the same grade. And it came to the point one time, we were sitting in the bus, she said 'I don't know what else to do. The teacher, just because I hang out with them, that's the end of it, all of us get the same grade'".
Sierra Leonean Female, Age 19

The social identity of being an African student also played a role in the friendships that participantss made, providing students with a group of peers to whom they could relate regardless of nationality. The sense of similar culture and values between African students was a source of emotional support in an environment where many students felt isolated.

"Well actually having them around, having, um, the African girls, a lot of them because by Year 11 there's a lot of us now. It actually really helps cause I find that my year level, which is made up of a lot of Australians, different kind of people, it was all about the parties; beer and drugs at that stage. That was it, it, it, it, it, IT! And I found, when I didn't like well my group was different but still, when I went and sat with my 'African' [making finger quotes] people, it was more fun and we got all kids all laughing, joking. It helped me cope, I can actually say, it really did help me cope because it was like an instant boost."
Sierra Leonean Female, Age 19

It is worth noting that some participants did not feel that they were ostracised and that they personally had the capacity and the responsibility to participate fully in school life in order to feel engaged. They believed that participation and engagement was more difficult for students from refugee and multicultural backgrounds, but that the benefits were worth the effort.

"For me I reckon getting involved in everything, like you know it's there. Sports you get involved, class discussions you get involved, ah you know, excursions, ah pretty much a bit of everything that's provided at school helps you get into the system and also helps you feel part of it. It's, that's how, that's how I got into it, that's how I understood, I want to fit in, yeah just to be involved."
Sudanese Male, Age 17

Most participants discussed their African identity in the context of perceived discrimination, but some also saw great value in it, as a source of personal strength and friendship. This became important emotionally for students coping with challenges they faced at school.

Coping with the challenges of school

Students described a number of the barriers to successful engagement with school that have been documented in previous research, including unrealistic academic expectations, family conflict, language barriers and discrimination (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Crisp, Talbot, & Cipollone, 2001; Sidhu & Taylor, 2007). They discussed the strategies that they had used to respond to these challenges, a topic which led to considerable divergence of opinion within focus groups, regarding the effectiveness of different approaches.

Many participants felt that a sense of self-sufficiency was important in order to be successful at school. Participants discussed times when they were feeling particularly stressed, and relying solely on themselves during those times.

"Whenever I have a problem, I keep it to myself. I don't let anyone know. Once I sort it for myself then I start telling people... I just keep it to myself and when I finished solving it, then I can start telling people... Like the one I just told you about [being kicked out of home by] my mum. I solved it myself, I didn't tell anyone. Yeah, I was just moving from friends place to friends place, going to school, coming back, sleeping all around. And one day I got a place to sleep... I'd see my friends going in to school. I won't stop and say 'Yes, look I'm suffering, I'm doing this, I don't go to school'. I need to learn too so I just come clean to everyone once I got a place."
Liberian Male, Age 17

Self-sufficiency was valued because it represented the ability to succeed and learn when there was tension in relationships or a general lack of social support. Some participants felt that being self-sufficient at school was a natural by-product of the loss they had experienced and their lack of social support networks after resettlement. Most did not identify their parents and caregivers as appropriate support for the stresses associated with schooling and so needed to feel that they could rely on their own capacity.

"Sometimes school gets really, really hard, like with my relationship and family problems at the same time and you are trying to finish work and it's really hard to for you to concentrate, you don't have anyone around you to help you and you want to do good because you want to learn for your own, you want to get used to learning by yourself. You don't always want people to help you"
Sierra Leonean Female, Age 15

A comparable proportion of participants valued the support networks available in the schools and made an effort to utilise the resources available to them there. They endorsed reaching out to whatever support was available in order to find assistance with schoolwork and emotional stress.

"Seek for help, to school, talk to your school councillor, talk to your teacher, talk to your friend who understand you, don't feel that no one cares about you, don't feel that no one is there to help you and don't try and hide yourself... Get to other connections that have support, like help always, always ask for help so you can be a good person in the future, instead of just sitting there. You can't do it alone, we can't do it alone, because English is our second language we have to get help you know, we have to see a social worker, councillor, friend, see good friend, see people."
Sudanese Female, Age 18

Even for participants who felt that there was discrimination against African students, most identified one teacher or counsellor to whom they could rely on for support and understanding. These were people who were able to empathise with experiences of the African students, modify their expectations to the individual needs of the student, and help foster a sense of belonging.

