

Refugee background students in tertiary education: An insider's view  
Alfred Mupenzi  
*Western Sydney University*

## Abstract

This paper presents the insiders' view on resilience and education for refugee background students in Australia who have finished or are currently enrolled in tertiary education. Resettlement for refugees who are unable to return to their home country has been embraced by the international community as a durable solution to protect refugees from continued conflict, war and persecution. Resettlement happens by transferring refugees from an asylum country to another state that has agreed to admit them as refugees and ultimately grant them permanent residence. The transfer processes remain a responsibility of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Individual host countries like Australia, take the responsibility to provide these refugees with legal and physical protection: including access to civil, political, economic, social, educational and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. A handful of refugee background students are able to navigate mainstream secondary education and senior high school (Years 11 and 12) but majority enroll into vocational courses at TAFE. The institutions and educators on one hand grapple with supporting refugee background students' integration into the Australian education system and refugee background students on the other hand, struggle with learning new content, in a new language but also in a new culture. Thus the consequences of displacement continue through people's experiences beyond school into vocational and university education. The trauma of social breakdown, war and geographic displacement unfold into major educational and vocational challenges. This paper reports on some of the findings from my PhD thesis investigating narratives of displacement resilience and education of African refugee background students in tertiary education in Australia. My personal life story of growing up a refugee and the struggles I have gone through to acquire tertiary education resonates with those of my research participants in terms of narratives through multiple institutions and locations within and outside Australia. Stories revealed the impact of forced displacement on the participants' education pathways.

## Introduction

There are increasing numbers of people experiencing forced displacements from their home countries as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations (UNHCR, 2016). In today's world, human rights violation is leading to unprecedented people's movements and according to Ogata (2005), "today's human rights abuses are tomorrow's refugees" (p. 12). In 2015, 65.3 million individuals were displaced and these figures indicated a 5.8 million increase in the number of displaced persons as compared to 59.5 million individual that were on record for 2014 (UNHCR, 2015). Statistics also indicate that, since 2011, when UNHCR announced a new record of 42.5 million forcibly displaced people globally, these numbers rose sharply to 45.2 million in 2012, then to 51.2 million in 2013 and 59.5 million in 2014 (UNHCR, 2016). By examining the above statistics, it becomes clear that the problem of forced displacement has become endemic and is causing people's suffering across different nation states. That is why conventional thought assumes that a refugee is pushed out of his or her country for political reasons... (Bartlett & Ghaffar, 2013, p. 3). The terms used to describe the people who have left their homes not by choice are refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people (Adams, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, a refugee in this paper has been understood according to UNHCR as,

Any person who, owing to the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence,

is unable or, owing to such fears, is unwilling to return to it, (UN convention relating to the status of refugees, April, 22, 1954).

The 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees is the key legal document in defining who is a refugee, the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of states towards them (Zimmermann, 2011). In 1951, the Inter-governmental committee for European Migration (ICEM), included an additional broad category to the above definition and defined a refugee as “any person who has been the victim of a war or a disaster which has seriously disadvantaged his condition of living” (Demirdjian, 2012, p. 5). Suffice to say the durable solutions to refugee populations, as defined by UNHCR and governments, has been threefold: 1) Voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, 2) Local integration into the country of asylum and 3) Resettlement to a third country, (UNHCR, 2003). Participants in this research paper belong to the third category; that is, those who were resettled in a third country, in this case Australia.

Furthermore, statistics indicate that at the end of 2015, about half of refugees were children (UNHCR, 2016). When it comes to students, these require focused efforts to address their needs and minimize the impact of forced displacement upon them. One of the interventions by different host countries has been, ensuring that this category of refugees enjoy the right to education which they might have been denied for many years in transit countries. Whereas it was difficult to have access to quality education in transit countries especially in the refugee camps, students who are resettled in Australia gain full access to education at all levels and without any age limit. Despite the educational opportunities available in the resettlement country, refugee background students deal with a number of challenges. First they study English as a Second Language and secondly when they seek employment, they may need to undertake several post school options before they are employable. Refugee background students' ability to ultimately finish tertiary education demonstrates educational resilience. Many of my research participants have succeeded and made it through TAFE and Universities. This paper therefore, draws from lessons of my personal life story and the voices of some of my research participants to reveal factors that have enabled refugee background students to successfully pursue their educational goals amidst adversity.

