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Articles

Educational resilience and experiences of African students with a refugee background in Australian tertiary education

Alfred Mupenzi

University of Western Sydney
A.Mupenzi@westernsydney.edu.au

Abstract

In Australia, only a handful of refugee background students are able to navigate mainstream secondary education and senior high school (Years 11 and 12). Most refugee background students arrive in Australia as adults and enrol in Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges as a pathway to university. The institutions and educators that receive these students can struggle with supporting their integration into the Australian education system, and students struggle with learning new content, in a new language, within a new culture. To complete tertiary education in their new home, these students must possess educational resilience, amid language barriers and culture shock. Using three cases (the researcher and two participants) this article presents the narratives of displaced African students, highlighting their educational trajectories and the factors influencing their educational resilience. This article seeks to open space for situated and embodied understandings of the broader resettlement experience for refugee background students. It tries to intervene in and interrupt the 'deficit logics' that have shaped scholarship in this area. Data were obtained by means of life history narratives and self-reflective methodologies. Educational resilience is evident in the students' lived experiences and influences from: family; community; teachers; peers; faith and religion; and self-determination and behavioural factors. The study's findings reveal that the effects of displacement continue beyond people's initial school experiences and into their vocational and/or university education. In other words, the trauma of social breakdown, war and geographic displacement experienced by these students unfolds into major educational and vocational challenges. My personal life story of growing up a refugee, and the struggles I have gone through to acquire tertiary education, resonates with those of my research participants across multiple institutions and locations within and outside Australia. The stories in this study reveal the impact of forced displacement on refugee background students' education pathways.

Introduction

This article is premised on the concept of resilience and the aspirations demonstrated by refugee background students to stay in school and finish tertiary education. It shows the complex ways in which these students negotiate and navigate the intersections between displacement, resettlement and educational resilience. Humpage and Marlowe (2017) highlighted that the "experiences of displacement, political violence and upheaval are … a powerful and enduring part of the lived experiences of those of refugee background, no matter which immigration pathway was taken" (p. 62). In terms of higher education, international agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have shown that "the chances of a refugee completing secondary school are slim and the chances of reaching university indicate a low probability because of the challenges associated with forced displacement" (Pflanz, 2016, p. 1). Only one in every 100 of the world's refugees goes on to tertiary education (UNHCR, 2016). These students' difficulties in completing tertiary education revolve around experience of being a student which is best understood as the lack of a student identity, among other challenges. For Abur and Spaaij (2016), "there are many challenges faced by people from refugee backgrounds as part of the settlement process, such as learning a new language, finding employment, understanding the health system and the culture of the host country, planning for family reunification, and dealing with discrimination" (p. 108). At the school level, refugee background students might lack the ability to match the skills, knowledge and demands of being a student; "the knowledge of how to 'be a student', and indeed look like one, entails many skills, behaviours, formative experiences and a great deal of knowledge" (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005, p. 25). As such, it is likely that students with a refugee background:

> …will leave school early, will never participate fully in society or in the decision-making processes of government, and that they will neither enjoy the benefits of good health, nor experience the upward mobility needed as adults to make them full contributors and partners in shaping and participating in the larger society. (Biscoe & Ross, cited in Aragon, 2000, p. 4)

In Australia, refugee background students are exposed to several other challenges, such as placement into classrooms that are age appropriate rather than appropriate to their academic level, social isolation, bullying, stress and academic failure (Ferfolja, Vickers, McCarthy, Naidoo, & Brace, 2011). Yet, despite the many challenges, some refugee background students display

remarkable resilience and capacity to learn, and eventually become accomplished survivors. They go to school every day and they never give up. They work very hard, they value education highly and some progress to university and higher education and build a strong career pathway (Ferfolja et al., 2011).

This article includes examples of three African students with a refugee background who are focused, resilient and looking forward to challenging the assumptions that group them into a single category—for there is no homogeneity in these students' educational experiences. They differ in "colour pigmentation, come from different language, ethnic, tribal and cultural backgrounds and often have not had access to similar educational and economic opportunities" (Dhanji, 2010, p. 157). Homogenising this diverse group is perhaps a result of their defining characteristics that are perhaps obvious like their 'visibility or skin colour', and their vulnerability resulting from their past and present experiences. Further, the word 'African' might "convey a misleading sense of cultural homogeneity" (Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW, 2006, p. 24). It is fallacious to think of Africa and Africans in a homogenous way, given that "Africa is a continent with multiple diversities in terms of culture, language ability and experiences" (Khapoya, 2013, p. 1). That is why this article focuses attention on African students with a refugee background in Australian tertiary institutions: to demystify the assumptions, stereotypes and misconceptions attributed to this cohort. The focus on educational resilience is intended to identify the positive experiences associated with displacement, beyond the deficits and adversities. This article gives voice to participants as they reflect upon their social, cultural and political histories and ascribe meaning to lived experience.

Why African students with a refugee background?

In 2007, the Australian media drew attention—in the absence of any evidence—to African refugees as "having difficulties in integrating" into wider Australian society (Dhanji, 2010, p. 152). It is a fact that African students with a refugee background have endured many difficulties resulting from their forced displacement from their home countries and their transit journeys to Australia. Their difficulties are twofold: first they have experienced forced displacement, leading to loss of home and identity; second, during transit, these students have been exposed to further losses, including the loss of loved ones. African students with a refugee background have lived in difficult circumstances within refugee camps and have had to manage traumatic experiences resulting from civil war and conflict.

