

The Educational Aspirations of Adolescents from Refugee Families:  
How Parents' Attitudes and Expectations Affect Their Children's Goals

by

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study provides a view of Arab refugee families and their experiences as they acculturate into the American educational system: what their challenges are, how parents support their adolescents in their education, and how parents' prioritization of education and higher education affect adolescents' goals. Fourteen adolescents and their parents were interviewed. Data were coded using constant comparison methods. Responses suggested that parents and adolescents had different perceptions of what their greatest educational challenges were. Because of these differences and acculturation gaps between parents and adolescents, adolescents did not always receive the academic support they needed. Despite challenges, however, parents and adolescents both had high aspirations for adolescents' futures, including their higher education and career goals.

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## **Introduction**

Parents' attitudes, ideals, and priorities directly influence their children's entire lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Minuchin, 1974). Adolescence is the stage of life when children are tasked with discovering their identities through extensive exploration. They must navigate the processes of maturing out of childhood and finding their place in the world as they age into adulthood (Erikson, 1968). One important context for this exploration is formal education. Given these theoretical views and this context for exploration, this project seeks to address important questions regarding the nature of the relationship between the attitudes and expectations that Arab refugee parents and youth have concerning education. Furthermore, this project will examine how the parents' attitudes influence the value, whether positive or negative, that adolescents have for their own education.

### **Parental Involvement in Education: Refugees' Unique Experiences**

Though parental involvement in adolescents' education is important across all demographics, it proves vitally important in refugee families due to a variety of other components such as their unique language, culture, and adaptation experiences. (Aldous, 2006; Jung & Zhang, 2016; Holloway, Park, Jonas, Bempechat, & Li, 2014; Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014; Chariza, Cooper, & Vasquez-Salgado, 2016). Adolescents in this demographic make decisions about their future aspirations in a multicultural context (Hayes & Endale, 2018). This study seeks to determine not only what effect parents have on children's education, but also how this phenomenon may be occurring due to salient family environmental factors such as each family's unique



language and cultural experiences, the parent's or adolescent's gender, and relationship differences within the family unit.

Refugee families have the task of adjusting to an entirely new cultural world as it pertains to language, educational systems, values, and lifestyle. Parents who are accustomed to a collectivist culture where the family's needs and well-being are put before the individuals, must adjust to the individualistic culture of America (Ghazarian, Supple, & Plunkett, 2007). In addition to these differences, parents may have different perspectives on the roles of parents and teachers in education. Some may value active involvement in their child's education, while others take a more laid-back approach and leave the education to the teachers (Holloway, Park, Jonas, Bempechat, & Li, 2014). Because of these differing perspectives, it may be harder for parents to formulate effective roles in their adolescents' education (Holloway et al., 2014). It is important for parents to support children in education pragmatically, by providing resources, knowledge, and skills to assist their youth in their education and future educational attainment, but this can become a problem when salient language and cultural factors become barriers for parent-child communication (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014). Parents who are attempting to adapt to a new culture themselves may have greater perceived barriers in helping their adolescents along in their adaptation. These factors may make a significant impact on the adolescents' education because the parents' language, cultural, and immigration experiences have direct effects on their children (Gonzalez, Villalba, & Borders, 2015).

Parents' level of involvement may also be tied to their perceptions of adolescents' performance in school. Studies appear to contradict each other on whether immigrant

students succeed or struggle in levels of academic achievement compared to their native-born peers (Bodvoski & Durham, 2010). Despite disagreement on immigrant students' success in school, studies seem to agree that immigrant youth pursue higher education at rates significantly lower than American native-born adolescents. Only 17% of immigrant youth obtain a bachelor's degree, compared to 48% of native-born adolescents (Lumina Foundation, 2016; Lopez & Radford, 2017). Since the population of immigrants in the United States is substantial and is projected to grow in the future, under-education among immigrant youths, and first generation youths in particular, is a serious problem that needs to be examined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). Addressing the factors associated with achieving post-secondary degrees is key to alleviating educational disparities within this minoritized population.

### **Youths' Educational Aspirations**

While parental involvement is important, students' own educational dreams and efforts also matter. Educational aspirations are often believed to contribute meaningfully to educational success (Briley, Harden, & Tucker-Drob, 2014; Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Jacob & Linkow, 2011; Ou & Reybolds, 2008; Purtell & McLoyd, 2013). Adolescents that have high hopes for their futures are more likely to formulate strategies to attain their educational goals of pursuing higher education. (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserma, 2014). Because of their high expectations for themselves, they are more likely to be academically motivated, and thus achieve their own goals (Wang & Benner, 2013; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). It is important, though, not to generalize across refugee-American populations when studying beliefs about education. There are significant differences in findings regarding educational experiences when examining

immigrant or refugee families from differing countries of origin because of their different cultures, languages, and ideals (Jung & Shang, 2016).

Though Arab refugee families are absent from the literature regarding how such educational aspirations impact actual educational experiences, information from other lines of scholarly literature warrants important consideration. Past research studies of this nature have frequently examined immigrant families of Asian and Latino descent. Past research studies on refugee families, though there are few, have frequently focused on Somali Bantu families. These studies find that refugee parents and adolescents have difficulty negotiating cultural identity when adapting to the American culture, which can be exasperated by parents' lack of awareness regarding adolescents' experiences within their adaptation processes (Frounkenfelker et al., 2016). A main theme in the literature is the differing rates of adaptation that parents and children of immigrant and refugee families experience, which is termed "acculturation gaps" (Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009). These gaps have been linked to difficulties in parenting and parent-child relationship quality (Buki, Ma, Strom, & Strom, 2003; Fu, 2002; Weaver & Kim, 2008) and educational experiences, particularly in parents' ability to provide academic support to adolescents (McBrien, 2005). My honors research provides a unique perspective since it examines data on how Arab refugee families may function, with important care taken to identify parent-child gaps in acculturation, and how the unique challenges they face impact their educational choices.

### **Educational Challenges**

Refugee families must overcome a variety of challenges as they acculturate into the American school system (Holloway et al., 2014). There are two specific challenges

that refugees face: dealing with language issues and adapting to find a place in American culture. Both of these challenges are intrinsically important to adolescents' educational journeys.

### ***Adapting to a New Language***

Language competence is a problem that makes functioning independently difficult for refugee parents. Because refugee children develop language fluency at a significantly faster rate than their parents, children are commonly used as translators or interpreters for their parents (Corona, Stevens, Halfond, Shaffer, Reid-Quinones, & Gonzalez, 2011; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; Marinez, McClure, & Eddy, 2008; Rounkelker, Assefa, Smith, Hussein, & Betancourt, 2017; McBrien, 2005). It is common for immigrant and refugee children who live in homes where English is a second language to be relied on by their parents to translate or interpret for them. This informal process has been termed "language brokering" in research literature (Tse, 1995; Corona et al., 2011). Refugee parents rely on their children to language broker a wide range of social contexts including social engagements, medical appointments, business transactions, and even legal situations (McBrien, 2005). Research studies suggest that the experience of language brokering can have positive and negative effects on both refugee children and their parents (Corona et al., 2011; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; Frounkenfelker, 2017; Guntzviller & Wang, 2018).

It seems language brokering has mixed effects for parent-child relationships. Some families suggest that language brokering often strengthened their parent-child relationships (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). Adolescents enjoyed the feeling of independence and pride it brought them to be such a vital part of their family (Corona et

al., 2011). Parents also are proud of their children for their language brokering abilities. Some parents even consider the duty of translating as a valuable learning experience for their children and themselves (Perry, 2014). However, this added responsibility can sometimes causes adolescents to feel frustrated or anxious. Such situations mean adolescents shoulder the responsibility for their family's success or failure and want to avoid disappointing or harming their families. This can be especially hard for adolescents who are still not fully comfortable with English themselves (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). Adolescents also mention that language brokering in certain contexts, such as medical settings and academic settings, are especially daunting because there are words and phrases they must communicate that are unfamiliar to them (Corona et al., 2011). In certain cases, these added responsibilities caused some adolescents to become resentful of their parents and, ultimately, their original language and culture (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009).

The added responsibility of language brokering affects adolescents' educational experiences as well. Students that language broker for their parents suggest that these commitments frequently interfered with their education and even, in some cases, hindered them from completing high school (Founkenfelker et al., 2017). Because of the time commitment and stress that come with language brokering, students are frequently drawn away from studying, which negatively impacts their academic performance (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019).

Parents, similar to adolescents, report negative effects of language brokering. Sometimes parents feel uncomfortable about their reliance on children. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed that they cannot be independent in their language fluency

(Corona et al., 2011). Parents also report that reliance on children in daily life makes them feel less useful in their parenting roles (Martinez et al., 2008). The role reversal that language brokering causes in the parent-child relationship is hard on both the children and the parents (Corona et al., 2011).

One key mechanism through which language brokering impacts parent-adolescent relationships is through levels of language competence. Parental support in education is important, as it significantly predicts adolescents' grades (Aldous, 2006). Yet poor language competence makes it harder for parents to assist their children in educational needs, such as helping with homework. English proficiency and parental involvement in the school system are related to adolescents' educational achievement, cognitive development, language development, and, ultimately, their educational aspirations (Jung & Zhang, 2016; Aldous, 2006). Refugee students report that though they receive an abundance of emotional and financial support from their parents, they experience a significant lack of academic support due to cultural differences or structural barriers (e.g., language barriers, poverty, or lack of experience in the United States educational system, Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). The downward cycle resulting from limited English fluency could create problems for first-generation refugee families. They may have a desire to assist their children in school, but language barriers could get in their way despite a desire to achieve and excel.

As evident, the effects of language brokering on parents and children across studies are mixed likely due to the effects of individual factors such as culture, parent-child relationship quality, and individual characteristics. The emotional support provided by parents can serve as a coping mechanism to help mitigate the added stress adolescents

take on due to their language brokering duties (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009), perhaps because strong parent-child relationships can moderate the magnitude of language brokering difficulties on adolescent development (Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008). The emotional support and open communication that characterizes a strong parent-child relationship are believed to mitigate the difficulties that language brokering causes. Though findings are conflicting on whether language brokering has positive or negative effects on adolescents, it is clear that language brokering is an extremely significant component in their lives that can significantly impact education.