### **Resettlement and education in Australia**

The chances of a refugee completing secondary school are slim. The chances of reaching university indicate a low probability because of challenges associated with forced displacement. Only one in every 100 of the world's refugees goes on to tertiary education (UNHCR, 2016).<sup>1</sup> In Australia, different scholars (Naidoo, 2014, Matthews 2008, Ferfolja et al., 2011), have highlighted different challenges that students with a refugee background struggles with although according to Hughes (2002), it is not only those who come to Australia but rather, millions of displaced persons across the globe are, “mostly ill-educated, disoriented and living in shockingly deprived conditions” (p. 36). African refugee background students entering Australian education institutions in particular, have spent many years in refugee camps and as a result have typically received no formal schooling prior to their arrival in Australia. According to Naidoo (2014), “upon their arrival, many of these refugee students are placed in classrooms that are age appropriate rather than appropriate to their academic level and this increases the pressure on both students and school officials as both have to produce passing scores on standardized tests to achieve high school success” (p. 140). At secondary school level for example, Weekes, Phelan, Macfarlane, Pinson & Francis, (2011),

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2016/9/57cee6674/kenyan-refugee-camp-girls-learn-beat-odds.html>

show that “most secondary schools, in particular, are busy places with each student having multiple teachers for different subjects and moving from room to room in a day, this becomes so challenging for these refugee background students who have not grown up in this type of education system” (p. 312). Matthews (2008), in her study on refugee schooling and settlement: talks about Africans and Middle Eastern refugee students and highlights two reasons why their education is of concern:

First because we (Australians) know little about the historical and cultural backgrounds of new refugees and the effects of pre- and post-displacement factors such as interrupted schooling, lack of literacy in mother tongue, trauma, torture, migrant status and reception, racialization, acculturation and resilience; and, second, because English as a Second language (ESL) instruction and support are currently underfunded and poorly resourced, p.32.

Despite the many challenges, these young people often display remarkable resilience and capacity to learn. Naidoo shows that, “while refugee background students often encounter significant barriers to their educational achievements, many are highly resilient and hold strong aspiration for their future, particularly in terms of their own educational achievements and attainment” (2014, p. 23). Additionally, Grandi says that, “Refugees have skills, ideas, hopes and dreams... They are also tough, resilient and creative, with the energy and drive to shape their own destinies, given the chance (Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). Therefore, we need to be cautious when interpreting deficit discourses about refugee underachievement in school. Scholars; (Cranitch, 2008, Olliff, 2005, Chegwiddden & Thompson, 2008, Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2002) argue that, refugee background students are often successful learners who make great strides in their personal and academic growth (Cranitch, 2008) and it is important to recognize and value the life skills, cultural understandings and potential benefits to Australia offered by young people from refugee background (Olliff, 2005). Many of these young people are highly motivated and see education as “the most important aspect of their life as it is a source of hope and future” (Chegwiddden & Thompson, 2008, p. 5). In fact, they frequently demonstrate enormous courage and strength (Tiong et al., 2006, p.8) and often go on to thrive in their new country and surroundings (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2002, p.58). Hewson cited in Ferfolja (2011) says that,

It is important to recognize that being a refugee is seen as only one part of a person's identity and therefore, talking about students with a refugee background shouldn't obscure or fail us to recognize the strength, fortitude and resilience of these young people. Refugee students are survivors and they have histories which have brought them to Australia. p.3

Therefore, “examining the qualities of resilience and resourcefulness that young people bring with them to their schooling, out of often devastating personal experience, reminds us of the importance of the student's hopes and aspirations for the future in the brave endeavor of their education,” (Hoddinott, cited in Ferfolja, 2011, p.vii). This paper presents an insider's view on educational resilience by refugee background students.