"They only had one teacher who cared who would um have people come into the school to help us. Um, that was Mr H. He would get us involved. He made us feel like we were part of the school community. All the other teachers didn't care whether we were part of the school community or not, or we were just the African kids that liked to make noise."
Sierra Leonean Female, Age 19

Given the complexity of the challenges facing students from refugee backgrounds it is perhaps unsurprising that many saw themselves as their own best source of strength. This self-sufficiency and autonomy is an important component of resilience, particularly when other resources are lost or unreliable. However, many participants did feel able to recognise help that would be appropriate to them and accept it when it became available.

Optimism and Focusing on the Future

Participants described the challenges of schooling within narratives that often emphasised optimism, growth and adaptation. Discrimination and a sense of disadvantage could be ignored or "let go" when students felt capable of focusing their energy and attention on the more important aspects of their education. Problems that could not be changed did not necessarily have to be addressed for students to feel that they were progressing.

"Most like everything is like based on time so, cos like time is moving everything up and down so as soon as, when time passes you learn how to move on with it... [For example] sometimes you feel like you get singled out for your skin colour. So sometimes when you get into trouble and you tell a different story, the teacher takes a different story. Then in the end you don't feel like the teacher is fair. The punishment should be equal. And then how you cope with it? You just move on, discover new skills, that's it."
Sudanese Male, Age 17

For some participants, a vision of their future and a positive attitude regarding their potential to succeed in resettlement were key factors in motivating their engagement with their educations. They described the challenges of engaging with school as part of a process of transition, which was worthwhile despite its difficulty.

"You know it's like, I found it quite challenging, but now you know when I look back I think to myself, gee I have come quite a long way. So I have grown as a person you know, I have grown and become someone different and I feel as though I have achieved something you know. Like I if I compare myself to year, um, year seven and I compare to myself in year eleven now I see as though you know I am a completely different person as opposed to when

I was in year seven, everything just was completely different. So you grow as a person, once you start."
Sudanese Male, Age 18

Some participants discussed their plans to return to Africa in the future, and utilise their educations. They viewed the challenges of school as worthwhile in the context of what they would be able to achieve with the education and the benefits that would accrue to themselves and to their communities.

"Like one day in the future I hope like, I hope when I finish uni, I'm thinking writing my own book, telling people what I experienced, how life was so hard on me, how God gave me a second chance to come to Australia and change my life and help others, to tell them that they can do it, if I can do it they can do it too ... I hope that one day I can go back home and build a home for homeless people. I want to work hard and to be a nurse and help those poor people to build a shelter for them and help them, those who live in the street, help those who cannot help themselves, help them with food, help them to have education, help them to have, to show them that we are the future right now here in Australia."
Sudanese Female, Age 18

Discussion

There are numerous challenges and barriers to engaging with schooling for African students from refugee backgrounds. Not all of these challenges are unique to being a former refugee or to being African, but the participants were negotiating some challenges that are specific to the recent increasing visibility of African students in the Australian school system. However, it is vital to understand the experience of schooling not just in terms of challenges and barriers, but also to consider the proactive and adaptive ways in which students manage these challenges and create a meaningful schooling experience.

For the participants in this study, their African heritage took on great salience as a social identity in the context of their schooling, with both positive and negative consequences. While language barriers and interrupted educations are practical adversities, perceived discrimination was a key factor in their ability to engage with schooling. Participants differed in their belief as to the extent to which their schools were prejudiced against students from African backgrounds, but when asked about the most challenging aspects of school, all groups presented stories of the way in which their individual identities were subsumed by a group identity.

Participants described a number of strategies and resources that promoted engagement with their schooling. The complexity of these descriptions means that they were rarely discussed purely in positive or negative terms. Participants' descriptions of an African identity could be a source of both social support and discrimination. Self-sufficiency could be a personal strength but could also deter individuals from seeking appropriate available help. Just as the refugee experience can lead individuals to discover key personal assets such as optimism and autonomy (Daud, Klinteberg, & Rydelius, 2008; Goodman, 2004), so too the school environment can stimulate students to develop skills and optimism that allows them to engage with their own education.

The extent to which the issues raised by participants and the nature of the discussion, particularly those parts relating to identity, are a product of the context in which

students were speaking i.e. with an Australian-born university researcher, is unclear. Furthermore, as this is a preliminary analysis, further collaborative work with the participants themselves as well as with other resettled African students is required, in order to ensure the quality of interpretation and access a deeper level of experience and the meanings made of experiences (Marlowe, 2009).

The engagement of resettled African students within the school system is a complex story of frustration, achievement and optimism for the future. The challenge for the schools themselves is to find ways to improve engagement at the individual and structural level. The coping strategies and resilience displayed by these young people should not exist in isolation but be recognised and supported by principals, school counsellors and teachers. Only in this way will African students from refugee backgrounds have an equitable opportunity for engagement with the Australian school system.

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