### ***Adapting to a New School System***

In addition to language issues, immigrant children could also have trouble adapting to the new school system. Students struggle to adapt to the non-academic aspects of their educational environment while mastering the academic concepts. Students must find a way to develop their own cultural identity in their new home while still maintaining a strong connection to their family's culture (McBrien, 2005). For adolescents this can be a major struggle as they try to relate to their peers and teachers in an effective way (Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2014).

A sense of "belonging" in school can significantly impact an adolescent's long-term academic achievement and positive attitude toward school. School belonging can be predicted by a variety of parenting factors, including generational status, family income, and family education (Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2014). Because immigrants come to a new place where culture, people, and even language are unfamiliar, their sense of belonging in school is much more likely to be low. Parents may be unable

to help children find their place in educational communities because they are just as new to the American environment as their children.

One important factor that impacts a sense of “belonging” is the discrimination parents and students face. Most often, discrimination negatively affects adolescents’ sense of belonging in their new environment. Discrimination leads adolescents to feel increasingly isolated in their new environment, which can cause negative attitudes towards their educational environment, including having desires to skip school (McBrien, 2005). There are some data to suggest that Arab adolescents may experience unique circumstances during educational experiences when compared to other immigrant or refugee groups. Arab refugees, in particular, are at risk for having a low sense of belonging in school; Muslim individuals are perceived with more prejudice in American culture due to the stereotypical association they have with terrorist groups (McMurtrie et al., 2001; Wingfield & Karaman, 2001). The risks discrimination poses in Arab refugee adolescents’ school performance may be further exacerbated if Arab-American families adhere more strongly to Muslim religious beliefs, particularly if they display outward indicators of their faith such as hijabs, observing prayer rituals, or fasting (Ikizler & Szymanski, 2018; McBrien, 2005). These prejudices cause Muslim refugees to be targeted at a greater rate than other students and higher levels of perceived discrimination are related to decreases in school performance (Tabbah, Chung, & Miranda, 2016). Because perceptions of heightened discrimination may persist for long periods of time, even into post-secondary contexts (Shammus, 2017), there is reason to believe these decreases in school performance may occur over some time.



The impact of discrimination on education may also stem from internal conflicts spurred on by assimilation. Adolescents, specifically those that are frequently the target of discrimination, are torn between their cultural identity and their desire to assimilate into the culture of their American-born peers (Stepick, Stepick, Eugene, Teed, & Labissiere, 2001). This can cause youth inner conflict as well as a conflict within their family unit (McBrien, 2005). Adolescents who identify with their culture have higher academic motivation, and it is foundationally important to refugee parents that their adolescents maintain close ties to their culture (Fuligini et al., 2005). Yet these desires spur on conflict for adolescents, who struggle to balance loyalty to their culture while abandoning or adapting cultural practices in order to adjust to a new culture (Fuligini et al., 2005). Discrimination factors have the potential to affect adolescents' overall feelings regarding their new environment.

### **Educational Strategies for Facing Challenges**

Refugee adolescents must have support to deal with the major challenges they face while adapting to the American school system (Holloway et al., 2014). Parents should be a major source of this support, emotionally, practically, and physically. Parental involvement and expectations can affect adolescents' adaptation both positively and negatively (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; McBrien, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010; Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014).

### ***Parental Involvement***

Parental involvement in education for immigrant, refugee, and native adolescents is directly linked to how adolescents perform, engage, and adapt in school, as well as

their later academic success (Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010; Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016). Parenting factors such as practical support and emotional support can significantly impact adolescents' education. Adolescents who believe their parents can contribute practical support and advice on how they can obtain their future goals are more likely to have high aspirations for their futures and formulate realistic strategies to pursue their dreams (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014). Additionally, high levels of parental emotional support can improve adolescents' self esteem, ability to cope and adjust in situations, and career and educational goals. Even adolescents' grades in school are directly affected by the aspirations that their parents have for them (Chavira, Cooper, & Vasquez-Salgado, 2016). These adolescents internalize their parents' positive feeling about their futures, which allows them to use these positive feelings to inspire their own confidence and motivation to work hard towards their educational goals.

Even so, research suggests this involvement may not translate directly to educational success. Refugee parents seem to support their adolescents emotionally and practically, but fail to support them sufficiently academically (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). Refugee parents report low levels of involvement in their adolescents' education and a lack of awareness regarding the discrimination and other stressors their adolescents experience in educational environments (Frounfelker et al., 2017). This could be due to a variety of factors including language barriers, poverty, or lack of experience in the U.S. educational system (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; Perry, 2014).

For some parents, supporting children in education may be a desire but may not be an option for them (McBrien, 2005). Other parents may simply be unaware of the American custom of parental involvement in the educational system (Perry, 2014). Even

despite the lack of academic support parents provide for their adolescents, parents do still seem to provide frequent motivation for students' success. Students suggest that seeing how hard their parents work for their families to have a chance at success in turn motivates youth to work as hard as they can to succeed in school (McBrien, 2005; Ceballo et al., 2014; Chavira et al., 2016).

While little is known about Arab parents' involvement in their children's education, McBrien (2005) suggests Arab parents highly value their children's education and often have a desire to be actively involved in their children's education. Refugee parents, however, are often discouraged to participate in their children's education by their own fear of being rejected due to their language barriers and culture (McBrien, 2005; Carter, 1999). Their lack of involvement may be due to their own adaptation issues. Unfortunately, parents' difficulty adapting can further exacerbate adolescents' adaptation issues because they are not getting the parental academic support they need, resulting in a cycle of adaptation struggle for the whole family. Much remains to be discovered regarding the specific ways Arab parents may be actively involved in supporting their children's education.

### ***Parental Expectations***

Despite challenges faced among immigrant families, immigrant parents overwhelmingly exceed native-born parents in their expectations and aspirations for their children's futures (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). These high expectations are a result of "immigrant optimism," which is the highly positive expectations parents hold for children's achievement in the American school system. This optimism may have been a result of the motivation to move to America originally, as parents' desire to give their

children the best chance they can to pursue their dreams (Chavira et al., 2016). What is notable, though, is that this optimism seems to somewhat dissipate and become more realistic over time as the families gradually assimilate into American culture (Bodvoski & Durham, 2010).

Immigrant parents strongly emphasize the importance of aspiring to have a better life. For most immigrants, coming to the United States means continuously working hard to achieve their desired standard of living and finding their place in a new society (Holloway et al., 2014). In previous studies primarily focused on Latino populations, immigrant children and parents were found to have congruent career aspirations (Ceballo et al., 2014; Chavira et al., 2016). However, Latino parents emphasized that they believe that their children may choose their own career paths and refrain from steering their children in certain directions.

Parents' continuous hard work to give children the best life possible has the potential to affect adolescents' choices in their academic and career pathways (Ceballo et al., 2014; Chavira et al., 2016). Some immigrant adolescents may even feel that it is their duty to perform well in school and have high aspirations for their future in light of everything their parents have sacrificed. Hearing stories of parents' hard work, challenges, and sacrifices can provide an incentive for children to work harder in school and develop realistic plans to meet parents' goals and their own goals (Ceballo et al., 2014). Parents and adolescents in refugee families seem to have a mutual respect for each other and, therefore, maintain congruent attitudes towards the importance of education and future aspirations. It remains to be seen if such expectations convey to other immigrant and refugee populations.

## **Thesis Statement**

The purpose of my thesis research is to test the hypothesis that the expectations and attitudes of Arab-speaking refugee parents concerning education directly impacts their adolescent children's prioritization of their education and their aspirations for the future. This thesis research project examines interviews from fourteen adolescents and their parents. These refugees are all of Arab decent and have recently relocated to a local town in Tennessee. This project seeks to determine specific challenges that these families face in the American school system; how parents react to these challenges; and how their reactions, attitudes, and expectations ultimately affect their children's aspirations.

## **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

1. What specific challenges do Arab refugee families face when attempting to adapt to the American school system? Based on the current literature, I hypothesize that Arab refugee families will face issues such as language barriers and adapting to a new school system.
2. How do parents attempt to deal with these challenges? Based on the current literature, I hypothesize that parents will deal with these issues with emotional and practical support strategies, which includes encouragement and direct involvement in adolescents' education.
3. What effect do parents' attitudes, expectations, and ideals have on their children's school performance, educational aspirations, and pursuit of career pathways? Based on the current literature, I hypothesize that parents' attitudes, expectations, and ideals are directly linked to their children's school performance, educational aspirations, and pursuit of career pathways. How parents prioritize their

adolescents' education will directly influence how adolescents prioritize their education.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

To conduct this study I use existing, unpublished data collected by my thesis advisor, Dr. Claire Cook. These data examine fourteen Arabic-speaking adolescents, who attend a local high school in Tennessee, and their parents. Most of these families ( $n = 12$ ) are originally from Iraq. All of these families were relatively new to the United States, arriving within the last three years from the date the data were collected. The adolescents ranged in ages from fourteen to eighteen; approximately half were male and half were female. Since this was a relatively small study ( $n = 14$ ), these data should not be considered representative of a whole population, but instead should be considered a case study.

### **Measures**

Adolescents and their parents participated separately in qualitative interviews, which were all conducted by a principal investigator associated with the project and an Arabic speaking translator. All participants, both parents and youth, gave informed consent to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in English, with a translator present. Participants were allowed to speak in their native language if they desired. At a later date, the translator transcribed the participants' answers to English. These data were collected across several months from May 2016 until December 2016. Since these interviews were done fairly recently, no follow-up interviews have been conducted.

### ***Adolescent Focus Groups***

Adolescents participated in focus group interviews during the school day for approximately one hour. During the interviews adolescents were segregated into gender and language groups where they would feel more comfortable opening up. The questions sought to address the adolescents' attitudes on higher education, whether or not their parents support their education, and the challenges that may get in the way of their pursuit of higher education.