## Methodology

In order to present the insiders' view, I employed Life History Narrative Methodology which has been used in this paper to mean, an extensive record of the participant's life as it is reported by him/herself in a guided interview by the researcher. Researching refugee background students requires that we understand the history behind refugee background student's current experiences: why they migrated, moved from their home country and

exchanged life for circumstances almost wholly foreign to them. It requires us to understand the peculiar pleasures of exile they have acquired in addition to the resilience that they have come along with and gained in their new country Australia. The life history narrative methodology helped me to gather participants' stories, covering three levels of their life experiences: 1) prior to displacements, 2) in transit countries and 3) after resettlement in Australia. According to Clandinin & Connelly, "stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell our stories and that a story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history" (2000, p. 415). Plummer (2001), on the other hand, says that, life history narrative methodology at its best, "always brings focus on historical change, moving between the changing biographical history of the person and the social history of his or her life span... a life history cannot be told without a constant reference to historical change" (p. 40). That is why I asked for the stories of critical transitions common to the lives of my research participants.

### An insider's view

Given the fact that most refugee background students spend their childhood and adolescent years in the refugee camps, all of them are able to finish compulsory universal primary education supported by UNHCR. Below is a mapping of educational journeys for three insiders (Alfred, Ineza and Anna) from primary through to higher education that was entangled with geographical journeys of forced displacement.

#### Insider's view one: Alfred

Name of the Participant	Alfred
Country of origin: Rwanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Courses completed in Uganda</b></li> </ul>
Cause of forced displacement: 1959/62 Rwanda social revolution	Bachelor of Arts with Education (2000-2003) Masters of Arts in Public Administration and Management (2007-2010)
Country of transit:  Refugees in Uganda for 30 years for my parents and 17 years for me	<p><b>Abandoned course</b></p> <p>Bachelor of Social and Philosophical studies (1998-2000)</p> <p><b>On-going course in Australia</b></p>
Year of arrival in Australia : 2013	Doctor of Philosophy - Education (2013-2017)

#### Primary school:

I grew up in Kyangwali refugee camp, which is located in the mid-western Uganda. Like my family, all families in the refugee camp endeavoured to send their children to school. Even when children would be sent back home because of unpaid school fees, the following day, parents/guardians would go back to school with their children and ask for an extension for the payment from the school administration. In my case, my grandmother was the major reason for continuing my education because she always made sure that I had produce from her

garden to sell in order to pay school dues on time.

Being in school meant being able to have time to play with peers and have fun. Thus going to school meant escaping from hard labour of the daily home chores like: Fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking for those who have gone to dig in the garden or siblings who have gone to school. It was better to be at school than to remain at home because it didn't matter what age one was, when it came to doing all sorts of errands you would do them.

My teachers always encouraged me to study hard and perform well in school. I remember my mathematics teacher was very influential in my education because he would invite me to his house and he would give me extra tuition with his young brother at no cost. I would also walk about 20kms once a week to go and receive that extra tuition.

### **Secondary school:**

There wasn't any secondary school in the refugee camp, so I received secondary education by travelling to Hoima town 65 kilometres away from the refugee camp. While at school, I never wished to go back to the camp although I sometimes missed the care of my grandmother. At our school we had enough to eat and we were sleeping in good dormitories. I didn't want to go back to the way of life in the camp where we slept on a mat on the floor, did not have enough to eat but were also subjected to hard labour.

However, when I started experiencing discrimination and abuse from peers, my desire to remain in school was reduced and I started feeling that while the camp life did not offer us much in terms of material stuff there was constant love and security. At school, I began to deal with discrimination and isolation from other native children and that hurt my feelings because I felt like I had no value and did not even deserve to live. Our fellow Ugandan students would discriminate against us, by making reference to us using demeaning word prefix of "ka", which reduces something in size, for instance "*Kanyarwanda*" would mean "small Rwandan" almost to non-existent as opposed to "*Umunyarwanda*" which prefix "Umu" refers to a person or a human being. I felt as someone who had no right and this was very destructive to my self- image, confidence and self-esteem.

The other reason why I wanted to drop out of school was my inability to compete favourably in terms of academic performance. At our primary schools in the refugee camp, our teachers were semi-qualified and therefore the foundation we got was quite weak. At secondary school, some students were from good primary schools and had a good educational foundation. They were not struggling with the language of instruction and of course they were quite ahead in subject specific content. However, I kept working hard to the extent of foregoing other leisure activities like sport and recreation activities. I did not want to lose the opportunity to be in school.