Historically, African students with a refugee background come from a continent characterised by "inter-state conflicts, anti-colonial wars, ethnic conflicts, non-ethnic conflicts, and flights from authoritarian and revolutionary regimes" (Lischer, 2014, p. 223). Some have come from countries that have experienced protracted civil wars and genocide—for example, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Burundi, among others— and chronic violent conflicts, and which still experience some level of instability (Amnesty International, 2016/17). It is a choice by the host communities whether to concentrate on the visible and evident adversities experienced by these students (and thus define them in terms of deficit) or focus on their resilience and survival strengths in a way that will boost their morale to pursue higher education. For the latter purpose, it is better not to view African students as a homogenous group, but rather view them in the "light of their individual complex histories, not in a way that can re-traumatise the students but by hearing their stories of hope and resilience" (Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2016, p. 599).

It is important to emphasise that these students are not responsible for the catastrophes that define their life histories, but rather have found themselves confronted with circumstances not of their own making. In their case study, Naidoo, Wilkinson, Langat, Adoniou, Cunneen and Bolger (2015) highlighted that "many arrivals in Australia from Africa face additional challenges ranging from language, pedagogical difference and cultural orientations" (p. 9). In addition to classroom-level challenges, the education system in Australia is yet to address the challenges associated with how these students are perceived. For instance, Uptin et al. (2016) state that the system "quickly relabel[s] young former refugees with deficit terms rather than opening up a discourse to include the intricate complexities of each refugee experience" (p. 598). In other words, the difficult life experiences emerging from being uprooted from their home countries follow these students to their resettlement countries. By learning about their life experience narratives, host communities, schools and institutions interested in helping African students with a refugee background may be able to address their individual specific educational needs more effectively.

In addition to this deficit-model relabelling, most interventions in support of refugee background students continue to endorse a needs-based approach rather than appreciating and rewarding the resilience these students have brought with them. It should be kept in mind that by the time refugee background students become visible at tertiary education and training institutions in Australia they will have endured many challenges. This calls for a shift in thinking from a deficit model to a strengths-based model,

particularly because students with a refugee background, when given the opportunity, "can contribute to, as well as benefit from, the further development of a high quality socially inclusive university system" (Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo, 2016, p. 7). Current educational researchers reject "the focus on 'deficit' models for refugee background students which do not acknowledge the social and cultural capital that these students carry with them" (Terry et al., 2016, p. 14). Therefore, this article highlights the factors that enable African students with a refugee background to pursue tertiary education amid life challenging circumstances in Australia. To this end, a life history narrative methodology was employed to provide a platform for participants' voices.

Tertiary education in Australia

In this article, I discuss and critique the work of scholars who have focused on the lived experiences of students with a refugee background in their transition to tertiary education. In Australia, these students arrive on a humanitarian visa category Subclass 200[1] which grants several rights, including the right to education. However, because of the complexities associated with their past experiences, many do not make it to tertiary education and encounter both academic and non-academic challenges in their endeavour to access and participate in Australian tertiary education. These challenges have been addressed by various scholars (for example, Ben-Moshe, Bertone, & Grossman, 2008; Harris, Marlowe, & Nyuon, 2015; Hatoss, O'Neill, & Eacersall, 2015; Naidoo et al., 2015; Onsando & Billet, 2009; and Terry et al., 2016). Whereas academic challenges are mainly limited to language skills and an unfamiliar curriculum, non-academic challenges arise from the individual student's lived experiences, as well as perceptions, stereotypes and assumptions.

Academic challenges have been pointed out by some scholars using the lens of language proficiency. For instance, a limited ability to speak and write English by refugee background students has often been used as a measure of their inability to access and complete tertiary education. Ben-Moshe et al. (2008), focusing on both refugees and asylum seekers, found that their English skills impeded their progress and asserted that a lack of English skills necessary to pursue training and qualifications was the major obstacle to their

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[1] *Refugee visa (Subclass 200)* this visa is for people who are subject to persecution in their home country and are in need of resettlement. The majority of applicants who are considered under this category are identified by the UNHCR and referred to the Australian Government for resettlement consideration. https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Refu/Offs/Refugee-and-Humanitarian-visas

access and participation in tertiary education. Further investigations have been undertaken by Naidoo et al. (2015), who looked at transitions from secondary to tertiary education. The authors found that one of the major barriers was "language proficiency" (p. 36), stating that, over and above the need to communicate, students also needed subject-specific language to access and complete tertiary education. In the same vein, Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2010) identify English as a form of acculturation difficulty impacting many aspects of refugee background students' lives. These scholars found that students with a refugee background have high aspirations for educational attainment and a strong desire to succeed academically, but that the English language remains their number one obstacle to accessing and participating in tertiary education.

It is a fact that accessing and completing tertiary education can have a transformative effect on refugee background students' lives. Onsando and Billett (2009) hold the view that access to education and training is a means to developing self-esteem and confidence and, above all, creates opportunities for employment and a better living standard. However, these potential transformative effects can be compromised, and difficulties exacerbated, when refugee background students enter class/lecture rooms where their histories, experiences, background and knowledge are not reflected in the curriculum (Zamudio, Russell, & Rios 2011). In other words, when refugee background students enter schools and tertiary education systems in host communities, the unfamiliar curriculum and pedagogical demands can limit their progress and completion of tertiary education (Naidoo et al., 2015). As a result, refugee background students have a limited opportunity to enjoy the benefits that accrue from quality education, such as employment.

In addition to unfamiliar curricula and pedagogical practices, challenges arise when African students with a refugee background are treated as a single group with the same demands, desires and abilities. The differences in these students' cultures, backgrounds and identities are often ignored, yet there is no homogeneity in their educational experiences. For example, students who arrive in Australia from Francophone countries (countries formerly colonised by France and Belgium) face different challenges to those who come from Anglophone countries colonised by Britain. Accordingly, Ben-Moshe et al. (2008) conclude that, to increase access and participation in tertiary education, "there is need for the adoption of an integrated approach which recognizes the diversity [heterogeneity] of refugees as well as the relationships between the broader needs of refugees" (p. 8). It is in this respect that Terry et al. (2016) asserted the need to "acknowledge the social

and cultural capital that these students carry with them" (p. 14) and recognise their differences. Nevertheless, Onsando and Billett (2009) caution that "the socially derived cultural heritage of many African people comprises subcultures that cannot easily be described or interpreted under a single definition" (p. 82).

In addition to classroom-level difficulties, Australia's tertiary education system is yet to address the challenges associated with how these students are perceived. These non-academic perceptions range from prejudice to stereotypes and assumptions, and mostly result from political debate and hyperbolic media messaging. Harris et al. (2015) have argued that these "media discourses of deficit, dangerous and traumatised people are limiting [these students'] potential" (p. 1227). There is a need, then, for successful tertiary refugee background students to speak back to such reductive notions of failure. The social injustices and prejudices coming from political debate and the media are a source of distress and discomfort for students with a refugee background, which is experienced in addition to existing learning challenges (Onsando & Billett, 2009). Scholars agree that there is a need for the demystification of assumptions and stereotypes around being a refugee and the struggles students with a refugee background encounter in their endeavours to access and participate in Australian tertiary education.

Non-academic challenges also result from each individual student's experiences with displacement, transit, and resettlement in the host country. The cumulative trauma sustained can affect, in both positive and negative ways, the student's access to and participation in tertiary education. For example, Onsando and Billett (2009) highlight that "refugee life experiences impact on students' learning activities and can also help them to reach goals in their education" (p. 81). Scholars agree that the diversity of these lived experiences means that the "experiences of refugee background students cannot be easily subsumed under the term 'refugee' that bundles all communities and individuals into a monolithic group" (Terry et al., 2016, p. 5). These students may also experience racial discrimination, which can act as a deterrent to accessing and participating in tertiary education by engendering "feelings of being isolated and stereotyped as inferior beings" (Onsando & Billett, 2009, p. 84).

A range of studies have made recommendations for addressing these barriers to education access and participation (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Naidoo et al., 2014; Terry et al., 2016). Academic challenges could be addressed through both "ESL [English as a Second Language] support from specialised teachers and teaching that is more culturally inclusive" (Terry et al., 2016, p. 7). These scholars emphasise the need for community-based

engagement programs and strategies containing inbuilt capacity building approaches. However, these strategies remain at a general level of response to refugees' needs and desires, which increases the risk of homogenising refugee background students. Ben-Moshe et al. (2008) approach the solution from a different angle, by adding the teaching of employment skills to culturally inclusive teaching and language education. These scholars believe that program success will only be possible through collaborative efforts by educational institutions, community representatives and community-based service providers. Partnerships could also include organisations addressing torture and trauma (Onsando & Billett, 2009) and university-school/TAFE partnerships (Naidoo et al., 2015).

Educational resilience

Despite many difficulties, refugee background students often display a remarkable resilience and capacity to learn, finding ways to negotiate their adverse circumstances and "searching for better education, supporting their families and trying to pursue and define a successful career path to expand their vocational options" (Abkhezr, McMahon, & Rossouw, 2015, p. 74). Moreover, Naidoo et al. (2014) observed that "while refugee background students often encounter significant barriers to their educational achievements, many are highly resilient and hold strong aspirations for their future, particularly in terms of their own educational achievements and attainment" (p. 23). Similarly, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, in the UNHCR education report (2016) states that "refugees have skills, ideas, hopes and dreams [and] are also tough, resilient and creative, with the energy and drive to shape their own destinies, given the chance" (p.1). We need to be cautious, therefore, when interpreting deficit discourses around refugee underachievement in school. Recognising that refugee background students are often successful learners who make great strides in their personal and academic growth (Cranitch, 2008) makes it possible to recognise and value the life skills, cultural understandings and potential benefits they might offer Australian communities (Olliff & Couch, 2005). Many students with a refugee background are highly motivated and see education as "the most important aspect of their life as it is a source of hope and future" (Chegwidden & Thompson, 2008, p. 5). In fact, they frequently demonstrate enormous courage and strength (Tiong et al., 2006). For these reasons, Hewson (2006) states that:

> It is important that being a refugee is seen as only one part of a person's identity. Refugee students are more than 'just' refugees. The term, particularly when applied to young people, connotes

subjects who are perceived as at risk or as 'victims'—understanding that is reinforced through media representation. Such representations fail to recognise the strength, fortitude and resilience of these young people… Refugee students are survivors … they have histories which have brought them to Australia. (p. 46)

Recent studies also provide sound evidence that "under similar socio-economic circumstances immigrants fare much the same in their educational achievements and attainment as any non-immigrant student" (White & Glick, 2009, p. 174). As Hoddinott (2011) argued, "examining the qualities of resilience and resourcefulness that young people bring with them to their schooling, out of often devastating personal experience, reminds us of the importance of the student's hopes and aspirations for the future in the brave endeavour of their education" (p. vii).

Hutchinson and Dorsett (2012) discuss three major enabling factors of resilience: "personal qualities, support and religion" (p. 56). They argue that trauma and trauma counselling have been given attention at the expense of resilience and coping strategies, "which may in fact contribute to or prolong the alienation of refugee people and impede their inclusion into Australian communities" (p. 56). While "refugees hold with them a past involving persecution or fear of persecution … [they] also embody hope for a brighter future. Refugees, perhaps more than any other group, confront the challenges of the present and future in the context of a tumultuous past" (Brough et al., 2003, p. 194). We need to look at refugee background students beyond the label of 'refugee' "because our gaze can be restricted to transitions in lives rather than whole lives, to victims rather than survivors, to illness rather than health" (Brough et al., 2003, p. 195). It is essential, then, that we do not make assumptions about who refugees are and what problems they face, but rather listen to refugees themselves and attempt to understand their issues within their frame of reference. Resilience in this case looks at the whole person and the entirety of their experiences—as well as how they interpret what they have experienced—rather than focusing on what is missing in an individual's life.

Three major resilience enabling factors that have been highlighted by different scholars include: "talking with friends, family, counsellors, medical practitioners and engaging in activities like sports" (Brough et al., 2003, p. 204); "reliance on religious beliefs, cognitive strategies such as reframing the situation, relying on their inner resources, and focusing on future wishes, aspirations and social support" (Khawaja et al., 2008); and, "maintaining

attachments with caring and supportive people, such as family members, mentors, neighbours, and people in the community [that can] help refugee background students cope successfully with loss" (Luster et al., 2009, p. 203). In their study, Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2010) show that "support from family, the Sudanese community, and Australian friends … assisted participants in adapting by providing a forum for discussion of problems and a distraction from stressors" (p. 26).

It can be deduced from the above that education resilience in refugee background students is multifaceted and linked to several support systems, such as institutional support, family support, individual support, faith and religion. Irrespective of the source of support, individual life experiences, from the home country, through transit/temporary resettlement, to resettlement in Australia, shapes students with a refugee background and their resilience and aspirations. These students can emerge from the ordeal and whims of life as people able to handle life experiences as they unfold. Important to remember is that, while some prevail, others struggle in the face of simply trying to make ends meet.

Methodology

This study uses the life history narrative methodology to produce a holistic trajectory of displacement and education for each research participant and to detail the complexities of their individual experiences. As a research methodology, life history narrative enables analysis at multiple levels and recognises that the individual story is always intertwined with larger stories (Sikes & Goodson, 2017). This study provides a platform for refugee background students' voices to be heard on issues that affect their lives (Delgado, 1989; Zamudio et al., 2011). We need to strengthen the capacity of students with a refugee background "to exercise 'voice', to debate, contest, and oppose vital directions for collective social life as they wish" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 66). This is crucial for African refugee background students because most governments/political leaders in African countries have restricted the voice of the masses, denying them the basic human right of freedom of expression. The life history narrative methodology draws out what Atkinson (2001) suggests is of the most importance to participants and their experiences:

> I have felt that it is important, in trying to understand other persons' experiences in life or their relations to others, to let their voices be heard, to let them speak for and about themselves first. If we want to know the unique perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in that

person's own voice. I am also interested in having the person tell his or her story from the vantage point that allows the individual to see his or her life as a whole, to see it subjectively across time as it all fits together, or as it seems discontinuous, or both. It is, after all, this subjective perspective that tells us what we are looking for in all our research efforts. (p. 125)

Giving people an opportunity to tell their own stories in life history research mitigates the colonising aspect of having others tell your story and "reduces the research power imbalance because, in life history narrative research, the researcher has less control over the participants while they are narrating their stories" (Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010, p. 33). Participants' narratives in this study cover their life experiences during displacement, in transit countries, and within the resettlement country. This is intended to address gaps in the existing literature, which tends to focus on the challenges these students face in resettlement in the context of the deficit model (Brough at al., 2003; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Refugee background students' past experiences are, therefore, often not acknowledged, and their future aspirations are crippled by labelling them as victims and traumatised people without agency or history (O'Connor, 2015). In this article, each individual participant including the researcher is given space and a platform to voice their life history, educational experiences and aspirations. The researcher's vignette draws on a self-reflective narrative and auto-ethnographical approach. Auto-ethnographies have the potential to challenge and change power structures through storytelling (Bhattacharya, Chawla, & Atay, 2018; Atay & Chawla, 2018). As a researcher, my experiences of border crossings are juxtaposed with the narratives of my participants, thereby fleshing out the local, national, and global terrains in which life experiences occur.

Sampling/participant recruitment was undertaken via 'snowballing' which, according to Morgan (2008) "uses a small pool of initial informants to nominate other participants who meet the eligibility criteria for a study" (p. 815). In snowball sampling—commonly used within the life history narrative methodology—"the researcher works with a participant who tells him/her of friends or colleagues who might be prepared to participate" (Goodson & Sikes, 2017, p. 77). I met with each participant twice, on average, to build greater rapport and share transcripts of the first session, as well as to ask for further details of events that emerged in the first interview. Participants were given one hour to tell their story in their own way and at their own pace. Before the interview, participants reviewed and signed the consent form.

They were also given a copy of the participant information sheet and verbally consented to audio recording. Participants were informed of the research aims and design, the number of interviews expected, confidentiality, recording and transcribing. Participants were then encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the research, as an ice breaker to kick start our discussion. I then shared my personal experience of being a refugee, in an effort to build more trust and a closer relationship with the research participants. Therefore, in this study, both the researcher and research participants shared their experiences of being refugees, and the participants' stories were co-constructed by the researcher and the research participants. This reflects the fact that life history work is often collaborative, with the researcher seeking meanings and explanations together with research participants (Goodson & Sikes, 2017).

Three criteria were used to select research participants for this study, it being required that each participant: was originally from Africa; had come to Australia on a humanitarian visa under the auspices of the UNHCR; and, had participated in the Australian education system since their arrival, progressing to university, college or TAFE (for VET courses). A total of 11 participants were recruited. This paper will give an insider's view of educational resilience, by offering the detailed vignettes of the researcher and two participants from Rwanda and Burundi (countries that share similar geographical and cultural characteristics). These three vignettes offer a good representation of the Great Lakes region of Africa and the refugee crises that have impacted the lives of the masses therein. The theoretical framework is reviewed in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, postcolonial, critical race, and critical event theories have served as an effective tool kit to elaborate the educational disadvantages arising for African students with a refugee background as a result of their displacement and the loss of sovereignty of their respective home countries (see Fig 1). Discourses of postcolonial scholarship—which are historically located (Said, 1993; Bhabha, 1994, 1996; Mohanty, 2003) and positioned within geopolitical legacies of power—provide this study with a framework for exploring the nuances of participants' life history narratives. Postcolonial theory assisted with examining the histories and legacies of colonialism, which have contributed to the refugee crises and displacements in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. Critical race theorists agree that race is a central structure in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Figure 1. The theoretical tool kit
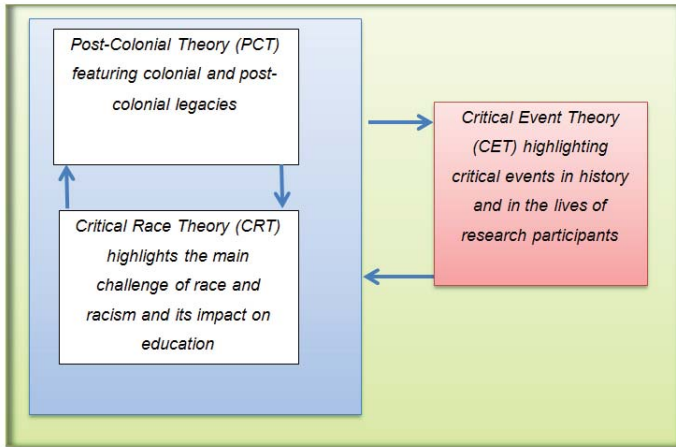
In this article, inequality in education offers one measure to gauge the persistent and pervasive problem of racial inequality. Critical race theory, which highlights the challenges of race and racism, has been used to consider the educational exclusions experienced by participants. Critical event theory was used to identify turning points in participants' life history narratives. These personal narratives formed a large section of the transcribed data generated during interviews. The works of critical events theorists (Measor, 1985; Webster & Mertova, 2007 Woods, 1993) were used to unpack the impact of critical events in the participants' narratives. A critical event, or episode, is one that has a profound effect on the life of an individual with significant and potentially life-changing effects "Critical Events have significant and potentially life-changing effects on individual/s that are largely unplanned, unanticipated and uncontrolled" (Woods, 1993, p. 357). According to Webster and Mertova (2007), an event is critical if:

> [i]t has impacted on the performance of the storyteller in a professional or work-related role. It may have a traumatic component, attract some excessive interest by the public or the media, or introduce risk in the form of personal exposure: illness, litigious action or other powerful personal consequence (p.74).

Measor (1985) has identified three types of critical events or critical phases: "extrinsic, intrinsic and personal" (p. 61). As elucidated by Webster and Mertova (2007), "extrinsic critical events can be produced by historical and political events, intrinsic critical events occur within the natural

progression of a career and personal critical events can be family events, for example illness" (p. 74). The longer the time that passes between the event and the recall of the event, the more profound the effect of the event has been and the more warranted the label. The participants' vignettes begin with the researcher's self-reflective auto-ethnography.

The researcher's vignette

I grew up as a child in double jeopardy as a refugee and an orphan. The double jeopardy began when my grandparents and parents were displaced from Rwanda in 1962 becoming refugees in Uganda until 1994. I lost my father before I was born in 1978 to the uncertainties that were prevailing in Uganda and I lost my mother in 1992 to HIV/AIDS. I was born into and spent my childhood and adolescent years as a refugee in Kyangwali refugee camp in Uganda. I have also lived part of my adult life in Uganda in the shadow of Rwandan refugees. My grandparents and parents were among the Rwandans who fled for their lives in 1962 following 'the 1959-1962 revolts in Rwanda which overthrew the last King of Rwanda, King Kigeri V (Jean-Baptiste Ndahindurwa), the younger brother of King Mutara III' (Peter & Kibalama, 2006, p. 15). The king was forced into exile, first to Uganda and later to the United States of America where he died recently in 2016

Education profile
Primary education

As a child between the ages of 7 to 12 years I never knew I was a refugee, given the fact that the refugee camp we lived in had become our home. This refugee camp had a population of close to 70,000 people and we had only three primary schools: Kasonga, Kyebitaka and Kinakitaka. I went to Kasonga primary school where I finished primary seven (P.7) in 1991. The education system in Uganda has seven years of primary, divided into lower primary (P.1 to P.3) and upper primary (P.4 to P.7), as well as six years of secondary education also divided into two levels; ordinary secondary (S.1 to S.4) and advanced secondary (S.5 to S.6). At the university level, most degree courses take three to five years.

At our primary school, more than 80 percent of our teachers were Rwandans, people with whom we lived and saw as our elders. There was no stigma nor abusive experiences at school, simply because we shared a common identity. This favourable learning environment, however, might

have been achieved at the expense of quality education, as our teachers were semi-qualified compared to the professionally trained Ugandan teachers.

Secondary education

After completing my primary school education, I was among four fortunate children in the refugee camp who passed the Hoima Diocese seminary entrance examinations set by the Board (HDSEB) and I was admitted into the Catholic seminary to train as a future Catholic diocesan priest. This training opened doors for my education. The school I attended for my secondary education, St. John Bosco's seminary, was one of the best in the region and had most of the basic facilities needed for a secondary school. Even at the national level it always emerged among the best schools in terms of academic performance.

For students within Kyangwali refugee camp, getting a chance to enter secondary education was a privilege, not a right, and it raised the hopes and aspirations of family members in terms of improved standards of living. The whole family gave up all they had by selling small animals, seasonal harvest and anything else to keep their children in school. Families with children who had finished at least the lower/ordinary secondary level (S.1 to S.4) were afforded improved standards of living because their children were employed and financially supportive.

Regardless of the chances one had to access secondary education, we were always reminded by local students that we were refugees. I felt the weight of being a refugee when I started secondary education. Notwithstanding the fact that we were training to be priests in a Catholic church, local children always identified us as refugees. No matter how brilliant we were, they always had to bully us and remind us of our status in a demeaning way.

Tertiary education

My enrolment in tertiary education was through the Catholic major seminary, doing a degree in social and philosophical studies. I did not complete this degree because of challenges associated with my identity. In the year 2000 (five years after the repatriation of Rwandan refugees in Uganda), I was no longer a refugee yet neither was I a Ugandan. Nevertheless, in 2000, after being denied the chance to continue pursuing my dream of becoming a Catholic priest, the government of Rwanda gave me a scholarship to Makerere University in Uganda where I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in education. In 2007, I sponsored myself in the same university to pursue a master's degree in public administration and

management and in 2013 I was admitted to Western Sydney University to undertake a higher degree by research—a PhD. My continuing desire to acquire tertiary education was based on my desire to raise my chances of acquiring a better paying job, confidence and self-esteem.

Francine's vignette

I am originally from Rwanda and I was born in 1983. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, I lost my father. My mother, my younger sister and I, like many other Rwandans, fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in May 1994. In DRC we were faced with another wave of civil war and we lost our mother through unpredictable circumstances. My sister and I continued the journey with other people to Zambia. This was a long journey that took us about two years from 1998 to 2000. We were finally settled in Meheba refugee camp in Zambia in 2000. In 2010 my sister and I were among the most vulnerable people in Meheba refugee camp, where we had settled for ten years, and through the support of the UNHCR we were selected for resettlement to Australia.

Education profile
Primary education

Francine completed her first four years of primary education in Rwanda. She was motivated to be in school at that stage by her father, who was a local leader and an advisor to community members. She admired her father and wanted to be like him. At the same time, she was following the Government of Rwanda's regulations, which required her to be in school at a certain age. When the war and the genocide took place in Rwanda, Francine's education was interrupted as she started her journey to Zambia through the DRC. In the refugee camps, Francine received an informal education facilitated by older people within the camps who would create small study groups among children and teach them cultural values as well as the French language. At this point, Francine cared more for peace and security than education.

Secondary education

There were no secondary schools in the refugee camp in Zambia, so Francine had to go to Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, to start high school. Francine managed to complete high school because of a friend who paid for her tuition fees.

Tertiary education

After arriving in Australia, Francine went to TAFE to complete the 510 hours of ESL to which she was entitled. Later, her motivation to continue with tertiary education arose because she wanted to be employed and independent of the financial support provided by Centrelink. After a year of studying English, she enrolled for a Certificate II in Information Technology, which enabled her to use computer programmes like Microsoft Word and Excel. With her Certificate II she was able to get a job in a meat factory as a records keeper. However, she did not want to settle for less than she thought she was capable of and, when her friend advised her to enrol in an aged care course, she completed her Certificate III and IV in Aged Care sponsored by Centrelink.

Francine then developed the motivation to become a Registered Nurse. She enrolled in different institutions of learning, including the University of Wollongong and Career Australia (a private college). Nevertheless, due to several financial challenges, she discontinued her studies in both institutions and opted instead to study for a Nursing diploma with the Gold Coast Institute of TAFE in Queensland as it was offered online. Her motivation to remain in school stemmed from her desire to become a professional in a specific field. In 2015, she enrolled in a Diploma in Business Administration at TAFE which she finished in 2016.

Anna's vignette

I was born in Tanzania to Burundian parents. We however went back to Burundi, and in 1993 an ethnic civil war broke out in Burundi and we were displaced again into Tanzania. My mother and my siblings were all settled in Kanembwa refugee camp from 1994 to 2005. In 2005, we were transferred to Nduta refugee camp following the insecurity that had cropped up in Kanembwa refugee camp. We lived in Nduta refugee camp from 2005 to 2007. In total we lived in refugee camps for over 14 years (1993 to 2008). In 2008, we were resettled in Australia.

Education profile
Primary education

Anna started her primary education in Tanzania. She was following the Tanzanian curriculum where the languages of instructions were English and Swahili. She was later transferred to the refugee camp, where the languages of instruction were French and Kirundi. Anna was bullied by fellow refugee

students because she couldn't speak Kirundi and French. Anna repeated academic years four and five of her primary schooling, which affected her confidence and self-esteem. However, she was able to catch up very well and was promoted to year six. In year six she sat for the national exams and qualified to join year seven (the first year of secondary education). Anna remained in school because it was the way of life in the camp that all children of her age attended school.

Secondary education

After her promotion to year eight, Anna's education was interrupted by the UNHCR transferring her family to Nduta refugee camp for their own safety. At Nduta refugee camp the students were different and the environment very friendly. Anna mixed with different students from different camps and their support was important to her pursuit of education. Anna's education was again interrupted in 2007, when her family was transferred to Kanembwa refugee transit centre in preparation for resettlement to Australia. In the transit centre, Anna did not go to school and so lost another year of her education. In 2008, her family was finally resettled in Australia and she was able, together with her three younger sisters, to enrol at Evans High School where they completed ESL studies for one and a half years. In 2010 she attended St. Mary's Senior High School where she completed years 11 and 12.

Tertiary education

In 2012, Anna enrolled at Western Sydney University for a degree in social sciences which she did not finish. She dropped out of university in 2013 to marry and start a family. Her education was interrupted from 2013 to 2014, and in 2015 she enrolled for a Certificate IV in Community Services at Nirimba TAFE, which she finished in April 2016. In July 2016, Anna resumed her degree at Western Sydney University but dropped out again a few months later as she was having her third child.

Discussion of findings

This section discusses the findings relating to how the research participants exhibited educational resilience despite adversity. The discussion of resilience, below, reveals the ability of students with a refugee background to respond to adversity in productive and life-affirming ways, thus providing answers to the question: What makes students with a refugee background educationally resilient in the face of adversity? Refugee background students' ability to continue their education is a result of their

inner strength in managing adversity, but also the result of support from individuals, organisations and governments. Importantly, this study was not looking for the magic ingredients of resilience, but rather for the kinds of strategies students with a refugee background have employed that have assisted them to remain educationally resilient.

Family influence on educational resilience

This study found that the factor of family (nuclear and extended), and specific family members (father and mother figures and siblings), significantly contributed to the development of educational resilience in students with a refugee background. Deveson (2003) argued that:

> (r)esilient children are said to be securely attached children, whose most important need is to grow up with one or more adults who are there for the long haul. These children need people who love and believe in them. They need consistent emotional support and, ideally, parents play this role, but good relationships with other relatives or close family friends can also make a big difference in a child's life. (p. 78)

The life history narratives of research participants revealed the influence of family members in building their educational resilience. Luster et al. (2009) hold the view that "maintaining attachment with caring and supportive people, such as family members, mentors, neighbours and people in the community helps refugee background students to cope successfully" (p. 203). Even when participants had lost immediate family members, their presence remained strong in their minds. Francine recalled the statements of her father encouraging her to always be in school, study hard and finish well. She recalled her father's advice that "if you want to buy shoes for yourself, then you should go to school and study hard" and "if you go to school, you will know how to speak with people, respect them, and above all respect yourself". The institution of the family, therefore, can be a significant influence on these individuals' resilience. Above all else, the educational experiences of family members—that is, parents or relatives who have been in school and acquired education to a tertiary level—act as encouragement to refugee background students. Even in times of failure at school they still believe they can make it, by keeping these people in their minds to inspire them to persist. Anna says that her mother protected and cared for them as children. She was a leader in the refugee camp and always urged them to study hard. Anna failed some classes at school but kept repeating them so as not to disappoint her hard-working mother and consequently made it to

university. Although Anna's university studies have been interrupted more than once by marriage and child-rearing, her intention is to return to university as soon as she is able and to finish her degree in social work.

Community influences on educational resilience

The perception of refugees in the west has been negative, and students with a refugee background have been so negatively labelled and stigmatised that many do not want to be identified as being of refugee background, even for legitimate purposes (Mupenzi, 2018; O'Connor, 2015; Olliff & Couch, 2005). These negative perceptions drain refugee background students' natural resilience, ensuring they are always on guard to defend themselves in the event they are discriminated against (Uptin et al., 2016). As a result, refugee background students have been defined by the label of 'refugees' and denied their own identity and these experiences have either hindered or interfered with their education and vocational outcomes (Abkhezr et al., 2015). On the other hand, communities where refugee background students live—be they in transit countries or resettlement countries—influence their resilience. These communities have institutions, like churches, where specific individuals such as pastors, priests and other community leaders play an influential mentoring role for students with a refugee background. For instance, the influence of Francine's pastor in the Zambian refugee camp helped her to remain in school and ultimately finish her primary schooling in Zambia. Individuals and organisational influences have also surfaced in the stories of research participants as factors promoting educational resilience. For instance, when Anna arrived in Australia, she attended a program at school offering migrants extra classes to catch up in English and other subjects, and to help with homework and assessments, which improved both her performance and ability to remain in school.

Teachers' influence on educational resilience

Teachers in the school community were identified in this study as promoters of educational resilience among students with a refugee background. For instance, Anna's good relationships with her fellow students and teachers gave her a reason to continue her education in Australia, and one of her teachers remains a good friend. Arguably, schooling in resettlement countries helps these students "cope with … and transcend the negative effects of conflict and disaster" (Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p. 102). Moreover, teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that refugee background students find meaning and reasons to remain in school/tertiary institutions. Nonetheless, these students have been caught up in the

"complicated process of establishing an identity that is both different from, yet influenced by host communities" (Parsons & Harding, 2011, p. 4) and they occupy what Bhabha (1994) calls "the third space of enunciation" (p. 34). In other words, access and participation in tertiary education for refugee background students also presents other complexities like having to deal with racism, bullying and a curriculum that is alien to them not reflecting realities and experiences from their countries of origin. It is hoped that host countries will reach that level of acknowledgement for the plight of refugees and find a shared understanding of humanity irrespective of their past, present and future. My contribution to knowledge through this study has been in writing about my participants' stories and using this as a platform to offer counter-narratives from students with a refugee background. Schooling puts a huge responsibility on students with a refugee background, as they are required to manage and familiarise themselves with the institution's culture, both the formal and informal curriculum, and develop relevant social networks in an unfamiliar environment (Ferfolja et al., 2011).

Peer influence on educational resilience

Peer influence within the communities where refugee background students are resettled also plays a big role. From Anna's story it is evident that a welcoming environment at school, including friendly students, influenced her love for school. Eades (2013) argues in favour of support from other people by asserting that "the self is vulnerable to be affected by violence but resilient to be reconstructed through the help of others" (p. 3). In this sense the emphasis is on the collective strength of individuals within social networks and the importance of social support in the process of recovering from adversity for vulnerable individuals. Maintaining attachments with caring and supportive people, such as mentors, neighbours and people in the community, has been acknowledged by scholars as a way of building resilience among refugee background students (Luster et al., 2009). However, negative influence from peers may sometimes both undermine and promote educational resilience. In Zambia, Francine's detailed narrative described how she was despised by a lady who doubted her capacity to write a report for a women's association meeting. Francine was nominated to be secretary for the meeting and to take minutes for the Great Lakes Region Women Refugees Association (GLWRA). She overheard one of the ladies voicing doubt about her [Francine's] capacity to write a credible report and take minutes for the meeting in her local language: *'ee uriya mu sekuritare wabo se, ndaba ndebe, abantu bafata umu sekuritare utarize bakamushiraho ndaba ndeba ibyo ari bwandike',* meaning *'oh that secretary*

of theirs, people who choose a secretary who has never gone to school, I will see which type of report she will write'. Although Francine ended up writing a good report using the knowledge she had acquired from church meetings, her experience with that lady became a turning point in her life. She developed greater determination and made a resolution to always aim higher in education when a study opportunity was available. Nevertheless, it should be noted that refugee background students often lack both peers with university experience and adult role models, which may impact their educational resilience.

The influence of faith and religion on resilience

A common statement found within the research data was, "By God's grace, I was able to …". This supports Gartland's (2009) assertion that religion is a factor that contributes to the development of resilience in refugee background students. Edward (2007) foregrounds the context of religion as giving assurances of hope. Faith and hope become coping mechanisms in times of challenging circumstances, often bringing about a sense of calm and peace of mind. While this belief system is sometimes taken to be mere superstition, belief in God helps people to regain control and meaning in their lives (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Another study found that faith could be a negative force if refugees gave in to the situation and believed their fate was out of their hands and in God's (Khawaja et al., 2008). Spirituality gave other refugees strength: whether it was a belief in a "higher power, calling on dead relatives or something deep inside, spirituality assisted refugee people to cope through hard times" (Sossou, Craig, Ogren, & Schnak, 2008, p. 378). Thus faith in God can be seen to be one of the factors motivating refugee background students to remain in school.

Educational resilience in the face of discrimination

The experience of forced displacement is also highly salient when seeking to understand how students with a refugee background build and maintain educational resilience. A submission by the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) to the Attorney General's Department in Australia made the relevant conclusion that "while laws cannot address what is a historical and social problem in society, they can at least set a very minimum standard of decency that should be bestowed to all members of the public" (RCOA, 2016, p. 7). Refugee background students have endured segregation and unfavourable laws in different countries and have taken risks in order to acquire some education. In the researcher's vignette we read, "regardless of the chances one had to access secondary education, we were always

reminded by local students that we were refugees. I felt the weight of being a refugee when I started secondary education." In Tanzania, Anna had to escape bullying by changing from a state-owned school to a school in the refugee camp where she felt some level of acceptance. Cumulatively, refugee background students take risky decisions in their lives and keep daring to take an extra step. These sets of experiences and dispositions, built from the hardship of forced migration and living in highly dangerous and precarious situations, play out in the educational resilience these students demonstrate when settling in a new safe country. Additional studies have been directed toward understanding the impact of race and racism on refugee background students in both transit and resettlement countries. Taylor et al. (2009) assert that "racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the educational barriers for people of colour, as well as exploring how these barriers are resisted and overcome' (p. 9). When it comes to refugee background students, dealing with racism, inequality and isolation is a common experience—as evidenced in their stories—starting from their home countries through to settlement in Australia. Some have been displaced from their home countries simply because of who they are, and others have been rejected and discriminated against without clear reasons.

Self-determination and behavioural factors

Resilience in students with a refugee background arises from individual students' goals and dreams and, because they cannot take anything for granted, refugees tend to be highly resourceful and adaptive. Mundy and Dryden-Peterson (2011) attribute this kind of persistence-resilience to the value of schooling in the lives of refugee background students:

> Schooling [in the context of African students with a refugee background] provides children with goals for their lives and tangible ways in which their actions can, they believe, improve their future. By adopting ways to hope for a better future, children are able to cope with and transcend the negative effects of conflict and disaster. (p. 102)

Indeed, refugee background students have been tested through adversity. As a result, some refugee students have developed an inherent resilience and are able to develop strategies to help respond to educational challenges. Participants' lived experiences revealed common motivating factors for their educational resilience and pointed to the importance of intrinsic determination to meet personal goals (Goodson et al., 2010). It was also revealed that some students with a refugee background responded to

adversity in a resilient manner, while others collapsed at some points and rejuvenated at others, leading to the argument that collapse and breakdown are also built-in phases in the development of resilience and necessary for renewal and ongoing growth. Education, for most refugee background students, is their most valued goal. The fact that many refugees have been given a second chance in life makes them determined to convert their visions into realities. Some students with a refugee background have succeeded by seizing every opportunity that comes their way. For example, Francine attended "every free course that was offered and every workshop that was open"—whether relevant to her areas of study or not—in order to catch up on her education.

The responsibility factor in educational resilience

Several research participants demonstrated resilience in pursuing their education because of their desire to secure employment that would allow them to meet their various obligations (Mupenzi, 2018). Education and training become a means for developing self-esteem and confidence and increase the opportunities for employment and better standards of living (Ager & Strang, 2008; Onsando & Billett, 2009). A primary need in these students' lives is access to tertiary education, because of its potential transformative effects on their lives (Onsando & Billett, 2009). Education is one of the few resources and the best gift ever these students receive from their host communities. Moreover they value their education because it is a means to employment and access to other social networks. For refugee background students, having a source of income enables them to be responsible for themselves but also provide financial support to both their nuclear and extended families. From the literature reviewed, it is clear that educational resilience is not static but dynamic (Gartland, 2009Therefore, responsibility and determination can build resilience among students with a refugee background who are otherwise totally on their own.

Conclusion

I have argued that students with a refugee background are strong, respond dynamically to situations and circumstances, have a high capacity for adaptability and cannot be reduced to their past(s). The stories presented in this article suggest alternative ways of imagining and enacting resilience in students with an African refugee background, which diverge from the focus on constraints related to language, literacy and cultural barriers. These stories also exposed the realities of education in refugee camps in Africa. Participants' lived experiences revealed common motivating factors for their

educational resilience and point to the importance of intrinsic determination to meet personal goals as well as the role of family support. It was also revealed that, while some students with a refugee background have responded to adversity in a resilient manner, others have collapsed at one point and rejuvenated at another. This leads to the argument that collapse and breakdown are also built-in phases in the development of resilience and necessary for renewal and ongoing growth. I have also discussed the enabling and disabling factors influencing access to and retention in tertiary education. I have argued that educational resilience is a concept that needs to be defined in a more multi-dimensional way depending on intrinsic and extrinsic factors: family, peers, teachers, communities, belief systems and above all inner abilities. This approach recognises that the experiences of African students with a refugee background are diverse and complex and cannot be put into one basket or homogenised.

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