### ***Parent Interviews***

Parents participated in in-home interviews, which ranged from thirty to sixty minutes each. The questions sought to address parents' aspirations for their children's higher education and later careers; the challenges they believe they will encounter on their way towards higher education and career pathways; and the supports they can offer them along the way.

### ***Data Analysis***

To begin assessing and analyzing data, I coded the translated interviews. I used constant comparison methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with ATLAS.ti as my coding tool, provided to me by my advisor, to begin seeing trends in the data. I tagged relevant information I found in the data with phrases that corresponded to my research questions. I looked for themes in the data that involved the challenges that immigrant youth face in education, parents' attitudes toward youth's education, and how parents attempt to support their children in education. The themes I found created the framework for my conclusions.

## **Results**

During data analysis major themes in the data were identified. The data seem to suggest that students and parents have completely different perceptions of major challenges faced when adapting to the American school system. Because of these differences in perceptions, the findings are separated into student data and parent data.

### **Challenges Faced When Adapting to the American School System**

The goal was to identify specific challenges Arab refugee families face when adapting to the American school system. The tentative hypothesis was that the families would face challenges such as language barriers and adapting to a new school system. The hypothesis was partially supported because students all faced challenges when adapting to the American school system; however, students and parents experienced different challenges. These data will focus on student challenges first, including language issues, discrimination, and feelings of belonging (see table 1.1).

#### ***Language Issues***

Six out of the eight females interviewed ( $n = 6$ ) and three out of the six males interviewed ( $n = 3$ ) reported experiencing language issues. This study determined that the barrier of language affected students' entire educational experiences in two separate domains, which will be referred to as direct challenges and indirect challenges.

**Direct Challenges.** The direct challenges of language barriers affect students' learning environments, and specifically their social interactions and learning. When discussing these environments, students overwhelmingly felt constraints in the ways they were able to relate and connect to their peers and teachers. One student described how difficult the first experience at school was for her:



I'm still so hard for me because I don't know any English, I don't know anyone, nobody. And when I came the first day at the school, it was so hard for me because when I go to the school nobody that I know. I just like walk. I didn't know where to go. I just tell to the teacher like that, and she just told and I don't understand anything.

Refugee students are in a new environment where they have to begin to build a network of friends. Furthermore, these students have the additional struggle of barely speaking the language their peers speak, which seems to make building these networks extremely daunting. Some students report being judged: "Yeah like the English was hard for me but it's like the people start judging, that's hard," while others experience outright discrimination from their peers because of their lack of English fluency:

When I first came here and I thought it was going to be hard. And the students make fun of me cause I didn't know if I am going to make you know cause of different language and I speaking Arabic since I was young.

It seems this judgment and discrimination creates a hostile social environment that makes it harder for students to create the social networks needed to feel supported in their new home.

Not only can they not relate to their peers, but they also cannot understand their teachers' attempts to help. It seems most of the misunderstanding concerns teachers' attempts to help when they get lost or confused, which affects students' abilities to excel in school. Even after being in the United States for some time and learning English better, students still admit to struggling with some complex words and complicated class concepts:

But you know one time I was asking the teacher because it was like my first year in here and she was like, "you already speaking English so you don't need help." But I was like, I don't understand. Like you know when you reading Biology like there are some like science words that you don't understand. But here there is a lot of teachers that help me and they tutor me like after. Maybe like I go like at free time.

In situations like these when a student's requests for help are rejected, a disconnection in communication with a teacher begins. From students' perceptions, such feelings impact students' learning environment and academic progress.

The struggle for students is the added burden of taking tricky subjects such as Algebra, History, and Chemistry in a language they do not yet completely understand.

One student voiced her frustrations with this struggle:

The hard one is just history. The teacher, he's so nice, but like the topic is so hard because they have like long words and like, World War One. So I don't understand anything. I got the midterm. It's one hundred questions and I don't know any of them.

Even the most well-meaning teachers may see value in completely immersing the students in the language so that they can learn, but for students this could be a major frustration, especially the students that are trying their best to excel. Some students struggle to keep up with all of these learning demands and try to find a way to make it easier:

Sometimes I don't like it here. Like last year, they have the Chemistry class and I have test and I want to translate the words and they said you can't use your time to translate, but I can hardly work if I can't translate. So it's like I can tell I fail the test because you don't like see the questions and I can't answer all.

**Indirect Challenges.** What seems apparent is the impact direct challenges in students' learning environment initiate in indirect challenges such as feelings of isolation, anxiety, and self-consciousness. As students struggle to learn a completely new language, they feel a sense of loneliness: "Yeah, I'm just regular and I was so scared at the beginning, cause I was scared of like of speaking of English. I felt I did not have anything here." Such feelings further spur on isolation because students' attempts to relate to their peers or seek help from their teacher are often unsuccessful. For many, continuing struggles with communication cause students to fear or dread even going to school. A lot

of students used the word “scared” to describe their feelings about the educational experience:

I was scared and at the same time I was happy because I was scared that people will judge me and just look at me different and I didn’t know any English. So that’s why I was scared, but I was happy because I get to run away from the war and stuff.

Unfortunately, this fear, propelled by anxiety and isolation, leads some of the students to self-consciousness motivated by concerns of being judged or rejected by peers based on their lack of language fluency. One student described her first day of school, “It was embarrassing for my school the first day, I didn’t speak that much English.” Isolation is perpetuated with many students fearing social interaction, experiencing difficulty relating to their peers, and ultimately facing fears of judgment from peers due to language fluency. As one student summarized this ultimate pinnacle of isolation, “Yeah like the English was hard for me, but it’s like the people start judging. That’s hard.”

These direct and indirect challenges act as a cycle, creating in students a dread of going to school or even a negative opinion of their new home. Several students mentioned having negative feelings towards their school or new country because of the feelings they felt as a result of language barriers:

Ummm I actually didn’t like it in the beginning because ??? speak English when I first came here. But, I mean, if you ??? the condition much better.... The only thing that I didn’t like was me not able to speak English. Yeah, but that changed.

Even though students continue to have language issues for some time, overtime the feelings of dread surrounding the learning experience seems to dissipate as language gradually improves.

## ***Discrimination***

Students overwhelmingly reported facing discrimination from their peers.

Discrimination issues were brought up frequently among female students ( $n = 6$ ), while only one male student mentioned facing discrimination ( $n = 1$ ). Gender differences in responses may be due to a variety of factors, which will be discussed later. Only two out of the eight female students denied facing discriminatory acts in school, and both of these students had other reasons why this may be the case for them and not others.

Commonalities among all the females and the type of discrimination they faced were striking. There were two types of discrimination present: *overt* and *covert*. These two types of discrimination took many different forms such as harassment, bullying, name-calling, micro-aggression, gossiping, and stereotyping.

Many female students faced harsh, *overt discrimination* in the forms of harassment, bullying, and name-calling. One common experience for female students was being harassed about wearing headscarves:

Some people they take power or something because you know like I'm the only girl with the scarf, so like they say, "why put the scarf," "it ugly," "you look different," "just don't wear it."

Several girls were called "ugly" for wearing their headscarves. One student admitted that even though she acted like these comments did not bother her, when she went home the comments would affect her perceived ability to return to this difficult environment:

"It feels like nobody here like me because when I first came here, for one week I put my scarf on my hair. So I came I was like all scared that people don't like me because I put the scarf in, so I was like, some time when people tell me I was like miss school. They tell like "you ugly. You wear scarf in your hair." So I tell people I don't care So I just kept wearing my scarf, but when I come home I'm so scared about that. Yeah. But I don't care that people don't like me because I put my scarf."

Students seemed to be consistently bullied and singled out for the things that made them different than American students. Their ethnicity, culture, and customs became sources of judgment. This contributed to their already existing anxiety of transitioning into a new country and building a new support network of peers.

Female students also faced *covert discrimination* in the form of micro-aggression and gossiping. Students found that sometimes they were not meant to hear the negative conversations carried out at their expense:

Um, they're nice, I don't know, like nobody's like meant to me, but I like better the ESL students because they understand you. Like some Americans like, if they see you represent they don't say anything, but like, her, they didn't know she was Arabic so they just start talking bad. But when they see like you know they say nothing. Like sometimes you hear in the hallway and they are just like 'oh oh oh. I didn't say anything' and you are just like.... I don't say anything.

Students even picked up on unintentional biases, which resulted in them feeling more isolated, rejected, and judged.

One of the most common types of discrimination the females faced was stereotyping, which was presented in both overt and covert ways. Females experienced *overt stereotyping* in the form of name-calling and harassment:

I just came to class and there's a boy that sits near the back and he'll say bad words like that...about ISIS and stuff. He said like that "I don't like Arabic" and like that. I didn't like it.

Many of the girls mentioned experiencing other students judge them based on preconceived notions of their country or ethnicity: "There were people being mean, they say, 'I hate Arab people, they are all terrorists.'" Girls faced comments like these as well as other assumptions about their ethnicity and culture in a more *overt* way, which usually came across as assumptions or judgments. One female who did not wear her hijab

mentioned how some students assume her ethnicity is not Arabic, so they talk badly about Arabic culture in front of her without realizing the connections:

There are some who think we are from ISIS and all that. Yeah, they will talk about it. In these two classes the student doesn't know me, that I am Arabic, they think that I'm Spanish because I look it, like Spanish. So that's what they keep talking bad about it...and I really didn't like it.

Students are consistently stereotyped for their ethnicity and culture, which causes more feelings of anxiety, isolation, and self-consciousness.

Only one male student mentioned facing discrimination in school. This instance of discrimination was *overt* and concerned language issues:

Yeah and when I first came here and I thought it was going to be hard. And the students make fun of me cause I didn't know if I am going to make you know came. We take everything in Arabic. It was different.

There may be gender and cultural reasons why discrimination is such a gendered finding. Gender differences will be fully addressed later in this section.