Over time, the catholic school being selective would not tolerate bad behaviour and therefore some students were expelled and our class was reduced from 38 in senior one to 16 in senior four and then to 15 in senior Six. [The Ugandan system of education is organised around six years of primary, four years of lower secondary and two years of upper secondary]. Academic performance in the seminary was not the only factor that determined your stay in school but also discipline and behaviour. I remained in school because I was well-behaved by the standards of the catholic seminary. I remember I was made a leader of students like Assistant

Head-prefect, and Head-prefect amongst others. Holding such important roles in the student body restored my self-esteem and gave me a reason to remain in school.

In the catholic Seminary each individual student had a mentor whom we called 'Spiritual Father.' My spiritual father believed in me so much and that is why I remained in school. I received a great deal of counselling and guidance from him. Specifically, when the civil war in Rwanda of (1990/1994) ended, the majority of refugees from Kyangwali refugee camp as well as students from all schools in Hoima district were repatriated back to Rwanda. Of the twelve refugee students who were in my school across different levels, only two of us remained. Remaining in school at that moment was totally due to the encouragement of my aunt and my spiritual father. My aunt kept paying for my tuition and my spiritual father become my liaison with my family.

### **Tertiary education:**

During my first degree towards priesthood at university, I was in a major seminary at national level which brought together students from different corners of the country. At this level of education, discrimination was based on regionalism rather than on an individual basis. I was not looked at as a refugee but rather as someone from mid-western Uganda. I remember the rector of the institution who was from the central part of Uganda and who did not like students from western Uganda. At one time when we were late for chapel, he used that excuse to dismiss me from the major seminary with two other students. He however, allowed the other two friends to come back and do their final exams to earn their degree in Bachelor of social and philosophical studies but he never allowed me to do so. When I discovered that I was being discriminated against because I was Rwandan, I reported the case first to my Catholic Bishop, who did not want to take it any further and then I took the case to the Embassy (Rwandan Embassy to Uganda). The Ambassador's statement was that "Alfred go back to your country and try to ask for a scholarship and your government will pay for your education but we cannot take your case any further since it might yield to nothing and also may be wasting time" At this time, I thought my education journey had come to a standstill because all my hopes were shattered.

When I arrived in Rwanda with the recommendation from the Rwandan Ambassador to Uganda, the Rwanda Ministry of Education appreciated my school performance track record and offered me a scholarship back to Uganda's number one University-Makerere University where I was formally accepted into through the major seminary. At Makerere University, you can hardly be openly segregated against, because there are selection criteria for admission but also students are identified by student numbers and not by names. At this point in my educational life, I was sponsored by my own government and I was so confident in whatever I did and with high self-esteem.

In 2007, I was able to go back to Makerere University and sponsored myself to do a masters degree. This time I was mature and I kept in school by choice and with a higher goal of finishing school and securing a better job because of my higher credentials. The more I climbed the ladder of education the more I developed the desire to leave no stone unturned and that is how I started pursuing a scholarship to do a Higher Degree by Research. Today, my orientation and motivation is to gain skills and knowledge in research and I look forward to publishing my story on my educational experiences but also encourage writing of individual stories from my fellow African students.

**Insider's view two: Ineza**

<b>Name of the Participant</b>	<b>Ineza,</b>
<b>Country of origin:</b> Rwanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Courses completed in Australia</b></li> </ul> English as Second Language Certificate II course in Information Technology (IT)
<b>Cause of forced Migration:</b> 1994 Rwandan Genocide	Certificate III and IV in age care Diploma in Business administration at Bankstown TAFE
<b>Countries of transit:</b> From Rwanda to DRC, then to Zambia and resettled to Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Courses abandoned in Australia</b></li> </ul> Wollongong University (Enrolled Nurse) after six months Career Australia Gold Coast institute of TAFE in Queensland after one year
<b>Year of arrival in Australia :</b> 2010	

**Primary Education:**

Ineza had her first four years of primary education in Rwanda. She was motivated to be in school then by her father who was a local leader and an advisor to community members. She admired her father and wanted to be like him. At the same time she was following the Government of Rwanda curriculum of being in school at a certain age. When the war and the genocide took place in Rwanda, Ineza's education was interrupted and she started her journey to Zambia through the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the refugee camps, Ineza got informal education facilitated by elderly people within their community who would create small groups of children and teach them cultural values as well as French language. At this point, Ineza cared more for peace and security than education. She desired peace and healing from the traumatic experiences of losing her parents and the insecurity of life in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. However, in Zambia UNHCR funded the government of Zambia to build schools in the refugee camp and that is how Ineza managed to finish her primary education.

**Secondary education:**

In the refugee camp in Zambia, there were no secondary schools. So Ineza had to go to Lusaka the capital city of Zambia to acquire high school education. Ineza managed to complete high school because of a friend who paid for her tuition fees. The medium of instruction was English in the Zambian Schools. Ineza managed to remain in school because someone was financially supporting her but she also got moral support from other people. Ineza's pastor in Zambia was her motivation to remain in school.

**Tertiary Education:**

Ineza went to TAFE first do the 510 hours of English as Second Language (ESL). Later her motivation to continue in tertiary education was because she wanted to be employed and become financially independent from the support of Centrelink. Therefore, after a year doing English, she enrolled for Certificate II in Information Technology (IT) which enabled her to use computer programmes like Microsoft Word and Excel. With her Certificate II in information technology, she was able to get a job in the meat factory as a record keeper. However, she did not want to settle for less and when her friend advised her to go for aged care course; she did certificate III and IV in aged care sponsored by Centrelink.

Ineza then developed motivation to become a Registered Nurse. She got enrolled in different institutions of learning including: Wollongong University and Career Australia. Nevertheless, due to several challenges associated with financial support, she stopped her studies in both institutions and instead opted for a nursing diploma with Gold Coast Institute of TAFE in Queensland because the institute offered an online course. Her motivation to remain in school till today is because she wants to become a professional. More recently, Ineza developed an interest in business studies and has now completed a diploma in Business administration at Bankstown TAFE. Ineza became the Vocational Student of the Year 2016 and was the New South Wales award winner. Today she is on the list of national finalists for Vocational Education Award Winner 2016.

### Insider's view three: Anna

<b>Name of the Participant</b>	<b>Anna</b>
<b>Country of origin:</b>  Burundi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Courses completed in Australia</b></li> </ul> English as Second Language (ESL)- (2009-2010)
<b>Cause of forced Migration:</b>  1993 Civil war in Burundi	St. Mary's Senior High School year 11 and 12 (2011-2012)  Certificate IV in Community services at Nirimba TAFE (2015- 2016).
<b>Countries of transit:</b>  From Burundi to Tanzania and resettled to Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Courses abandoned in Australia</b></li> </ul> Degree in social services at Western Sydney University (2013)
<b>Year of arrival in Australia:</b>  2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>On-going course in Australia</b></li> </ul> Resumed degree in Social Sciences at University of Western Sydney (2016)

### Primary Education:

Anna started her primary education in the Tanzania. She was following the Tanzanian curriculum where the languages of instructions were English and Swahili. She was later transferred into the refugee camp where the languages of instruction were French and Kirundi. Anna was bullied by fellow refugee students since she couldn't speak Kirundi and French. Anna repeated year four and year five and this killed her confidence and esteem. However, she was able to catch up very well and was promoted to year six. At year six she



did the national exams qualified to join year seven which is the first year of secondary education. Anna remained in school because it was the way of life in the camp that all children of her age were supposed to be in school.

### **Secondary school:**

When Anna was promoted to year eight, her education was interrupted because they were transferred to Nduta refugee camp from Kanembwa by UNHCR for their safety. At Nduta refugee camp the students she found were different and the environment was very friendly. Anna mixed with different students from different camps and their support was important in her persisting with her schooling. Anna's education was again interrupted in 2007; her family were again transferred to Kanembwa refugee transit centre where they prepared to come to Australia. In the transit centre, Anna did not go to school and lost another year of education.

In 2008, they were finally resettled in Australia and she was able together with her three younger sisters to enrol at St. Evans Intensive English Center where they did English as a second language for one and a half years. In 2010 when she started high school at St. Mary's Senior High School where she did year 11 and 12. Anna says that life was challenging, but at St. Mary's fellow students were helpful. At school too, they had a program for migrants of extra classes to catch up with English and other subjects including doing homework and assessments. Anna had a good relationship with her teachers of which one of the teachers is still a good friend of hers up today. Evidently Anna was able to finish high school because of the friendly environment at school including friendly students and teachers.

