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## Educational Experiences of Congolese Refugees in West-Central Florida High Schools

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# Educational Experiences of Congolese Refugees in West-Central Florida High Schools

by

Michaela J. Inks

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Applied Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## **Abstract**

Since 2016, refugees from the Congo Wars (RFCWs) have been one of the largest populations of refugees resettled in the United States. High-school aged RFCW students are, however, dropping out of Florida public high schools at alarmingly high rates. This study uses ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation to investigate educational challenges experienced by RFCW youth. This study has three objectives: to learn more about refugees with discontinuous education and the barriers to graduating from public high schools after resettlement; to better understand Tampa bay area programs that serve culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students; and to use ethnographic participatory action and interview-based methods to evaluate programs' abilities to meet the special needs and overcome challenges of English learning students. This thesis identifies factors that impede student success, including cuts to school programs, trends in educational policy, cuts to services reserved for refugee youth, pervasive school and community bullying, and most recently, changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research can serve as a model to guide other schools dealing with similar issues, especially those in an underfunded environment.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“They lack so much. A lot of these kids never went to school. Not only the kids from the Congo but my Honduran kids coming in have a level three education, third grade. They are missing so much. They just don’t have the basic concepts. They don’t even have the academic language in their own language to be able to transfer to English. It makes it easier if they know the planets and the universe and the constellations. If they know that in their language, they can just transfer the knowledge. They don’t have that. The biggest thing is the gap in what they know in *content* compared to our other students.” (Ms. Kline<sup>1</sup>, personal communication, 2019)

In early 2019, The ESOL<sup>2</sup> Coordinator at a Tampa bay high school, Ms. Kline, invited my advisor, Dr. Dillon Mahoney,<sup>3</sup> to come and talk with her about challenges she was consistently facing among her “Congolese kids,” as she tended to refer to them. Her intent was to get these primarily Swahili-speaking students extra help in navigating their school day. Since she had moved into her position as coordinator within the school year, she had been searching for anyone in the city who could help. As the advisor to the Swahili Students Organization at the local university, located about fifteen minutes from the high school, my advisor was an obvious early contact who she found with a simple Google search.

When we arrived at Lyon High School for that first meeting, to which I and a few other students were invited, we were confronted by an older building with thick glass windows and tall

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<sup>1</sup> All participants or key interlocutors will be referred to by either pseudonym or basic description (i.e. young adult woman).

<sup>2</sup> The English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program is a main topic of discussion and will be analyzed in depth later.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Mahoney is an Assistant Professor of applied anthropology, who then in turn invited a team of researchers and people interested in helping that included a Swahili-speaking graduate student, a Swahili-speaking undergraduate student, a member of the local Refugee from the Congo Wars (RFCW) community, and myself, a graduate student who had participated in several local refugee projects.

teal gates to the right. The front gates remained locked, and the office doors were shut after the first classes began. Ms. Kline let us in and gave us a quick tour of the front office. She walked and talked through a maze of locked doors and hallways until we reached a conference room where we all sat and introduced ourselves. Following introductions, she announced that her primary concern was a cohort of students who she characterized as “Congolese kids.” Following a spring 2017 project on diet and nutrition among Congolese refugees in Tampa bay, many of us from the University of South Florida (USF) working with Tampa bay’s refugees had become aware of pervasive bullying of Congolese students in the local schools, including at Lyon High School (Mahoney et al. 2017; Baer et al. 2017; Mahoney et al. 2020a). It was, therefore, no surprise to us when she told us about the daily bullying her students were confronting, which she believed to be related to numerous issues including language as well as hygiene.

Ms. Kline was also concerned about students’ inability to complete assignments. “They don’t know what to do in class, and their teachers don’t know what to do with them, so they just sit in classes all day and do nothing,” she complained. The biggest revelation was that she had, in her words, already “lost” several students who had dropped out. She was adamant that the school was encouraging students to drop out if they were not expected to pass “on time<sup>4</sup>.” Her idea was for those of us from USF who either spoke Swahili or had experience working with RFCW<sup>5</sup> youth to start a tutoring and mentoring program at Lyons during the school day. This would help pull students English-language classes where they were, as she put it, “doing nothing” without basic English competency.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term RFCW to inclusively describe this diverse community of refugees from Central Africa (see Mahoney et al. 2020a). The population’s diverse population and politics will be discussed in a later chapter. From here forward I will refer to ‘Congolese’ as RFCWs. Youth or student will refer to individuals who were or are attending public schools, while adults will refer to community leaders, parents, or household heads.



We started the tutoring program the week after our first meeting with Ms. Kline in the spring of 2019. Initially we planned to go to the school for two hours every Friday to help the students finish schoolwork. Ms. Kline told us that RFCW students often did not attend classes on Fridays, and she was correct in assuming that holding the program on Fridays would encourage students to attend and not skip. All ten students Ms. Kline placed into the group were at least somewhat conversational in English, which enabled us to work in small groups to focus on current assignments. But all students were behind for their grade level. One of the girls had never gone to school prior to coming to the United States, leaving her well behind in comprehending the overall educational structure. One of the assignments her history teacher gave her was to define terms related to colonial trade. “If they know that in their language, they can just transfer the knowledge. They don’t have that,” Ms. Kline explained. In the case of colonial trade, we could not finish defining eleven words in the assignment during the two-hour block we had with the students. But every little bit seemed to make a difference.

Our spring 2019 team was aware of many of the issues we were confronting in addition to simple tutoring. Following the nutritional and bullying research of 2017 (Baer et al. 2017, 2019; Mahoney et al. 2017), Holbrook and others from USF found that low literacy levels among adult RFCWs severely reduced access to social services (Holbrook et al. 2019). The development of literacy levels, therefore, for the older school children was essential for long-term familial success, as these youth would soon become the real “household heads.”<sup>6</sup>

As the tutoring program continued, I noted several issues that had not been covered in previous research. In Tampa bay, public schools are suffering from consistent budget cuts, teacher shortages, racially segregated schools, and constant changes to standardization via

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<sup>6</sup> Others like Mahoney et al. (2020a; 2020b) and Billingsley and Mahoney (2021) have continued to work closely with RFCW youth to create Swahili language videos about adapting to the US.

multiple policies (Solocheck 2021; Amos 2016). Refugees themselves became the center of political debates that represent ideals of opponents to the Trump administration. As a result, refugee resettlement was increasingly contested and opposed by those in power and large swaths of the American public as never before. Budget cuts to refugee services that used to fill in some of these educational gaps reduced programming to one-third of what their operational capacity had been just before the 2016 election. Almost every educational program that served refugees in Tampa bay was left to rely upon volunteer labor, put on hold, or cut completely. Each of these issues are singularly deserving of their own thesis, but for a cohort of ethnically diverse RFCW youth, these factors all came together to create a challenging transition from war and refugee camps to the struggles of America's public schools.

My focus in this thesis is on the Florida public school environments that enable negative outcomes for the cohort of English-learning refugee students with whom I worked in Tampa bay. In addition to their refugee and English-learning statuses, age, gender, and race all intersected to frame a particularly violent experience of US public education (see Monson 2017, Mwangi and English 2017, and Imoagene 2015). I take a critical applied approach to my ethnographic research with refugee students. I use ethnographic methods to understand the perspectives of RFCW youth, their parents, and their program coordinators. This allows an exploration of how power works from policy to daily lived experience. A critical applied approach is generally problem-based and seeks to create or facilitate action by supporting research participants (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 62-67). The research for this thesis was grounded in an applied project on nutrition and diet among RFCWs and then upon the tutoring program, which in itself represents an applied approach. A critical applied approach to anthropological research allows

me to investigate critical issues while also providing recommendations for possible solutions to such problems.

Several years after most RFCW families began arriving in Tampa bay in 2016, this thesis questions why so many refugee youth who have recently come to the United States in their mid-teens are dropping out of school and struggling so severely. Using applied anthropology methods, this thesis explains the barriers of educational inclusion as described by the participants and answers how they can be removed or overcome. This research used the following questions to guide the ethnographic investigation.

1. How do the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of RFCW students shape their experiences with the US public school system?
2. How do RFCW students and parents navigate the public school system and other alternative educational programs?
3. What can the long-term experiences of RFCWs who dropped out of high school tell us about the pros and cons of alternative educational programs?

My applied method builds on other community-based approaches to ethnographic fieldwork in educational settings (Tužinská et al. 2017; Pacheco 2010; Bialostok 2019), while demonstrating that critical language skills and in-depth cultural knowledge are essential for evaluating public educational programs and the educational challenges of vulnerable populations like RFCWs.

## **Chapter 2: Background**

### **Refugee Status in United States**

There is a large literature on the educational barriers refugees regularly face following resettlement in the United States (Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher 2017; Bigelow et al. 2017; Birman and Tran 2017; Blanchet-Cohen et al. 2017; Dryden-Peterson 2015; Guerrero and Tinkler 2010; Ham, Yang, and Cha 2017; Herrera et al. 2013; Mahoney et al. 2020a; J. McBrien, Dooley, and Birman 2017; J. L. McBrien 2005; Murray 2018; Patel et al. 2017; Scott and Safdar 2017; Wilkinson, Santoro, and Major 2017). McBrien's (2005) review of educational barriers for refugee students highlights language acquisition, psychosocial wellbeing, and level of host country reception (extent of xenophobia), as three commonly recognized educational barriers. In Tampa bay, recently resettled refugees have suffered from a perfect storm of budget cuts, population-specific challenges related to language and education, as well as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which moved all learning online (Mahoney et al. 2020b). In Tampa bay, the preparation for RFCW refugees coincided with major changes to refugee policy and practice (Mahoney et al. 2020a).

The term "refugee" is used broadly to include people who are fleeing from persecution. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term to refer to people who have been vetted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). US presidential administrations set refugee quotas and are singularly responsible for how many refugees the United States will resettle through the State Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Over the past twenty years, administrations generally kept the quota ceilings between 70 and 90 thousand per

year (Rush 2018). However, during former Presidents Trump's first year in office, he reduced the ceiling to 50 thousand, and continued the decrease until it bottomed out at 18 thousand for the fiscal year 2019-2020 (MPI 2020). The effect on refugee communities and agencies were immediate and devastating (see Holbrook et al. 2019; Mahoney et al. 2020a).

In 2016, RFCWs made up the largest proportion of refugees resettled in the United States by ORR (Refugee Processing Center 2016). Previously, most arrivals were from the Middle East, North Africa, and South America. Due to administrative changes and exclusionary migration policies against Muslim and Latino populations, the refugee demographic changed from 2016 to 2020, as the Trump administration's budget cuts simultaneously reshaped the structure of refugee resettlement and integration services. In 2017, there were four resettlement agencies in the Tampa Bay area. But after the lowered quotas and even lower arrivals, the number of resettlement agencies was reduced to two. Even those who did not lose resettlement contracts were still forced to lay off over half their staff (Mahoney et al. 2020a). The process of resettlement, which includes housing provision, English lessons, job training, and social service benefits, is expected to last up to the first three months after arrival but can continue up to five years if funding is provided. Such long-term programming became impossible for agencies, which were dealing with their own downsizing, funding cuts, and subsequent layoffs. While RFCW students were resettled and are integrating into the United States at an especially challenging time, what the students in my study experienced is not unprecedented. Cuban and Haitian refugees have had similar experiences in Florida schools to those I document in this thesis. Below, I will describe the historical experiences of Cuban and Haitian refugees in Florida's schools to put the experiences of my research participants into perspective.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Portions of the following sections are cited from a previous work by the author in the book *Making a Spectacle: Examining Curriculum/Pedagogy as Recovery from Political Trauma* (Inks, 2020).

### *Maríel Boatlift of 1980: Cuban Arrivals to Florida*

The Maríel Boatlift from Cuba occurred over the course of several months in 1980 and introduced over 100,000 Cubans to South Florida. At least 10,000 of these individuals were children who were entered Florida's public schools and special programs (Garcia 1996; Silva 1985). In 1980, this was the third wave of Cuban refugee arrivals from Fidel Castro's regime. But the reception of this group was less positive in the United States, even among Cubans who had fled to South Florida during prior immigration waves.

In the late 1970's, to curtail international discontent, Fidel Castro allowed for a set period during which any Cubans who wished to flee their country could do so without penalty. Prior to this moment, any dissenters who attempted to flee would have been sent to prison in Cuba as political prisoners. The Carter administration and Castro were beginning to strike a deal about accepting Cuban refugees. However, Castro announced that Cubans who wished to leave were free to do so before any deal was completed. This left the Carter administration largely unprepared to receive what would be 125,000 refugees between April through October of 1980 (Garcia 1996).

Cubans living in South Florida shared conflicting sentiments about the increased arrival of additional Cubans, this time from more rural areas and darker skinned populations. Some Cubans in the United States were excited to see and help theirs and others' families, even renting boats to arrange for pickup from Cuba at Maríel port. Other Cubans in the United States were less likely to support the newcomers, feeling that these later immigrants were Castro loyalists who should have attempted to flee Cuba earlier. At Maríel port, people waited for days as Cuban authorities dictated who could leave for the United States. The process was long and dehumanizing. Some family members who arrived at the port expecting to pick up their families

left instead with an overloaded boat of strangers they had never met before. The US Coast Guard was overwhelmed with the number of over-capacity boats that were at risk of sinking, and due to the bureaucratic mess left from the failed political negotiations, an unknown number Cubans died on their way to Florida, either from violence or drowning.

The reception of Cuban refugees by Americans prior to the Mariel Boatlift was largely positive. Cold War logics dictated that it was only right to accept Cubans fleeing from a communist regime in exchange for American democratic values. But the media depictions of Mariel Boatlift refugees showed them in a much different light when compared to the earlier Cuban refugee arrival. The media often focused on theories that Castro had initiated the boatlift to smuggle criminals and the mentally ill out of Cuba (also see the 1983 movie *Scarface* for more on the stereotypes of Cubans from that era). While it is true that Castro intentionally released prisoners so they would leave the country, almost all were anti-Castro political dissidents and not violent criminals. This distinction did not matter to the mainstream US media. Class and race played a central role in these new media representations of refugees, as the Cubans who arrived via the Mariel Boatlift were of lower socio-economic status who did not have enough money to arrange for travel during previous waves. Much like in the United States, Cuba has a long history of racialized enslavement on plantations, and Blackness and poverty are still closely correlated to backgrounds of enslavement or indigeneity in Cuba.

The media's criminalization of brown-skinned Cuban refugees in South Florida made its way into the schools and classrooms, denying many Cuban refugee students fair and equal access to and inclusion within the public educational system (despite such inclusion being legally mandated by the US Constitution via *Lau v. Nichols* (1973)). It was ten years after the Mariel Boatlift that The Consent Decree of 1990 (shortened to the Consent Decree) would officially

establish a Florida state public education program for CLD students, which was meant to specifically address the educational inequalities experienced by Spanish speakers in the school system (*LULAC v. FDOE* 1990). But the decade-long gap between the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the landmark educational legislation of 1990 forced many Cuban students to fall behind in school. For example, there was an especially high drop-out rate for Cuban students who entered the United States at high school age (Garcia 1996).

#### *Haitian Arrivals to Florida*

While Cubans were arriving to Florida, Haitian immigrants were already experiencing challenges with education. Researchers have extensively documented Haitian experiences in United States and other international educational systems (Stepick and Swartz 1998; Lawlor and Tolley 2017; Steimel 2010; Mwangi and English 2017; Hos 2016; Doucet 2005). As with the Cuban refugees of 1980's Mariel Boatlift, media representations greatly shaped public perceptions around the reception of Haitian refugees to the United States. While there is a long history of Haitian immigration to the United States, it was during the repressive Haitian political regimes beginning in the 1970s that Haitian refugees began arriving in much larger numbers in South Florida. The 1990 census conservatively estimated that 150,000 Haitians were living in Florida, only seven percent of whom were reported to have arrived prior to the 1970s (Stepick and Swartz 1998).

Haitians fled to the United States for many political and economic reasons that directly involved the US government. These included an increasingly repressive but US-backed dictatorship and the resulting food shortages and political violence and unrest (Stepick and Swartz 1998). Their reception by Americans in New York, Boston, or South Florida was largely negative and overlapped with the US government's declaration that Haitians were "economic



refugees,” ignoring their own complicity in creating the crises affecting Haiti in the first place (Doucet 2005). The popular perceptions of Haitians as poor and opportunistic, however, created a widespread misconception among working-class Americans in places like South Florida that Haitians were unnecessarily draining resources at the expense of “hard-working” Americans (Lawlor and Tolley 2017).

In 2010, a major earthquake destroyed essential infrastructure, and further hurt the country’s economy as well as the qualities of Haitian education, health, and security. One million Haitians were left without homes and around 300,000 people died (although the Haitian government reports a much smaller number of deaths as a result of the earthquake; see (Pallardy 2019)). Following the humanitarian crisis, fewer than 60,000 Haitians were granted Temporary Protected Status by the US government, which further increased the flow of Haitians to the United States during the late Obama administration (Zong and Batalova 2019). When the Trump administration discontinued Haitian’s Temporary Protected Status in 2017 (*Saget v. Trump*, 375 F. Supp. 3d 280), it was estimated at that time that 680,000 Haitians were living in the United States (Zong and Batalova 2019).

The high school experiences of Haitians in the 1990s were greatly affected by public perception of Haitians as poor economic immigrants (Doucet 2005; Stepick and Swartz 1998). Haitian high school students, comprised of first- and second-generation Haitians, lived in a crisis of identity in which their Blackness and family histories of enslavement overlapped with African-Americans in some ways but not others (Stepick and Swartz 1998). Haitian high schoolers negotiated this American cultural assimilation by either “covering-up” their ethnic or refugee background or by fully embracing it (Stepick and Swartz 1998). Students who would hide their Haitian backgrounds did so because they did not want to be harassed or beaten up by

other students. They instead behaved as African American students were expected to, meaning they would, draw on popular stereotypes and express less interest in doing well in school, focusing instead on social standing, popularity, and fashion (Stepick and Swartz 1998). As with other populations, Haitian refugees would frequently hide their accents to use the sounds of their voices to pass as Americans. Proudly Haitian students tended to be new arrivals and more interested how they could benefit from the US education system (Doucet 2005). But they were also often isolated, harassed, and beaten by other students (including Haitians passing as Americans, who were participating in these violent assimilation rituals) (Stepick and Swartz 1998).

#### *Refugees from the Congo Wars*

Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) were forcibly displaced by ethnic and gender-based violence that followed the end of colonial rule with the Burundian Civil War, followed by the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, and then the First and Second Congo Wars (Mahoney et al. 2020a; Stearns 2012). While the Congo Wars officially ended in 2003, violence in the eastern parts of the country near the borders of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania, have left 2.4 million displaced and nearly half million still seeking asylum in neighboring countries (COR Center 2014). Many refugees from the DRC lived in overcrowded refugee camps for 10-20 years before resettlement to the United States, meaning that many of their children who were born on the camps had never even seen the Congo.