### ***Feelings of Belonging***

The majority of female students mentioned feeling some type of lack of belonging in their new school ( $n = 7$ ). These feelings of not belonging in their environment seemed to be fueled by the language issues and discrimination they faced. There were a significant amount of comments mentioning feelings of isolation, anxiety, and self-consciousness. Some of the feelings students felt were due to anxiety that they would be discriminated against or judged before the discrimination or judgment even occurred. Some students reported feeling self-conscious or embarrassed while attempting to adapt to school, which may contribute to their difficult experience finding their path to success.

For many of the female students, their differences set them apart so much it was hard for them to overcome their feelings of not belonging. The combinations of language

barriers with peers and teachers, struggles to succeed in schoolwork, and continuous discrimination in different forms made them feel that they had nowhere to turn. The shock of suddenly being completely immersed in a new culture, language, and environment influenced the students' opinions about their new home. One of the greatest struggles were the students' lack of connections to other students with the same experiences as them:

Oh you meant when they tell us the airplane is getting here on that day and you have to come? I was like happy cause I get to see my uncle and his family, and when I came here like the first week I was happy and stuff like that. But when I got to school in Nashville, like all the students were like mean. Cause like nobody was Iraqi girls, it was just American and Spanish. They all was mean and I hate the school I'm at.

Overall, it seemed that when students found out there were other students with similar experiences at their school, their feelings of belonging improved considerably.

### **Positive Aspects of Adaptation**

Though students mentioned challenging aspects of adaptation into their new environments, these data strikingly revealed that not all students' beliefs about pursuing education were riddled with challenges. Instead, adolescents also mentioned some positive aspects that helped them mitigate their challenges. These discussions were significant and warranted exploration. These positive aspects of educational experiences included safety, teacher support, and more opportunity (see table 1.2).

***Safety.*** Students did mention some positive aspects of living in America compared to their country of origin. Since these students were refugees, they all came to America because of some danger or oppression they faced back home. Some male students ( $n = 4$ ) and female students ( $n = 3$ ) discussed feeling relief and happiness because of the peace they experienced in their new home:

Yeah I like it here cause it's safe here and umm you don't have to worry about like your families and stuff. You know my friends, my family, the good thing is safe here.

Many students had seen death and destruction firsthand because of wars in their countries of origin:

I was happy because the school I was actually in Iraq like it got bombed when I was actually in it. So yeah, I was happy about that.

They experienced fear daily for their family and their own lives; this made the safe environment of America an incredible relief for them even in spite of the transition being an incredibly difficult one:

Yeah, when I came to here I was happy because I went to Syria, we just stay three months over there and move back and then to here one month. And then something happened to my country, like the ISIS and the war and stuff. And my dad says like we have to stay here because it's dangerous over there.

### ***Teacher Support***

Female ( $n = 6$ ) and male ( $n = 5$ ) students both described teachers as positive aspects of their experiences in America compared to their experiences back home. Students described their experiences with teachers in their country of origin as violent and cold:

Yeah, it's better than there. Cause like when they teach there they have to...you have to know it, if you don't know it they like slap you do stuff like that. Yeah they beat you.

Students suggested that teachers in America take a more understanding, patient approach to teaching:

I like teachers too, because they are friendly and they speak to you like a friend, But in my country, no. Teachers are teachers. That's it. Like you don't do your homework they just take, they strike you.

They described their educational experiences in the United States as more positive than their former experiences in their countries of origin because of the differences in how students are treated by teachers:



Student 1: Yeah, like everyday I did my work, if you did your work no one beat you, but if you don't do your work.... (They would beat you?) Yes! Like some time there like cold outside, they just tell "go outside." Yeah like, so cold.

Student 2: That's what I was gonna say, Yeah so like you don't understand something they are way more mean to you, but here they are way more chill. They don't care.

Many students described teachers as friends:

Yeah, like, you can be a friend with your teacher. So, like in my country if the teacher like teacher become like... you can't do it. But here we can follow the teacher, go outside, help, you know.

Overall, students seemed to agree that the difference in teacher approaches in their former countries and America are because of the relationships teachers in America attempt to have with their students. There seemed to be an overwhelming consensus that teachers made an effort to be friendly towards students because of how much they truly care: "A lot of teachers like the class."

The good teacher-student relationships end up positively affecting students' attitudes towards their school and coursework. Students feel supported, so they are more likely to ask for help from their teachers. The positive feelings towards teachers could also be positive motivators for students to continue to attend school and to try their best to succeed.

Because teachers in the U.S. were willing to help, caring, and friendly, students spoke of them with fondness and gratitude: "I like my teachers. Yeah cause they help me a lot. Yeah, I wouldn't be here without them." While refugee students are facing so many challenges in communication, discrimination, and feeling like they belong, the attempts that teachers make to relate to them and help them feel at ease seem to really make an impression. When asked about positive aspects of their lives in America, both male and female students answered these questions with descriptions of how friendly and helpful

their teachers are. Throughout all of the anxiety, self-consciousness, and isolation students feel while adapting to America, teachers seem to be making valuable strides to make them feel more welcome and accepted in their new home.

### ***Opportunity***

Students also noticed a distinction in what they experienced in their country of origin and what they experience in America when it came to their coursework and studies. Some male students ( $n = 2$ ) mentioned feeling freedom in education:

Yeah umm we have like they have like uhh classes that they can take. They have like swimming, art. So you can like uhh choose like science classes and these stuff so yeah. Like you have much space like to see to take what class you want.

This student went on to say that back home they were required to take specific classes and did not have all of these options to choose from. The freedom students feel when choosing their own coursework may translate to choosing what opportunities they would like to pursue after high school. One student directly stated this, “I like the school because you can you are allowed to... go to college and study to be something in the future.”

Despite adolescents’ struggles with adaptation, they seem to formulate healthy educational and occupational goals for their futures (see table 1.3). All of the adolescents interviewed had some plans for their future ( $n = 14$ ). All male students ( $n = 6$ ) and all but one female student ( $n = 7$ ) knew what field they would ideally pursue after high school. All but one student planned to attend college ( $n = 13$ ), and the one that did not want to pursue higher education wanted to join the army. Adolescents’ goals did not end with higher education. They also had lofty goals for their future careers. Most of them wanted to be in the medical field, whether this was in the capacity of a doctor, nurse, pharmacist,

dentist, or surgeon ( $n = 8$ ). Other occupations that were mentioned were engineer, pilot, and fashion designer. The pursuit of higher education was a topic that seemed to be important to most students because all of the students that mentioned future plans had planned to go to college and thought about what kind of career they would pursue.

### **Parents' Experiences**

Parents had completely different perspectives of what the major challenges and positive aspects of adaptation were for both themselves and their adolescents. Despite this, parents seemed to genuinely care about their children's educational success and had a desire to be actively involved in helping them achieve their goals. Parents faced unique challenges. Similar to adolescents, I also found parents described unique benefits to the new educational system. These benefits are discussed along with the challenges, as they seemed very important to participants.

### ***Differences of Student and Parent Impressions***

There were unexpected discrepancies in data when students and parents were asked about the challenges they faced in adapting to the American school system. While students discussed language issues, discrimination, and feelings of belonging, parents barely mentioned these challenges. Parents also had differing opinions when it came to comparing the school system in their former country and the American school system. Parents, instead, discussed completely different challenges that were not mentioned by students at all.

When discussing the issue of language, there were some discrepancies found in parents' opinions. Some parents ( $n = 4$ ) admitted that if language had not been an issue, adaptation would not have been as hard as it was:

Of course if our language was good, very good, we would have adapted immediately and have not faced any difficulties.

Many parents agreed that language was one of the main difficulties of adaptation; however, the parents seemed to dwell less on the isolation, anxiety, and self-consciousness that language issues caused their adolescents. Parents overall seemed to suggest that language issues dissipated over a short amount of time:

The education is very good here of course, for the children and for us. We are have been very comfortable. Also they have learnt a new language very easily. I didn't expect that they will learn English easily and fluently. I mean, thank God.

Parents seem to be less aware of the extent language issues affect their children's learning environment and adaptation.

Parents may have a somewhat more optimistic view of language because they are comparing their own language fluency with adolescents. Overall, students seem to learn English quicker than their parents because of the amount of exposure they have to the language:

Yeah, but I did not communicate with people, therefore, my language did not improve. I mean ammmm how to say? Speak the language fluently, no fluency. I not ammm, I did not communicate with people, so I had difficulties, but my kids learnt it very quickly, and my husband is good. He is better.

Though they do consider language an issue, the lack of awareness of the scale of this issue found in the data could be explained by the downward comparison parents make.

Parents seem to have little to no knowledge of the discrimination their children face in school. Only one parent admitted that their children faced discrimination in America ( $n = 1$ ). The parent that did mention discrimination, when asked if her children experienced bullying as a result of their differences, suggested it was because of the differences in culture:

It happens sometimes. You know that we came here and we are foreigners and we have a saying, “a foreigner should be well behaved.” Therefore we try to be polite to show a positive picture of our culture. You know people are different even inside Iraq, for example I am from the Capital and I am different from people in south. Culture in Iraq is different from place to place. North is different than middle and south.

This parent suggested that discrimination is a result of differences and suggests that their attitude as foreigners can change this, but the discrimination described by students goes over and above something that can be solved by their own attitudes. Parents seem to all around have limited knowledge on the types and extent of discrimination in schools and the way this discrimination affects their adolescents.

Not only do parents not know about the discrimination that is happening, but they even have an optimistic view of how their children are being treated:

God...some time the things that I want to think of or put in mind, I mean, I saw that the school is thinking about it before me. I mean it is really true. I mean even sometime we hear that.... I am afraid.... You know we are Muslim and the Hijab thing (putting scarf on head), it was in my mind that...I am afraid of someone will get them trouble or something like that. But I saw they were good and they welcomed them. It makes you feel comfortable. Basically they are already ahead of me in thoughts better than me.

Some parents even specifically insist that their children are not bullied:

Interviewer: Do you feel that your children are uncomfortable or someone is annoying them in school?

Parent: No, never.