### **Tertiary Education:**

In 2012, Anna joined University of Western Sydney and started a degree in Social Sciences which she did not finish. She dropped out from University in 2013 and started a family and got married. Her education was interrupted from 2013 to 2014 and in 2015; she enrolled for Certificate IV in Community services at Nirimba TAFE which she finish in April 2016. July 2016, Anna resumed her degree at Western Sydney University and she is now a full time student. Anna thinks that Australia provides great opportunities for education and students with a refugee background have no excuse whatsoever for not finishing school. She is looking into finishing her degree in social sciences and doing case work and support for migrant workers.

### **Further findings and discussion**

Whereas several themes emerged from data analysis, in this paper I have discussed two major themes:

#### **1. Family and other people's influence**

Like all the other research participants, family attachment hugely affected Ineza's capacity to remain at school. A pastor in Zambia encouraged Ineza to go to school; her late father has always been her inspiration and adopted role model to continuously remain in school. She recalls her father's advice that "if you want to buy shoes for yourself, then you should go to school and study hard, that if you go to school, you will know how to speak with people,

respect them, and above all respect yourself. Her father used to call those who had not gone to school “Inkandagira bitabo” which is translated to mean “people who walk/step on top of books because they are ignorant of value and knowledge contained in them.” Looking at the influence of other people to remain at school, Ineza brings in a unique example when she was nominated to be a secretary to the meeting for the Great Lakes Region Women Refugee Association (GLWRA). She overheard one of the ladies speaking in doubt of her capacity to write credible report/minutes of the meeting, in her local language: “Ee uriya mu secretary wabo se, ndaba ndebe, abantu bafata umu secretary utarize bakamushiraho ndaba ndeba ibyo ari bwandike.” Meaning “Oh that secretary of theirs, people who choose a secretary who has never gone to school, I will see which type of report she will write”. Ineza ended up writing a good report using the knowledge she had acquired from church meetings. But this experience with that lady became a turning point in her life such that she developed determination and made a resolution to always aim higher in education as long as an opportunity to study was available.

My commitment to my educational life has been influenced by my grandmother, teachers, aunt, spiritual father, and the ambassador of Rwanda to Uganda not forgetting the government of Rwanda that has always sponsored me. Educational resilience can partially be attributed to people we meet and these can be family members or even friends and relatives. Their influence can impact us positively or negatively. Refugee background students’ most important need is to grow up with one or more adults who are there for the long haul. These students need people who love and believe in them. They need consistent emotional support and ideally, parents play this role, but good relationship with other relatives or close family friends can also make a big difference in their lives.

As for Anna, her mother protected and cared for all her children. She was a leader in the refugee camp and always urged them to study hard. Anna failed to pass some classes but kept repeating them not to disappoint her hard working mother. Anna on the other hand says that when she arrived in Australia, at school she attended a program for migrants offering extra classes to catch up in English and other subjects including doing homework and assessments, and this motivated her performance. Furthermore, Anna’s good relationship with her fellow students and teachers gave her a reason to continue her education. One of the teachers is still a good friend of Anna's today. This influence encouraged Anna to remain in school.

Narratives of displacement from my research participants show that, the very fact that research participants have a life that they have been denied in the past, when they are resettled in a third country like Australia, they settle with an assumption that they are going to have good life. The nature of life style they expect is; to go back to school, become professionals, and have a home to belong to, enjoy community belonging or even regain a sense of belonging to a family. When this does not appear or turn out to be as they had expected, they tend to be distressed and feel lonely. However, one comforting factor is when these refugees connect with people originally from their home country. One of the contributions from these “emerging communities”<sup>2</sup> becomes change of attitudes through experience sharing with new arrivals and thus re-orienting them to possible opportunities within the country of settlement. Managing expectations therefore, brings research participants to terms with their past encounters in their former way of life.

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<sup>2</sup> *Emerging communities* is term used in the widening participation program that is being implemented by Western Sydney University to refer to different communities that come together to celebrate a common origin and support each other.