RFCWs are a diverse population of people, though they are often referred to by service providers, researchers (like me), and educators as ‘Congolese’. Even my use of community to refer to RFCWs, within this thesis, does not best describe how people identify themselves along ethno-linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious lines that have existed, in some cases, since before

the outbreak of the wars. With their flexibility a key survival strategy, RFCWs hold onto multiple identities while also taking on new ones with their migration to different countries. For example, Uganda's "self-reliance" model (Betts et al. 2019) gave refugees access to education and employment thus better preparing some families for their move to the US. In Tampa bay, refugees who had very different experiences in other countries nonetheless came together to form a new community around shared experiences to support each other through the transition (Mahoney et al. 2020a). Ethnic and religious differences that were politicized during the war also had the potential to divide the community that was re-establishing itself in Tampa bay. Churches that open their doors to newly resettled RFCWs are also the settings for intra-community segregation and exclusion and deciding who gets community support and who does not (Mahoney et al. 2020a). Simply put, there are many intersectional power differences within the RFCW community that create lived experiences outside of schools. While this had the potential to divide students, we found that their shared struggles at school played a role in unifying students across their differences (and even leading to the inclusion of other African and Haitian students into their cohort due to similarities of experience).

Education in the refugee camps was inconsistent or, in some cases, non-existent (Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher 2017). All the students in my study reported having arrived in the U.S. in 2015. The older students stated their place of birth was in the DRC. Unlike their parents, the students born in the DRC did not generally specify a specific place for which they came. This is likely due to migration at a young age. Many of the students do not remember living in the DRC. Three students were born in Tanzania and one in Burundi. The students not born in the DRC were born within refugee camps. The transition to the United States and Tampa

bay's school system has been a difficult one for all the students to navigate, even as they help one another based upon their different experiences.

Refugees' experiences of bullying and harassment at school and work are a product of an environment and national culture of unwelcomeness. In 2016, the Trump campaign actively demonized refugees as he supported hostilities directed toward immigrants and refugees as he promoted white nationalist ideologies, most notoriously labeling countries refugee youth came from as "shithole countries" (Vitali et al. 2018). These xenophobic sentiments trickled down into (and reignited, in many cases) the biased views of American teachers, students, coworkers, and case managers, who often blamed RFCWs themselves for the challenges they posed to those responsible for them. Case workers often saw RFCWs as lazy or unable to maintain jobs (Billingsley and Mahoney 2021). RFCWs in Tampa bay relayed to us stories of how their mostly African-American neighbors at their apartment complexes would sometimes harass them at night from outside their homes or bang on doors, throw rocks at windows, and shout obscenities at them. Most RFCW students who described bullying in schools also noted that it was an extension of what they were dealing with in their apartment complexes (Fullerton et al. 2017). Female students were particularly targeted for the long dresses or more "conservative" clothing they wore, which ran counter to many African-American preferences for fashion. Students also had their hair pulled and were sprayed with perfume on busses and while at school. Lacking basics like deodorant, soap, and toothpaste meant that hygiene was often targeted with devastating results for the students in question, most of whom did not understand English and who described school as torturous (*kuteswa* in Swahili) (Fullerton et al. 2017).

It is maybe no surprise that RFCW students immediately fall behind their US peers for their age group or class. Despite having only limited formal education, RFCW students were

placed into public schools based purely on their ages and with no investigation into their educational backgrounds. Schools were provided with no information about these diverse students, making it difficult for teachers and ESOL instructors to help. At Lyon High School alone, there were over 100 English-learning students in the school, but all Ms. Kline had been given was a list of names and languages.

While RFCW students are fewer in number than Haitians (who were in turn fewer in number than Cubans), these populations share several similarities in experience. Issues such as food insecurity, bullying, and a high drop-out rate have been especially common among Haitians and Congolese students (Stepick and Swartz 1998; E. Holbrook et al. 2019; Roberta et al. 2017). All three populations struggle with graduation rates, and all have dealt with negative media representations and poor public perception of their communities, refugees, and people of color more generally. These contextual factors are essential for understanding the hostile school environments commonly cited as the major barrier to the success of these students in the school system (Riley 2015; Jeng, Lim, and Hoot 2015; Hos 2016).

### **Being Black in America**

A pattern of bullying noted among students and researchers was that many of the bullies were other Black students. Maynard et al. (2016) found immigrant students are more likely to experience bullying. As discussed with Haitian arrivals and their bullies, Black American students do not connect with the language, dress, and focus on education and family that RFCW students have. Conversely, RFCW students do not connect with the racial cohesion and shared experience of racial injustice of Black American students.

As was the case among Haitian refugees, a collective Black identity was shared with the RFCW students through bullying them into acting 'Black' (Stepick and Swartz 1989). Ms. Kline

reported another similarity between Haitian student experiences in the 90s. She was worried that the RFCW students were modeling themselves upon their American classmates, who are often on their phones or hitting or being mean to each other. Even as we were tutoring, we noted the ways in which the RFCW young men would pick on RFCW young women. We did our best to address the issue but their fighting amongst each other did continue.

RFCWs are consistently negotiating their identity against their confrontations with people who were born or have spent significant time in the US. Anthropology has spoken at length about the intersectional ties of “race” around the world (see AAA Statement on Race 1998). African refugee communities are often seen as a monolithic group after their arrival to the United States due to media perceptions that depict ‘Africa as a country’ (Monson 2017,). This causes Americans to assume a shared experience that extends to how immigrant students are grouped in educational settings (Mwangi and English 2017, Imoagene 2015). Black Refugees who come to the United States are never given an ‘orientation’ of what it means to be Black here and this has left them unprepared for the negative experiences that Black people often endure.

### **Education Policy<sup>8</sup>**

Much policy and research in education discusses how ESOL programs are supposed to *ideally* function throughout the United States, although the realities are often quite different (AIC 2016; Colorin Colorado 2019; Cummins 2016; DeCapua 2016; Herrera et al. 2013; LULAC v. FDOE 1990; Montero et al. 2014; OCR 2018; Sanchez 2017). US educational policy is often taken for granted as a static and uncontested object, although Wedel et al. argue that, while “policies may be clothed in neutral language—their ostensible purpose merely to promote efficiency or effectiveness—they are fundamentally political” (2005; 34). In other words, larger

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<sup>8 8</sup> Portions of this section were previously published by the author in the book *Making a Spectacle: Examining Curriculum/Pedagogy as Recovery from Political Trauma* (Inks, 2020).

power structures are not given adequate contemplation when designing and assessing policy. Power structures are, therefore, regularly reproduced or ignored. The Consent Decree was the main piece of legislation that affected the students who are the focus of this thesis. But I will also analyze other legislation that has shaped Black and refugee student experiences in US public high schools over the last four decades.

Legal cases show a continuing debate about how students with limited English proficiency should be taught in the US. Many states do not provide resources for multilingual education despite evidence of improved student outcomes (Bialostok 2019; Bigelow et al. 2017; Bhatt 2001). National cases such as *Lau v. Nichols* (1973), *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981), and *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) demonstrate that there is a continual lack of consensus about how students with limited English proficiency (LEP) should be taught in countries of relatively high immigration such as the US. *Lau v. Nichols* (1973) established that students who speak do not speak English should be provided with English courses. *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) rules that schools are not required to provide English translation but must create programs that meet needs of English language learners (ELL) students based on sound educational research. *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) ruled that any child living within the United States is required to attend school regardless of their citizenship status. There are many other education policies that support or erode language-based programs for CLD students, but these are listed because of their use to support the Consent Decree (*LULAC v. FDOE* 1990).

#### *Establishment of ESOL*

It was not until the Consent Decree that special accommodations would be made for English learning students. The Consent Decree was drafted from a lawsuit between the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the Florida Department of Education (*LULAC*

*v. FDOE* 1990). During the Mariana Boatlift of 1980s, 11,000 new Cuban students reported to Florida's schools in that year alone, putting the schools into a crisis of accommodation (Silva 1985). Cuban students brought both linguistic and cultural differences to the schools. The differences in educational structure between Cuba and the U.S. was also a reflection of communist versus individualist attitudes. Cuban students were being confronted with not only a new language and understanding of history, but also a classroom teaching method that stressed individual responsibility and achievement. Those who could not assimilate often dropped out. Older students in particular "fell through the cracks" and moved into the job market. LULAC argued that the Florida school system was not allowing speakers of other languages to participate in a free and equal education, thus violating federal law<sup>9</sup>.

While the decree reorganized schools to effectively teach most Cuban students, it did not account for the increasingly diverse student body that would continue to develop into what we have today (with over one hundred English learning students from over a dozen language backgrounds just in one high school (Sanchez 2017)). While the consent decree is still applied to ESOL programs in Florida today, there remains a major achievement gap between culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and students who are well-versed in navigating American public schools. The Consent Decree presupposes that the gaps are based only on linguistic differences rather than diverse linguistic, cultural, and historic backgrounds.

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<sup>9</sup> Made in Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Office of Civil Rights Memorandum (Standards for Title VI Compliance) of May 25, 1970, Requirements based on the Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974, Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974, Requirements of the Vocational Education Guidelines, 1979, Requirements based on the Fifth Circuit Court decision in *Castañeda v. Pickard*, 1981, Requirements based on the Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982, Americans with Disabilities Act (PL 94-142), Florida Education Equity Act, 1984, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (*LULAC v. FDOE* 1990). Through the consent decree, public school systems are given the funding to develop ESOL programs, whose main goal is to raise English proficiency for students and, in turn, improve student success and graduation rates (*LULAC v. FDOE* 1990). The Consent Decree mandates educational accommodations for English-learning students based on the argument that language was the main barrier to student success.



The Consent Decree requires schools to provide resources for all CLD students but does not require bilingual education. Much of the research that support this policy focuses heavily on translating or learning the English language rather than building on prior skills (Eakins et al. 2017; Georgis et al. 2014; Hos 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). In other countries of high immigration, such as Canada, schools implement the practice of multilingual education for their English and/or French emerging student population (Cummins 2016). Innovative programs in the United States have also shown promise in implementing a multilingual of curriculum (Bigelow et al. 2017; Bialostok 2019; Herrera et al. 2013). Building on DeCapua (2016), this thesis will demonstrate that when it comes to educating CLD students, the direct translation model is inadequate and can be replaced with more effective approaches.

#### *Other Related Policies*

The *No Child Left Behind* Act (2001) was a law enacted during the second Bush administration that sought to erase the gap between affluent, white, middle class families and more vulnerable minority and poor students who were attending underfunded schools (Valenzuela et al. 2007). The law sought to standardize teaching methods and implement more consistent testing to monitor school progress. Student success, as the logic goes, would then be rewarded with more funding for students and teachers. But such incentive-based performance-based programs overly focus on metrics, overlook structural issues at the root of inequalities, and then exacerbate the pre-existing issues setting certain school systems behind. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) replaced NCLB in order to consider those outside influences when grading performance by schools. For ESOL programs, this meant school funding would increase if certain alternative requirements were met other than test scores. Other measurements mentioned in the act included : “school climate, chronic absenteeism, suspension/expulsion rates, and

college and career readiness” (Learning Policy Institute 2015). Education activists point towards this policy as a way to overcome the barriers that CLD students face but have yet to see any major changes as policies often plan for better outcomes but never provide appropriate funding (Kamentez 2015).

### **Tampa Bay Area School District**

Despite recent policies that have increasingly limited immigration to the United States, the percentage of English-learning students in US school systems sits at around 10 percent and continues to increase (WIDA 2016). Florida public school systems are the third largest in the country for CLD students, with 265,000 students described as ELLs statewide (FLDOE 2021). While the national graduation rate for CLD students is 63%, in the state of Florida the rate of graduation for CLD students is only 55% (Sanchez 2017). The school district’s Public School Strategy Plan (Eakins et al. 2017) found that only 17% of immigrant students were making gains in English language as of 2017. In addition, Black students in the school district are graduating at a rate of 79% which is 6% less than the national average (Eakins et al. 2017). In Florida, ESOL is among the top five positions that shows critical shortage of trained teachers (FDOE 2019a). In 2019, the school district underwent an aggressive campaign and hired 800 new teachers (Leigh 2019). But this still did not do enough to prepare teachers for the special needs of their diverse student bodies.

The school district has long been at the forefront of conversations about citywide housing and school-based segregation. During the 1970’s, there were desegregation orders put in place across the country that aimed to desegregate schools by intensively bussing students between urban, suburban, and rural schools (Stroub and Richards 2013; Kimmel 1992). This, however, did not solve the larger problem of housing segregation based on the intersection of racial and

socio-economic status, which continues to be an issue today. In 2001, the school district board voted to overturn the bussing mandates on the basis that “a school board has no obligation to remedy racial imbalances caused by external factors, such as demographic shifts, which are not the result of segregation and are beyond the board’s control (Johnston 2001).” In other words, the School District announced that it could not take responsibility for fixing deeper structural inequalities related to unchecked race- and class-based disparities that separate different parts of Hillsborough County – urban, suburban, and rural. As a resident of Tampa bay for over six years, I hear shared perceptions towards specific schools which shows these issues have never been remedied. In the school district, urban schools continue to host high population of Black and Latinx students while suburban schools host majority white populations. Rural schools, in turn, host a mix of white students and students from immigrant farm worker families.

One accommodation mandated by the Consent Decree was that of extended testing times. While English-speaking, American students take several versions of standardized tests, CLD students have tests specifically meant for them to evaluate their knowledge of core subjects in addition to their English language competency (Eakins et al. 2017). While CLD students are expected to take some of the same tests that as native English-speakers, such as SATs and ACTs (Giambo 2010), they are not held to the same time limitation as other standard English-speaking students.

RFCW students experience first-hand the educational limitations these high stakes tests pose on them (Kamentez 2015). A national movement has begun, led by education activists, to push schools to opt-out of testing requirements (Neill 2016; Kamentez 2015). Researchers and educational activists consider over-testing an abuse of power by legislators who prioritize testing over funding (Neill 2016). Through the ESSA, it is possible for school systems to negotiate how

much they should be evaluated based up on the standardized testing, thus removing the standardized aspect of the system (Learning Policy Institute 2015). Universities across the country have also increasingly been removing standardized testing as an application requirement. But for now, and as I discuss in this thesis, linking school funding to standardized testing scores and metrics like graduation rate are not incentivizing schools to invest in their students but rather to disinvest and actively encourage students who are pulling down a school's scores to simply drop out.

### *CLD Education and Language*

English has long been politicized as the dominant language of power and communication in the United States (Sayers 1996; Valenzuela et al. 2007). In schools, teachers' assumptions about English-learning students influence their perspectives on their students' ability to perform and succeed (Riley 2015). English is used as an indicator of assimilation or the desire to live in America, and English-learners are often seen as undeserving of the benefits of US-living. Such English-language biases are apparent in the educational system, which revolves around knowledge of English. Even the Consent Decree focuses on language as isolated for student success, ignoring the various other racial and class-based reasons Cuban students struggled with the education system in the 1980s.

Much of the educational literature of the last few decades has focused on the creation of endless acronyms and bureaucratic terms to categorize and organize students based almost purely on their language proficiency. Students categorized as English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Learner (ELL), English Learner (EL), and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD), are all placed into ESOL programs, which can also include students who do not fit those four categorizations (WIDA 2016, LULAC v. FDOE 1990, Eakins et al. 2017). The

categories of ESL and ELL are most used in practice to refer to students who are in the ESOL program<sup>10</sup>. Education researchers tend to use terms like CLD, EL, and ELL, meaning that the schools and the researchers are often using different sets of jargon. Three of the primary categories refer to student education in terms of “English proficiency,” and therefore ignores the non-English learning that is also taking place. The category of CLD is broader and better for discussing cultural differences among students and evaluating and understanding learning beyond simple English learning and proficiency (Herrera et al. 2013).

Cummins, a prominent education researcher, introduced the concept of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to best explain how languages are learned in the classroom (Cummins 1980). Many immigrant students who enter public schools are immersed into English language in the form of conversation. It takes most students a few weeks to begin using English in conversations with proficient English speakers. BICS refers to this conversational, informal, colloquial use of English. School work, tests, textbooks, lessons, and lectures are usually conducted using CALP, or the more complicated and standardized forms of English that are often only used in school contexts. Cummins found that it takes an average of 5-7 years for CLD students to become proficient in CALP (Cummins 1999). This is significant for the population of Congolese students with whom I worked because they were using some conversational English, or BICS, but were far from becoming proficient in CALP and thus did not fit into most of the common models of English learners. This is because their learning curve included more than just language learning.

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<sup>10</sup> ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) is used in the U.S. to describe programs implemented in public schools that provide accommodations, specialized curriculum, and teachers whose goal it is to increase student English proficiency enough so that students can attend schools without these accommodations. ESOL is used to refer to programs, teachers, and class titles but not students. An ESOL teacher may also be a teacher who has one or two ESOL classes a day but also teaches classes for the English proficient student body. This term is provided from U.S. and state policy, such as the Consent Decree, and is used commonly in practice.

I find Cummins' terms useful for their embrace of the multiple uses of different types of English language and literacy within different contexts.

In a more recent return to BICS and CALP literature, Cummins has also focused more on the impacts of age on language learning in schools (Cummins 2016). He notes that some older students do not have enough time to learn CALP to pass the testing requirement needed to graduate public schools. He advocates instead for multilingual programs where the everyday language is taught as a single class and the other subjects are taught in the students' preferred languages. This would prevent student from falling behind in other subjects that privilege the dominant language as the language of education. Cummins is not the only one to show support for such multilingual education (Bialostok 2019; Bigelow et al. 2017; Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs 2018), and there are numerous programs offered that effectively use multilingual curriculum. However, Florida's Consent Decree does not provide the resources necessary for the creation of accessible and inclusive newcomer programs that have been successful in other states (International Newcomer Academy 2019; Salerno and Kibler 2015; Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs 2018).

Clarifying terminology is important for this thesis. There are, indeed, several other abbreviations, acronyms, and models that can be used to describe and categorize students who speak other languages (Herrera et al. 2013). These terms are commonly used among teachers, education researchers, and policymakers. Unfortunately, much of this abstract language is based upon outdated educational theory that centers English acquisition as the ultimate solution for CLD success (see Herrera et al. 2013). Within the current framework, when a student is identified as having a low English proficiency, or being English language deficient, the response from Florida schools is to put the student into a program to increase English proficiency

(LULAC v. FDOE 1990). But this approach indirectly defocuses the student from other important subjects. In other words, ESOL programs focus so much on English language learning that they generally do not consider the other intersecting barriers to student success and graduation. The English-deficit model of understanding students sees the only solution to be the translation of specific knowledge from a “mother tongue” into English (Shapiro and MacDonald 2017). But this greatly ignores other challenges as well as the varying linguistic and cultural assets that CLD students bring with them. CLD students have a wide variety of characteristics that may prevent them from successful graduation. Further, these students also have a great number of resources and assets that are being ignored (DeCapua 2016, Bigelow et al. 2017, Shapiro and MacDonald 2017). Language is only one struggle for these students, who also must deal with overall unwelcoming environments to newcomers, bullying at school and in their neighborhoods, and pressure from their families to help support the family.