Some parents may be completely uninformed of the discrimination that occurs within school or how alienated this discrimination makes adolescents feel.

### **Challenges According to Parents**

In contrast to the diversity of direct challenges and indirect challenges students faced, parents discussed different direct challenges faced in the American school system; they considered such challenges to be the most important (see table 1.4).

### ***Lack of Resources***

Parents reported a lack of resources to get the help, information, and necessities they need for their children's education and daily lives ( $n = 4$ ). The lack of resources parents have caused them to have a harder time adapting to the United States because they did not know where or how to get the help they needed. These struggles affect adolescents' education because parents are unable to give them sufficient help to succeed in their education and continue their education. Particularly, the complicated processes of getting into college and applying for financial aid is a tough barrier for parents to overcome:

Translator: For this level now, they want college, About colleges they need to collect a lot of information. Which college? Better? How do they get into college? Its hard for them to help. Time, language, everything, its hard. The FAFSA is very long, it is very complicated and they don't know which way they can choose.

Though parents want their children to go to college, parents struggle to help their adolescents with the process of obtaining higher education because they do not know it themselves and, in most cases, their English fluency is not as developed as their children's. To help their children, parents need someone to help them.

Before parents can attempt to understand the information to help their adolescents transition to college, they must determine where to obtain information on college enrollment and financial aid processes. Finding this information can be a struggle for parents. Parents frequently asked the interviewers for this information during the interviews:

Interviewer: So I know the state has some money and for everyone in the state. But it's not that much. But I wonder if even that information is available right? Or understandable.

Translator: Yes, they want that information.

Parent: They don't have 100% experience in everything, and in education, and if you leave us some information about college then they be much better.

Parents are more than willing to do everything in their power to help their children succeed in higher education, but their lack of knowledge of the system or how to get this knowledge is working against them. Some parents admit they have no idea what their children would need to transition to higher education:

Translator: What information or resources you will need to help \*\*\*\*\* to go to college?

Parent: After I came to United States, I was home most of the time. Therefore, I don't know what they will need. They might have to get books or go to library, but you guys will know better than me.

Parents like this one are commonly uninformed because of their own isolation and lack of language fluency.

A common stressor for refugee families is the constant struggle with resources, particularly finances and transportation. The lack of financial stability could be due to a number of factors, but one factor is the job opportunities refugees are presented with when they arrive in the United States. During focus groups, students were asked what their parents occupation was in their former country and what their occupation was in the United States. Answers suggested that only two fathers out of the fourteen families represented had the same job in the United States than they had in Iraq ( $n = 2$ ). One father had no job in the United States and one father was still in Iraq working to support his family. Mothers, on the other hand, overwhelmingly did not join the workforce when they arrived in the United States ( $n = 9$ ). Most of these mothers that chose not to work had also not worked in their countries of origin. This may be a cultural choice or an individualized choice, but, regardless, overall these families overwhelmingly ran a one-income household; their sole income in most cases is either somewhat less or significantly less than what they were accustomed to in their former countries.

For a family already struggling to adjust and adapt to a completely new environment where they are not familiar with the culture, language, or people, financial hardships immediately fuel problems with transportation when it comes to looking towards higher education opportunities for adolescents:

I can't work because I am sick and same thing about her father. She need a car and everything. All our family came here, so we don't have anyone in Iraq could help us financially.

Parents are stuck in a struggle of wanting to help their adolescents attain their aspirations of college and career and juggling the everyday hassles of meeting their families needs financially:

Interviewer: Is there anything you need specifically? You can think of that can really help?

Parent: Money is the first. The first money. Especially during the immigration. You don't have enough, especially for four kids.

For some parents this struggle has the likelihood to completely stop them from providing support for their adolescents to attend college. This is potentially devastating to parents, who are willing to do everything in their power to help their children succeed:

Yes, transportation. I have this daughter and \*\*\*\*\* who need to continue their study. What is stopping me is transportation. It is transportation that is stopping her. This is our problem. She is destroyed, I mean I cry for her. Her life is destroyed because when the person is not studying, getting busy and developing idea and he has a talent, I mean I don't know so I cry. I can't do anything. Nothing is in my hands. If I was in Iraq I would have done something for her.

### ***Differences in School Systems***

Parents seem to have mixed feelings when comparing the school systems from their countries of origin and the school system in America. Though all parents considered the differences to be substantial, responses were mixed when it came to which was better for their adolescents' education. Some parents miss the school system in their countries



of origin and consider the differences in the American school system as negative ( $n = 3$ ).

Even the parents who like the system in America admit that they think the systems in their former countries were stronger than the system in the US:

You asked about the level of education, back there the education is not better, but it is stronger, I mean they give students more value than the teachers...

Parents explained that the differences in the systems boil down to who gets the responsibility for learning, the teachers or the students. Some parents considered putting more learning responsibility on the student to be a strength of their former school systems:

The education in Iraq is better. We studied more, memorize things much more than the teachers. The teachers were only explaining things and all the things were on students, but here everything is on the teachers and the students only came to the class. They get information and go.

Some parents suggested that the American school system and the school systems of their countries of origin differ in their values of what is important to equip children with:

What I noticed here is that schools are focusing on practical part than theoretical as far as I know from my kids. They say that they have labs they work in and they can show their talent there. In Baghdad all the system is theoretical and all pressure is on students. This is what I see is better than our school system in Baghdad. They can help students to show their talent and abilities.

Some parents like that in the United States, their children are able to practice their talents rather than consistently learn information from studying and memorizing; but some think that these aspects of the American school system make it too easy for their children, which inhibits their growth as individuals:

Parent: No, but what \*\*\*\*\* is studying now I already taught him in Syria. Therefore, when he came here he found it too easy for him, so he is doing good.

Interviewer: From your point of view as a teacher do you think what they get in school is good?

Parent: I think it is good. Sometimes I feel like my son \*\*\*\*\* is bigger than doing simple add/subtract problems.

Whether parents like the differences in the American school system or prefer the school system they are used to, all parents seem to struggle to adapt to the new system and feel that their children struggle as well because of the dramatic differences.

### ***Lack of Studying***

Some parents saw their adolescents' tendencies to spend little time studying a major challenge to their education ( $n = 3$ ). Parents voiced frustrations with their adolescents, saying that for them to improve they must work hard and study:

Translator: What do you think your children need to know better about the school system here? ...like time, if they need more time to study English they would be better. This is one of the factors. What else they need to be more successful?

Parent: Yes, if they read and study more, Everyone can improve himself by reading and even there are ways to learn the accent. Science is like ocean, the deeper you swim the more you discover.

Parents whose adolescents struggle with taking time to study try to push their kids to study more often: "\*\*\*\*\* is smart, but he doesn't like school and don't want to study. We always try to push him to study, but he doesn't."

Parents struggle to find the balance between encouraging kids to study so that their education will improve, while simultaneously refraining from pushing them too hard and damaging their parent-child relationships:

Sometimes I get tired of guiding them and their brother helping them. He tell them you have to have good education otherwise you won't get a good job. If you don't study now you will not get used to it and will not be able to study in college.... I don't want to be rough on them and force them to study as it will cause reactions and more problems that make them not willing to study. There should be a balance.

To achieve this balance, parents try to be empathetic to their adolescents' life circumstances:

I understand that they are teenagers and they might have pressure on them especially with moving here. In addition to the different style of life here comparing with Iraq. I try to remind them with our culture, but not push them to a point makes them hate us.

Parents are aware of the struggles adolescents face as they attempt to adapt to a completely new culture and gently try to encourage more studying to preserve a healthy parent-child relationship.

Some parents consider the studying issue a product of the American school system. These parents say that pushing students usually works, but the school system in the U.S. does not do this enough:

Sometimes when you push you children to study it works. He was studying hard. I noticed here they don't push students to study. They focus more on activities, and they do homeworks at school. Even if they do homeworks at home it will not last long, usually it is less than an hour. Back in Iraq was hours of homework's. I was helping him in homeworks as well.

Parents, like students, have a hard time adapting to the completely new school system. They attempt to help their adolescents with adaptation but there are discrepancies in what they choose to target and what their adolescents experience in their adaptation struggles.

### **Parental Support of Education**

I hypothesized that parents would attempt to deal with adaptation challenges with emotional and practical support strategies, which would include encouragement and direct involvement in education. This hypothesis is supported; however, the situation is more complex than originally anticipated. Parents supported their adolescents' education in ways they feel are appropriate and helpful to their children, which includes encouraging students and getting involved when they feel it is helpful. They strive to support their adolescents by providing active involvement and support networks (see table 2.1).

### ***Active Involvement***

All parents mentioned the importance of being actively involved in their children's education ( $n = 6$ ). Whether this involvement consisted of direct actions or simply the desire to be involved more, parents overall seemed to agree that education is important and should be encouraged as much as possible. Encouragement, however, encompassed a broad continuum of helping efforts and differed from parent to parent. Despite this, every parent that mentioned the importance of helping their children in education seemed to put their best effort forward to help their child to succeed.

Parents who want to be actively involved in their adolescents' education have a hard time doing this because of the language barriers. Parents who are used to directly helping students with homework now cannot because of these barriers. They instead result to communicating as much as they can with their adolescent and their school and encouraging or pushing their adolescents to succeed:

Translator: The same subject, you also make sure that she doesn't miss school and help her as much as you can. I know you can't help her with homework because of the language. It was in Arabic and now all of it in English, but you still try to follow her like saying what did you do today?"

Parent: Yes, yes. Even when I was in Iraq they had to tell me everything happened every day.

Because parents cannot directly help as much as they want to or are used to, they frequently communicate with their adolescents to make sure they know what is happening in their education and if they need any support:

Translator: She is asking if you have homework do it, but she is not good in English so she cannot help. But she is asking all the time and making sure everything okay with the school.