## 2. Schooling and learning environment

Whereas the schooling and learning environment in transit countries and refugee camps was not favourable for refugee background students, on the contrary, the enabling environment in Australia for example, where services are streamlined and available enables these students with a refugee background to start looking ahead and focusing on their educational pathways. Anna at Western Sydney University had this to say,

A couple of years ago, I could never be sure if I would go to school, spend the whole day in class and come back home. When I did, I wasn't sure if I would find what to eat at home. In one pair of a uniform, I was supposed to be careful not to make it dirty for the next day of school or else I would miss out on school the following day. With one exercise book, size A2 of 24 pages at best and one pen given to me at a time, I made sure all academic subjects had a space and one book was portioned into different compartments to contain the four major disciplines; Mathematics, English, Social studies and Science. But today, I am free from obstacles; no longer mistreated by teachers and some family members, no longer worried about food, I am able to go to school anytime and at whatever age and not worried about washing and drying the only one pair of clothes overnight.

According to Anna, life in the refugee camp was not easy because they were depending on fortnightly food rations supplied by UNHCR and they would sometimes run out of food and other supplies.

Ineza in her story shows gratitude to the Australian Government as she says, "the Government of Australia has played the role of my parents and I am so grateful for the support I have received" She was a refugee for more than 15 years first in the Democratic Republic of Congo-Ruvunge camp (1994-1996) and Second in Zambia (1996-2010) and yet her educational dreams were fulfilled in Australia.

Throughout my refugee journey, my education was hampered and I never was in school fulltime until I reached Australia. I arrived in Australia in September 2010; it was a life changing experience and that is when my eyes were opened and I started to feel like a human being. Upon our arrival, we were introduced to several services in the country and after a week we were taken to TAFE to start 510 hours of English classes. In the following months, we were going to school every day an experience that was exciting and fulfilling for me.

Refugee background students sometimes work with instincts and tread waters that may seem difficult at the time but are pleasantly surprised later in life. On a positive note therefore, because refugees cannot take anything for granted, they tend to be highly resourceful and adaptive. Some refugee background students have succeeded by seizing every opportunity that comes their way. Ineza had this to say for example "I attended every free course that was offered and I went to every workshop that was open whether it was relevant to my area of study or not." Such stories and highlights reveal that, the fact that many refugees have been given a second chance in life makes them determined to convert their vision into realities.

Refugee background students undergo severe challenges but are pleasantly surprised later in life by the resilience these experiences have given them. Refugee background students sometimes work with instincts and tread waters that may seem difficult at the time but are pleasantly surprised later in life. Some refugee background students have succeeded by seizing every opportunity that comes their way. Ineza had this to say for example "I attended every free course that was offered and I went to every workshop that was open whether it was relevant to my area of study or not." Such stories and highlights reveal that, the fact that many refugees have been given a second chance in life makes them determined to convert their vision into realities.

Arguably, schooling for African students with a refugee background, helps them to "cope

with and transcend the negative effects of conflict and disaster.(Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p. 102)” It is also argued by politicians, researchers and educationalists that, schools like other government institutions provide appropriate attitude for refugee background students to work and obtain citizenship. However, schooling puts a huge responsibility on students with a refugee background for example upon enrolling in school, refugee students are required to negotiate the Australian education system developing social networks, familiarising oneself with schooling cultures and practices, and negotiating one’s progression through these” (Ferfolja, 2011, p. 4). During transit, “the situation of refugees is unique in that they confront uncertainty related to the duration and location of their exile in addition to structural constraints imposed by the host governments that circumscribe how they imagine and plan for the future,” (Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p. 87).

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents an insider’s view of factors that influence education and resilience among refugee background students. These factors include two major ones: Family and other people’s influence, Schooling and learning environment. By working with refugee background students, I was able to understand that these students require patience and the willingness to listen from researchers. There seems to be too much to remember in the lives of people with a refugee background and yet much is revealed through trust and confidence in the researcher. Most refugee background students tell their stories depending on their mood, perception at the time and their current state of mind. They have all told a story about their life which earned them a humanitarian visa to come to Australia. This time around the story they had to tell me was very different because it was not meant to earn them a visa but rather to bring to the table, knowledge about resilience in pursuit of an educational journey. Their resilience is witnessed in their ability to continue with their education in the face of adversity.

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