ESOL also has a categorical way in which it organizes its students as described by handbooks provided by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE 2019b). A, B, and C is used to describe the level of English proficiency a student has, what classes they take, and what tests they must pass to exit the program. The RFCW cohort of students are “A’s” and take “A” classes for most of their school day. The “A’s” have classes that teach them English, math, and science (essential subjects for passing standardized tests). LY is also used to refer to “A” students who have low proficiency in English speaking, reading, and/or writing. This categorization of students is used for reporting purposes but is also used among teachers in the ESOL program to describe students in conversation. A teacher will refer to the students in her class as “My A’s” when indicating a cohort of students who are at the lowest level of English proficiency. These were the students with whom Ms. Kline had initially asked us to help her.

## **Alternative Education for SLIFE Students**

As I will discuss later, beginning in 2019, the school district did begin two “newcomer” programs in two high schools that were dealing with many of the educational issues discussed so far<sup>11</sup>. Newcomer programs are a type of alternative educational strategy that have had varying success based on the level of funding, training, and host country reception (Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher 2017; Bigelow et al. 2017; Georgis et al. 2014; Guerrero and Tinkler 2010; Hos 2016; Scott and Safdar 2017). Generally speaking, newcomer programs focus on special populations of students who are unfamiliar with a host country’s languages and have had disrupted or non-existent experiences with formal education (Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher 2017). Newcomer programs have more freedom in curriculum and instructional method and tend to value the use of multiple languages in the classroom (Bigelow et al. 2017; Georgis et al. 2014; Guerrero and Tinkler 2010). Such programs have great potential in the school district, but as I will discuss later, they still suffer from persistent structural issues including a lack of awareness of the problems and a lack of funding to address these issues.

### *SLIFE Defined*

Another way to frame the students in my study were as SLIFE, or Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). Such students have further challenges making educational gains because their formal education may be years behind or non-existent (DeCapua 2016; Hos 2016; Montero, Newmaster, and Ledger 2014; Potochnick 2018). The United States’ highly institutionalized “formal education” system can often be taken for granted as the norm or the best way for students to learn. Yet it can seem very foreign to students coming from other countries. While many SLIFE students have never participated in a formalized educational

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<sup>11</sup> The newcomer programs within school district will be discussed at length in the discussion.



setting, they still have education and are capable of learning (DeCapua, 2016). The work on which this thesis is based approached these differences as assets rather than view SLIFE students as being simply deficient (see Shapiro and MacDonald 2017). It has become increasingly clear that the self-defeating “deficit discourse” (categorizing refugees by what they lack) central to educational policy has been complicit in reproducing rather than overcoming power imbalances and inequalities among Florida’s students. The SLIFE categorization, therefore, both a descriptor and a critique of educational policy itself (DeCapua 2016; Potochnick 2018; Montero, Newmaster, and Ledger 2014).

By definition, SLIFE have had at least two years of interrupted formal education or no formal education at all (DeCapua 2017). Formal education is described as standardized institutions where students are expected to participate in a standard curriculum for long periods a day (Hos 2016, Potochnick 2018). The curriculum is typically broken up into subject sections, and the work assigned is mostly decontextualized from real world applications (DeCapua 2017). A SLIFE will have a difficult time keeping up with the expectations of the curriculum because they lack basic institutional knowledge of schools because of a history of political instability or war (Hos 2016). This does not mean that the students are “lacking”, uneducated, or incapable of learning (DeCapua 2017, Potochnick 2018). But SLIFE are unfamiliar with long school days, testing strategies, language reserved for education, or subjects taught out of context from real world examples (DeCapua 2017).

### *Alternative Assessments*

While it is easy to critique standardized testing, assessment is essential for educational institutions. Terms such as “authentic assessment” have emerged to refer to types of assessment that recognizes real-world contexts and uses identifiable outcomes to assess the learning that is

taking place among SLIFEs (Herrera et al. 2013). Research shows that “authentic assessments” and similar activities work best for English language learners because students can build their English knowledge in relation to their own lives and preexisting knowledge (Herrera et al.2013; Bigelow et al. 2017; DeCapua 2016). The problem with authentic assessment is that it does not mesh well with standard school curricula and testing, making it difficult for teachers to implement.

Authentic assessments can often come in the form of spoken word responses, which may have been difficult to implement among the RFCW youth. When discussing her students as SLIFE, Ms. Kline listed “silence” as one of her main concerns for the students during our initial meeting. The “silent period” occurs when a new student enters an unfamiliar educational space (J. L. McBrien 2005). There are many reasons new students go through a silent period upon arrival at a new school. In the cases of CLD students, they often fear that their speaking skills will be made fun of (Potochnick 2018; J. McBrien, Dooley, and Birman 2017). In the case of SLIFEs, they often fear that their inability to participate will signal to other students that they are “deficient” or “lack education” (DeCapua 2016). The more barriers that exist to the student, the longer the silent period will continue. Since 2019, my goal has been to work with Ms. Kline and other in the Tampa Bay Area to help SLIFE students and advocate for new and better newcomer programs that take the situations of SLIFE and CLD students into account.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

### **Anthropology and Education**

The anthropology of education approach focuses on the lived experiences and perspectives of the students, parents, teachers, and administrators that make up the educational system (Tužinská et al. 2017; Pacheco 2010; Bialostok 2019). Ethnographic research that focuses on the teacher perspectives typically offer innovative curriculum that can be used to better teach diverse student classrooms (Valli and Chambliss 2007; Trester 2011; Rymes and Pash 2001; Flores 2007; Luykx 2008; Knauer 2012; Pacheco 2010; Bialostok 2019). Ethnographic research on student perspectives tends to stress the importance of the contextual student backgrounds and the lived experiences of those students in the classroom (DeCapua 2016; Hos 2016; Stepick and Swartz 1998). Anthropologists who write about education make arguments for viewing diversity as an asset in the curriculum (Kasun 2015) and argue for the importance of a welcoming environment in the academic success of students (Gitlin et al. 2003; Stepick and Swartz 1998; Garcia 1996; Georgis et al. 2014). Another theme across anthropological education research with diverse students is the focus on larger structural issues such as funding and racial discrimination, which can create barriers to school inclusion and success (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011; Flores 2007; Tapia 1998; Tužinská et al. 2017).

In Tampa bay, anthropologists from USF have helped develop new curriculum for refugee students in the past. The School District has implemented some of these programs, which are widely used elsewhere today. As noted by Holbrook (2019), while alternative education programs can be useful for adults in need of work readiness and job placement, they

are often not affective for younger RFCW adults and high-school age students, who face a unique set of issues that an ethnographic approach is essential for understanding.

In addition to the educational anthropology literature reviewed above, researchers from sociology, education, international studies, and refugee studies have also investigated the experiences of refugees in institutionalized classrooms to varying degrees (Montero et al. 2014; Jeng et al. 2015; Hos 2016; Georgis et al. 2014; Scott and Safdar 2017; Bigelow et al. 2017; McCaffrey and Taha 2019; Sontag 2019). Some education scholars have, for example, become more insistent on the importance of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. Cummings (1999, 2016, 1980) has long argued for the importance of multilingual educations, especially for students who are not showing proficiency in English. Education scholars have also discussed the importance of identifying the differences of meaning between ESL students and CLD students. *Special Education Issues in the Assessment of CLD Students* (Herrera et al. 2013) discusses the wide variety of students a teacher may encounter and how to develop a curriculum that best services their needs in order for them to pass standardized testing. While these works are great at supplying information of lived experiences from diverse student populations, they do not effectively explore and critique the long-term effects of the policies they recommend. There does remain a lag in time between when research can be completed and suggestions can be implemented (Caesar and Kohler 2007). But there are still fundamental issues with these approaches, like the persistent emphasis on standardized testing and evaluation.

This thesis would not be complete without analyzing policies that affect refugee youth experiences. To analyze the policies and laws relevant to this thesis, I drew on Wedel et. al.(2005), specifically when approaching the institutionalization of ESOL programs. As Wedel et al. (2005) argues,

“Anthropologists can explain how taken-for-granted assumptions channel policy debates in certain directions, inform the dominant ways policy problems are identified, enable particular classifications of target groups, and legitimize certain policy solutions while marginalizing others (34).”

The process by which laws become policies and policies become practice is mediated among stakeholders. In the case of educational laws, that would be the state, the county, and then individual schools.

### **Critical Race and Black Feminist Theory**

I wanted to engage with Black feminist theory in this thesis because I was focused on a population of people whose intersectional ties to immigration and blackness coalesce to place them at a great disadvantage in the US. Black feminist theory promotes the inclusion of often silenced or underrepresented voices that can speak to unique experiences. Intersectional theory was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989) in response to previous iterations of feminist theory that focused on white woman's issues. She saw that there are more differences in the experience of woman that observes class, race, gender, religion, and other identity markers (Crenshaw 1989). Lorde expounds on this with her famous quote, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives (2007, 138).” I use Black feminist theory at a more individualized level by making comparisons within the students based on their ethnicity, gender, parental relationships, and educational experiences. According to Harrison, “there are no feminist methods per se. However, there are ‘feminist methodologies,’ because methodologies articulate conceptual, theoretical, and ethical perspectives on the whats, whys, and hows of research and the production of knowledge” (Davis and Craven 2016, 76). Black feminist theory has informed my stance toward ethical dilemmas such as reciprocity, power imbalances, and personal motivations during research. I have an ethical obligation to protect the RFCW youth and others who informed this thesis.

Drawing on Harrison's Decolonizing Anthropology (2010), it is important that I recognize my power and position in this research. My personal background has impacted the way in which this research was carried out. I am a white American woman seeking my master's degree. Sometimes, I identify with my Central American ethnicity. My linguistic abilities helped and hurt different aspects of the research. I speak English, some Spanish, five words of Arabic, and three phrases in Swahili. I am a product of Florida public schools. This background fueled my interest in issues of refugees and public education. I am from the American South. Sometimes, I identify with my Southern identity. I see the differences between participants and myself. I try my best to present myself as humbly as possible. I am aware that I am perceived as access to resources, people, jobs, housing, money, and education by refugees, even if I feel that I have only very limited power to help them in those areas. There are people who got frustrated when I could not deliver the help for which they asked. I must constantly remember that many people may have participated in this research with the hope that I may help them more in the future.

### **Critical Educational Ethnography**

My critical ethnographic approach to education aims to bridge the gap between educational policy and student experience from an anthropological perspective. While the field of education has shown interest in the connections between language-education policies and outcomes for ESL students, there is still a lack of critical ethnographic analysis that explores the holistic impacts policies have on students. A review of applied anthropological research in education shows few connections between the lived experiences of diverse students (immigrant and refugee) and the policies that shape their educations (see Valenzuela et al. 2007, Garcia et al 2008, Zoch 2017). Furthermore, there are hardly any collaborative ethnographic approaches to

renegotiating alternative education or education policy that includes the perspectives of refugee youth (Guerrero and Tinkler 2010, Bajaj et al. 2017). I will fill these gaps by providing refugee perspectives on the policies that affect them and using their suggestions to create actionable recommendations for a more inclusive and equitable school environment.

## **Chapter 4: Methods**

Data for this thesis was collected using four primary methods: participant observation within the resettlement community, participant observation with refugee students through a tutoring program, interviews with teachers and educational staff in the county, and interviews with refugee parents and other family-members. The first section below describes challenges to my initial research design. The challenges were many and greatly shaped the data. I then provide background information from a long exploratory phase of participant observation that began for me in 2016 before discussing the specific methods I used for this project.

### **Challenges to Research Design**

At the time I was submitting my IRB, the university IRB made major changes to the application process that required all paperwork be standardized using the same language while leaving blank spaces for things like “research name” and “sample criteria”. They also provided scripts for interactions like consent, recruitment, and follow-up. I can see where this makes the application process easier for the people who read through all the forms, but the practicality of my having to repeatedly change my documents became a major barrier to my research. While I argued that interview scripts must use simplified language, I was told to use a prescribed template that was well beyond the reading comprehension of my population. It took months of revisions for my application to be accepted, and I was unable to conduct interviews until the late summer of 2019. By this time, some of the students I had been tutoring were preparing to go back to school. Others had already enrolled in new programs at different schools. Since families often moved between houses and apartments in Tampa bay, students were also frequently



moving between schools. By the fall of 2019, many of the students from the spring tutoring program had enrolled in different schools. I had difficulty interviewing the original participants.

I made several attempts to include more structured participant observation with varying levels of success. The purpose of the observations was to see interactions between teachers and their students. It was also supposed to be an opportunity to ask teachers about their perspectives of failing students. I chose a school with one of the newly formed newcomer program,<sup>12</sup> which I will call Eagle High School.<sup>13</sup> Several students from my spring 2019 program at Lyon High School had shifted to Eagle High for the fall semester. I was fortunate enough to have a connection with a teacher there, and she allowed me to come to the school to talk about the program.

Unfortunately, I could not get the permissions needed to do either tutoring or university approved research, which I think is worth a discussion. First, I asked both ESOL teachers at Eagle High School if I could sit in their classrooms and participate as a tutor while also collecting data for research. One teacher said yes while the other teacher, who was most likely to have the students that fit my sampling criteria, said no. Her only reason given was that she did not feel comfortable. When submitting a university IRB to do research at a school, a separate approval from the school district's research board was also required. The research board's application was simple, and I was able to complete it in twenty minutes. I described the student sample I was interested in and that I was interested in evaluating the newcomer program's curriculum and the related student success. But when I tried to get permission from the school's

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<sup>12</sup> There will be a description of newcomer programs in the background section of this thesis. There will be a separate description of my meeting in the analysis of alternative programs.

<sup>13</sup> Both Eagle and Lyon high school will be spoken about in detail in terms of students and teacher composition in a later section. It is important to note here that many students who started at Lyon high school moved to Eagle high school after a newcomer program was made available there.

principal, I was repeatedly told to “try back later.” When I pushed harder after several attempts for an answer as to why I was being passively denied permission, an administrator for adult education programs told me, “We are still going through growing pains,” referring to the newcomer program, about which they were clearly rather self-conscious and protective.

I could not get the permission I needed to evaluate the program at Eagle High School. I was, however, able to shift my focus toward the other public alternative education programs, and I could still talk directly with the students in the newcomer program, even if I could not observe them in the program. The school board’s research board eventually declined my application, stating that they did not want to put the students in the program “at risk,” a response which stemmed either from a fundamental misunderstanding of my project or was simply a deflection that allowed them to keep outside eyes from observing the program in its infancy. They also critiqued my study for only planning to include students in the newcomer program, which again revealed a lack of willingness to allow outsiders observe what was happening within the newcomer program. A colleague who taught an English course at an adult education program within the school district was willing to let me sit in and observe her classes, which did give me an opportunity to gain further participant observation in an alternative educational environment. To make up for the information I was not able to gain from observing more newcomer and alternative education programs, I relied on interviews and my participants who attended the programs to make their own evaluations and comparisons of the programs.

### **Exploratory Participant Observation and Analysis**

This thesis is based on years of data that includes my personal experiences, the experiences of my colleagues at USF who also work with RFCWs, community meetings I have attended since I was undergraduate, and several projects for which I volunteered in the past. This

exploratory participant observation phase was very difficult to compile and sat without analysis for some time. When I came back to it for my thesis, I was shocked at how my memory refreshed itself of events and interviews that occurred in the past. I spent weeks looking through the fieldnotes and focusing on what people said and did during my research and years of experience before then. Educators, refugee resettlement employees, RFCW adults, and researchers from USF shared common concerns with various perspectives. I broke down the information first by its source and their relationship with refugee youth. Much of this information came from presentations by other researchers at Refugee Task Force meetings or during workshops and talks for the resettlement, refugee, or USF communities. I also had good relations with several RFCW community organizers, who guided and mentored me as I also helped them. Finally, the RFCW students and their parents were pivotal in making this research work.

### **Tutoring Participant Observation**

I refer to the tutoring sessions often as my main source of data gathered from participant observation. The tutoring sessions inspired this research and so much of this data was collected during the exploratory phase as well. The tutoring sessions at Lyon high school occurred once a week for two hours during the spring of 2019 and ended once testing season began in late April. We interacted regularly with thirteen students during the tutoring program. Because Ms. Kline decided which students would be in our group, some other than RFCW students were included. All students were African or Black (Haitian), born outside of the United States and were learning English and the US educational system to varying degrees. Most came from low-income families that depended upon social services. Eight of the regular 13 students were from the RFCW

community and had been resettled by local agencies. I will go into detail with the functions of the tutoring program in the analysis portion of this thesis.

### **Interviews with Key Informants**

While I often refer to RFCW and resettlement as a singular community it is more aptly described as a large local network connected by the process of refugee resettlement. This would mean that I would have many key informants who could provide insight into different refugee communities, resettlement programs, and schools that RFCWs attend. When I first drafted my research proposal, I included plans to interview individuals who were involved with RFCW youth. This would mean RFCW parents, refugee community leaders, teachers, and employees or volunteers with resettlement agencies. As discussed earlier, I could not get the permissions needed to properly interview teachers and therefore rely heavily on my personal observations during tutoring or the exploratory interview done with Ms. Kline.

### *Exploratory Interviews*

I went through two rounds of interviewing over the course of my work with the RFCW community. The exploratory phase used an unstructured and conversational approach to interviewing. As is common in ethnographies, anthropologists must gain an understanding of the participants perspective before they begin forming questions (see LeCompte and Schensul 2013, 19). I had conversations with teachers, refugee community leaders, and resettlement staff and volunteers. The second round of interviews occurred immediately after community permission was given through the church meeting. These semi-structured interviews would first include parents, then ask permission to include their students. Most parents agreed to have their youth interviewed but it typically occurred at a later date. There were a few instances where parents

were not interested in interviewing but still provided permission to interview their youth who were less than 18 years of age.

When my research first began, I initially approached two individuals who worked with the school district and were not refugees but worked regularly with them to discuss my project and get feedback on the issues. These conversations included important data for the thesis. I also spoke with two refugee community leaders at a conversational level about refugee youth in schools. I spoke with two volunteers and one employee of resettlement programs as they were one of the first people to notice issues with RFCW education experiences. I used one RFCW adult and youth as pilot interviews to test my interview guides. These initial interviews were all conversational, and only two were recorded for analyses. I include these conversations in my overall sample, although only one is included in my description of RFCW adult participants.

## **Interview Sampling and Consent**

### *Sampling for Interviews*

In the summer of 2019, I submitted an IRB protocol for research with RFCW youth between the ages of 14-21. I chose this age range because I wanted to capture the experiences of RFCW youth who were currently in high school or had attended high school but were forced to leave. Many participants in my sample arrived between 2015-2016, and I decided to raise the age range past the high school level (18) to capture long-term experiences of youth who were forced to leave high schools. The initial focus was on RFCW youth experiences in American schools. I also included in the IRB plans to interview parents and potentially other family members. I created separate interview questions for adults and youths, and I opted for verbal consent from RFCW students and parents. I also relied heavily on resources such as church groups and friends

in the community for sampling and to help with scheduling interviews and getting updates on students' school choices.

### *Interview Consent Process*

On one sunny Sunday in the fall of 2019, I found myself sitting in a church where my advisor and I were the only white people. We were directed toward some seats toward the front when we arrived and there was a noticeable space in the chairs between us and the rest of the gathering. Since my advisor is fluent in Swahili and I was visibly lost, he gave quick summaries of the multiple sermons done by a series of pastors and their wives. This lasted almost two hours, and we had even arrived very late.<sup>14</sup> The crowd sang songs in English and Swahili. I recognized one of them from my time at youth church, however the rendition I grew up with had a strong Christian rock influence.

At the end of the service, the leading pastor asked everyone to stay for my announcement. This was my project, so I walked up there with a wordy page provided by IRB's standardized script for recruiting participants. On the margins I tried to squeeze in Swahili words and phrases I learned a few years prior. I had tried to make appropriate word changes during the earlier sermons, but now the sheet was a mess of scribbles. I started with introductions in Swahili and led everyone to believe that the whole speech would be in Swahili. As soon as I switched to English the pastor began translating for me. I had to balance between the language IRB had given me while also trying to make sure the language was clear enough for the pastor to properly interpret to capture the meaning correctly. The outcome was an awkward and stilted speech that came one sentence at time. Everyone in the audience seemed confused until my advisor came to save me. He talked casually in Swahili about the research project, cracked some jokes, and

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<sup>14</sup> We arrived as advised by our mutual contact and the church's leading pastor. We really should have come later, at the end.

regathered everyone's attention. In the end, I was able to get verbal consent from household heads to interview their children, but this only came after a more detailed and off-script explanation from others who assisted with the project. Had I relied solely on the IRB-approved script, I may not have received consent. The community integrated method was more successful. Community members who agreed to participate either gave me their phone numbers after church or gave the pastor permission to share them with me. Often with the pastor's help, I was able to organize interviews in peoples' homes. The pastor repeated our message on other Sundays and gathered a few more participants that way. After some of the interviews I would ask the participants if they knew any families they thought would be good for our project and we would organize more interviews. I call this a purposive social networking sampling, and it is how I recruited my participants for this thesis.

### **RFCW Adult and Youth Interviews**

I drew on McKirdy's (2015) work on "Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators," as a guide to interviewing parents and students. Many of the students were conversational in English, but their parents were not. For adult interviews, I therefore had to often rely on colleagues, friends, and my advisor for help conducting interviews. While my interviews were not long enough to be considered oral history, I still structured the questions to be open ended while staying on the topic of education. I wanted to squeeze in a lifetime of perspectives in less than two hours per participant. I used chronological interview guides that helped students and parents recall their past educational experiences.

My next set of interviews were semi-structured and based upon the IRB-approved interview guide for RFCW youth and parents. I formed interview guides that sought to visualize a school day in Tampa bay for refugee youth students from their perspective as well as measure

differences and similarities from their past schooling experiences. The parent interview guides were meant to allow parents to compare their own experiences with schooling in Africa to what they perceived of their children's experience here in the US. I only recorded the interviews when the interviewee gave consent, which was rare. For the parent interviews, I mainly relied on a translator, whose help then gave me time to record answers on my interview guides while they spoke. I interviewed students one-on-one and wrote their answers on the interview guide as well. After each interview, I sat in my car and recorded my own personal notes on my phone. This strategy worked best for me because I can recall and speak much faster than I can write. I was also able to save those recordings in addition to the recorded answers to better recreate the interview during transcription. In total, during the first phase, I was able to speak with the five individuals mentioned above, during the second round I spoke with five parents (3 separate interviews), and during the final phase I interviewed seven more students individually.<sup>15</sup>

## **Analysis**

Interviews were analyzed by question and then coded by theme. Where appropriate, I placed participant responses within themes and included quotes that best represented each theme. I did separate parent from youth interviews as the questions were different. Once I completed this process, I included overall interview themes for parents and students. These themes were then measured against themes I gathered during the exploratory phase of the research to support connections between RFCW youth, RFCW adults, refugee community leaders, teachers, and resettlement volunteers and staff. I had to make decisions on what information was relevant, repetitive, or could be saved for further analysis. Data was color-coded by theme. I preferred to analyze and code by hand rather than use a program. Specific observations and quotes were

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<sup>15</sup> There was one interview in which a Black Haitian student participated but never completed the interview. I do not count him as part of my sample, but I will explain the importance of his presence in the analysis section.



written on colored sticky tabs, which I then placed on a poster board in relation to one another. This allowed me to identify connections, like that both refugee youth and the adults talked about parents' participation in education. Community leaders and educators had their own perspectives on parental participation as well. On the poster board there were eventually 15 sticky tabs with information that pertained to the topic of parental involvement in a student's education. This would become a major theme for analysis. After posting nearly a hundred sticky tabs on two poster boards and taking a step back, I made some additional changes and then drew circles around common themes. These would become my discussion sections.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This thesis's heavy reliance on participant observation meant that I had to take a flexible approach regarding what counted as "data" and what experiences I could analyze to understand the lived experiences of RFCW students and families. I also had varying access to refugee service providers, , community leaders, and the schools themselves. I followed multiple trails of information that always led back to the students. The discussion below will first explore data collected through key informant interviews from key informants like refugee resettlement employees and volunteers, refugee community leaders, and Ms. Kline. Next, I will discuss data collected from observations at tutoring. I will then discuss interview data collected from RFCW youth and parents. Lastly, I discuss alternative education programs as a possible solution to many of the current issues I address below.

### **Key Informant Interviews**

I begin the following discussion by reflecting on some of what was lost during the arrival of Trump's presidency as discussed by my key interlocutors in the resettlement community. My participation in the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force (RTF) allowed me to build many contacts and learn of resources available to refugees. My key informants among refugee community leaders also provided important insights into youth expectations amongst adult refugees. Lastly, I spoke with Ms. Kline about the functions of the ESOL program and how it places RFCW students at a disadvantage.

## *Refugee Resettlement*

When I initially began exploratory research, I spoke with the head organizer of the RTF, Barb, to assess who I should talk to among refugee services that could also be considered as an “educator” or someone who may be representative of education for the refugee youth. Barb and I met in a Panera and we discussed the breakdown of communication between the schools and the RTF. Before the hiring of a new superintendent for schools, Barb had access to all the school principals and would hold teacher trainings and information sessions about refugees. With the new superintendent, the communication system changed to isolate school administrators and principals from broader community events and activities (ostensibly to allow school administrators to focus more on their students). Barb informed me that resettlement agencies had previously hired full-time educational liaisons to assist refugee youth, but those positions were cut when refugee arrival quotas were reduced beginning in 2017.

Barb and others had referred me to a former USF graduate and former educational liaison for refugee services. Since the budget cuts, she had lost her position as a refugee youth liaison but was still using her free time to support volunteer-based programs that tutored and empowered refugee youth. She was very familiar with many of the students at Lyon high school. Another liaison I spoke with had also lost her position but had stayed with the resettlement organization for nearly two years as a volunteer until they could find funding for her position.

Barb’s new point person with the school district was Kim, a school district employee who covered the whole County-wide district. Kim plays an important role updating the RTF on major changes to the ESOL program and any other public education programs. But Kim was unable by herself to replace what was lost with the elimination of the liaison positions. For example, it is

not a part of Kim's job description to keep track of refugee students in ESOL programs or to relay important information to caseworkers and parents, even if this job was badly needed.

### *Community Issues*

Like dominoes, programs or support groups that were offered to incoming refugees also fell when arrivals slowed to a halt. One RFCW community leader who had lived in the United States for ten years offered her perspective on two issues: resource awareness and community separation. She noted families needed help finding programs because they did not know where to look. She described to me how this problem occurs. "[The RFCW families] won't go after things for themselves. They don't know how to keep in touch with social services." She then pointed out the issues of refugee resettlement and housing around Tampa bay. "Where some of the families are placed, they're kind of spread apart," she told me. Tampa bay has notoriously bad public transportation and many refugee families do not own cars. This makes it difficult to come together as a community and to allow their students to have choices about programs.

I spoke with another key informant amongst refugee communities about problems among refugee youth. Father E built his church from the ground up in Tampa bay in the 1980s. He spent one-on-one time with RFCW students when he managed a refugee garden on his property. Refugee families would come to pick up food to supplement their diet with more familiar and fresh produce from the garden. But at the time of the interview, no one was going to the garden, and there was no readily available transportation for the families that had initially participated. He told me, "The garden is sleeping!" Over the 30 years that he has lived in Tampa bay, he witnessed many different refugee groups come together to strategize their survival. Previous refugee groups received support and cash assistance from resettlement agencies. They had people to give, "Good orientations," He said. Father E himself had once been employed by a

local refugee agency, where he would explain what living in America would really be like. He highlighted President Trump's impact on the refugee community, saying that the welcoming atmosphere for refugees and immigrants had changed to hostility toward those considered different. In particular, he noted that outside churches no longer offered refugees as much support.

Father E's church has become a major source of support for newer Ethiopian families, but RFCWs are missing that opportunity for unification and healthy gardening in the Tampa bay area. He compared RFCWs to his congregation of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, who had arrived decades earlier. "The Ethiopians had the benefit of a good orientation," Father E told me. "If someone cannot work, then the congregation steps in and pays for rent." On the topic of unification, he compared RFCWs to the Burmese, with whom he had also worked. Both communities had post-war issues with community unification that he referred to as "a disease left over from Africa," referring specifically to tensions in the RFCW community that prevented community unity and cooperation. He seemed upset that no Africans like him were still employed to work for refugee services providers to give new arrivals that "wake-up" talk. "No one is there to do that for refugee services anymore," he said, "And they do not do it in Africa."

*Ms. Kline*

The tutoring program and this research started with Ms. Kline's advocacy. She was one of the first educators to ask for help on behalf of the students. She was essential for helping me understand how ESOL works for and against the students. Initially, I was unsure about her actual job requirements, and I wanted to make her job a focal point for the research. Without my knowing, she scheduled our interview while she was proctoring exams. I was unsure whether to

keep going but Ms. Kline insisted we continue, saying she did not know when she could spare more time. I asked her first to describe her job to me. She explained:

“Get students what they need and all the accommodations that are allowed by law. I advocate for them. I assist teachers with training. I mentor students. I follow the kids’ data and I monitor their progress by speaking to teachers and report cards to see if schedule changes are needed, if they are not successful in one class it may be too hard, then I look at other options. I go into classrooms and facilitate the teaching process. I test and intake new students. Look at scores (of students) and determine if they are ready to be dismissed from the ESL program. A total process of making sure ESOL kids are in the proper classes by using test data and observation in the classroom. It’s not in my job description per se but that is my primary focus to make sure the students have what they need.”

Ms. Kline wore many hats while the volunteers and I were operating the tutoring program. It was often very difficult to track her down. She spent very little time participating in tutoring while we were there; she simply had too many multiple responsibilities. At the end of tutoring sessions, we would debrief with Ms. Kline about our newest findings and ask her for suggestions on how to proceed. These debriefs ended once testing season began in late March.

The school often used her as a replacement proctor, regularly pulling her away from her many other responsibilities. She proctored exams not only for students in the ESOL program but also for students she did not even know or teach. Despite this, she remained active in supporting our role as researchers by planning a meeting with the school principal. Ms. Kline constantly attended other meetings regarding newcomer programs; programs she felt were *the* critical long-term solution for RFCW students. Ms. Kline was the first person to push the idea, telling me, “Everyone agrees it needs to happen, and they talk about the steps that each administrator needs to take, but then nothing happens. I am tired of meetings.”

She kept her role as student advocate separate from her time spent working directly with students. When she had the chance, she focused on getting students to simply speak with confidence. She often reflected on the success of our tutoring program by commenting on

students' posture and physical appearance. As she told us one day when congratulating us on some of the progress we had made, "I saw some of the kids smile for the first time since I met them in August." On cue she asked for one of the students to smile for us, and he did so willingly, which at the moment was so profound an improvement that I became emotional. She attended more meetings to get the school to buy her students better dictionaries. We witnessed the lengths she went to give her students her attention. She spoke about talking to the families, contacting the school social worker, getting her students economic support, working closely with unaccompanied minors, providing food for her students, and the list continues. I asked her if she was expected to perform these extra duties for her job.

"The rest I do because I love these kids. I'm not supposed to go out. I do because I worry about them, especially my unaccompanied ones. But my job is supposed to be work with the teachers in the classroom with the kids, do the intake, and test the re-evals, and test the new kids. That's it."

While completing my research, I took a "Teaching ESOL" course at USF's College of Education. It was here I became more familiar with the expected duties of an ESOL teacher. Our final assignment was to create a student on the WIDA scale of English comprehension and modify an assignment found online for whatever grade we were planning to teach. The experience demonstrated the amount of creativity required on the part of the teacher to recreate an assignment while still maintaining enough of the assignment to determine whether a student understands a concept that the standardized curriculum wants them to know. I had yet to experience this when I first started working with Ms. Kline, but it helped me understand teachers' struggles more.

I asked Ms. Kline if teachers were willing to modify assignments often. She replied:

"Some of my older teachers are not as willing as I guess the younger teachers coming out of college. I see that as a big difference. The universities, once they touch on ESOL, the newer kids coming out, they are more

accommodating than my older teachers. That's my own observation from this school. I was not ESOL trained. I'm an older teacher, this is my 40th year. You just know you can't teach them the same way and some of them (older teachers) refuse to even know that. I had a few who just, (say) give me some alternate assessments but a lot of them have been working with me. It's only a few that just they're stuck. They have been doing this for too long. They don't realize hey you know we have a different population, and they are more reluctant to modify. Like 'I can't give them a dictionary no one else gets a dictionary.' I hear that a lot."

It had not occurred to me that younger teachers would be trained on a wider variety of students while older teachers kept their job with the education, they received decades prior. I asked her if teachers had some recertification process, "It doesn't happen because we do have to get hours to recertify our certification, but they can be trainings that are held in (our) school. They are not as detailed as a class in a university. I can go to my ESOL meetings and that counts for a training. It counts for points. So, they look for the easiest way to get the points to recertify." In addition to a teacher shortage, there is also a shortage of teachers who are qualified to teach ESOL, but they still have ESOL students in their classes. The outcome of this shortage is that many teacher's attention is imbalanced between their American students and their CLD students.

Many of the students did not seem to have a strong network of friends at their school. At Lyon, Ms. Kline saw this as an issue and stepped in for moral support. Ms. Kline share her frustration with this issue of separation. "I have 122 ESOL students. They come to me for help. I tutor them. I only have one para. Normally, the para goes into the classrooms to help them. We realized that we can't do that, because I go to the classrooms and help when they need it. There is only two of us, so actually, they come to us." In other words, the two staff responsible for the 122 students at Lyon were so overwhelmed, they were working largely with the students who had the initiative to approach them. It was best when students could form friendships, study together, or go for help with a companion. Students who were individually isolated were at the greatest risk, and prevented positive community identify formation.



I am aware that Ms. Kline is one person in an entire education system, but what she had to say about the ESOL program was so fundamental to my research approach that I had to dedicate a large section to her. She could still be successful at her job by doing significantly less than she is currently doing. She *should* be doing significantly less, but there is no one else hired who can fill-in for the many roles she has taken on.

## **Tutoring**

### *Early Tutoring Sessions*

During our first meeting with Ms. Kline, our research team discussed possible solutions to help students do better in school. From the beginning we all understood the tutoring program was only a short-term solution. We settled on focusing on building the students' self-esteem by reintroducing them to US public schools with our personal insights and building their confidence with teachers and students. We strategized how to best teach students with low self-esteem. They needed to develop a feeling of solidarity amongst each other. They needed a 'safe-space' to speak without judgement. We were given a space in the high school's media center to work from. At our next gathering we would be able to speak with the students.

Ms. Kline was able to get us a space in the school's media center, where we would be able to meet with our tutoring group. The following week the volunteers and I showed up at the school. We heard excited voices as we walked through the media center, then to a room off to the side and into another room after that. The buzzing stopped once we walked in the door. We noticed a group of 10-11 boys sitting at one table and two girls at another. After introductions some of the boys recognized my advisor and a couple of the volunteers from previous projects. The boys continued their discussions while we tried to find ways to capture their attention. The girls stayed silent and looked at their phones. This first meeting was very short. We spent time

introducing ourselves to the students and had them introduce themselves to us. Many were not interested in participating, but eventually Ms. Kline got them started. After the greetings, the volunteers encouraged conversation by using Swahili to speak casually. The girls warmed up after the activity and became more engaged, so I spoke with the girls in English for the rest of our first session.

The media center was a multi-use space that limited our initial plans to talk about American schools as well as cover some educational essentials in reading and math. The space was used by other students to complete work alone or in groups. The space was also used to host classes that required a computer. One day there were two classes occurring at once and groups of students sharing tables in the back conversing with papers in front of them. The media center employee was always the same older white man. He often called students out for being too loud. He even directed his attention towards our group a few times. When there were other students present, our students were not as willing to engage with tutors because they were embarrassed about the concepts they had yet to learn.

We decided to divide the tutoring session into two halves. The first was reserved for completing homework and the second for activities that would help instill confidence in the students. We allowed a revolving door policy where students could come and go as they pleased. If they felt like our help was not needed, then they could leave and go back to class.

Every week each of the students had different assignments they were behind in. Every week we had to wait in the media center while the students came from classes all over the school. Once they were able to come together, they would take a while to focus. There were days when rather than completing assignments we did group activities like cultural orientation but for high school. We quickly realized the various levels of English as well as educational experience

made it difficult to complete a single assignment question in one session. We decided to create activities that revolved more around the culture of school and how to navigate it. We also wanted to address issues such as nutrition, health, and clothing to see if the students needed donations to supplement supplies at home. Ms. Kline shared that none of the students do their work at home and that was not going to help them improve their language comprehension. There were other activities we simply could not complete due to the nature of the media center environment such as proper greetings or discussions on hygiene because students who were not in the program could easily hear.

The students would often begin our weekly sessions by handing us their assignments from whichever classes they had just left to attend the tutoring session. Ms. Kline commented on her experience working with some of the students, saying:

“I ask these kids if they are reading, and they look at me like it’s a joke. They are not used to it. I trained them how to use a dictionary...If there is a word you don’t know, you need to look it up. But they don’t know how to look it up.”

I spent most of my tutoring time with the boys and I learned more about their reading and writing comprehension. They flew through the single word flash cards. Another assignment Ms. Kline gave us to complete was very easy for them to do. I had them read through a paragraph until they could not understand a word, and then we pronounced and defined the word together. By the end they were able to correctly identify the meaning of the words when given a multiple-choice question. But these were the types of small baby steps we had to take.

We eventually pushed Ms. Kline for a new classroom space, where students would be able to speak as they pleased. She found one teacher willing to let us use her room during her free periods. Once the teacher understood what we were trying to accomplish, she gave us additional help teaching math concepts to the students. She was a younger Black teacher, and she

helped created a warm environment for our students. She had a wall dedicated to historically Black colleges and universities that were meant for the majority Black student population at Lyon. It was a good influence for our students in the group. We were gaining momentum in reaching our goals as the semester ended, but I was unable to see many of the long-term outcomes once we left.

The volunteer and I experienced one setback that strained our relationship with the students for a couple weeks. One week Ms. Kline was assigned to proctor exams in the media center and sent student passes around the campus in her stead. The volunteers and I were preparing to discuss hygiene issues We knew it was a sensitive topic and we created an activity that does not focus on personal habits but rather comparing cross-cultural hygiene expectations. We also wanted to measure how much access these students had to hygiene products and work on getting appropriate donations.

As we waited for the students to arrive from various classrooms, one of the ESOL teachers sent his entire class over to us. The students were Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, and East and Central African. This left two tutors to work with over 20 additional students. Some spoke English very clearly. Some did not speak any English at all – at least to us. A core group of Spanish speakers dominated the classroom space through their numbers and the loudness of their voices. They were able to negotiate the most time for our attention while our usual students separated themselves on the other side of the classroom. The Spanish speaking students asked for help often and would work together out loud to solve problems. I do want to note that some of the Spanish speakers were very quiet, and even when we had other students translate for them, they did not reply.

Our usual students were completely spread out in the rest of the classroom and many of them had put their heads on their desk. When we went over to ask them if they wanted to review any material, they did not say much. I then realized that this must be what most of their school day looks like. One of the students asked us if tutoring was going to be like this all the time. She sounded hurt. From the beginning we encouraged our usual students to come and go as they pleased because we did not want to force anyone into any program. This time, A few of our students left the tutoring to go to their other classes without saying anything.

When I asked Ms. Kline if she expected us to work with more students, she stated that there was a miscommunication between her and one of the ESOL teachers. She told us from her perspective one of the teachers took advantage of the situation and sent all his students to tutoring so that he could take a break. Our rapport with our usual students took a big hit that day. The next time we held tutoring, there were notably fewer students. We explained to the students what happened and assured them that this was their personal time. They were then able to convince the other students to come back to tutoring and we could start working on activities together again. Some of the tutoring sessions that followed were the most productive.

### *Late Tutoring Sessions*

As the semester continued, we tried alternative approaches to learning and building confidence among the students. One of the volunteers suggested using a “think, pair, share” teaching strategy for the first half of the tutoring sessions. This student-led teaching technique has students share information with each other to come up with answers through consensus (Herrera, et. al 2013). One male student, whose reading and math comprehension seemed to be the strongest out of the group, became our translator and moderator of sorts. He would come ask us how to complete a problem and we would give him some tips. Once he understood, he would

share this knowledge with others in Swahili. The technique seemed to work well for the boys, but two girls in the group who had minimal reading and writing skills still struggled to participate. Toward the end of the semester, a new girl who had been in Uganda and spoke some English, started attending our tutoring sessions. Because her math and language skills were more advanced, she became a sort of tutor for the girls with less education. They all seemed to enjoy the new system, especially the new student who enjoyed great initial popularity for her educational background, despite still being way behind typical American students of her age.

The use of native languages, or a mixture of English, French, and Swahili during teaching, became a go-to methods for explaining difficult concepts to the entire group. Rather than teacher-led classes, the students did much better when everyone could play a role explaining to the others. Once we moved from the media lab into the classroom, the students felt much more comfortable using their own preferred language. While every student spoke enough English to be considered “conversational,” English was generally not enough for explaining new concepts. One of the volunteers spent time learning Swahili language words and frequently practiced greetings in Swahili with the students. This not only helped the tutors learn a language that was new to us while also giving the students confidence in their background and expertise.

In the second half of each tutoring session, we would try to bring everyone together to hold “workshops” on various aspects of American education. The workshops lasted about an hour each and were done on a weekly basis. I have listed the workshops below in no order, but they show examples of ways teachers could work with SLIFE students in addition to offering insights into our students’ educational histories and preferences. In one workshop discussed some test prep strategies that are not study related; sleep well, eat breakfast, chew gum, exercise, listen to music, etc. The students were very active during this exercise and remained engaged

much longer than our usual tutoring sessions. They were interested in learning, but what they wanted to learn was different from what the school was trying to teach them for evaluation and testing purposes.

In another workshop, we held more serious discussions about bullying and hygiene by asking students what new refugee students could expect to encounter at their school. But unlike typical focus groups used in research, students were able to talk about experiences more broadly rather than explicitly sharing their own challenges. During this workshop, some students discussed their experiences with bullying. We found that student-teacher interactions and miscommunications were a big reason students doubted themselves. Students felt teachers were mean to them and would pick on them just like the bullies. Because of this, we decided to hold a separate workshop, where we explained to students how to talk to teachers and repair relationships.

During one session, one of our volunteers, my advisor, was able to use his background knowledge on Central African plants (the names he knows in Swahili) to explain the concept of biodiversity to the students for a class assignment with which they were all struggling. He used the example of growing cassava in a garden. He stated that if you grow only cassava and then a bug gets to it the whole field is gone and now there is nothing to eat. One student was able to complete his thought before he finished it. All the other students were able to compare their experience gardening or farming to understand the importance of biodiversity and then answer the question to the assignment they were given. He employed an asset-based approach to teaching by building on the students experiences and knowledge to introduce a complicated concept that was not necessarily new to them but was just something they had never formally been taught before.

The last workshop I want to discuss was a group activity that helped students create a more productive learning environment for themselves. We asked how students preferred to prepare for tests, how they would like the desks to be arranged, whether they liked to work in groups or alone, and if they liked silent or noisy study environments. Many of their choices were similar and helped us to give advice on how to recreate their preferences either at home or during their regular study periods. Nearly all the students told us that they preferred environments like what we were offering in the tutoring sessions, where conversation remained open, everyone could see each other, and they could decide on their own which group they wanted to work with, if they wanted to work with any group. They had freedom of movement and freedom to use tools like dictionaries or their cellphones. They liked being able to help one another and ask each other questions. It was clear that student engagement leapt when they became more involved their educational environment. But as much as the students thrived in the alternative environment, where they felt willing to talk and work harder, standard classes and testing situations still placed the students back into a situation where they were forced to work in isolation, which often caused the students to freeze up or shut down.

As testing season came closer, our tutoring sessions were put on hold, and eventually Ms. Kline decided they should end altogether after the students took their exams. Unfortunately, I am not aware of their testing results, but I do know that one family whose children were part of our program were so upset with the education the school provided that they moved out of state to join family elsewhere. As much as students seemed to enjoy our program and thank us regularly, we soon learned that many of them dropped out that summer. One of the boys told us that the tutoring program definitely did help him with school. "I didn't know anything about school," he



told us, “but then Ms. Kline helped, and you all helped.” But it still felt like our efforts had minimal impact on student success from the school’s standpoint.

### *Bullying*

Bullying continues to be a major issue in the US public school system that radically sets bullied students back. The tutoring program was made to build the self-esteem of the students who we knew had a history of being bullied by their peers. The students were being bullied for various reasons. Ms. Kline noted that their personal hygiene may be a major factor. I witnessed an instance of a teacher enabling this type of bullying or shaming during my time as a tutor. The RFCW students left the class after tutoring, and one volunteer and I were picking up after the class. The teacher who let us borrow her room was preparing for incoming students as well. Another teacher walked in and exclaimed loudly that the room stunk and proceeded to use body spray inside the room. A few students walking in witnessed this incident as well. This type of micro-aggression from authority figures enables students to continue bullying based on hygiene. Teachers also need the awareness that many of their students cannot afford soap and cleaning products in their homes. Rather than shaming these students, the teachers must be taught that they play a crucial role in either helping these students or encouraging them to drop out through such actions.

I only once witnessed bullying toward the refugee students while working at Lyon. when I was walking around the school collecting the students for our group and saw one of the tutoring students standing outside of his classroom. An English-speaking female student I was unfamiliar with had her head out the classroom door and shouted endless curse words at him. He was at first ignoring her and trying to get other tutoring students out of the classroom, but he finally returned to the attention-seeking girl by simply saying “badabadabada” back at her. When he

said something to her in Swahili, she shouted back in English, “Watch what the fuck you say about me.” I ushered the students away to the tutoring class without saying anything to the shouting student. I did not report this because I was worried that my immediate attention to the issue would have made it worse. I should have taken more responsibility then, but I was unsure of the best approach, so I hesitated. I did not witness an instance of explicit bullying after that.

### **RFCW Parent and Student Interviews**

The interviews done with RFCW parents and students were semi-structured so as to allow for more room for in depth responses. However, I did structure the interviews to follow a chronological pattern of educational experiences. I broke up this section by themes that both groups spoke to. I begin this thematic discussion with educational experiences prior to arrival in the United States. I then include what the students had to say about their peers and teachers since these would have been first interactions the students experience after arrival. Because teachers reported difficulty with parental involvement, the next section will discuss parental involvement from the perspective of parents and students. As I will discuss, my data speaks to the importance of gender in shaping parents’ decisions about student success. I will then include the students’ perspectives and ask why they felt they had to leave schools. I also asked parents and students if they knew about available alternatives to education, and I end the discussion of parent and student interviews by talking about their future prospects for graduation and higher education.

### *African Systems of Education*

The languages used in the African schools also varied from country to country. The languages known by students often indexes their ethno-regional backgrounds in the DRC. All the students knew Swahili well, although English was more of a challenge. Students also tended to know French, Kibembe (a language spoken in the South Kivu region), and Luganda (the national

language of Uganda). All students knew between three and four languages. English, however, was the bigger issue despite their multilingualism. Some students reflected on having missed the opportunity to learn English prior to resettlement in the US, and one young man simply said that while his mother paid for him to go to school and learn English, “I didn’t pay attention.” In other words, he did not learn English well, but he took responsibility for that.

RFCW were not aware of how crucial their participation would be for their student’s success in schools, and schools were often concerned at the lack of help students were receiving from parents while at home. RFCWs described African schools as much stricter than US schools. As one older man shared, “In Africa they beat you with a stick.” One student described the African teacher’s role as more of that of a parent, but with parent being understood as disciplinarian. “When you are in school the teachers are like your parents so when you do something disrespectful, you get punished.” Of importance, adult RFCWs I interviewed averaged 12 years of school while their high-school aged children averaged only 5.3 years. Adult refugees who are resettled often have benefitted from their educational backgrounds, and it is not surprising that some of the best educated in the RFCW community were being resettled. However, these parents were also obviously aware of the gap between their own educations and that of their children, and this caused much more concern for parents who had significant educations than for those with little education.

Both parents and students spoke about educational challenges presented by the refugee camps where they had lived. One man, who had been a teacher before fleeing the DRC, said that he also started an informal school in the camp. “I also used to teach at the camp in Tanzania,” he said. “There were a lot more students in a classroom, like sixty. Tanzania would not build more schools, so I taught classes from my home, and then World Vision and International Rescue

committee came and built a school where I could teach. I taught high school management from 7:30am until 1 pm with no food.”

Students also spoke about the limited classroom space at the refugee camps. “Teachers change, and the students stay in one classroom,” a 20-year-old student told me. He called the African system “a lighter schedule” of four to five hours of school per day.” Others described systems where there were two daily sessions, and students were expected to attend in mornings in the evenings but otherwise had a break in the middle of the day to play sports, return home, or eat lunch. A student whose family had been in Uganda told us his parents had paid extra for him to go to a school off the camp in the capital city of Kampala. He was the only student in our tutoring group who learned English well prior to his arrival in Tampa bay. His experience was the exception: two students I interviewed commented on not being able to go to school for most of their youth.

Ms. Kline was shocked to learn that some students did not know how to turn on a computer at all. Students who did not learn English before arriving to the United States noted the time it took them to learn how to use the common US technology, and they felt this prevented them from fully participating in school. One young woman shared her early school experience, saying, “I started (learning English) here. I took some tutoring, like one and a half years. In math, when I knew something, I would raise my hand and write it at the front,” she said with pride. But while math was relatively universal, subjects that depended more on technology or English language competency were nearly impossible for students.

### *Student Peer Relationships*

It was clear both from participant observation and interviews that many students did not have a strong network of friends. During the interviews, I wanted to see if there were any

changes with RFCW students and peer relationships. Only one girl referred to a relationship with another student as a friendship, adding positively, “I like reading, I like my school, I like my friends.” Younger children seemed to have an easier time than the older teenagers. A 16-year-old young woman simply told me, “I don’t have friends.”

Most of the RFCW students were concerned about other American students lack respect towards their teachers. One young woman said that students have “no respect” for their teachers. One student commented on the bad habits of his peers, saying, “In Africa students don’t smoke. they have security there.” Students referred to American students in terms of violence, often through fighting and bullying. One young man said, “At middle, I don’t like the way kids behave, they fight and smoke.” Another young man shared an event that shocked him, “There was a guy who brought in a gun to (alternative adult education program).” One young man explained that this phenomenon happens outside of his school as well, “Lots of American schools have fights, like Lyon.”

Apart from the two students listed above, none of the other students confirmed or denied friendships but rather spoke of other students in terms of knowing or speaking to them. I asked students about relationships with Americans they may have built at their schools despite their negative perspectives. One student reported, “I talk to Black Americans. I don’t get along with a lot of them, but I talk to some.” One young man was very adamant that was not going to happen, “Never, hell no. I don't have time for that.”

I asked if there were other types of students that they interacted with in their school. It is no surprise that their participation in the ESOL program limits their interactions with only non-native speakers. Students spoke of knowing ‘Spanish’ and ‘Asian’ students. During tutoring, one of the students asked if I could teach her Spanish so she could talk to her Spanish-speaking

classmates. I then asked the students if there were other refugee students they knew from school. Two students mentioned speaking with their siblings, who also attended the school. Only one student I interviewed, the eight-year-old, stated they could not talk to other refugee students saying, “There are no other refugee students.” Many of them did find they were able to develop relationships with other refugee students from Africa. One student shared, “I only talk to an African girl from Tanzania, but there are three Congolese at Eagle.”

Students also mentioned other students from Ethiopia, Haiti, Djibouti, Sudan, and Somalia. What seemed interesting to me was that students were able to keep record of who was a refugee and who was an immigrant. When compared to the school’s records, the students are much more accurate at determining this distinction among other students’ backgrounds and statuses. This also speaks to cohesions that occur between students based on their experience in the US. RFCW youth tended to establish better relationships with other immigrant students and not with Black American students.

### *Student-Teacher Interactions*

During the tutoring program we learned that students felt their relationships with their teachers were damaged because of their lack of class participation. When I later interviewed students, I found that those relationships improved with time and language learning. Despite Ms. Kline’s misgivings about older teachers, all the students had something positive to say about their teachers. One student shared, “The teachers are nice. They help you a lot. You can use calculators.” One student did explain that she has had a variety of experiences with teachers based on her school. “They did (help) at Lyon,” she said, referring to Ms. Kline. “But not at Eagle.” I suspect that the students will always have experiences with what they see as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers, but students I interviewed tended to focus more on the negatives than the

positives. One boy told me he has continual trouble with a teacher, saying, “But my teacher is kind of mean. she is in everyone’s business. If you shake hands, she will write you up.” Two other students told me they had developed important and positive relationships with employees who were not teachers, like the librarian, the coach, or the counselors. Sometimes it just took time for students to find these people, especially because overworked staff could do little more than rely on students’ own initiative to find them. As one student said, “Yes, the coach and some other teachers (help me).” Another said, “The counselor, she was nice.” She then regretfully added, “I haven’t seen her in so long.”

### *Parental Involvement*

Teachers were often reporting that they felt the parents were not doing enough for their students at home. I asked parents about their involvement in their children’s education. I wanted to get a grasp of what information was being communicated from the schools to parents and what was left out. Many of the adults do not feel they know enough about their children’s educations. One parent shared his frustration, saying, “I am worried they don’t learn anything in school. I ask what they learned today, and they say nothing. Everything is on the computer, and they don’t bring it home. I don’t know anything about the schools.”

Parents understood the language barrier that their students faced despite their students’ conversational English. Two parents did not know English, but all parents understood the importance of learning English for both them and their students. As one older woman told me, “I know my daughter’s grades are low because of the language.” One older man was very concerned about the quality of his child’s education, saying, “If they don’t know English, school becomes a game. I am worried they don’t learn anything. I ask what they learned today, and they say nothing.” One adult man commented on how the language barrier affected them in

participating in their child's education, "I can help with math but if it is in English then I can't do anything." Two adults did not know any English, but all adults understood the importance of learning English for both them and their students.

When asked if parents assist their children with homework, the students reported their jobs prevented them from doing so. One woman added, "I try to help my daughter with homework, but I get too tired from work." Adults regularly take on jobs that are done at odd hours and usually involve hard labor. Both the labor and hours of their jobs prevented them from participating in the students' education. This same woman reported that she could not attend her daughter's school events because of her job, saying, "I can't go because I work at that time." One parent explained her student's homework in relation to duties at home, saying, "Her homework is the chores she does at home." One woman described her uneven work balance as an opportunity for her children, "You're obligated to work for your kids, but you work till your body hurts. I really want my kids to study. Education is just so important. If they study, they won't go through the same. By the grace of God, we have made it this far."

RFCW youth also understood that their parent's participation will often be limited to their moral support. One young man remarked, "My mom tells me I cannot skip school." The RFCW youth gave two reasons as to why parents cannot participate more; their assignments cover topics the parents never learned in their schools and they work long hours. One young man recognized his parents could not help him with school, "I do my homework by myself because they won't know what I am learning."

There was one adult, an unmarried mother of 23, who was the exception when it came to parental involvement. Not only was she the youngest parent I interviewed, but she was the same age of many of the young adult students with whom I spoke. She was also trying to attend



school herself, although she said she had to stop pursuing her education so that she could become more involved in her daughter's schooling. She explained her routine with her daughter, saying, "Every three months I will go to the school and ask for [her] progress. I know what she is learning because I go to the school to check. They use colors to show. She is given a color to show her grade, and it hasn't changed." At eight years old, her daughter was at an age where she could grow and develop naturally through the US educational system, and her mother was aware of this. She told me, "I am concerned about her grade, and I feel that the schools are not helping her." Rather than complain about the schools like other parents, she did something none of the others had done, and hired her daughter an American tutor to help her. But this woman's involvement in her daughter's education was unique and based somewhat on the fact that she herself had a high-school education from Africa and was unmarried, making her daughter her sole priority.

### *Gendered Experiences*

From my census data, interviews, and follow-up with families, it appears that young women are graduating with degrees and going to colleges at a rate that far exceeds that of the men. I asked one of my key informants, who is a community leader among RFCWs, how many RFCW youth she knew who had graduated from schools or adult education programs in Tampa bay, and she could only list four young women. Though the constant movement of RFCW families into and out of Tampa bay made a firm calculation difficult, of the estimated 25 RFCW students in high school in Tampa bay, only four were known to have graduated from high school or other adult educational programs. Another male did graduate from high school in 2020, and another young man who had graduated from high school in Uganda before coming to Tampa bay completed the Job Corps program in neighboring Pinellas County in 2018. But it became clear

from interviews with students and parents that young men and women were tending to follow different educational and employment paths. Father E commented on this by explaining the differences in schools, saying, “In Africa, the schools are packed, and if you want your kid to go to school, you have to beg the schools to let your kids in.” He was implying that families had to make difficult decisions about which of their children could attend school and which must stay home. After arriving in the US, these familial negotiations about roles continued, based upon lines of gender and age. One parent had this to say about his young adult children: “Patricia is super smart, and she is going to go to a good school. David is an idiot. He is gonna work.”

The pervasiveness of the pattern does not mean everyone in the community accepted it. One RFCW woman gave her thoughts on young men who are leaving school, saying, “They drop out, they get jobs, they're more focused on money than they are on education.” She feels their priorities are skewed and the young adults are obsessed with material things, adding, “They want these material things, but those items don’t help them do better in the US. They want cars and they want phones, and they want TVs. They can’t make that money at school, so they leave.” She explained that the young men think having money in their hand shows that they are doing better than surviving. I heard this same sentiment from many parents and community leaders, as well as many youth. Father E said that RFCW youth were more worried about today than tomorrow. He discussed this lack of future planning in terms of dreams, saying, “They don’t have their own dreams. They were told what their dreams would be, and so they never built them for themselves.”

Three other parents pointed toward economic prosperity as reasons young adults put their education on hold. Priorities and planning became a common theme among the adults. One male household head shared, “I am grateful for God. People can make \$17 an hour, but it doesn’t

matter because they have no plan.” Another woman referred to the choice between getting a job or paying for schools as a reason that young men choose to put their educations on hold, saying, “College is about money, and we don’t have money for that. If they graduate, they can start working and save money. The problem is when they work, they get money. They don’t want to go back to school.” Of interest, parents and their children tend to feel the new generation is being given more freedoms than the generations that came before them, and it is common to hear references to individuals’ choices now that they are in the US. But while the young men and women are increasingly being allowed to make important life decisions for themselves, their parents are clearly still worried about the choices they are making.

#### *Running out of ‘Time’*

Of the students I interviewed, four were asked at some point by their school’s administration to drop out and leave Tampa bay’s public schools. I asked the students if they were given an explanation as to why those phone calls and discussions took place, usually between the school and the parents. Three students said they were told it was because they were failing and, because they were 18 years old, they were told they were too old to attend their high schools. As one student said, “I was failing, and then they said I was too old to stay, so I started at [an alternative adult education program].” One of the students I interviewed who was enrolled in an adult alternative educational program seemed unaware that her program was not technically considered a typical public high school. Another student wished he could have started school either at a younger age or lower grade level, “I should have started in middle school.”

#### *Alternative Education Programs*

The RFCW adults I interviewed were aware of other public schools or universities that would benefit their students. Two adult women commented that they wanted their children to go

to USF. Two other parents felt their students were at good schools but could attend even better schools if possible. They were also learning the roles they could play in getting their children better access to opportunities. One woman explained her student's situation, saying, "I had her move schools in February. I wanted her to go to another school closer to downtown. I have a car and a full-time job, so I can afford to drive her." One adult was pleased with how her child's education at an adult high school was progressing, saying, "She started a new program and is learning English and working harder at the school. She gets a bus pass to go to school and likes school and talks about her homework all the time. So, if she had a good teacher, she would do really well."

Many of the students who initially attended Lyon had either moved schools or moved out of state. Only two of the students I eventually formally interviewed had been part of the initial tutoring project. They and two others I interviewed were by then public high-school dropouts, three of whom were pursuing their educations at alternative adult education programs. Since I could not attend those programs in person as a researcher, I used the students to get a better understanding of how those programs worked and whether the students preferred them over their high school experiences.

One of the students I spoke with went to high school for at least a year before failing, then graduated from an adult education program after two years. She attempted to go to community college but was told she still did not have enough high-school credits. She then re-enrolled into another year-long GED program so that she could eventually be accepted to the community college. Three others I interviewed, described following a very similar path. The process takes more time and adds an extra three to four years of schooling before graduation. But

the more focused students – especially the young women – are successfully pursuing this route. Education is clearly still highly valued.

Four of the parents I interviewed were aware of some of the alternative education programs available to them and their children. These were either schools that specialized in technical work, like nursing, or English language programs. The adults were only aware of these school because they or their children had attended them. Two parents who were seeking further adult education had to stop attending their programs so that they could work more to pay for bills. One man told me, “All the English I know is from CARIBE, but now I work, and I cannot go. I can’t go to church either.” Surprisingly, none of the parents had heard about the high-school newcomer programs, even though at least two of the parents I interviewed had children in those new programs. This lack of communication is an example on how schools have not modified parent interactions to account for their CLD families.

Three young adult students I interviewed said that they attended technical schools. One of these was the young woman mentioned above, who had been in a program to earn her certification as a Certified Nurse’s Assistant (CNA), but had to leave the program to focus on helping her daughter with her education. The other two had attended the same technical program and gave mixed reviews. One young man said, “They help you form your career. What you learn in school is to prepare you for a career.” The other young man was less sure of what he had taken from the school, though he did mention that he had seen a student at the school carrying a gun, which I found revealing.

### *Higher Education*

I was curious what subjects and careers the refugee students were interested in pursuing and how far along they saw themselves. Towards the end of many interviews, I would ask a few

simple questions to see how confident students felt about their prospects. Despite adults' protests that youth have their "priorities skewed" and they are only interested in money, many of the youth are looking forward to participating in higher education. One young man had this to share, saying, "Yes, I want to go to college, thinking about it. Trying to study." Even the one young man I interviewed who had was no longer in any educational program did tell me that he had plans to go back to school to become a video director. During interviews of current students, I would ask if students were ready for their graduation. Three students gave firm yesses. One student responded with a maybe. The two others specified the date they expected to graduate. I then asked students why they thought they should finish school. Three students mentioned attending college or career plans that requires higher education. One young woman had serious interest in the medical field.

### **Discussion of Adult Education Programs**

One goal of this research was to compare adult alternative education programs, since it seemed inevitable that many RFCW youth would be attending at least one form of these programs located in Tampa bay. The terminology of adult alternative education programs was one I crafted myself because I feel it is inclusive of the variety of schools many youth and young adults attend currently. These schools are meant mostly for students eighteen years or older, although in some cases high-school aged students have been allowed to enroll.

#### *Observations at CARIBE*

One of the volunteer CARIBE teachers who works specifically with RFCW adults allowed me to observe her classroom on multiple Saturdays. She is not an educator by training, but she has piloted lesson plans specifically meant for refugees. CARIBE has also worked with USF to cocreate books about refugee stories as classroom content. I went to her location, where

two CARIBE classes are held simultaneously, to speak with her about the program and observe the classes.

CARIBE is an adult education program that focuses on working with refugees or asylees. They have a language program that is free for all refugees and asylees. They have classes in multiple locations around Tampa bay that they choose based on clusters of families. Their content focuses on English language acquisition and workplace readiness skills. Many of the RFCW adults enroll in CARIBE classes upon their arrival to the US.

The upper-level class tends to be made up of Spanish speaking adults and is taught by a teacher who speaks Spanish. She worked closely with the lower-level class, which was entirely RFCW adults. The lower-level class did not have any teachers who could speak the languages of the RFCWs. As a result, student progress has been slow for most of the students. She reported that some students had been attending her lower-level course for two years without improvement.

Language services such as CARIBE are free to refugees for up to five years after their arrival. But an evaluation of the CARIBE program for RFCW adults revealed many similarities to what I had found at Lyon. For example, CARIBE regularly has to deal with the issue of students in a classroom coming from many different educational levels and backgrounds. The students who improve the fastest often become the translators for future lessons, which helps them move forward, but does not necessarily help those with the least knowledge or background.

### *Newcomer Programs*

Through participant observation and key informant interviews, I was able to learn a great deal about the newcomer programs being planned in 2019. Ms. Kline spent months gathering the right people to create a newcomer program. She presented all the research to school board

members and school administrators to explain why the programs would benefit her ESOL students. After numerous meetings in 2019, the school district agreed to fund and allocate space for two newcomer programs, one each to be located at Eagle and Lyon High Schools. The program at Eagle began first, although few of the students I knew from the tutoring program had enrolled there. One student, however, had transferred from Lyon to Eagle during the summer of 2019, and described to me how the new program functioned. Students would spend most of the day together in one class covering basic education content in reading, writing, and math. However, they needed the socialization of the high school environment, so the programs were still located within high schools. The students in the program were either being prepped to re-enter high school or to enroll in a GED program (if they were over eighteen). They would also be able to take elective courses with the rest of the student body.

Up until the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Ms. Kline was running the newcomer program at Lyon. But she regularly told me that the program was going through “growing pains.” She was still just a single educator working with a classroom now full of SLIFE students who spoke multiple languages and had different needs. She found it difficult to plan for all the students at once and was hoping the school district would supply her with more staff. There was no information about the new programs on the school district websites when I went to investigate. This, of course, also comes in the context of the fact that the school district denied me permission to observe the programs in their infancy. The students seemed to think they were attending public high school and on track like other American students.



## **Chapter 6: Thematic Discussion**

### **Introduction**

For the following discussion I will share common themes that participants shared through the interviews or during participant observation. Over the course of my research, refugees were politicized in the United States as they were increasingly seen and discussed as an ongoing threat to “American values,” or the presumed shared civic ideology, culture, and customs of a lessening white majority. Through xenophobic political discourse that have resulted in the slashing of budgets for resettlement and integration programs – as well as special educational programs – Black youth are discouraged from completing their educations and becoming fully participating members of society.

The result of such exclusion is a dramatic loss of resources for the nation. This loss begins the day refugee families arrive in Tampa bay. Refugees are generally resettled because they represent a resource (labor, background, education) to the host country. But these skills and assets refugees bring can only be utilized and serve the host society if these refugees are given the basic support for integration. An underfunded environment of resettlement and integration has meant that the number of issues confronting refugee youth only grow as they enter public schools. Students then often feel that their best option is to leave school to pursue low-wage employment like their parents. Others pursue their high school equivalency elsewhere and almost always at an extra cost to them and to their families. The intersectionality of language, education, race, and gender create mixed outcomes for refugee students.

## **Resource Loss**

Case worker positions were cut with the budget cuts that began in 2017. Resettlement agencies reacted to the arrival of new refugee communities, with their cultural and linguistic specificities, by hiring people from within already settled refugee communities (especially Cuban and Spanish speaking refugees). This model is commonly used among refugee resettlement agencies, even if it makes it difficult for them to find people with the right credentials. In the case of RFCWs in Tampa bay, there were people in the refugee community who arrived in Tampa bay with years of social work experience, but their educations and experiences did not meet the hiring criteria of the resettlement services. Those RFCWs who were employed by agencies were offered lower-level positions to help with client issues. These positions were still minimal, and the largest resettlement agency in Tampa bay struggled to keep even one Swahili-speaker employed and on staff. Many refugee agencies supplement their lack of translators by using telephone translation services. These services are also limited in their language options. Caseworkers can use them to talk to Swahili- or French-speakers but cannot use them to talk to RFCWs who only know regional dialects.

Job services among refugee resettlement programs have long been inadequate to serve entire refugee populations. While these programs have remained in place since the budget cuts beginning in 2017, they provide limited options for refugees. Service providers must build rapport with employers to get them to agree to take on non-English speaking employees. Refugees in turn take on jobs that are done at odd hours and usually involve hard labor. Many families work the night shift at restaurants or factories. For example, the RFCWs I interviewed shared some information about their positions. One older man reported working at a factory. Two women had hospitality positions in assisted living and housekeeping at a hotel. Two other women reported being students while also having full-time jobs. One married couple reported on

waiting for the resettlement agency to give them a job even though it had been four months since their arrival in the United States. This is especially notable because the model of assimilation that refugee resettlement services use requires families to be economically self-sufficient three months after arrival. In the case of the family that was still waiting for help finding employment, the husband had completed a master's degree in business and held multiple teaching positions prior to arriving in the US. But as is common for many refugees and immigrants, his degrees did not translate to a US equivalency, and he was treated like other RFCWs who may have been born on the camps and lacked any formal educational background. This erasure and devaluation of refugees' previous educational backgrounds and experiences is a fundamental piece of the structural violence that they encounter upon resettlement.

### **Segregation**

Another major challenge facing RFCW students in Tampa bay is that they are spread geographically thin across Tampa bay's neighborhoods and schools, making the development of cohorts of friends in schools and neighborhoods very difficult. Segregation of students in Tampa bay's schools has a long history, and it continues on multiple levels. First, housing in Tampa bay is historically segregated, causing certain schools to have majority black or brown and majority white student populations. RFCW students attend schools all over the county, and even those who attend the same schools are not guaranteed to share classes or lunch periods. The public transportation in Tampa bay is inefficient and underfunded, preventing many Tampa bay families from accessing school choices. The schools do not provide transportation to different schools as well.

Within refugee resettlement there is no one location where families are confined to live. They are scattered all over Tampa bay, which is a continuously sprawling city. This makes it

difficult for RFCW students to gather after school. One parent asked if I could help enroll her eight-year-old daughter in extracurricular activities on the weekend. She worked all weekend and there were no kids for her to play with or people to watch her in their apartment complex.

In another case, students in a family who moved closer to Lyon High School were told that to continue attending their previous high school, they would have to provide their own transportation and would not be provided school-bus transportation. The family worked desperately to develop a system of dropping off and picking up the kids from the original school, as much to maintain the continuity with teachers and friends as to avoid the move to Lyon (which did also carry a more negative reputation among students).

### **Student Success**

Few things in education circles today are as important as the evaluation of “student success (Eakins 2017).” But my ethnographic approach and use of qualitative data show that student success is being hindered by the current focus on quantitative metrics and standardized testing. An applied anthropological approach involving speaking to parents and exploring the cultural backgrounds of parents *and* students allows you to speak directly to the contradictions in the current system of generating and evaluating student success.

Understanding the background of refugee students is essential to helping them succeed (Dryden-Peterson 2015). Yet, the school system has no record of RFCWs’ educational backgrounds or experiences. Ms. Kline informed us that some of the students had incorrect information regarding their language spoken, age, and state of origin. The most notable mistakes were two Swahili-speaking refugee students were listed for her as speaking, in one case, “Swedish,” and in another, “Kiowa Indian.” Because the public schools do not have Swahili-speaking staff (and the school system obviously does not know the difference between Swedish,

Swahili, and Kiowa), it is nearly impossible to communicate with new English-learning students or their parents. All the students spoke conversational English, but that was not enough to keep up with their coursework.

There was also a miscommunication between the school district, resettlement programs, and RFCW families with regards to age. Many immigrant and refugee students are placed in grade levels with respect to their age despite their educational background. The RFCW students often did not have any documentation prior to arrival and were told to supply just their age. It was a regular practice that families in Africa would age their children up or down depending on perceived benefits. For instance, there was an assumption that being older was better because it was assumed that children had to be of a certain age to be able to gain employment to help support the family. So, parents would say that their 14-year-old was actually 16 to ostensibly increase the chances of that student gaining employment upon resettlement. However, despite the assumption that individuals would benefit from being older, youth-based social benefits and the benefits of the educational system end at age 18, and it would therefore have been much more beneficial for the children if their parents had changed their ages to make them younger than they were. But instead, estimates show that maybe a majority of RFCW families include children whose ages on paper show them as several years older than they are. This would mean that in addition to missing years of school experience, many of these students were placed in classes well above their level.

This issue continued through testing results. There is no question as to why RFCW students failed standardized tests. In one case, a student who was 17 on paper and was told he should drop out of school because he was not going to graduate complained to Ms. Kline and to us that he was really only 15 and he be in the age-appropriate class. This problem was much

more pervasive than is widely known or understood, and after many attempts we found that there was nothing we could legally do to correct the student's age. Inevitably, these students were told by their teachers that they were at risk of failing state tests and either should repeat their grade or, preferably, drop out.

Even students whose reading and writing levels were better than their peers found standardized tests were a major issue. The students had to pass not only tests made specifically for ESOL but also the same tests given to the general student population. The students could also provide good scores from either the ACT or the SAT to graduate. Since they were in the ESOL program, their scores were weighted lower, but the students were still consistently failing exams. If the schools saw no potential for them to graduate, then they would advise students to leave and attend adult alternative education programs.

Although most students describe English as a barrier, I did encounter two students who had learned English prior to their arrival in the US. For these students, they were not behind in their educations, and they really did just need help learning English and translating over their previous knowledge. Yet, there was no one at the school to make this observation, and as a result, students were grouped by racial or linguistic background rather than by age, class, or educational level. For the two students with good formal educational backgrounds, the ESOL program was too far below their learning level. One of these students shared with me, "I'm good at English, too smart for ESOL." More and better in-depth and in-school student assessments are essential for schools to meet the minimal educational standards required by law. It is one thing for a school to complain that they do not have the funding to hire multilingual teachers to work with all their English learners. It is a separate issue for a school to never bother to verify which languages their students speak or whether they had been to school before. Student assessment

need not only include what educational experiences students have had but also their parents. These assessments should also include obstacles that can cause RFCW students to drop out of schools.

### *African Educational Systems and Student Success*

Solutions to the educational gaps experienced by refugees can come from a better understanding of the differences between the African educational system RFCW parents were used to and the one their children were encountering in Tampa bay. In Africa, parents are not expected to be directly involved in a child's education. This inconsistency was at the root of much conflict and confusion between parents and schools in the US. Parents and students alike referred to the punishments that teachers could dole out in Africa as crucial to maintaining the student discipline so lacking in the US. African teachers were also considered responsible for the entire education. Students were not regularly sent home to learn or get help from their parents.

When families arrived in the US, the foreign nature of the US school systems intersected with other issues to create negative outcomes for the students. While the students have taken to using their cellphones as an educational or entertainment supplement, digital literacy was never discussed. This is especially problematic when schools in Tampa bay rely heavily on computers for testing and assignments.

There is a fundamental issue in the United States with parents being expected to play a major part in their children's education. While this problem is being highlighted by refugee parents, it is a pervasive problem throughout the United States school system. As schools are increasingly underfunded, more and more work gets passed back into students' own informal networks and connections. Students with well-educated stay-at-home parents tend to do very well in school because of the help they receive at home. This is not a reflection a student's work

ethic or intelligence, but rather a reproduction of their family's own socio-economic status. While it is possible to complain and study the educational gaps being actively created and perpetuated by the normalization of this practice of making the home the student's second school and the parent the student's at-home tutor, it is a system that is place for a reason – it keeps wealthy people from having to pay for the public to be educated while solidifying socio-economic gaps between families.

### *Parental Involvement and Student Success*

Educators commonly cite the importance of parental involvement for the success of students (Penfield 1987; Georgis et al. 2014). This logic has continued today through the school district's Strategic Plan (2017), which states, "Our goal of putting students and families at the top of the organizational structure ensures that every student's needs are met." Parents are expected to participate by looking at their students' grades, helping them with their homework, maintaining contact with their teachers, and attending events. As discussed earlier, this runs counter to African school traditions where the student's education is between them and their teachers. Parents expect teachers to do their jobs. But RFCW adults are extremely limited in the ways they can participate in their student's education. I asked parents during interviews how often they communicated with their children's schools to see how their students are doing. Four adults reported having no more than one interaction with someone from the school, and usually on the phone with a great deal of linguistic misunderstanding. When parents did visit the schools in person, they often expressed shock at what they saw. One father spent a great deal of time discussing his one visiting to his children's new school, saying, "When I went to the school, oh, I was so confused! I was like, what's happening? Are they learning anything? Everyone is walking around in the hallway, and no one is in class!"



American school systems do not seem to be interested in making modifications that would put less emphasis on parental support for student learning. Ms. Kline often spoke of how much she wanted the parents of the RFCW children to come to the school and meet with her and learn about their student's progress. What she did not seem to understand, along with many other teachers, was that the parents not only did not have the time for such trips, but they viewed such requests of them as negligence on the part of the schools, whose job they felt it was to educate their children. Ms. Kline said only parent from the RFCW tutoring who came to meet with her had walked several miles from her home to get to the school, and when she arrived, she was exhausted and need to sit down and have a drink of water. But it was difficult for the schools to learn more about their students if the parents were unable to fill out the informational cards that parents are supposed to fill out and return to the school. Rarely are the parents of refugee students able to understand or comply with that process. I would learn that one of the teachers at Eagle High School gave his students similar paperwork to take home for their parents to fill out to learn more about the students. The form had several boxes to be filled in and was only printed in English and Spanish. This only caused frustration from students and their parents, who could not understand the form, as well as for the teacher, who did not understand why they were incapable of completing it. When another teacher at Eagle questioned the initial teacher about her use of the form, the teacher from the first teacher was a simple insistence that, "The students will know what to do."

### *SLIFE, Silence, and Student Success*

Familiarity with systems of education prevented many students from fully participating at school. This is a characteristic of SLIFE. As discussed previously, students with limited or interrupted formal education have either missed years of school or not attended at all. One

RFCW student, who attended school for a year and half before coming to the United States, told me: “I only went for a little, then they started to kill students.” His sister reported never having attended school at all. Such backgrounds much be understood by the schools and teachers.

During tutoring, we encountered other characteristics of SLIFE among the RFCW youth. They struggled to read and write in any language. They found difficulties answering questions because of the way they were asked. I spent nearly two hours with a student one day working through a matching vocab assignment about history. The information required hours of history lessons before the student could begin to match the words herself. This is a characteristic of formal education where subjects are broken down into decontextualized sections that makes completing assignments more difficult for SLIFE (DeCapua 2016). They lose confidence in their skills as learners and give up entirely. This manifested in students through their silence. Immigrant and refugee students often utilize silence as a coping mechanism for encountering a new space (Duff 2002). Silence can last months after a CLD student enters a new school. When we first met Ms. Kline, she was relatively new to her position at Lyon. The RFCWs’ silence caught her attention. She shared her observation, “They don’t know what to do in class, and their teachers don’t know what to do with them, so they just sit in classes all day and do nothing.” While Ms. Kline worked hard to fix this issue, without her the students would be doing nothing.

#### *Effects of Bullying on Student Success*

Consequences of bullying have impacted students’ health as well. Students were taunted and bullied for using the food pantry services offered at the school, for example. Refugee students regularly expressed a lack of wanting to ride the busses home because of the bullying. Students regularly skipped lunch because of bullying, and the lunchroom’s lack of adequate teacher supervision often made it a violent or confrontational place for students. When we first

started the tutoring program, Ms. Kline mentioned she would often find the refugee students hiding in bathroom stalls or under desks in the library to avoid the cafeteria. The biggest lack of supervision came just after school as the kids left the grounds and started to walk home. This made them vulnerable to traffic incidents as Lyon is located at a very busy intersection. Even with supervision from the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Department, the bullying has continued. In addition to the psychological trauma this causes students, research shows that the meals the students are being forced to skip have a negative impact on the students' nutritional health.

Volunteers and those with long-term experience working with refugees were aware of the issues of bullying among refugee youth but felt like they were being prevented from doing the important work to stop it. Father E, for example, said he would often hear kids say that the other students make fun of them for the way that they talk, to which he would respond, "That is only the first month. But if you stick with it and learn English and do better in school than them, then you get to turn around and make fun of them." He felt that students were best motivated through competition rather than solidarity with American students. But if Father E could not get students to his garden and had no way of interacting with them, there was not much he could do to help them with their confidence beyond sharing his awareness of the issue with me.

While students were in the room with my tutors and I at Lyon, they would talk, share pictures, joke, and laugh at one another. But once they left the safe space we created, they were closed off and moved quickly in the hallways to get to their next class unbothered. Near the end of the semester, Ms. Kline shared with us that she had another discussion with the students about bullying and they feel as though it has gone down. Ms. Kline said that she has been adamant about finding the bullies and addressing their behavior. She also had other teachers talk to those

students as well. She did say that she has had three different students suspended as a result. The way she described her part in overcoming the bullying issue made it sound as though she was boasting. My advisor and I felt that the students who are bullies are potentially dealing with stuff that isolating them at home will probably not solve.

### *Gender and Student Success*

As discussed previously, there appears to be a gendered aspect to student success in the RFCW community. One way to understand the gendered aspects of these choices is to consider the crisis of masculinity confronting many in the RFCW community – a community shaped by a history of war, genocide, and in particular, mass sexual assault of both women and men. The impact on older men who had lived through the wars still resonated through their decision-making. Parents often felt that young men needed to be getting jobs to become breadwinners and household heads. Similarly, young men seemed less interested in school and more interested in having disposable income. Young women, however, did not have the same pressure placed upon them to be responsible for bringing income into their families. Girls were instead protected and, in some instances, appeared more valued than boys. Unlike the challenge to their masculinity that boys may feel in school, girls and their families viewed school as a place of opportunity and potential for young women.

However, prior to arriving in the United States, young women often did not stay in school. In much of East and Central Africa, there is a major issue of “secondary school leavers,” or high school-aged girls who drop out at high rates, often due to pregnancy or lack of familial support for their education (Njuguna 2020). As discussed earlier, some of the RFCW women I interviewed left school early to get married when they had been in Africa. In the US, however, there is almost an overcorrection of the discrepancies. This is possible in the United States

because young women can more easily stay in school for longer because, public education in the United States is still free (unlike a quality African education), and young women in America are not under the same pressure as young men to leave the household to make money and help support the family. Parents may also be encouraging this pattern of boys getting jobs and girls staying in school to protect their daughters from getting pregnant or marrying early. But this pattern also appears to be based upon the women's choices to pursue educational opportunities they had not imagined while in Africa. Following a similar pattern, within Tampa bay, there have been very few (one) instances of young women leaving their parents' homes to live on their own or with a boyfriend, while this pattern has become very common for young men, who more frequently drop out, find employment, and often move in together or with American girlfriends.

### *Timing*

RFCW students were not the only students who experienced this phenomenon of being encouraged by the schools to drop out or transfer. Ms. Kline shared the story of another English-learning student who arrived in his late teens.

“He is from Egypt. He thought that he could come and just get a diploma because they don't have state testing in Egypt. So now my heart goes out to him, because now he can't pass these exams, which means his diploma is out the window, and he is going to have to go through a GED. He is already 18 and gonna be 19. So, he came in with hopes and dreams, and I feel so bad because he didn't realize how hard it was. He thought he could speak English, not the academic English. So, he was totally thrown when he realized he wasn't graduating. He's heartbroken. And his sister wants to come next year, and I said, 'Why don't you tell your sister to finish high school there [in Egypt], and then she can just come for college. Had you stayed in Egypt you could have gone to college.' It would have been an easier transition.”

This is a powerful quote, not just for pointing out the importance of timing for a student's success in the United States, but also for Ms. Kline's blunt acceptance of the fact that most students coming from countries in the Middle East, Africa, or the

Caribbean, were much better off getting a high school education in their home countries than trying to graduate from an American public high school. It was a sad acceptance that not only was our public education system a failed system, but it was also much worse than that of the countries from which refugees were coming. The contradiction was biting.

The timing of a students' arrival should not prevent them from going to a college, especially if they are academically prepared to do so. I interviewed an RFCW student who experienced something like what Ms. Kline described above. She has now gone through multiple adult education programs just to begin attending community college. "In 2017, they told me I can't go. Then I went to (adult public high school) and I graduated but when I went to community college, I did not have the right transcripts. I was 18 and they said I couldn't go back." She lost valuable time by having to make up the gaps from the lost time caused by her resettlement's disruption of her formal education. In her case, she had been placed into a high school when she first came to Tampa bay based purely on her age, and which gave her no room to make up for her lack of English language proficiency.

### **Educational Policy and the Law**

Ms. Kline spoke often about accommodations provisioned by the Consent Decree. "Students are entitled, though they have a second language, to the same classes as the native-born students," she explained. I later carefully read the 32-page document myself to see what other accommodations the state legally requires schools to offer to students (some of which are not offered):

- basic ESOL instruction that covers language, reading, writing, and speaking components,
- educational assessment and record collection of languages spoken and country of origin,
- grouping same language students by providing transportation,

- instruction in basic subject areas (computer literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies) that uses ESOL teaching strategies,
- materials that are, in part or whole, provided in home language,
- recruitment of qualified staff to help fulfill these criteria,
- a “thirteenth” year funding provision that allows students to stay in schools even if they fail state testing,
- adult education funding provision that gives students better access to alternative programs.

Despite the legal mandates for such programs, an ESOL budget must be set by the Florida Department of Education to fulfill these requirements. Some of these accommodations also include a “practical and feasible” clause, which gives schools a pass on some legal requirements that they are financially unable to provide (in Tampa bay, these would include providing extra transportation or educational materials to students and the hiring of qualified staff to work with these students – things the school district claims are beyond their budget). Schools regularly argue that the legal mandates cannot be met with their limited budgets. As discussed previously, Florida schools are underfunded, and the school district underwent a significant teacher shortage during the time of the research for this thesis. Lyon High School alone began 2019 with twelve unfilled teaching positions, and Ms. Kline’s position at Lyon highlights exactly how fragile remaining ESOL programs currently are (when the need is at historically unprecedented levels). Without a multilingual staff or the ability to communicate with the students, she is often left feeling helpless. As she told me, “They are supposed to sit there with the instruction and translate for the Spanish kids. I only have a Spanish para (assistant). But unfortunately, I can only do it in Spanish. I can’t help the other kids. So, it’s kind of slighted. It’s not fair.”

### *Teacher Shortages*

While it might seem easy to place blame for the high dropout rates on teachers, like the RFCW students, teachers have their own difficult experiences with their work environments. Ms.

Kline reported that space issues have forced teachers to use classrooms with native English speakers and CLD students at the same time. The teachers have almost no background information about their students, and they rely on what poor information the school may have to modify their CLD students' workloads. Teachers must provide a modified workload as an alternative assignment for students who are not fluent in English. But the teacher cannot do this without knowing more about the CLD students and breaking away from the plans she intended to use with her standard students. This balancing act is a product of students being placed into classrooms based on age alone with no evaluation of students' backgrounds. Teachers are then expected to account for all students irrespective of language or educational level. There are laws in place that mandate schools provide students with the necessary accommodations. But the active defunding of Florida's public-school systems by the state legislature has made it impossible for the schools to follow the law.

### **Alternative Education Options**

They are alternatives to public high schools, but they do not always provide a high school diploma or GED. Some programs focus on English language acquisition and others prepare students for higher education. These pathways to higher education or better job prospects have varying levels of success. Some RFCW youth have graduated from programs like adult high schools or Job Corps (which is only available in Pinellas and *not* in Hillsborough County – a major issue). Conversely many of the young adults start and stop programs multiple times until they find better employment opportunities. CARIBE and the Newcomer program offer alternatives to education for RFCW students but there still remains an imbalance between the quality and quantity of curriculum and time they provide for students.



What makes CARIBE's model work better than the high schools is that there is no pressure to succeed or be forced to leave the program. Refugee students are encouraged to attend, free of charge, for five years. Even students who show limited improvement are praised for their effort and their tenacity – something completely opposite of what I found in the public school system, which was focused on metric-based outcomes of student performance from standardized testing. While CARIBE can only do so much to address the larger issues in Tampa bay's refugee communities, its model as a type of newcomer program was the basis for the new programs that were developed in 2019.

The RFCW students I interviewed who were in newcomer programs were completely unaware that they were even enrolled in a new or separate program that was technically an adult education program not designed to get them a high-school diploma. But unlike the other students at the high school, if the participants in the newcomer program complete the program, they will not be guaranteed a high school diploma. I found this to be problematic, especially considering the interviews I had done with other young adults who had been confused about why their adult education programs had not led to a GED or diploma. The programs were not being clearly described to the students. Further, one of the main reasons the school district agreed to create the newcomer programs was that students in the programs would no longer be calculated with the rest of the school's standardized test scores and graduation rates. This raises major questions about the actual motivation behind these programs: Were they created to actually help newcomers assimilate, were they created to continue removing under-performing students from the calculations and metrics upon which school funding depends, or – most likely – was it a bit of both?

## **Looking to Higher Education**

It was striking how much emphasis many young RFCW adults placed on obtaining a higher education, even while those in the educational system or who worked for resettlement agencies continually doubted them. I found this very hopeful for the refugees themselves, that many would end up being much more successful than those helping them had assumed they would be. At the same time, the local community college told one of my participants she did not have the credentials to be accepted to be the community college even after completing an adult high school program. The college was able to help her enroll in their own GED program. This seemed to be working well for her, and in general, once students were at a level to be accepted to Hillsborough County Community College, those advisors would provide them valuable support.

But to retrace this one woman's educational experience, she first spent a little less than two years at a public high school before she was told to drop out. She then spent an additional two years at an adult high school, but which did not grant her a GED. When she tried to enroll in community college, they placed her into a GED program instead. The GED program is mostly at her own pace, and she may spend up to a year in the program before beginning her AA degree. Her situation is important to highlight because she came to the United States with a strong establishment of educational basics and the knowledge to graduate. In this case, she just lacked the English language competency. She was ahead of most of the others her age in the RFCW community. Her educational journey was still comprised of several years of navigating bureaucratic hoops just to get to the chance to obtain a degree from an institution of higher education. On a positive note, she likes her community college curriculum, and she told me, "I recommend my school for all students."

If these young adults were provided with more resources, their educational and professional trajectories could remain very promising. The RFCW youth who were a part of my study will continue to pursue their education despite the extra time and costs because education, success, and prosperity are things they value and the reasons they came to the US. This is significantly contrary to popular Trumpian political discourse and American xenophobia today that holds onto the misguided assumption that refugees are a burden on society and are not interested in great achievement.

## **Chapter 7: Applications and Recommendations**

### **Mentoring Program**

I consider my research to be community and advocacy based because I had immersed myself in the resettlement community when still an undergraduate student and place advocating for refugee students as a primary goal of this project (Davis and Craven 2016, 92). This is another example of my feminist approach to anthropological research. It was my intention to begin an applied project that I could see to the end or least help sustain after I was done. Tutoring the high school students started as research and has now become my career for the foreseeable future. I spent most of 2020 helping design and run an alternative education program, even if this thesis is based upon the data collected before that particular experience. Additionally, there was a strong community interest to investigate these issues and come up with solutions. I could not talk about issues that were questionably legal (or illegal) without the support of people I spoke to.

Since the completion of my thesis research, I have used my research experience to help better guide refugee students in choosing the best programs for their needs and that would create the best opportunities for them. As I finish my degree, I am currently managing a peer mentorship program that services refugee youth up to 24 years of age. The program is being built from the ground up, and I am applying my knowledge and leveraging the relationships I have established to create an inclusive program that focuses on individuals in search of assistance.

I currently work with a local refugee agency in Pinellas county that has been building a mentoring program for refugee youth. My agency works directly with a broad range of refugee youth including RFCWs. A similar program was also established at our partnering agency in the school district. These programs are new and at risk of ending as soon as the funding for our

positions runs out (these positions are currently funded by AmeriCorps). One of the largest hurdles we have had during the COVID-19 pandemic, as all the issues I have relayed in this thesis were compounded, has been to recruit volunteers that are racially, linguistically, and generationally representative of the refugee youth who participate in the program. One RFCW youth asked me to find “people who help,” but that can be much easier for a Spanish or Arabic-speaking student than for a Swahili-speaking student. Still, I think these programs do represent a slow movement in the right direction, even if there is much left to be done. It is not the perfect solution, but it is an application I am happy to start with and continue to build upon.

### **Recommendations from Participants**

During the interviews, RFCW youth offered advice to incoming refugee students. Many students highlighted the impact that English had on their education and resettlement. One young man (18 yrs.) stated, “For me when I started it was hard because I don’t speak English. There are more challenges if you don’t speak English.” Students also gave advice with regards to attending school. Two young woman advised incoming refugees develop a good relationship with teachers, “Learn to respect the teacher.” The young adults also wanted incoming refugee youth to know of challenges they will inevitably face and how to overcome them. One woman (21 yrs.) shared, “They need to do their work even if they don’t understand it, and if they need someone to help them then they need to ask.” However, asking for help is a problem for refugees who are unaware of available resources. One young man (18 yrs.) offered to be a guide to incoming students, “Maybe I can help with new people coming in. To teach them to take a bus and stuff like that. I can help.” He pointed out that while many people were trying to figure out why RFCW youth were struggling, they were not focusing on the unprecedented success stories.

As discussed previously, Father E sees the need for more representations of successful African immigrants in inspiring the RFCW youth. This could be included in mentorship

programs that ask former refugee youth to come and help by speaking to newer communities or in schools. This could also be done by community organizers who bring the youth together under a common goal to better their educational experience in Tampa bay. Some of these programs exist and have existed to serve RFCW youth. But most either lack the necessary focus or funding.

### **Broader Recommendations**

There are still pervasive problems with representation with refugee resettlement agencies. Agencies rely too heavily on Spanish-speaking and other former refugees who do not represent the newer populations being resettled. Agencies must focus on anticipating arrivals and hiring appropriate informants based on community specific needs. These new hires can easily come from refugee communities themselves and can be recent arrivals if refugee agencies can find ways to adapt their hiring stipulations. One does not need a four-year degree from an American university to be an expert on refugee community issues, and many experts on these issues are already living in Tampa bay without work. In the future, this disconnect must be remedied if services are to be distributed appropriately.

During the tutoring sessions, the volunteers and I reached out to faith-based communities to see who could donate hygiene supplies. We were often given supplies that arrived quickly and would be of great use. School was also a good location to give those supplies that were small enough to fit in student's backpacks. However, the school should not be the only place where these supplies are provided. RFCW adults also had issues affording and accessing hygiene and cleaning supplies for both their bodies and for their homes. Resettlement agencies and service providers must consider such supplies as essential.

Bullying in schools continues to be an issue for a much larger student population, although how this issue has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be fully investigated. As schools reopen, they must find new approaches to handle bullying in schools that goes beyond a simple punishment model. Counseling services can be used more widely to address students' mental health and domestic struggles, which are often at the root of their behavior. The schools should also consider campaigns to combat xenophobia actively in their schools as part of the curriculum.

The school curriculum offered to RFCWs needs creativity, ongoing re-analysis, and additional research. Schools with high populations of English emerging students or SLIFEs are legally required to hire educators that know how to handle the needs of their students. RFCW students should not be shamed for their inexperience with educational institutions but instead lauded for their diverse experiences and skills. An asset-based approach to curriculum focuses on building foundations from what students already know rather than starting from a point of assumed deficiency. Some researchers that offer insights into an asset-based approach include Herrera et al. (2013), Shapiro and MacDonald (2017), and DeCapua (2016). But for this approach to work, students would need to have their educational experiences assessed by well-trained educators who could learn more about the students themselves and their backgrounds.

Well-trained educators and innovative curricula require funding and policy changes. I have made attempts to collaborate with policy makers and address the issues at these schools, and I will continue to do so. I hope this thesis will be useful to others at the local, state, and national levels who are working to reshape public education to overcome rather than reproduce social inequalities. The more people that show an interest in change, the more likely it will occur.

Increased funding for schools and teachers is essential for helping refugee families become sustainable and to meet the basic minimal requirements necessary to follow the law.

The school district must provide programs for students while they are still enrolled in their schools rather than pushing students into alternative education programs. This is nothing short of illegal racial discrimination. Newcomer programs, inspired by successful adult education programs like CARIBE, have the most potential to make a long-lasting impact. But these programs appear to be viewed as a solution the problems posed by refugee and immigrant students as opposed to an attempt to actually help these students. In other words, the danger is that these programs could be used by school administration to help hide their negligence as opposed to helping the students they were designed for. This would also help explain why I was unanimously banned from evaluating the newcomer programs by the schools, although interviews with parents and student participants confirms such suspicions and demands further evaluation and transparency of these programs if taxpayer money is to be spent on them. Addressing problems of refugees requires a holistic approach that takes into consideration all their current living circumstances as well as their capacity to participate in new systems of education. Applied anthropology is uniquely fitted to consider culturally, historical, and linguistic factors that impact student success in education but many others can pick up where this work has left off. Researchers, educators, resettlement programs and many other stakeholders must look at the policies and misassumptions about refugees that have created the current educational problems and, if not addressed and reversed, will only make the problem worse in the future.



## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

RFCW students are experiencing a variety of educational experiences, though they are largely negative. These experiences tend to hurt educational outcomes of young men outright while also preventing young women from finding success without years of struggle. There are still successes, and RFCWs who started school at lower levels are showing much better success rates with time. RFCW youth are only one group of refugees, yet they have experienced similar educational challenges to many other groups. Black refugee and immigrant youth from Haiti, Ethiopia, Sudan, and many other places share similar experiences, in which young adults have difficulty finding their place in public education programs. Preparation for new arrivals is key to turning these negative experiences around.

The question of age upon arrival amongst the students is important because students are often told that if they keep failing, they will not graduate “on time.” This logic employed by the schools is concerning for two reasons. First, they place students in schools solely based on their age and not their educational background experience. Second, students in the school district are legally allowed to attend public schools until the age of 21. In fact, it is only at that time schools can legally refer students to an adult education program, such as those the students are attending now. Many of the students who came to the United States between the ages of 16 and 18, were essentially set up to fail. English as a priority language of learning is also hindering students’ progress. Given the time needed to navigate the complex system of educational institutions for young adults, many refugees simply do not have the time to spend away from jobs and other income earning opportunities. Despite the difficulties around language and time, RFCW students

are interested in their educations. They are only just beginning to understand what resources they need and what resources future students will need if they come to public high schools as well. The misassumptions about their interest in and drive for education has led to a lack of information being provided to them.

The idea that the problem with RFCW students is a lack of parental involvement not a *real* problem but problem created by the schools as an excuse for their own inability to do their jobs and follow the law. RFCW are clearly involved in their children's education, much more so, in fact, than they feel is appropriate. Parents put a great deal of pressure on their children to go to school and then to college. However, the excuses made by those who have structured these refugee children into a path that leads to failure, confusion, and low-wage jobs lies with the schools, not with the families. In truth, students' lack of familiarity with English, school structure, and the teacher-parent ritual act as walls to prevent RFCW students from equal inclusion and opportunity. Teachers are interested in having forms signed and completed by parents, in having parents meet with them face-to-face, and in having parents tutor their student at home in the evenings. This can never be possible with the state of refugee services and the Tampa bay economy as it is, and even if refugee services were to function flawlessly, the newest families would still not be able to participate in such informalized and educational systems where the work is passed back to student's personal networks. This does not mean that schools and teachers are uninterested in investing in their children's educations. But schools must consider alternative means of communicating with students and families if they are going to have any chance of success.

Refugee services has a role to play in student success. In the past they have shown the capacity to mitigate negative youth outcomes by providing informants who focus on those issues.

The devastation to refugee services left by Trumpian xenophobia, misinformation, and budget cuts, had the indirect effect of setting refugee students even further behind where they had been. Again, the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote learning made this even worse. With the arrival of a new presidential administration that favors refugee resettlement, various organizations show signs of coming back. Agencies are taking steps to hire new people as educational liaisons and case workers. But these programs are still understaffed, and their youth clients are still dramatically underserved while taking on new youth clients who are from families separated at the border. The funding structure of resettlement programs remains reactionary rather than progressive. Programs will see the capital they need to hire appropriate amounts of staff after new families arrive in larger numbers. We are also still talking about non-profit refugee resettlement agencies filling a massive gap left by the negligence of the public schools. These programs rely largely on volunteers and do not have the outreach needed to cover the problems of all refugee youth across two counties. While mentorship programs can make a great difference for those enrolled, it is a drop in the bucket compared to what would need to be done to fix the ever-growing education gap.

This research was uniquely fitted for an applied anthropologist to complete. I was able to observe, analyze, and critique an ongoing social issue by building on works in anthropological education, methods, ethics, and migration. I organized and coded data to look for larger themes in the transcriptions and notes, allowing for a bottom-up approach to understanding how peoples' everyday lives are shaped by policy. By privileging qualitative data collection, I found that students and parents define student success differently than many teachers and schools, which are mandated to use quantitative metrics. The concept of success is clearly subjective and defined differently across cultural groups and even genders. The findings and discussion

presented in this thesis challenge commonly held notions that there can ever been one single model for achieving and evaluating student success. With our background of cultural and linguistic knowledge, as well as long-term rapport from previous community projects, we anthropologists are in an ideal position to make such critiques.

This thesis is an addition to anthropological literature on flexible approaches to ethnographic research, educational empowerment, and research application. My research challenges are typical of applied projects like this, and it is an important lesson in how practicing anthropologist must be flexible and adaptive to situational changes or the sudden emergence of valuable new information about a population. It can also serve as a guide on innovative ways to abide by ethics boards that researchers often interact with. Furthermore, this research applies the perspective of RFCW students by placing their stories at the center of identifying solutions and defining their academic success. Youth and their parents offered sage advice on how schools can better interact with them and diverse students who share similar backgrounds. By listening to teachers and refugee service providers, I was also able to make connections to policies that limit their ability to create an equal and inclusive educational environment. I use their stories to critique education and policy and add to the catalog of arguments that ask for a better educational system in the United States and for more opportunities to engage with creative curricula among increasingly diverse student populations.

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## **Appendix 1:**

### **RFCW Interviews**

#### **Youth**

1. Census Questions:
  - a. Name
  - b. Age
  - c. Birthplace
  - d. Languages spoken?
    - i. Location Learned?
  - e. Where have you gone to school?
  - f. Years completed?
  - g. Do you have a job?
  - h. When did you come to the U.S.?

#### **Question Guide:**

1. What was school like before you came to the U.S.?
2. What did a day of school look like there?
3. What is school like now?
  - a. Different?
  - b. Same?
4. What does a day at school look like in the U.S?
5. What do you like or dislike about your school?
6. Do you talk to the other students?
  - a. American?
  - b. Migrant?
  - c. Refugee?
7. Do you feel like the other teachers help you?
  - a. Counselors?
  - b. Administrators?
  - c. After school programs?
8. What do you wish you could change schools?
  - a. Where?
9. How has English helped with school?
  - a. Has English made school harder?
10. Why do you think you should finish school?
  - a. Do you want to finish school?
11. If there is anything about school you would change what would it be?
12. (if dropped out) Why did you leave the public high school?
  - a. Do you like it? Would you make any changes?
13. Do your parents know about what you learn in school?
  - a. Do your parents help you with school
  - b. Projects?
  - c. After school events?

14. Is there anything else about your learning that you wish to share?
15. Are you ready to graduate?

## **Adults**

1. Census Questions:
  - a. Name, Age, birthplace
  - b. Arrival in U.S.
  - c. Languages spoken and where learned?
  - d. How much school completed?
  - e. Job? Students Job?

### **Question Guide:**

1. What was school like for you? How did you learn?
  - a. How much school did you finish back home? How much in the U.S.?
  - b. How did English help? Not help?
  - c. Did any other languages help you?
2. How many of your children have gone to school and where?
  - a. Abroad?
  - b. The U.S?
3. Do you talk to the schools?
  - a. Teachers?
  - b. Counselors?
  - c. Social Workers?
  - d. Administrators?
  - e. Over the phone or in person?
  - f. How many meetings if any?
  - g. How many events?
4. Do you help your child with their schoolwork? Projects?
5. Do you know what your child is learning at school?
  - a. Do you have a way to look at their grades?
6. Do you like or dislike your child's school?
  - a. Are there better schools?
7. How important is it to finish school?
8. What do you wish the schools would be better at doing?
  - a. Any barriers to graduation?
9. Do you know about other schools like CARIBE/Adult High School/Job Corp/Freedom?
10. Is there anything else about schools you wish to share?
11. Is there anything else about your child's learning you wish to share?

## **Appendix 2: Internal Review Board**

### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk**

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

**Title:** East African Resettled Refugee Experience and Newcomer Program Evaluation in Hillsborough County Public Schools

**Pro # 00042443**

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**Overview:** The following information is being presented to help you and your child decide whether you would like to be a part of a research study. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information may be provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Michaela Inks who is a graduate student at/in the University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Dillon Mahoney. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at Congolese community locations such as homes and churches. The purpose of the study is to understand the refugee experience in public schools. I want to learn why students leave the public schools and what other schools they go to after. I am also interested in what parents think about the U.S. school system and what they think should be changed.

Participants: You are being asked to take part, and allow your child to decide, because you are a parent of a Congolese student who has attended public schools in the U.S. and we are interested to know about your experiences there.

Voluntary Participation: You and your child's participation are voluntary. You and your child do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student's status, course grade, recommendations, or access to future courses or training opportunities.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: There is no cost to participate. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep you and your child's study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at you and your child's records must keep them confidential.

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### **Why are you being asked to take part?**

You are being asked to participate because there has been reports of Congolese students leaving schools before graduating for many different reasons. By speaking with you I hope to find out what some of those reasons are and what other schools you attend, if any. Your experience could help other students facing the same problem in the future or even help to change the ways schools work in Tampa.

### **Study Procedures:**

We will expect each person to interview for at least an hour. Some of the children may be asked to interview a second time, at a later date. During the interviews we will focus on any experiences with schools before and after arriving in the U.S. The follow up interview will be for those students who are a part of the newcomer program and we will ask what their experience in the program has been like since they joined. I will also ask if it is okay to record all or parts of the interview. These tapes will be stored in a private Box drive through The University of South Florida and only I or Dillon Mahoney will have access to them. If you do not want to record your interview then I will take notes instead. The recordings and notes will be deleted from the box drive five years after the research is completed. If you wish to provide papers or records about your student experience in school then we will electronically save them in the private drive and delete those after five years as well.

### **Total Number of Subjects**

A total of 100 individuals will participate in the study at all sites.

### **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Your decision to or to not participate will not affect your student status in schools.

### **Benefits**

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study.

### **Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

### **Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

## **Costs**

It will not cost you anything to participate and to let your child take part in the study.

## **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, translators, and all other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

Your information or samples collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will NOT be used or distributed for future research studies.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind you to respect the privacy of your fellow subjects and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

## **You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Michaela Inks at 386-956-2121. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu)

## **Consent to Take Part in Research**

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

## **Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.



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Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

**Assent of Children to Participate in Research**  
**Pro # 00042443**

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**Title of study: East African Resettled Refugee Experience and Newcomer Program  
Evaluation in Hillsborough County Public Schools**

**Why am I being asked to take part in this research?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study about the black refugee experience in public schools. You are being asked to take part in this research study because you have attended a public high school since your arrival in the U.S. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 100 people at this site.

**Who is doing this study?**

The person in charge of this study is Michaela Inks. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Dillon Mahoney. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

By doing this study, we hope to learn why some students drop out of public high schools or move to other educational programs. By talking to you I hope to see what your experience in public school was like and why do you think it has turned out this way.

**Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?**

The study will take place at different places based on what is more convenient for you. They include Congolese community spaces, in your home, or at church. You will be asked to participate in two visits which will take about an hour each. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is two hours over the resat of the school year, which ends in May 2020.

**What will you be asked to do?**

- Do two interviews over the course of the school year.
- Talk about your experience in public school.
- Talk about your school experience before coming to the U.S.
- Talk about any changes to your education since your arrival in the U.S.

**What things might happen if you participate?**

To the best of our knowledge, your participation in this study will not harm you.

**Is there benefit to me for participating?**

We cannot promise that you will receive benefit from taking part in this research study. However, any changes you recommend may be implemented into the public school system for future students.

**What other choices do I have if I do not participate?**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

**Do I have to take part in this study?**

You should talk with your parents or guardian and others about taking part in this research study. If you do not want to take part in the study, that is your decision. You should take part in this study because you want to volunteer.

**Will I receive any compensation for taking part in this study?**

You will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study.

**Who will see the information about me?**

We will share your information with your parents, the public schools, and the refugee resettlement organizations so that they can better help you. If you wish to remove any identification from your personal story I will do so. I will come back to you with the transcript of the interview and you can decide what you wish to keep on there.

The researchers will do everything they can to make sure what you say in the focus group is kept confidential. However, we cannot promise that other participants in the focus groups will keep what you say to themselves. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

**Can I change my mind and quit?**

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to change your mind later. No one will think badly of you if you decide to stop participating. Also, the people who are running this study may need for you to stop. If this happens, they will tell you when to stop and why.

**What if I have questions?**

You can ask questions about this study at any time. You can talk with your parents, guardian or other adults about this study. You can talk with the person who is asking you to volunteer by calling Michaela Inks at this phone number (386)-956-2121. If you think of other questions later, you can ask them. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you can also call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

**Assent to Participate**

I understand what the person conducting this study is asking me to do. I have thought about this and agree to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form or had it read to me in my language of choice.

**Recruitment Script**  
Pro00042443

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. We are asking you to help us identify individuals from your community to take part in a research study that is called: **East African Resettled Refugee Experience and Newcomer Program Evaluation in Hillsborough County Public Schools**

The people who are in charge of this research study are **Michaela Inks and Dillon Mahoney**. These people are called the Principal Investigators.

We are specifically looking to speak with individuals *of Congolese origin who came U.S on refugee status and are currently living in the Tampa Bay area and who are or were high school students in Hillsborough as well as their parents*. The purpose of this study is *to learn about how Congolese refugees go through high school in Hillsborough and what changes they wish to see, if any*.

This research is considered to be minimal risk.

There are no direct benefits that individuals will receive from participating in this study.

Participation in the study will take at least one hour but no more than two, including transportation, which will be provided. The participation will involve talking about going to high school and/or other schools you may have gone to since coming to the U.S. We will not be asking personal questions but talking about what changes you would like to see in the school to help you and your siblings graduate. You will have many chances to ask questions.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact **Michaela Inks** by phone at 368-956-2121 or by email at [minks@mail.usf.edu](mailto:minks@mail.usf.edu) or **Dillon Mahoney** by email at [dmahoney1@usf.edu](mailto:dmahoney1@usf.edu) or by phone at 603-494-5062. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

## **IRB Expedited Approval**



**RESEARCH INTEGRITY & COMPLIANCE**  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd, MDC35, Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 FAX (813) 974-7091

December 5, 2019

Michaela Inks  
Anthropology  
13401 Mike Dr.  
Tampa, FL 33617

**RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

**IRB#: Pro00042443**

**Title: East African Resettled Refugee Experience and Newcomer Program Evaluation in Hillsborough County Public Schools**

**Study Approval Period: 12/5/2019**

Dear Ms. Inks:

On 12/5/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below. **Please note this study is approved under the 2018 version of 45 CFR 46 and you will be asked to confirm ongoing research annually in place of a full Continuing Review. Amendments and Reportable Events must still be submitted per USF HRPP policy.**

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Protocol, Version #1, 11-6-2019](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Adult Student Consent Form, Version #1, 11-12-2019](#)

[Combined Parental form, Version #1, 11-12-2019](#)

[Verbal Assent V. #1](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the

"Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved. )All of your forms have been granted a waiver of documentation and are not stamped.)

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that: (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45 CFR 46.117(c), which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds any of the following: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject (or legally authorized representative) will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context; or (3) if the subjects or legally authorized representatives are members of a distinct cultural group or community in which signing forms is not the norm provided that the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and provided there is an appropriate alternative mechanism for documenting that informed consent was obtained. (All consent/assent forms).

This research involving children as participants was approved under 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving greater than minimal risk to children is presented.

Requirements for Assent and/or Permission by Parents or Guardians: 45 CFR 46.408 Permission of one parent is sufficient.

Assent is required of all children.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB via an Amendment for review and approval. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5)

business days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristen Salomon', followed by a horizontal line.

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board