Parents also value contact with the school administration. One parent considers teacher-parent communication a positive of the American school system that enriches their children's learning experience:

No, I don't have any problems. I am so happy because some time if my son's level of education is not good or he is making a trouble, then at that time maybe Ms. \*\*\*\*\* will call me. I mean I will be happy to go there any time because it is different from back there. There is nothing like that, they send your son home and tell him to tell you that bring some money or the school need some stuff like refrigerator or this and this.

Though some parents are pleased with the amount of contact the school has with them, one parent mentioned that wished she had more contact with the school:

Although here there isn't any discrimination, but I feel they only need encouragement to progress better. How to say, like pursuit. Like I don't know about how are they in school. Do they doing good? Are they good today? Does the teacher give them any note? So these I don't know about it at all, and you know student are lazy about these things or they hide it from their family. So nobody follow them up. Like telling them why yesterday you were not good and today you should be better. So I don't know these things and I want to be aware about their progress with the teachers. I mean parents should be notified. I mean either writing it or send someone to tell us. I don't want to be surprised on their results.

Regardless of whether their experiences with school contact have been positive or negative, parents value this contact as an important way to support their children's education.

### ***Support networks***

Outside support from family, the community, and helping organizations seemed to be important to parents ( $n = 3$ ). Many mentioned the importance of this support in their children's education. Parents utilized their families, their communities, the helping agencies involved in their resettlement, and their children's school staff to help their children in their education. They were overwhelmingly open to accept help from anyone that would offer it to them. Family and community seemed to be particularly important to

families when it came to receiving help. One parent stated that “only cooperation with the family” would help their children be successful in college. Family support can be hard for these families who have had to leave a lot of their family behind out of the necessity of protecting their children. One parent explained that the refugee community is very supportive of each other:

Interviewer: And who helps them do that?

Translator: Anyone helps them and who they are?

Parent: The people came here before them.

Interviewer: Oh, so it's within the community?

Parent: Yes, people help each other.

Parents frequently mentioned how thankful they are for the resettlement agencies that helped them. They were thankful for the helping services that these agencies provided, but also for the community they got to experience because of their connection with these agencies:

We face difficulties cause we had never been in another country before. We came to a country which is different in your way of thinking and languages. We didn't know when we go to, ammm, not many people came here. I mean there number wasn't... so when the Catholic church brought us to here to the compound where only one Iraq person was there, so it was good that he helped us. So these were the difficulties, but then you know we saw how the organization is helping and welcoming people, so many things were changed. I mean you become comfortable cause like when someone come here, like when you came here and told me what your son needs, so I became comfortable when someone tells me this and this. I mean you can speak freely and comfortably.

Not only were these families welcomed to the United States by people striving to help them, they were also introduced to a community of people, of various family structures, with similar backgrounds. These efforts help families to feel at ease in their new homes and are strategies for making adaptation as smooth as possible.

## **Challenges of Parental Support**

Though parents voiced a desire to support adolescents in their education, they faced challenges when attempting to support their adolescents (see table 2.2)

### ***Language Fluency***

Though all parents considered helping children in their education to be important, they admitted that this was difficult for them because of their limited language fluency ( $n = 3$ ).

Parents struggle because they do not have the ability to help their children with homework:

Parent: Because in Iraq they were excellent in school... because me and their father were teaching them. I were teaching them, I mean never left them, but here you know my language is not... I mean I stopped with them.

Interviewer: It is difficult when there is a language difference, isn't it?

Parent: Yes.

Not only are parents unable to help adolescents with homework, but they also have a hard time providing them help with information on higher education because of their lack of resources or knowledge of where to find resources. This lack of ability to help could make parents feel that they cannot adequately put their best foot forward to assist their adolescents in their educations.

### **Parents' Hopes for Adolescents**

I originally hypothesized that parents' attitudes, expectations, and ideals are directly linked to their children's school performance, educational aspirations, and pursuit of career pathways. This hypothesis was supported. Overall, all parents did have specific goals for their adolescents that included higher education ( $n = 6$ ) (see table 3.1). Some parents mentioned that higher education and career opportunities for their children was a leading factor in settling in the United States:

Translator: After high school, what would you like her to do?

Parent: Go to college. We left our country and came to America because we want a bright future for our children.

Parents want the opportunities they did not have themselves for their children: “I wanted all of them go to college because I didn’t, and I wish all of them go to college.” Parents also believe that in the United States, despite their adaptation challenges, their children will have these opportunities with their hard work:

Parent: I wish for them to get the highest certificates. Because we are now in a place which encourages those things. There is freedom here, so they should get the highest certificate here.

Parent 2: I will work hard.

Translator: You are trying, right!

Parent: You only need to work hard

Though all parents strongly desired their adolescents to pursue higher education after high school, some parents felt strongly that their adolescents ought to pursue careers in the medical field as either pharmacists, surgeons, doctors, or dentists ( $n = 3$ ). Some parents said this was because of culture:

Surgeon. Yeah. In our country, our tradition calls, we always want our children to be physician. Or surgeon. Or engineering.

Other parents wanted their children to go into the medical field because they felt that they were smart, had qualities and values that would fit, or wanted to be in that profession:

No, they will choose what they want. But \*\*\*\*\* love taking care of children, that’s why I would like her to be pediatrician. For \*\*\*\*\* , I like him to be engineer because he is good with math.

Even parents that had specific careers that they wanted their children to pursue admitted that they want their adolescents to ultimately choose their path in life. Most parents prioritized their adolescents’ wishes for their future over anything else ( $n = 5$ ).



For most parents it was obvious that they would let their children ultimately choose their paths in life:

Translator: Do you think that you will leave the decision to them or you will help them in this?

Parent: I will help them of course, but it will be their decision and what they desire. It will be their choice to where they can see themselves, and with my help too.

Parents seemed to recognize the value of giving their adolescents the independence to make these decisions for their own lives. Some parents mentioned that undue pressure on children to have certain goals may not be in their best interest:

In Iraq most parents like their children to be either engineers or doctors...hhhhhh maybe in all Arabic Countries or Middle East. I think if someone has talent he could be successful in any field he choose. I don't want to force my kids to choose a specific specialty that they don't like. Because they might fail in the specialty that I choose for them and be successful in what they likes.

Most parents hoped to give their children the freedom to choose what they wanted to do according to their talents, values, and desires.

Overall, whether parents wanted specific careers for their children or not, parents seemed to offer their adolescents as much support as they could in attaining their future goals:

Translator: She see that you are letting them to decide what they love. They want to finish college or not and you gonna help them in this?

Parent: Of course, yes.

The parents overall support of children seemed to be communicated to children. A lot of students felt that their parents would support them in whatever decisions they made for their future. This knowledge gave students the freedom to explore themselves and decide what they wanted to do:

In the beginning they just tell me, "what do you want to be? Do what you want." I don't know what I wanna be. I want to find something I'm really good at and do that.

What parents think mattered to these adolescents. Their parents' desires for them to pursue higher education along with their support seemed to be strong motivators for them:

I have the same comment. My parents tell, "do it! Yeah, go for it!" So I want them to feel good, so I will go to college.

Because the influence parents' desires have on adolescents is so strong, parents' desire for adolescents to navigate their own paths is pivotal. Even adolescents who thought their parents had a specific career in mind for them knew that their parents ultimately left that choice up to them:

Student: They want me to go to college.

Interviewer: Do they want you to major in anything specific or how do they feel about that?

Student: Ummm I actually like uhhhh dental hygentist. Yeah, but they like, they I mean, didn't ask me to chose a major. Yeah, that's just uhhh something I'd like to do.

Interviewer: And why do you think they let you, they didn't ask you to choose a major?

Student: I mean they, they are not going to ask me to do something that I don't like.

## **Discussion**

The themes in the data suggest that parents and adolescents face completely different challenges while adapting to their new environment. Because of these differences, parents support children in ways that may not be as beneficial to them as other forms of support would be. However, parents still continue to support their adolescents with their positive attitudes and high prioritization of their education. Adolescents, in turn, have positive attitudes and aspirations for their own futures. However, research suggests that refugee adolescents pursue higher education at a much lower rate than their native-born peers (Lumina Foundation, 2016; Lopez & Radford,

2017). This suggests that the situation is more complex than it may seem, and that the challenges of adaptation that refugee adolescents face are more difficult to resolve or they simply do not get the supports that they need from parents in order to resolve such adaptation challenges. Parents and adolescents would benefit from a deeper understanding of their current educational environments.

### **Adolescent Perspective**

Adolescents identified several challenges and supports that affected them in their educational adaptation process. Despite their challenges, they remained optimistic about their futures in both their career and higher education goals.

### ***Challenges Versus Supports***

Findings suggest that adolescents face both challenges and supports while adapting to a new country and a new school system. Their supports contribute to their optimism about their future and their ability to form healthy educational and career goals. However, it seems that their challenges, combined with the unique challenges their parents face which inhibit parents' abilities to support their children and inversely cause adolescents to offer support to their parents, become greater perceived barriers to maintaining these goals. These cumulative challenges eventually overwhelm adolescents and ultimately result in a struggle to accomplish the dreams they had for their education and careers. Direct challenges that students faced in their assimilation processes due to discrimination and language barriers contributed to a general feeling of not belonging in their new environments. This indirect challenge may place undue stress on the adolescents as they struggle to adapt to their new environments (Hernandez, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2014).

### ***Adolescents' Motivation***

The support and freedom of choice that parents give adolescents to choose their future goals motivates adolescents to pursue their dreams of higher education and future careers. Even so, adolescents struggle to adapt to their new culture, while still maintaining a healthy optimism about their future. This seems difficult for adolescents, perhaps because these data suggest parents and adolescents adapt to a new culture at very different paces. Adolescents feel pressure to help their parents adapt (e.g., serving as language brokers) and fail to articulate to parents the ways in which they need support during their adaptation process. Parents, in effect, are unaware of the struggles adolescents face. It would be easy for struggling adolescents to be discouraged because of the discrimination and language issues they face daily (McBrien, 2005; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; Founkenfelker et al., 2017), but instead they press forward. Somewhere adolescents are getting a motivation to move forward to formulate and attain their dreams.

Despite adolescents' motivation to work hard and achieve their future higher education and career goals, prior research still suggests that refugees pursue higher education at a much lower rate than their American-born peers (Lumina Foundation, 2016; Lopez & Radford, 2017). This suggests that though refugee adolescents' supports help them to remain optimistic about their future in spite of their challenges, their challenges prove to be greater perceived barriers that inhibit them from attaining their goals. They have the potential and the desire to pursue their higher education and career goals, but financial problems, familial loyalty, and lack of opportunity outweighs these desires and become adolescents' main priorities as they age (McBrien, 2005).

## **Differences in Adolescent and Parent Perspectives**

Previous literature suggests that an important factor for refugees in making the choice to move to America is their desire to give their family a better life (Chavira et al., 2016).

Parents frequently mentioned their desires for their adolescents to have more opportunities than they had:

No, I didn't go to school. So I want for my kids, I mean I want for them ammm because I am like someone who lost something.

Once refugee families arrive in America, however, adaptation is extremely challenging for each member of the family (McBrien, 2005; Corona et al., 2011). Adolescents mentioned unique challenges that their parents were either unaware of or could not help them with. Though parents seem to have a desire to help their adolescents adapt, the differences in the challenges they face, the lack of communication between parents and adolescents, and the parents' own needs of adaptation get in the way of parents providing helpful support. Adolescents are not only faced with their challenges of adaptation, they must also help their parents with the unique adaptation struggles their parents face as well.

Parents were a key supportive factor in adolescents' positive outlook towards education. Refugee adolescents grow up with an awareness of how important their education is to their parents. Refugees often leave their country to give their children a chance to have a better life with more opportunity (Chavira et al., 2016). Refugee parents are open to the possibilities this educational future can create; They do not pressure their children to chose a specific career course, but encourage them to pursue their dreams no matter what they are.

Despite the positive attitudes parents give adolescents towards education, adaptation struggles are an obstacle. Adolescents' assimilation process proceeds at a significantly faster rate than their parents when it comes to their language transition and beliefs, somewhat due to adolescents' desire to fit in with their peers (McBrien, 2005). This tension in adaptation challenges can affect adolescent's experience with education and pursuit of higher education because they may not be receiving the help they need. Though adolescents seem to get the emotional support they need from parents, they suggest that they get little to no academic support, which may be due to cultural or structural differences such as language barriers, poverty, or lack of experience in U.S. education system (Omori & Kishimoto, 2019).

### ***Explanation of Differences***

The differences in data on the challenges adolescents face while adapting to the American school system may be due to underreporting by adolescents. Overall, it seemed that parents had no information when it came to the emotional state of their adolescents. Only one parent mentioned the emotional state of his/her adolescent at all and the description was rather generic and broad:

According to what she told us, she was suffering after we moved to Smyrna as well as Islam and Ahmad. The difference in education system and grades made that difficulty, but after that things were good.

Emotional under-sharing between adolescents and parents is not uncommon from any population or demographic (Comstock, 1994). Adolescents may have neglected to tell their parents the extent of the language, discrimination, and feelings of belonging issues they were having in school for a number of reasons unrelated to adaptation.

Furthermore, this emotional under-sharing between parents and adolescents could potentially be exacerbated by the unique culture of the participants. This emotional under-sharing may also be exacerbated by the unique challenges of stress and change the population faces as they adapt to their new environments. Further studies should explore the emotional sharing process between parents and adolescents in refugee populations.

Because adolescents and parents have stark differences in what they perceive as the main challenges when adapting to the American school system, adolescents are not getting the support they need from their parents. According to these findings, parents believe that a main challenge for adolescents is their lack of studying. Some parents may feel that this is a lack of focus or discipline in their adolescents, whereas this may not be the case at all. Adolescents mention struggling with complicated concepts in advanced classes due to language issues. What parents may perceive as a lack of studying or focus in adolescents may actually be adolescents' constant struggle with developing their English fluency while learning new concepts. Because of a communication breakdown between adolescents and parents, already frustrated adolescents will not get the emotional support they need to continue strengthening their English. They will instead be put under more strain because their parents do not know this issue and are pressuring them to work harder. This could potentially cause adolescents to become disillusioned of their own higher education and career goals and cause them to pursue them with less optimism (Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Morales & Hanson, 2005).

Parents and adolescents seem to have the same goals for the future. They all have a desire to see students succeed in high school, pursue higher education, and, ultimately, be happy in the careers that they choose. Everything adolescents and parents do to

resolve challenges is geared towards these shared goals. The problem is the miscommunication of what adolescents experience. For example, adolescents are left on their own to deal with the emotional strain that discrimination has on them because parents are unaware that this happens at all. It is important for adolescents and parents to get on the same page when it comes to the adaptation challenges they face in order for adolescents to get the support they need to succeed.

### ***Language Brokering***

Language barriers create a power shift of parents helping adolescents to adolescents helping their parents. Because younger brains have more elasticity to absorb and apprehend a new language and students have greater exposure to English, adolescents overwhelmingly improve their English fluency much more rapidly than their parents (Brien, 2005). This causes the power shift of adolescents being the helpers in their families because they are commonly used as translators and liaisons between their parents and others (Frounfelker et al., 2016; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019; Corona et al., 2011; Martinez, 2009). Parents wish to improve their English fluency, but it is hard for them. Parents are caught in a struggle where it is difficult for them to get employment because of their language, but it is also hard for their language to improve as a result of lack of exposure:

Translator: She is telling you that it is difficult for you because you did not work, if you have worked you would have spoken more, but because you stay home, it is difficult for you.

Parent: Yes, of course it is difficult. I wish to communicate with people and work, and I wish I can improve my language. This is my wish.

Parents are then put in a situation where they cannot help their adolescents in their education to the capacity they want to, and instead are forced to have their adolescents



help them with language adaptation. This can ultimately affect adolescents' educational experiences whether parents mean for that to happen or not.

Because of adolescents' faster rate of assimilation, they are usually responsible for acting as translators for their parents, which sometimes affects their education:

I mean, back there when you tell your son, today don't go to the school, he feels happy, but here when I tell him, for example today.... I mean sometime I need him or his mother does, we need him for example translating for us at the doctor and something like that, he become upset and say no I want to go to school. I mean there is love. When someone loves something it means it is good. So there is something different.

Not only can language brokering affect adolescents' education, it could also affect their feelings. Adolescents already feel isolated, anxious, and self-conscious about their own language issues, but now they are solely responsible for their parents' communication as well as their own. Youth who are trying to adjust to a new country and a new language can experience strain when they are relied on to act as a language broker for their parents. Students admit that, though language brokering does have a mixture of positive and negative effects, it does give them more anxiety and stress (Corona et al., 2011; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019) These commitments to be solely responsible for their family's social world interfere with their education and even, in some cases, their chances to complete high school (Frounfelker et al., 2016; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). The role-reversal that refugee families experience, with parents now being reliant on children, can negatively affect the family unit (Corona et al., 2011). Adolescents have undue stress that they must overcome which affects their learning environments and ultimately their futures.

Despite all of the negative effects that language brokering has on adolescents, findings are conflicting on the effects it may have on the adolescent-parent relationship.

Some studies suggest that language brokering brings parents and adolescents closer with a unique bond (Perry, 2014; Omori & Kishimoto, 2019). Other studies suggest that language brokering can cause adolescents and parents an emotional struggle because of the role reversal that accompanies it (Martinez, 2008; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). Despite the conflicting findings in previous literature, it is clear that language brokering is a complex system that affects adolescents in their daily lives, and, ultimately their futures.

### **Examination of Relevant Contexts**

Each of these conclusions must be reviewed within unique contexts. Findings were radically different for each gender and were also affected by the unique culture being examined. It is important to consider each of these contexts when examining these conclusions.

### ***Gender Differences and Culture***

The discussions of students' challenges at school all showed a distinct, significant gender difference. Across the board, females seemed to be more open to sharing about their struggles than males did. Only three male students interviewed spoke about any challenges faced ( $n = 3$ ), and only one out of these males discussed more than one challenge ( $n = 1$ ). Even though males did not mention experiencing discrimination or feelings of not belonging, these issues may still be present. They may have not been as open due to cultural or gender differences or these problems may not affect them as strongly as they affect the female students emotionally (Darakchi, 2018).

The under-sharing attributed to male students may be due to culture. In some Arab cultures it is not customary for males to talk openly with females (Darakchi, 2018).

Since the interviewers and translator present were all females, this could be a contributing factor to the discrepancy between female and male sharing. The Arab culture may discourage males from openly sharing their emotions or feelings.

Gender differences in sharing could also be a result of differences in the unique female and male students present. The female students seemed to be more talkative and open to sharing overall, while males commonly declined to answer questions or did not answer as in-depth as females did. Some male students may have been open to sharing, but reconsidered their own answers based on the other males in the focus group. Males are commonly pressured by societal norms to contain their emotions, which may have been a factor in the under-sharing of males, especially in the presence of their peers (Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 2003; Luo, Wang, Jin, Huang, Xie, Deng, Fang, Zheng, Chen, Li, Jiang, & Zheng, 2014). In contrast, less talkative females may have been encouraged by the examples of the females that shared openly and took the discussion in the direction of discrimination and lack of belonging topics, whereas the conversation with the males was not steered in the direction of these certain topics.

### ***Immigrant Versus Refugee Distinction***

It is also important to note that this study examined refugee populations, which are unique to immigrant populations in their life experiences, values, and motivators. Refugee families are motivated to leave their countries of origin out of necessity. They have a desire to get their families away from the dangers they face and give them a chance at a better life (Chavira et al., 2016). They also have frequently experienced significant amounts of trauma, which can cause major differences in adolescent development and overall life outlook (McBrien, 2005). This study should not be

generalized to apply to both populations but should instead be utilized to add to the much-needed literature for the under-researched population of refugees.

## **Future Directions**

### ***Intervention Strategies***

The key to helping refugee adolescents and their families overcome these barriers is to target intervention programs at the source of their adaptation and assimilation challenges. Findings tell us that adolescent and parent challenges are different and proceed at differing rates, which means interventions should be targeted towards the entire family unit during their assimilation process (Martinez et al., 2009; Frounfelker et al., 2016). The goal of intervention strategies should be for parents and adolescents to work together towards their common goal of becoming comfortable in their new home by acclimating to the new language and environment while still maintaining their own cultural sense of identity (Martinez et al., 2009; Frounfelker et al., 2016; McBrien, 2005).

Part of the interventions geared towards helping parents and adolescents adapt to their new home should address language issues for both parents and adolescents. These interventions should be aimed at helping both parents and adolescents to be independently comfortable in their English fluency. The goal for both parents and adolescents is that they will be comfortable in their individual abilities to comprehend and engage in the English language without reliance on each other. Though this is the goal, it is important for language interventions to involve interactions between parents and adolescents. Since findings suggest that parents and adolescents are frequently not of the same mind when it comes to their unique challenges, the connection of learning

together may facilitate an opportunity for bonding (Martinez et al., 2009; Frounfelker et al., 2016; McBrien, 2005).

Further interventions should be aimed at providing parents and adolescents information on higher education such as scholarships, application processes, financial aid, and transportation means. Findings support that this lack of information and the lack of knowledge on where to obtain this information is a barrier for parents when supporting their adolescents' pursuit of higher education goals (McBrien, 2005). These interventions should be specifically targeted towards parents. It is important for them and their adolescents that parents are more actively involved in their adolescents' education (McBrien, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009). Their support is meaningful to their adolescents as well as themselves. More research would need to be done on the best ways of relaying this information to refugee families. Some options could be having classes within high schools for refugee adolescents and their parents or using resettlement agencies to facilitate these classes.

### ***Future Research Directions***

There is a significant lack of research that distinguishes the differences between refugee and immigrant populations (McBrien, 2005). These two demographics are significantly different when it comes to what they have experienced in their countries of origin and their resettlement processes and what their motivators were to resettle in America. Refugees have often been exposed to a significant amount of trauma in their countries of origin and are forced to leave out of their fear and desire to give better lives to their families. Refugees have been researched significantly less than the immigrant population. Similarly, Arab refugees are under-represented in research literature

(McBrien, 2005). Their experiences as refugees are unique to others because of their differing cultural backgrounds (McBrien, 2005). Arab refugees also face harrowing discrimination because of terrorism stereotypes and biases in the United States (McBrien, 2005). These factors could significantly impact their opportunities and experiences in the educational adaptation processes and need to be studied further.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that the data were collected before the last presidential election. The election of President Trump has brought about significant changes in immigration policies that are worthy of mentioning. These data will likely portray a somewhat more optimistic picture of immigrants' struggles in American society than if these data were captured in our current political climate. The increased stigmatization attached to immigration, however, may make these data even more useful than they were before. This research could potentially raise awareness of the challenges faced by a demographic that has largely been marginalized.

This research is also limited by the lack of previous research done on Arab refugees and refugees in general. Because of the lack of research on the population this study is focused on, previous research used to support this study had to be adapted to include both refugee and immigrant groups in all cultures. Generalizations were avoided as much as possible, but the lack of research made them impossible to avoid completely. This limitation should be considered when reviewing these data, and distinctions between population groups should be made in future literature.

## **Contributions**

This study has the potential to add new dimensions to the field of Child Development and Family Studies. The core of the Child Development and Family Studies field is built on how interpersonal relationships, along with environmental and contextual factors, have the potential to shape individuals' lives and development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This study could add to existing literature on the significance of parenting for educational success in an individual's life. It could also provide data that will assist larger-scale movements that seek to help adolescents achieve higher education in order to improve their later lives, as well as the economic well-being of America (Drive to 55 Tennessee, 2018). By narrowing this study to a certain demographic (i.e., high-school aged adolescents of Arab refugee families) and a certain aspect of life (i.e., education), we have the potential to examine multiple factors in a closer, more thorough way. The uniqueness of this research could help us understand what effect parenting has on how adolescents of refugee families prioritize their education.

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## Appendices

Table 1.1 Themes for Educational Challenges Faced by Arab Refugee Families	
Adolescent Challenges	Theme Example
Language issues ( $n = 9$ )	<p>“I’m still so hard for me because I don’t know any English, I don’t know anyone, nobody. And when I came the first day at the school, it was so hard for me because when I go to the school nobody that I know. I just like walk. I didn’t know where to go. I just tell to the teacher like that, and she just told and I don’t understand anything.”</p>
Discrimination ( $n = 7$ )	<p>“I just came to class and there’s a boy that sits near the back and he’ll say bad words like that...about ISIS and stuff. He said like that ‘I don’t like Arabic’ and like that. I didn’t like it.”</p>
Feelings of belonging ( $n = 7$ )	<p>“But when I got to school in Nashville, like all the students were like mean. Casue like nobody was Iraqi girls, it was just American and Spanish. They all was mean and I hate the school I’m at.”</p>

Table 1.2 Themes for Educational Challenges Faced by Arab Refugee Families	
Adolescent Supports	Theme Example
Safety ( $n = 7$ )	“Yeah I like it here cause it’s safe here and umm you don’t have to worry about like your families and stuff. You know my friends, my family, the good thing is safe here.”
Teacher Support ( $n = 11$ )	“I like teachers too, because they are friendly and they speak to you like a friend, but in my country, no. Teachers are teachers. That’s it. Like you don’t do your homework they just take, they strike you.”
Opportunity ( $n = 2$ )	“I like the school because you can you are allowed to...go to college and study to be something in the future.”

Table 1.3 Themes for Educational Challenges Faced by Arab Refugee Families		
Adolescent Aspirations		
Student	College	Career
#1	Yes	Medicine
#2	Yes	Doctor
#3	Yes	Doctor
#4	Yes	Unspecified
#5	Yes	Doctor
#6	Yes	Engineer
#7	Yes	Unspecified
#8	Yes	Fashion
#9	Yes	Surgeon
#10	Yes	Dental
#11	Yes	Doctor
#12	No	Army
#13	Yes	Pilot
#14	Yes	Pharmacy

Table 1.4 Themes for Educational Challenges Faced by Arab Refugee Families	
Parent Challenges	Theme Example
Lack of resources ( $n = 4$ )	“I can’t work because I am sick and same thing about her father. She need a car and everything. All our family came here, so we don’t have anyone in Iraq could help us financially.”
Differences in school systems ( $n = 3$ )	“The education in Iraq is better. We studied more, memorize things much more than the teachers. The teachers were only explaining things and all the things were on students, but here everything is on the teachers and the students only came to the class. They get information and go. ”
Lack of studying ( $n = 3$ )	“***** is smart, but he doesn’t like school and don’t want to study. We always try to push him to study, but he doesn’t.”

Table 2.1 Themes for Parental Support of Education	
Parental Support	Theme Example
Active Involvement ( $n = 6$ )	“She is asking if you have homework do it, but she is not good in English so she cannot help. But she is asking all the time and making sure everything okay with the school.”
Support Networks ( $n = 3$ )	“So these were the difficulties, but then you know we saw how the organization is helping and welcoming people, so many things were changed. I mean you become comfortable.”

Table 2.2 Themes for Parental Support of Education	
Challenges of Parental Support	Theme Example
Language Fluency ( <i>n</i> = 3)	<p>Parent: “Because in Iraq they were excellent in school... because me and their father were teaching them. I were teaching them, I mean never left them, but here you know my language is not...I mean I stopped with them.”</p> <p>Interviewer: “It is difficult when there is a language difference, isn’t it?”</p> <p>Parent: “Yes.”</p>

Table 3.1 Themes for Parents’ Aspirations Linked to Adolescents’ Aspirations		
Parents’ Hopes for Adolescents		
Parent	Adolescents’ Higher Education	Adolescents’ Career
#1	Yes	Their choice
#2	Yes	Doctor, but their choice
#3	Yes	Their choice
#5	Yes	Pharmacy, but their choice
#7	Yes	Surgeon
#8	Yes	Their choice

## IRB

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Office of Research Compliance,  
010A Sam Ingram Building,  
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



### IRBN007 – EXEMPTION DETERMINATION NOTICE

Wednesday, September 04, 2019

Principal Investigator **Elinore Thibodeaux** (Student)  
Faculty Advisor J. Claire Cook  
Co-Investigators NONE  
Investigator Email(s) *ect2s@mtmail.mtsu.edu; claire.cook@mtsu.edu*  
Department Department of Human Sciences

Protocol Title ***The educational aspirations of adolescents from refugee families:  
Parents' attitudes and expectations affect their children's goals***  
Protocol ID **19-1282**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXEMPT** review mechanism under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) within the research category (4) *Study involving existing data*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action	<b>EXEMPT from further IRB review***</b>	Date	<b>9/4/19</b>
Date of Expiration	<b>8/31/2020</b>		
Sample Size	50 (FIFTY)		
Participant Pool	<b>Interview notes collected from a previous non-research purpose sampling of minors and their parents from Smyrna High School</b>		
Exceptions	1. Online informed consent is approved as described in the protocol. 2. An abbreviated Informed Consent script is allowed for the post-test		

- Changes to the research location must be approved – appropriate permission letter(s) from external institutions must accompany the addendum request form
- Changes to funding source must be notified via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- The exemption does not expire as long as the protocol is in good standing
- Project completion must be reported via email ([irb\\_submissions@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_submissions@mtsu.edu))
- Research-related injuries to the participants and other events must be reported within 48 hours of such events to [compliance@mtsu.edu](mailto:compliance@mtsu.edu)

### Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

The current MTSU IRB policies allow the investigators to make the following types of changes to this protocol without the need to report to the Office of Compliance, as long as the proposed changes do not result in the cancellation of the protocols eligibility for exemption:

- Editorial and minor administrative revisions to the consent form or other study documents
- Increasing/decreasing the participant size

**Only THREE procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel.**

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all applicable post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, current & past investigator information, training certificates, survey instruments and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice.