

## **Abstract**

Title of Document: CHOICE IN TURBULENT TIMES:  
A CASE STUDY OF REFUGEE STUDENT EXPERIENCES  
IN QUASI-MARKETIZED EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Across the face of the globe, there have been unprecedented levels of migration from men, women and children who have been displaced due to political, economic, or religious persecution. Nearly half of the 70.8 million people that are forcibly displaced globally are school-aged children under the age of 18. In the context of the United States, a portion of the refugees granted status are resettled to urban areas whose school districts implement varying degrees of school-choice, market-based educational reform. Especially for those refugee families which are newcomers to the district/marketplace, the process of selecting a specific school is likely wrought with gaps in information and/or misunderstandings regarding educational pathways. Coupling actor-network theory with critical theory, this dissertation focuses on refugee students' experiences navigating, accessing, and attaining desired curricular opportunities within Saint Louis Public Schools (SLPS)—a large, quasi-marketized, school-choice district in St. Louis, MO. Using narrative inquiry, rich data were gathered from refugee

participants regarding their pre-and post-resettlement educational experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Analysis of participant narratives revealed a parallel process of school-choice for many refugees and several crucial findings emerged that highlight the extent to which refugee students' understandings regarding school options and educational pathways are rendered (in)visible for some, are racialized for others, and further demonstrates how underlying inequalities already present in under-resourced, urban school districts are often exacerbated by the introduction of neoliberal notions of choice and competition.

*Keywords:* refugee education, urban education, school-choice, neoliberalism, actor-network theory, education-in-emergencies

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EDUCATION SYSTEMS

by

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## **Dedication**

As I write this, I feel compelled to revisit my own educational trajectory and how it led me to choose to focus my doctoral research at the intersection of school choice and refugee education in St. Louis. There are numerous actors that have provided guidance and support through this journey. This dissertation would not have been possible without their patience, understanding, and encouragement. Thus, I dedicate this work to the main actor, my spouse, for her willingness to take on additional responsibilities during my doctoral pursuits and for always being present through the peaks and troughs. To the supporting actors which include my two children, I thank you for those shared moments of profound love and levity which allowed me to recognize that although this dissertation is the result of a lengthy process, you two remain the ongoing focus of my life's work. Finally, I would like to dedicate this study to the other cast members which include my advisor Dr. Jing Lin, my father, Dr. Thomas Reedy, and the International Education Program coursework for deconstructing the positivist mindset that I held when I entered and exposing me to alternative modalities of seeing our world.

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## List of Acronyms

ACCESS	Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State
ANT	Actor-Network Theory
AVID	Advancement Via Individual Determination
CRT	Critical Race Theory
EEO	Equality of Opportunity
EiE	Education in Emergencies
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ELL	English Language Learners
GEM	Global Education Monitoring
HBS	High School & Beyond
IISTL	International Institute of St. Louis
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
INA	Immigration and Nationality Act
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPP	Obligatory Point of Passage
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Achievement
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
R&P	Reception and Placement
SLPS	Saint Louis Public Schools
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Math
STS	Science and Technology Studies
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
USCIS	United States Citizen and Immigration Services
USCRI	United States Committee on Refugees and Immigrants
VICC	Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Cooperation
VOLAG	Voluntary Agency
WF	Wilson-Fish

## Chapter I: Introduction

“What high school did you go to?” is a colloquial question often posed between individuals of all ages who have resided in and around St. Louis, MO, USA. During these formative years, it can be interpreted as an innocuous icebreaker or a duplicitous appeal that leads to sweeping generalizations about status, social station, and identity. In a recent video<sup>1</sup> promotion, American Actor and St. Louis native Jon Hamm, called it “the defining question for every person from St. Louis” before gloating that he “went to the best one” (Vanity Fair, 2019). This question is so entrenched in the vernacular of St. Louis natives that it leads one to wonder the extent to which such common exchanges can be attributable to, or exacerbated by, a pernicious culture of neoliberal, school-choice ideology.

During my time teaching in St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS), I became curious how students, particularly refugee students, choose their respective schools. During my six years teaching at Sierra International Studies High School, a publicly funded magnet school, I became extremely close with this particular subset of the student population. Many of my students from refugee backgrounds would show up before school to chat casually with me or swing by my classroom during their lunch break to let me sample authentic cuisine from their culture. It was during these informal exchanges that I would learn about their other classes or just the everyday drama that typically occurs during high school life. I then began to question ways in which the school selection process might differ based on familiarity with the system, access to certain types of information, or structurally determined factors such as distribution of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgy4gjea1rY>, 3:50 min

certain/special services. I also asked myself, “In what ways does a magnet school, like the one I was teaching in, expand curricular opportunities for all students and in what ways might it function as a traditional neighborhood school for some?”

In the chapters to come, I examine the literature on refugee student experiences in both a pre-relocation and post-relocation setting. The purpose of the literature review is to understand the unique challenges that refugee students face in educational settings in both a global and local context. By digging into the research surrounding refugee students in the United States within the context of a global neoliberal paradigm shift in education policy, a balanced, more nuanced understanding of how school-choice systems operate differently for different users will be presented. My goal as a researcher is the production of scholarship that seeks to build a capacity for refugee resiliency within our systems, so that the most vulnerable among us are able either able to engage with school-choice in empowering ways, and/or join with others to work towards halting the further spread of neoliberalism in St. Louis. By resiliency, I mean the individual ability to become agents of social and political change. This can be seen in refugee responses when adapting, and/or recovering from a major life disruption by using the resources provided by their new environments, and specifically education systems, to persist and overcome barriers, both real and perceived. To understand the transformative potential of refugee educational research, one must first start by listening contextually to the stories that are seldom solicited in an effort to understand the unique needs of refugee children upon enrolled in school-choice districts.

Shifting locally, competition for students between schools is an essential feature of Saint Louis Public Schools. Magnet schools, which make up the bulk of the choice-schools in SLPS,

thematically position, market, and engage with prospective students and their families thereby sustaining their privileged operation within the educational marketplace. Furthermore, market ideology, as it pertains to education, can lead to competitive school recruitment strategies geared to attract certain preferred groups to the exclusion of others (Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Musset, 2012; Windle, 2015; Zancajo & Bonal, 2020). For those who are newcomers to the district/marketplace, e.g., refugee families, the process of selecting a specific school is likely wrought with gaps in information and/or misunderstandings regarding educational pathways in the United States. What is less understood is the refugee experience during the choice process. Little attention has been paid to the refugee experience, particularly those who elect to attend a magnet or charter school over a neighborhood school. This dissertation research focuses on refugees, specifically, as a subset of the overall St. Louis student population, who are asked to participate in school-choice structures. Individuals who held refugee status and had recently matriculated through a St. Louis secondary school were eligible to participate in the study. Therefore, the educational marketplace of St. Louis, MO functions as the social, cultural, and political landscape in which to view the type of education refugees' value and whether the schools selected have served the refugee population sufficiently.

As it pertains to education, the term quasi-market refers to a public institutional arrangement that is designed to mimic the free market in the hope that it will lead to greater efficiency and equity. Saint Louis contains a quasi-market school district as it comprises numerous public schools such as charter and magnet schools, as well as private academies. I have considered the refugee experience in quasi-marketized systems to be comprised of the following components: 1) motivations to select a particular school; 2) access to information

regarding the school choice process; 3) curricular opportunities and educational attainment; and 4) agency and empowerment. These categories came from an extensive review of the literature regarding school-choice experiences from both a student and parental perspective. Such perspectives were helpful in getting a general understanding of the varieties of intellectual inquiry that educational researchers have previously focused on when it comes to school-choice, in addition to identifying lacunae in the scholarship as it relates to refugee education. Therefore, these components of the school-choice experience were useful in crafting the specific interview questions to further elucidate the refugee student experience within quasi-marketized education systems. Although my intent is to focus on the educational experiences of refugee students, understanding the historical context of St. Louis, the rise of a robust magnet and charter school program, and its influence on the culture of school choice, is instructive, as it helps the researcher avoid the common pitfall of essentializing refugee experiences within this unique landscape.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Across the face of the globe, there have been unprecedented levels of men, women and children who have been displaced and are seeking asylum in the United States from political, economic, or religious persecution (UNHCR, 2019). Conflict in areas such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Yemen and several others have led to the highest rate of displacement since World War II, the era in which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established (UNHCR, 2016). As of 2018, 70.8 million people are forcibly displaced globally and of that 25.9 million people live as refugees (UNHCR, 2019)

Furthermore, nearly half of those displaced are under the age of 18 (Save the Children, 2016; UNHCR, 2019). Those fortunate enough to receive asylum are often relocated to urban areas wherein many districts implement some degree of school choice (Singer & Wilson, 2006; Kerry et. al, 2010).

Thus, it follows that a portion of refugee students and their families may be asked to participate in certain districts that have adopted a market-organized view of education. Although many recently resettled refugee families are not placed in cities whose education systems are driven and managed by market logic, there are a number of identified cities wherein such practices are adopted. It is against this backdrop that this doctoral study seeks to expand the literature regarding the refugee students' experience throughout the school-choice selection process in Saint Louis, Missouri.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research study seeks to analyze ways in which refugee students interact with the social, economic, and political aspects of school-choice programs in Saint Louis, an urban city located in Missouri, USA. The purpose of this case study is to understand precisely how refugee students experience the human and non-human associations (i.e., the social interactions and the physical barriers) that shape the St. Louis educational market—particularly with respect to their effects on agency, identity, and future aspirations.

### **Research Questions**

The two main questions that this study aims to address, and the following sub-questions derived therefrom include:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1).** How do refugee students describe their secondary educational experiences (navigating, accessing, and attaining desired programmatic and thematic curricular opportunities) in a school-choice district?

- a. Who are the stakeholders identified by refugee students as influencing decisions to attend a particular secondary school and for what purposes?
- b. What factors do refugee students (alongside their parents) consider when making a decision on where to attend secondary school?
- c. What are the recruitment/marketing strategies, if any, that are specifically directed towards refugee students and their parents?
- d. What are the barriers identified by refugee students, if any, to accessing/processing pertinent information and how are those overcome?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2).** How do refugee students describe their own sense of agency when it comes to deciding their educational future in marketized systems amidst obstacles and opportunities?

- a. To what extent are refugee students actively participating in desirable thematic/curricular opportunities marketed to them?
- b. How, if at all, do refugee students describe feeling in control of their educational pathway in school-choice environments?
- c. If educational trajectories are misaligned with their future aspirations, how do refugee students conceive of their own reasons for remaining in or transferring to a different school?

The research questions above seek to interrogate the extent to which schools provide access to desirable programs for all admitted students, or if certain structural barriers exist that restrict access to certain magnet schools and thus, the specialized educational pathways associated with them. It is of no surprise that schools operate under limited funds, space, and resources. Therefore, it is possible that some students upon gaining access to their school of choice might not be able to participate in the types of curricular opportunities or specialized programs that interest them.

## Key Definitions of School-Choice

This section provides working definitions of school-choice terminology for which there may exist a lack of cohesion among researchers. This is primarily because these terms, to a certain extent, are contentious and derivative of the politicized public discourse that shape the unique contexts in which they operate. Furthermore, definitions and conceptualizations of school-choice often vary between contexts, as well as the ideological biases of individuals articulating them. First, a prefatory disclaimer is required. These definitions, although informed by an exhaustive review of literature, have been intentionally selected to enhance understanding as to how they may or may not relate to the context of St. Louis. Therefore, the following terms seek to clarify to the reader what I mean when I use them within the context of this study.

### School-Choice

*School-Choice* generally refers to the myriad of options available to parents and their children, providing an alternative to traditional neighborhood or *comprehensive* schools. Associated with the economic turn toward neoliberalism, one of the more attractive aspects of school-choice is that it is said to “empower” parents to choose the best school that maximizes their utility (Bosetti, 2007; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955; Levin, 2009). Setting aside underlying and often unrealistic assumptions of market ideologies, which will be examined in greater detail in the sections to come, school-choice often comprises private schools, voucher systems, charters, magnet schools, and home-schooling among other options (Berends 2015; Walberg & Bast, 2003). Thus, school-choice can be categorized as being a private commodity, as

with the case of private religious and nonreligious schools; or a public option, which are schools funded by state governments, yet they generally retain a great degree of autonomy in regard to their daily functioning.

### **Vouchers**

Firmly rooted in the neoliberal ideology and market-fundamentals of Milton Friedman (1962), it is theorized that *voucher systems* could resolve growing educational disparities between privileged students and those of disadvantaged backgrounds. This is accomplished by supplying families with government backed certificates (vouchers) redeemable for tuition (or partial tuition) at schools that meet specific governmental standards (Levin, 2009; West, 1997). Yet as Viteritti (2010) reminds us—although Friedman’s seminal works presented a cogent, theoretical proposition for how education quality could be enhanced by market mechanisms—they still “contained no empirical support regarding the validity of his claims” (p. 211).

Despite this, experimental voucher programs were initiated across the United States in the mid-1990s, particularly in cities such as Milwaukee, Dayton, Cleveland, New York City, and Washington D.C. (Fuller, 2000) and internationally. Although analysis of the results of vouchers on student achievement are mixed at best, voucher systems continue to remain a part of the ongoing school choice debate. As it pertains to this study, St. Louis does not participate in voucher programs, and thus, the intersection of school-choice and refugee experience will not be examined from this angle. However, the inclusion of vouchers on the public understanding regarding its role in expanding educational opportunity is relevant.

### **Charters**

*Charter schools* also introduce the notion of market dynamics into mainstream education reform. Charter schools were devised under the impression they can function as a mechanism that disassembles the monopoly of government over public education while (theoretically) minimizing issues of inequality in terms of access to education. Charter schools are tuition-free public schools that receive funding from local, state, and federal government/s, principally on a per pupil basis. However, “their governance structure differs from that of traditional public schools in that they are established under a charter run by parents, educators, community groups, or private organizations to encourage school autonomy and innovation” (Berends, 2015 p. 161) and are not subject to all government educational/labor policies. Charter schools operate in 43 states and the District of Columbia, serving over 3.0 million children in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Charters are conferred legitimacy as institutions by State Departments of Education which issues them their charter; however, they still retain a fair amount of autonomy and are accountable to the stipulations of their charters (Manno, Finn & Vanourek, 2001). It is suggested that these two attributes (autonomy and accountability) allow charter schools the flexibility and discretion over curricular choice provided they report certain metrics indicating that state specific criteria regarding performance expectations are being met. The state of Missouri has restricted the establishment of charter schools to only two school districts, Kansas City Public Schools and St. Louis Public Schools (Baker, 2016). In 2018, charter schools in St.

Louis City School District enrolled 11,082 students, which is approximately 32% of the total student population enrolled in the city (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018<sup>2</sup>).

## **Magnet Schools**

Selective enrollment schools *or magnet schools* differ from other public school-choice options primarily on the basis of the unique and varied thematic course offerings available to the students that are matriculating through their institution such as: music, drama, languages, science, and law (Goldring, 2005; Plank, Schiller, Schneider, & Coleman, 1993). Like charter schools, magnets also operate under a relaxed degree of oversight regarding curricular choices and other educational/labor policies. Historically, these schools emerged in urban districts as a way to encourage or attract White families to send their children there in an effort to meet federal and state racial quotas following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling on adequate desegregation. Magnet schools rose in popularity following the *Morgan v. Kerrigan* ruling in 1976 that legitimizes their inclusion as a possible method to expedite desegregation in urban areas, specifically Boston, MA.

In the 35+ years following the establishment of a public school-choice option in St. Louis, 14 of the 42 elementary schools, 6 of the 12 middle schools and 10 of the current 15 high schools in SLPS are designated as magnet schools, while others are categorized as neighborhood or comprehensive schools. Students are asked to apply to magnet schools wherein admittance is determined from several criteria including GPA, attendance and disciplinary records, interviews, essays or auditions depending on the focus of the school.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-03/rd1\\_napcs\\_enrollment\\_share\\_report%2003112019.pdf](https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-03/rd1_napcs_enrollment_share_report%2003112019.pdf)

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

The purpose of a theoretical framework is to provide structure to a research endeavor by anchoring the literature review to the methodology. In this way, theoretical frameworks shape or frame the research questions by intentionally orienting them to address a specific phenomenon or fill a gap in the field (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The theoretical frameworks discussed below represent a sampling of lenses that have been used to investigate issues surrounding school-choice. It is my view, that research should be conducted with a thorough understanding of how these applied frameworks have assisted in advancing educational research while also highlighting their specific shortcomings, limitations, or contradictions. Thus, to better understand the experiences of refugee students within quasi-marketized education systems, and their individual perceptions of agency, I elect to utilize the following theoretical frameworks: actor-network theory, human agency theory, funds of knowledge and critical race theory. Although another framework, rational-choice theory, will be discussed in the following sections, its inclusion serves only to highlight its dominance within school-choice scholarship, in addition to the extent to which it is ill-suited for addressing the proposed research questions.

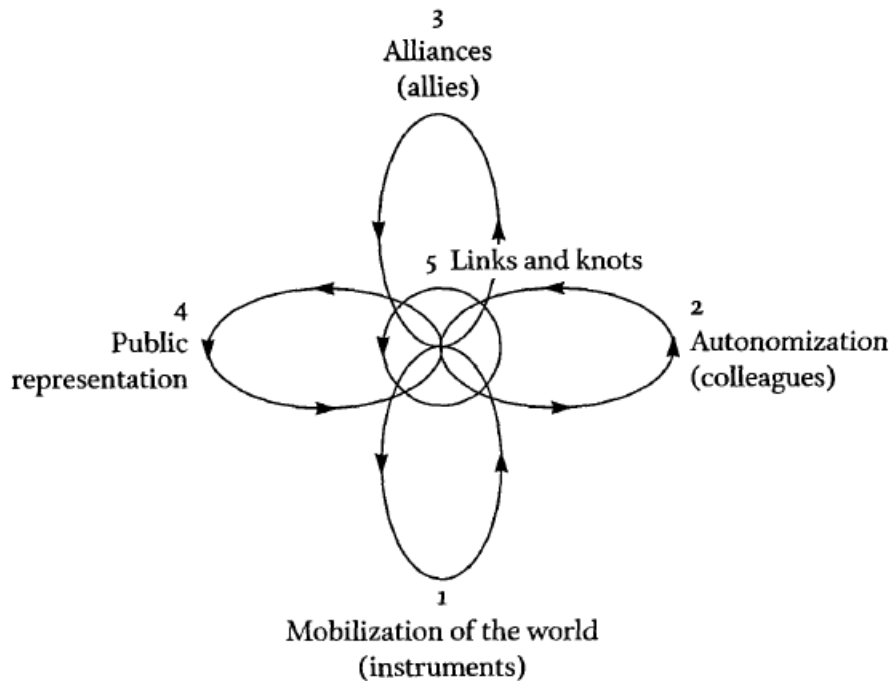
### **Actor Network Theory**

Though its conceptualization is historically rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor Network Theory (ANT) only recently has it emerged as an attractive framework in educational research. This is because ANT is increasingly being viewed as a tool for “intervening in educational issues to reframe how we might enact and engage with them” (Fenwick &

Richards, p. 1). The theory itself is generally credited to two French anthropologists, Bruno Latour (1987) and Michel Callon (1986). ANT is an analytical tool for understanding the social, political, economic and cultural conditions that create, transform, sustain, and destabilize associations between inextricably networked actors, or actants. Everything that exists within the real world, human and non-human, can be considered an actant. This does not mean that actants exert an equal amount of influence (e.g., acting upon an object), but rather that during certain times and under certain conditions actants—through the formation of alliances and associations and by way of negotiations and compromises—gain strength. The stronger the actant the more influence it has on other actants and the more prominent its status in the overall network. Conversely, isolated or unassociated actors/actants are generally weak and can only become stronger through allying themselves with other actors. Therefore power, in ANT, often emerges from an alignment (full or partial) of goals or interests between networked actors and its relevance is the reward for reaching those goals. As it pertains to the context of this study, this framework is useful in understanding the formation of a culture of school-choice in St. Louis through a series of *translations* (Callon, 1986), while simultaneously investigating the ways in which refugee-identified actors within their nascent network have influenced their educational experience within that culture.

Translations, although not the focus of the dissertation from a sociological standpoint, are integral to ANT. Since Latour (1987) and Callon (1986) were describing socio-technical systems in relation to the production of scientific knowledge when they coined the term, translations are most easily understood in STS parlance. *Translation* describes how scientists move theories, innovations, and technology, for example, from the pristine environment of a

laboratory to the messiness of the real world—thereby translating it from theory into practice. It might be best explained by Figure 1, which depicts how Latour (1999) envisions an actor-network system engaging with the context in which it is embedded.



**Figure 1:** Translation in Actor-Network Theory. Taken from Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*. Harvard University Press, p. 100

The core of the vascular system, what Latour refers to as the 'Links and knots', represents the object or concept's actor network—on which intellectual inquiry will unfold. The four corresponding loops are what the actor-network relies upon to not only embed itself within a specific context, but to also propagate certain socio-scientific ideas or understandings. For Latour and his likeminded colleagues, a concept does not rise to fixation within society simply because it's *true* (Latour would bristle at the use of this word), but rather, it obtains

axiomatic status by intensifying its connection to social dimensions and relations that allow for a specific concept to be considered as a matter of fact. The links and knots of this study, the beating heart that I seek to dissect, is school-choice—and the patient (or in many ways victim) is the refugee student population residing in St. Louis, MO.

Actors emerge and assemble around an issue or an object (in this case school-choice). Actors use tangible (material goods) and intangible (ideas, concepts, ideologies) resources (i.e., non-human actors) to carry out certain functions. This is referred to as the *mobilization of the world*. Working clockwise, *public representation* is engaging with the social reality surrounding the network to the gain approval of individuals (i.e., the public) or to convince them that this innovation is worthwhile. From there, *alliances* are forged, and a relationship is established between disparate actors who may share a partial interest in the issue yet retain distinct goals. To the extent that the network delivers a workable solution, the result of translation (the scaling up of a viable solution) is a societal transformation. This, in turn, legitimates the establishment of the network of actors while bolstering institutional support for its continuance, a process known as *autonomization*.

To recap, translations are converging events wherein interested actors are “brought together so that they may work together; which may mean changing the way they act. By being moved and changed, interests are translated in both place and form” (Sismondo, p. 82). Put simply, network formation first involves identification of an underlying issue wherein interested actors (stakeholders) must then come together to negotiate the terms of their involvement in said issue. This process inevitably results in the use of human and non-human resources to convince the public that there is an issue to begin with (e.g., inadequate

educational opportunity) and to bolster institutional support for addressing it (through school-choice policy) all the while forming actor alliances and associations to achieve individual or group interests.

Actor-Network Theory, as an analytical framework, allows the researcher to investigate certain assemblages of the information network society (Castells, 1996) and pinpoint selective and influential pressures, identify managerial and hierarchical structures of power, and critique informational and technological modes of exchange. Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) seem to corroborate the appropriateness of adopting ANT as a suitable lens in educational case study research stating that, “people, objects, and texts become vested and act” (p. 133). Nowhere is this more evident than in marketized educational systems wherein a decision, even one not to participate or to remove themselves from the school-choice system, must be made. Similar to observations made by Dagenais, Fodor, Schulze and Toohey (2013), ANT as a theoretical framework in this study “provides ongoing direction for data collection” and “offers strategies for intervention in educational issues” (p. 95). More pointedly, ANT can be used to compare strategic agents (actors) that have influenced student’s decisions across multiple sites (schools), during refugees’ transition to the U.S. and across time and space. It is by tracing targeted influences at pivotal moments across these boundaries<sup>3</sup>, that allow for the researcher render a more complete understanding of the relational dynamics that expand or restrict refugee’s educational pathways.

So, complex school-choice processes, dominant or accepted narratives of schools, and the movement of refugee students in the network, are considered to be the products of the

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<sup>3</sup> What Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) refer to as the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

actor-network. The task of ANT researchers, then, is to render visible the network's actors and how they assemble and ally themselves to maintain network stability, thereby, achieving partially or fully their corresponding interests. As it pertains to newcomers to the network (e.g., refugees), my goal was to map the network from their perspective while highlighting ways in which the revealed network may or may not prioritize its interests over those of its users.

Although this case study will explore each participant's historical educational trajectories through narrative inquiry, an emphasis will be placed on the refugee students' experience regarding school-choice at a pivotal moment in time—the transition from middle school to high school. Thus, narrative inquiry, which will be expanded upon further in the methods section, allows participants to describe perceptions of possibilities and constraints when engaging with network actors responsible for facilitating this transition. Thus, a partial actor-network map (the core in figure 1), as constructed from a refugee student perspective, begins to come into focus.

In common ANT vernacular, obligatory points of passage (OPP) represent a manifestation of a particular node within a network map wherein certain actors must converge, engage, and subsequently pass (Callon,1987; Latour, 1986). Within the context of this study, OPPs can be conceptualized as discrete materials (application processes), specific individuals (counselors, teachers, recruiters), precise moments in time (transition from middle school to high school) or any entity that facilitates, articulates, and/or mediates choice-related possibilities while simultaneously serving as the corresponding filtering mechanism thereafter. Yet, keeping with the conventional ANT approach to research, this case study completely rejects a priori distinctions between actors and actants, as it does not seek to impose causality

or attempt to explain away refugee experiences as simply a byproduct of network relational dynamics. Rather, the purpose of using ANT as it relates to the refugee experience, is to understand which actors are identified by refugee students as being influential and necessary points of passage when deciding their educational futures, while further problematizing the effects of these network negotiations on students' sense of agency. Thus, the emphasis continues to remain on commonalities and disparities within and between refugee students as actors and as actants navigating a complex assemblage of other school-choice actors.

As Fenwick and Edwards (2010) remind us, these OPPs are not only “important dynamics in the power relations circumscribing education (p. 18)” which is the emphasis of this exploratory case study, but they also might render visible “openings for their interruption (p. 162)” in the interest of educational equity. Thus, ANT provides us a possibility of mapping a theoretical assemblage of network actors from a newcomer perspective. This is of keen use for educational researchers and practitioners as it provides a lens in which to analyze “how such assemblages can be unmade as well as made, [*sic*] and how counter-networks or alternative forms and spaces take shape and develop strength (Fenwick, 2011, np.) Thus, utilizing ANT in case study research within quasi-market education systems allows one to examine the ways in which certain network configurations—as a combination of human and non-human actors—work to produce educational experiences for refugee students. More importantly, congruously coupled with case study methodology, ANT provides a lens in which to compare those experiences to each other to yield further insight into how the encroachment of neoliberalism into education policy may not only perpetuate but prioritize specific assemblages of network

relationships that advance educational choice for some while effectively obfuscating or rendering invisible the full extent of educational opportunity for others.

Refugee experience within quasi-marketized education systems cannot be fully understood without investigating the assemblages and influences of multiple and often competing stakeholders on the population of interest. One of the more meaningful contributions of ANT to educational research is the symmetrical treatment of both social and material influences, often referred to as human and non-human actors. Regarding the framework of Actor-Network Theory, Sismondo (2010) states:

The actors of ANT are heterogenous in that they include both human and non-human entities, with no methodologically significant distinction between them. Both humans and non-humans form associations, linking with other actors to form networks. Both humans and non-humans have interests that cause them to act, that need to be accommodated, and that can be managed and used (p. 81).

Human actors (stakeholders) of interest include policy makers at the administrative level, counselors/recruiters, teachers, social workers both in schools and in governmental and non-governmental organizations, parents and students. As for non-human actors, these are the artifacts/documents/information that influences decisions regarding school choice, i.e., admissions requirements, school ranking, accreditation, academic focus, test scores, rates of graduation and logistic barriers such as transportation. All of these actors (human and nonhuman) are enmeshed in a social system that is dynamic, recursive, and are reshaped in response to the inputs and influences that exert pressure on them (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Lareau & Goyette, 2014). The result is a fluid educational marketplace that is everchanging by design.

Actor-Network theorists demarcate the boundaries of a network society (Castells, 1997) and concern themselves with understanding underlying, systemic processes. This is generally

done by delineating relevant social stakeholders and analyzing their varied interests. *Parents* are social actors in the school-choice schema as they actively appropriate changes, create meanings through varied interpretations, and make sense of the shifting reality of their local context. Decisions are then in part due to influences from other actors, policy changes, student experiences, and implications for inclusion into society. Parental choice or preference, then, becomes a possible lens in which to view what parents' value in a school (see Rational Choice Theory below). *Students* are also stakeholders as they are the ones ultimately affected by a decision on where to attend school. Preference is intensified in marketized systems as schools tend to attract students through diverse thematic curricula. *Schools* also have an interest in securing students, as funding is often on a per pupil basis. Therefore, in order to be successful in a loosely regulated quasi-marketized system, a variety of approaches is necessary in order to establish relationships with feeder schools and other actors. Maintaining cohesion of the fabric that binds society together is the primary interest of the state and federal *government*, in addition to ensuring that their system is operating within their constitutional mandate. Finally, as it pertains to refugees, *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs) and government resettlement agencies also have an interest in promoting a seamless transition into the new communities. They are the ones charged with the task of facilitating the monetary, health, education, and career placement services for this newly arrived population.

Sismondo (2010) acknowledges that there are limitations to ANT as a framework for understanding decision-making processes stating, "rational choices are not made in a vacuum...they are made in context" (p. 87). It is in this spirit that this case study sought to utilize ANT to expose and map the varied influences within a marketized education network in

St. Louis that refugee students identify as being prominent when deciding their educational futures.

Understanding ANT as a tool that is useful in identifying and delineating specific influential actors in the educational marketplace is only partially instructive when investigating the experiences of refugee students as actors themselves. One of the limiting aspects of utilizing ANT as a theoretical framework is that it is ill-equipped, by itself, in understanding the desires and intentions that often undergird and mobilize human action. Furthermore, it is often critiqued for its lack of recognition regarding larger social structures that engender actor mobility within the network itself (Fliho and Kamp, 2019). Where most education researchers and sociologists would diverge from fully adopting ANT as an analytical tool is when it comes to its rather reductive view of human agency.

I say reductive, because although ANT views actants as behaving “with what appears to be particular intentions, morals, even consciousness and subjectivity” (Fenwick & Richards, p. 10), it also “does not conceptualize agency as an individuated source of empowerment” (ibid. p. 21). An individual decoupled from the network has no agency, from an ANT perspective, because “agency is directly related to the heterogeneity of actors in networked relations” (ibid, p. 21). Agency, then, is not viewed as a latent property that is activated at certain times under specific conditions nor shaped partially by structural influences. ANT conceptualizes agency as the aggregate of forces, determined exclusively through an amalgam of interactions on the individual. This may lead social science researchers to veer off into the forbidden territory of determinism, ascribing causality to the summation of network interactions. This is problematic as it does not consider agency to be even partially located within the realm of human domain

and fails to view students as agents of change themselves. Thus, this study adopts a wider, more nuanced understanding of the external and internal forces that shape human agency, which is the subject of the next section.

### **Human Agency Theory**

Youth studies regarding human agency are multitudinous. Firstly, it must be noted that conceptualizations of *agency* are replete with ambiguity (Parker, 2000; Akram 2010; Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Thurlby-Campbell & Bell, 2017). On a general level, agency typically refers to the capacity for humans to make decisions for the immediate or latent betterment of their condition. In psychology, agency is generally defined as one's individual ability and will to act independently often against oppressive systemic and structural restraints (Beck, 1992; Bandura, 2001). Historically, two dominant camps of thought have emerged within the academic theatre when problematizing the location of agency; one residing within the individual the other within the structure in which the individual is embedded.

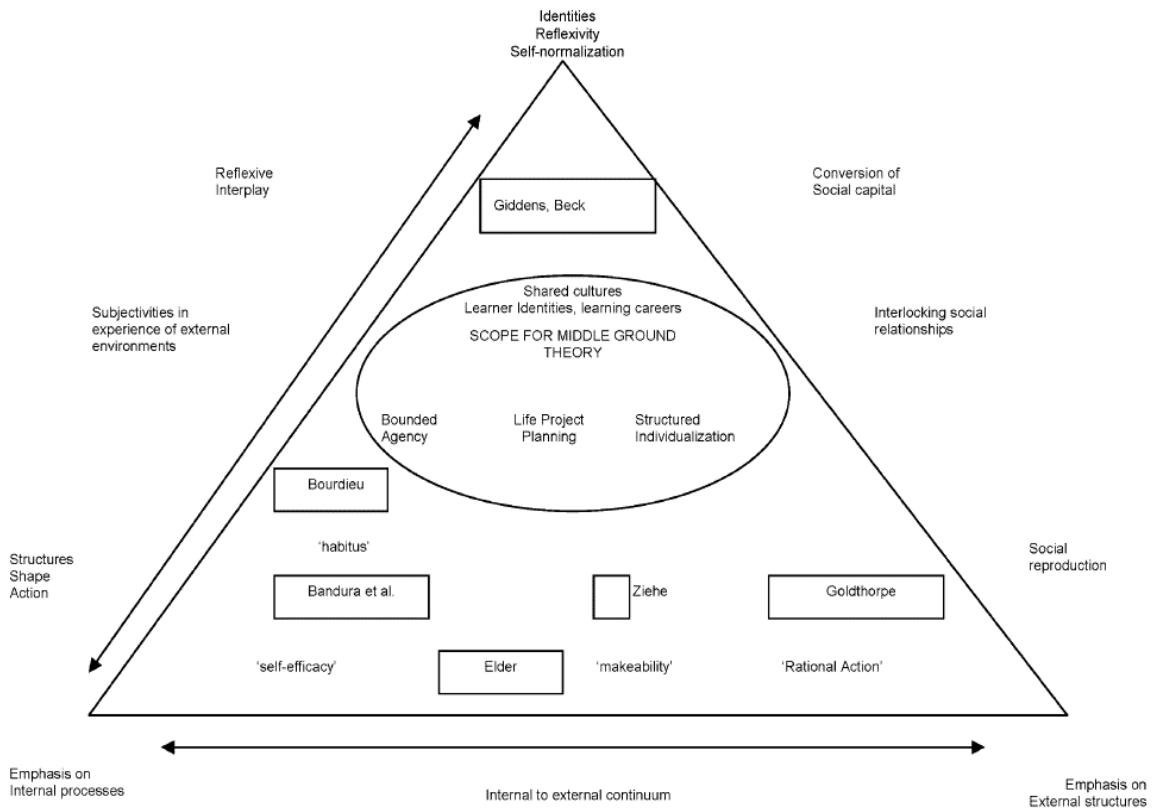
As Thurlby-Campbell & Bell (2017) notes, adopting Beck's (1992) view of agency as residing within the individual (often as having the innate capacity for choice) downplays the influence of systemic structural pressures that may be acting on that individual (p. 42). Similarly, Bandura's (2001) work of regarding *self-efficacy*, which is characterized as one's "ability to originate and direct actions to accomplish goals," is shaped to a certain extent by environmental influences that exert pressure on the individual, and also by individual's causal responses to those environments (p. 1182). Conversely, a hyper fixation on structural conditions, as in the Bordieuan (1980) sense of agency, underemphasizes the degree to which individuals can and do act according to their own free will. From a practitioner perspective,

dichotomizing conceptions of agency diminishes its applicability as a theoretical framework by overlooking the extent to which cultural and social networks play a critical role in empowering or restricting human action.

In an effort to avoid becoming ensnared in the dichotomized pitfall that often characterizes youth studies on agency, Evan's (2007) notion of *bounded agency* posits that structural social arrangements (i.e., school choice programs) and individual agency exist in a dialectical relationship. Viewing agency as bounded she states:

[bounded agency] sees the actors as having a past and imagined future possibilities, which guide and shape actions in the present, together with subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes that affect how they act. Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions. By examining bounded agency, the focus moves from structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration. (Evans, 2007, p. 92)

*Bounded Agency* acknowledges the discursive interplay between systemic structures and the individual exposed to them. Figure 2 below illustrates Karen Evan’s (2007) theoretical location of bounded agency in relation to other notable theorists’ conceptualizations of agency vis-à-vis external and internal processes and structures.



**Figure 2: The Theoretical Location of Bounded Agency** <sup>4</sup>

Thus, viewing agency as bounded by context and histories allows the researcher to peek under the hood and understand the ways in which refugee students make sense of their own reasons for remaining a part of a specific school amidst structural barriers and refugees’ subjective perceptions of them. It is a commonly held view that high schools situate students’ paths towards graduation that includes some degree of career or college readiness. Yet for

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted from “Concepts of bounded agency in education work and the personal lives of young adults, Evans, K., 2007, *International Journal of Psychology*, 42(2), p. 92.

refugees, distribution of opportunity regarding curricular choices and flexibility of mobility within the school system under question remains a black box for this population subset.

Therefore, research regarding the degree to which student trajectories are viewed as emancipatory (agentic) or structurally (deterministic) embarked upon are of keen interest. Taking an *a posteriori* approach to investigating refugee students' experiences as a process of recurrent choice (either to remain or leave a particular school) provides a nuanced understanding about the ways in which school-choice structures impact refugee student perceptions of their own sense of agency.

As refugees engage with various actors within a school-choice network, they do so from a position that is uniquely shaped by their singular experiences. To be able to better understand these individual experiences and how they interact with perceptions of what is possible in school-choice schema, a precise definition of individual agency is required, as well. Thus, my doctoral research will adopt Akom, Ginwright, and Cammarota's (2008) definition of individual agency which manifests itself as "young people's ability to analyze and respond to problems impeding their social and academic development" (p. 2). With this view of agency, the emphasis remains on the actions of refugee students and their underlying rationale—as actors who are enmeshed within the actor-network while understanding the varying spheres of interested entities. In this way, human agency theory complements actor-network theory by capturing refugee students' perceptions of control and self-determination when engaging with actors involved with the maintenance of certain obligatory passage points as it relates to school choice.

Yet, Akom, Ginwright, and Cammarota (2008) go on to warn about the effects of under-theorizing agency stating, “a rigid cause (lack of social capital) and effect (problem behaviors) framework (as with many quantitative studies regarding school choice) obscures the fact that youth in poor communities in the United States and abroad, utilize agency and self-determination to make healthy choices—which include resistance against repressive state and ideological institutions. (ibid. p. 2). It is only by investigating refugee experiences with school choice, as a function of the interaction between the structural constraints (bounded) and their individual actions, that a more granular understanding of the experiences of refugee students can be achieved in a hyper-marketized system. Such data would be invaluable for crafting the navigational capacity (Yosso, 2005) of refugee students upon arrival.

Applying one particular conception of agency runs the risk of dismissing participants who exhibit agentic qualities that do not fall neatly into the categories as structurally determined or personally driven. Therefore, a more expansive conceptualization would capture those whose reported experience breaks from the researcher-imposed narrowness of agency within the school choice systems. Departures from standard definitions given here can take many forms, but as Sarcombe (2010) observes, one manifestation is through resistance. Resistance can be viewed as a subset of personal agency, yet distinct from the traditional view described in the preceding paragraphs. In the context of this study, resistance could be captured by a student (actively) choosing to not attend any recruitment fairs and simply resigning to attend whichever neighborhood or comprehensive school that is assigned to their specific residence. Resistance, and other breaks from the status quo trajectories that refugees

take are of great interest as it provides yet another layer in which to understand how refugees experience school-choice.

There are, of course, other forms of agency that reveal themselves in educational research that seek to explain students' trajectories as a function of choice. Much of the research on student agency in education focuses on optimizing opportunities for students to exercise epistemic agency (Elgin, 2013), or the notion that students are imbued with certain virtues that under the right conditions allow them to dictate the structure of their own education. This generally can be characterized by the idea of a student taking ownership of one's education and necessarily involves a shifting of responsibility from the teacher to the student. Examples of this type of pedagogic-centric agency include individual research, capstone projects, apprenticeships and other non-formal, out of school learning experiences that enhance decision-making capacities (Overwien, 2000; Barron, 2006; Hall, 2009).

For me, the central questions as it pertains to agency are: 1) How, if at all, do refugee students perceive school-choice as a means to reclaim control of their lives? 2) If refugee students feel that their school is not meeting their perceived needs, what are the realistic options available to them to transfer to one that does? 3) What can we learn from refugee students who have attempted to do so both successfully and unsuccessfully? These are the looming questions that guide this research in the hope to produce actionable knowledge that captures how students have been able to gain agency when it comes to critical decisions regarding school-choice.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Funds of knowledge generally refers to culturally and historically developed understandings, skills, abilities, ideas, practices or other embodiments that are central to the functioning or livelihood of an individual (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Funds of knowledge can and often are dynamically (re)shaped by historical/structural influences such as colonialism or industrialization. They are not immutable, but rather also respond to contemporary influences that include generational practices or rituals of family members. These knowledges are often discussed during pedagogical interventions geared towards utilizing the cultural wealth that students from immigrant and minority backgrounds bring into the classroom (Yosso, 2005). Yet extant research on tapping into students' funds of knowledge has clearly demonstrated that simply implementing culturally responsive practices is an insufficient strategy for inclusivity, let alone academic success. Opportunities to connect with students might be missed due to teacher bias, misunderstandings, or lack of adequate training (Thomson & Hall, 2008). What is then suggested is an enhanced focus on cultural competency alongside *effective* pedagogical practices so that learning outcomes for students from historically marginalized backgrounds are anticipated to be met more consistently.

For refugee students, decisions on where to attend school may in part be derived from life experience (funds of knowledge) that operate outside the day-to-day interactions and exchanges they have within the context of a classroom. Often it is the case that understandings and perceptions regarding school preference are the result of tacit and acquired knowledges that are internalized in spaces that transcend the physical boundaries of a school building. In the context of this study, I am particularly interested in how refugee students use their funds of

knowledge to navigate the formal and informal social networks that inextricably link them to the exchange of certain kinds of resources/information.

Differentiating funds of knowledge further, González, Moll & Amanti (2005) state, “[funds of knowledge] become part of the implicit operational and cultural system of daily life. Friends and kin often provide a safety net and substantial aid<sup>5</sup> in time of crisis. Such exchanges occur in such a routine and constant fashion that people are hardly aware of them” (p. 58). They go on to emphasize that material aid is “less important economically than the exchange of information and special funds of knowledge” such as ones that help them navigate and deal with institutions and the bureaucracy of government agencies (p. 89).

I argue that access to these special types of funds necessarily include a general understanding of the inner workings of a district that implements some degree of school-choice. Thus, a choice to attend a certain school is not only a reflection of an individual perception of what type of education a school will provide to refugee students (which yields insight into what type of education they value), but it also is influenced by contextual and personal exchanges that recently relocated refugees have with others (actors) in their community. By examining how information regarding schools is transmitted to and absorbed by the target population, one can gain a better understanding of how marketing mechanisms and/or proponents of magnet schools cultivate a specific image for themselves.

Furthermore, if that image is being reinforced through certain social networks or as a function of selective enrollment, then the perception of that school as being a viable option is

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<sup>5</sup> In Bourdieuan terms aid from friends and family members would be viewed as social capital while funds of knowledge considers it to be part of cultural capital.

likely to differ across a variety of social and cultural dimensions. Lest we forget, teachers, administrators, counselors, and other in-school actors carry with them assumptions/ideologies regarding the role of education in society. To the extent that they are part of the dominant culture, these actors prioritize information that is considered important to them and assumed to be to others (such as students), as well.

Funds of knowledge are not immutable but can be modified as a result of persistent experience and interaction among actors enmeshed within a social system. They are fungible, but often at a price. If schools and educational institutions are viewed to be part-in-parcel with the goals of the State, it's likely that the pressures of assimilation, acculturation or integration into and with the dominant culture will devalue the retention of unadulterated funds of knowledge that refugees bring into their new communities.

### **Critical Race Theory**

In discussing the relevant scholarship regarding refugee education in both a pre- and post-resettlement capacity, one would be remiss to not acknowledge the considerable amount of groundwork laid by others who particularly utilize critical race theory (CRT) or social identity theory as theoretical frameworks. These are well-documented components that tint how students experience schooling.

Race is conceptualized in all aspects of education, with positive categories such as school achievement associated with Whiteness, and negative categories such as gangs associated with Blackness (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT in education is conceptualized as "...a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses" (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). CRT emerged from the

recognition that Black and minority populations must examine the ideological underpinnings of systems of oppression in order to shift the public understanding of racism as merely personal experiences to racism as a superstructure impacting the foundation of society. “CRT focuses on how people of color transcend structural barriers and create successful moments for themselves and others” (Mertens, 2015, p. 244). This requires a critical analysis of power relations within said structures to either expose, disrupt, or dismantle the mechanisms that maintain racial disharmony with the ultimate goal of bringing social justice for historically and contemporarily marginalized populations.

Race is also historically relevant when discussing school choice in Missouri as a proposed mechanism for desegregation and, contemporarily, as an unintended means to assist de facto segregation. “Choice in education has been used both as a means of escaping racial integration of schools (primarily by White parents) and as a way of bringing about stable integration of schools in cities (primarily by school districts establishing magnet schools with the aim of attracting a racially diverse student body)” (Plank, Schiller, Schneider, & Coleman, 1993, p. 127). Much of the extant literature on choice highlights the establishment of a robust magnet school or charter school program as a part of a multi-district strategy for achieving adequate desegregation (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004; Rias, 2019; Rossell, 2009; Ritter, Kisida & Bowen, 2016; Smrekar, 2009). Thus, the process of choosing a specific school is likely mediated by informational exchanges and, consequently, racialized narratives and counter-narratives. Research that provides the space for these stories to be prioritized within the field of social science can subvert dominant negative perceptions of refugee students by interrogating ways

in which school-choice structures work to support discriminatory practices or constrain opportunities for some.

Therefore, CRT can be an important theoretical framework useful for understanding the types of “othering” encounters that students from refugee backgrounds experience by administration, teachers, and peers throughout their schooling (UNESCO, 2019, p. 58). In this way, literature informed by CRT is pertinent to understanding the context of the St. Louis landscape and the experiences of minority refugee students within it.

As a researcher informed by critical ontologies and epistemologies, I draw from CRT to better understand how racial identity impacts power-knowledge relationships across different social, political and cultural contexts. Although I do not focus exclusively on refugee students from particular countries (i.e., Myanmar, Bosnia, Somalia, Sudan) or ones that identify being from specific regions of the world (i.e., the Middle East, West and sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia), or belonging to a specific group (Hmong, Karen, Uyghurs, etc.), such identities are likely to drive perceptions of schools and the types of students that attend them. Thus, this research is centered on the experiences of relocated refugee students’ who have navigated the school-choice process in St. Louis and includes a critical analysis of how these experiences might differ based on race. Ultimately, ethnicity and identity were a part of the discussions, but the school-choice interview questions themselves did not focus exclusively on such constructs.

By drawing upon CRT as a theoretical lens—especially within the current context of U.S. immigration discourse—portions of student narratives revealed a rich diversity of experiences as it relates to their unique and individualized identities. Thus, as a possible motif to refugee students’ narratives, CRT remains an instructive approach when illuminating the extent to

which schools operate as spaces of inclusion or exclusion, identity formation or confusion, and whether participants view choice in education to be liberatory or not.

### **Rational Choice Theory and Parental Preference**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) has achieved an axiomatic status in the field of neoclassical economics, despite push back from the behavioral and social science community (Herrstein, 1990; Tan, 2014). At its heart, RCT starts with the notion that human beings have preferences and make choices based largely on them. Yet, when applied to education, the assumptions, which necessarily views parents and their children as atomized self-serving individuals, seem dubious as they ignore the relational dynamics of a vibrant social network. Individuals often make decisions against their self-interest or in the interest of others. Students are likewise enmeshed in school cliques or social circles and are highly influenced by their peers, counselors, teachers and a variety of other actors. Lastly, decisions can be made under stress, duress or without sufficient time for deliberation. What is certain is that individuals are not always interpreting every interaction through a purely economic lens nor each decision stemming therefrom cannot be categorized as being chiefly transactional.

Utilizing data sets collected from large-scale standardized assessments, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) or the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), much of the extant research in education grafts RCT on to survey/questionnaire responses to gain a *post hoc* understanding on how parents choose schools (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles & Wilson, 2009; Elacqua, Schneider & Buckley, 2006; Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007). Drawing upon seminal research such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbien & Ajzen, 1975) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbien, 1980),

these studies almost entirely rely upon quantitative methodology to make inductive inferences and draw conclusions regarding parental preferences.

Many of these studies assume rational actors to be individuals imbued with abstracted and idealized conceptions of rational, cognitive decision-making capacities. Furthermore, empirical studies show that the limitations of structural equation modeling, like so many other quantitative studies, is that the model's predictions are only as accurate as the quality of data gathered by questionnaires and other instruments (Lubienski, Weitzel, & Lubienski, 2009). Therefore, it logically follows that incomplete or poor quality of information inputted into a theoretical model can yield uninterpretable or spurious results. As Klees (2016) put it, "causal models require certain conditions to hold for regression coefficients to be accurate and unbiased...which include: 1) all relevant variables are included; 2) all variables are measured properly; and 3) the current functional interrelationships of the variables are specified" (pp. 85-86).

As it pertains to theories of planned behavior or reasoned action regarding school-choice, although a generalized model is possible, the lack of historicity and cultural dimensions of refugee students within a structuralized school-choice context makes any such quantitative approach ill-suited for this research investigation. This is principally due to the fact that the researcher's goal is not generalizability (see Validity and Reliability below) or to establish a clear pattern of causality, but rather, to understand refugee's unique and varied experiences with school-choice systems.

Conversely, others have taken a more qualitative approach aimed at exploring the intersections of class, social structure, and race as it pertains to school-choice (Ball, Bowe, &

Gewirtz, 1995; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bell, 2009; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). This research acknowledges that school-choice models impact parents differently and unevenly, namely along racial and SES lines (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014). Yet these studies do not specifically investigate conceptions of agency within choice systems from a student perspective even though the product being ‘*sold*’ is consumed by the student albeit ‘*purchased*’ (via taxation) by the parent.

Research on the context of school choice and the decision-making capacities of its participants have viewed the phenomenon through a rational choice theory lens (Wilson, 2016). Rational choice theory is widely used in literature to explain how *parents* make initial decisions on where to send their children based on self-interest and utility maximization (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Herrnstein, 1990; Lubinski & Lubinski, 2014). Scholarship attempting to understand the social, economic, and political dynamics of education policy as it pertains to parental choice have identified both individual and institutionalized forces at play (Howell, 2006; Lareau, 2002; Lubinski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009; Musset, 2012). Yet, rational choice theory alone is limiting as it obfuscates the historical and current complexities of parental preference by reducing actions to only two dimensions (i.e., self-interest and utility). Furthermore, rational choice theory often downplays how prevalent discourses surrounding the notion of a “good school” become racialized or stigmatized based off socio-economic status of students (Lareau, 2002) or fail to consider the interaction between parental preference and dominant political discourse involving legal processes of racial integration (Smrekar, 2009).

Briefly tabling the widespread criticisms that standardized testing is reductive and narrowly confines our conceptions of a quality education, Hastings and Weinstein’s (2008)

findings that parents from disadvantaged groups, when presented with reliable information to test scores, will choose schools with higher academic achievement highlights just one of many presuppositions of RCT-- information symmetry. Yet, as many scholars have noted, RCT as a framework to view decisions making capacities in practice is compounded by barriers to both information dissemination and information comprehension (Herrnstein, 1990; Lehtinen & Kuorikoski, 2007; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014). Surveying over 4,000 parents across a multitude of cities, DeArmond, Jochim and Lake (2014) found that understanding enrollment eligibility requirements, comprehending transportation logistics and obtaining accurate information regarding specific programs were consistently among the highest ranked as factors contributing to parental frustration in school-choice districts (p. 5). Parents often reported needing to be a “fighter” on behalf of their children, whereas district officials referred to the recruitment practices of schools as “guerilla warfare” (ibid, p. 5). For recently resettled refugee families, many of whom survived various degrees of persecution and perhaps armed conflict in their homeland, such a hostile educational environment was neither expected nor prepared for. Thus, RCT with its assumptions that refugee parents have the navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to seek out pertinent information in order to make informed decisions is unrealistic.

Nell and Errouaki (2013) lambast the sanitized, unrealistic assumptions that RCT makes stating:

To make rational calculations projectible, the agents are assumed to have idealized abilities, especially foresight; but then the induction problem is out of reach because the agents of the world do not resemble those of the model. The agents of the model can be abstract, but they cannot be endowed with powers actual agents could not have. This also undermines methodological individualism; if behavior cannot be reliably predicted on the basis of the ‘rational choices of agents’, a social order cannot reliably follow from the choices of agents. (p. 30)

RTC, alone, is ill-suited as a theoretical framework on the account that there is likely to exist an uneven distribution of possible choices across individuals that is a result of the larger social structure in which the student is placed. Yet even if information symmetry was realistically achievable across mediums and in preferred languages, the extent to which models can reliably capture all variables that influence parental preference regarding school selection is dubious. Consistent with other scholarship regarding parental preference, a study conducted in Massachusetts by Glenn, McLaughlin and Salganik (1993) found that, “low income, minority parents rely most heavily upon the recommendations of friends, neighbors and relatives and tend to choose schools based upon the school older siblings attend, proximity to home, and some education-related factors such as special needs programs” despite establishing a systematic network of communication with parents (cited in Smrekar, 2009, p. 402).

This finding is relevant to the proposed study for a few reasons: 1) efforts to provide accurate and accessible information<sup>6</sup> (average test-scores, services available, curricular opportunities, etc.) that is linguistically, culturally, and educationally appropriate and widely distributed by multicultural professionals may be undermined by perceptions of power or dampened by issues of trust; 2) the translation of performance indicators and data denoting school *quality* is often confusing (Howell, 2006) and 3) individual parental preference is not fixed, but evolves with consistent and prolonged experience with school-choice and in relation to their surrounding social networks.

As it pertains to the context of this study, refugee families required to engage with school-choice systems for the first time are likely to differ not only from their native

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<sup>6</sup> Read non-human actors.

counterparts for many reasons, but also as a function of time spent in and familiarity with the educational market of St. Louis. This suggests that parental choice is likely unevenly influenced over time by numerous social actors that include school officials and resettlement agencies, and also the informal social networks (e.g. churches, mosques, community centers, international supermarkets, etc.) that refugee families initially meet or specifically seek out.

Furthermore, any information campaign regardless of the target population must firstly establish lines of trust. As Smrekar (2009) observes, this is a particularly crucial component for marginalized communities who would better be served by individuals “who would signal a critical degree of understanding and support of a school choice system committed to equity as well as excellence” (p. 403). Therefore, this study also seeks to expand upon this relevant and needed body of literature by abandoning abstracted and idealized notions of the self-interested, utility maximizing individual in favor of a more constructivist approach to understanding refugee student experiences in school-choice educational markets.

## **Summary**

By utilizing actor-network theory (ANT), human agency theory, funds of knowledge and critical race theory (CRT), this research is poised to better understand the types of interactions, both human (desires, teachers, recruiters, attachments, intentions, neighbors, non-profit organizations) and non-human (student transcript, school ranking, state testing data, additional costs, resources) that might shape the educational experience of refugee students residing in St. Louis. Warring stakeholder interests, agendas, and struggles for finite resources are commonplace occurrences in competitive educational markets. Therefore, by delineating stakeholders involved in the maintenance of an educational school-choice network and

identifying OPPs during transition to the secondary level, one is then able to question the extent to which certain actors within the network impact refugee students educational experience and how refugee students respond when presented with obstacles and opportunities.

## **Chapter II: Neoliberalism and the Crafting of a Culture of School-Choice**

### **Overview**

This chapter consists of two distinct literature reviews: the first discusses and critiques the historical and theoretical underpinnings of school-choice in St. Louis and the second explores issues regarding the global shift towards market-based solutions in education. Noting that school-choice policies can fluctuate in their degree of options available, be operationalized differently in across contexts, and be governed according to differences in educational, organizational, or governmental structure, this chapter deals with the underlying nature of school-choice and market logic in general and with reference to the United States and Missouri, specifically. Next, owing to the fact that market-based solutions to educational problems are a part of a global strategy (Rizvi, 2017), evaluation of the impact of neoliberalism on cultural attitudes regarding school-choice will be examined from an international perspective.

Throughout this chapter arguments will be made from disparate ideological perspectives. The goal of doing this is to not only demonstrate the complexities of school-choice policy and market-based solutions to educational inequality, but to outline the major camps of thoughts and contradictions that exist in the field of education research regarding this phenomenon.

### **Historical Context of School-Choice in St. Louis**

The demographic composition of St. Louis, the Gateway to the West as it is often called, is still as dynamic now as it was during early U.S. colonial expansion. Drawing individuals to the

area with distinct cultural, geographic and political identities, St. Louis has undergone major transitions in demographic shifts throughout the years. Recent literature suggests that school district's responses to shifting demographics often shape the responses of schools as well, particularly in pursuit of desired racial composition (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Fraga, Rodriguez & Erlichson, 2005; Lubienski, Gulosino & Weitzel, 2009; Zancajo & Bonal, 2020). Yet, situating these shifts historically, alongside the Civil Rights Movement, influential judicial rulings such as *Brown v. the Board of Education*, *Milliken v. Bradley*, and *Jenkins v. Missouri*, provide a unique backdrop that can be helpful in understanding the current struggles of Saint Louis Public Schools and the culture of choice that continues to be imposed on its residents.

At one point, the St. Louis Public Schools was one of the most segregated districts in the United States (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012; Rais, 2019; Wells & Crain, 1997). Astonishingly, "it wasn't until 1976 that the state government repealed its requirement of separate schools for White and colored children" (Frievoegel, 2002, p. 8). A comprehensive account of the tumultuous history Missouri has had with regard to race, starting with its inclusion as a slave state during the *Missouri Compromise* in 1819, the Dred Scott decision, the migration of Blacks to the region following emancipation (see Great African American Migration) and the ensuing race riots of 1917 is far too expansive for the purposes of this literature review. Thus, I start by outlining highly influential cases that serve as milestones in the struggle for racial equality in public education.

Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which ruled that separate schools were inherently unequal, the legal framework for segregated public schools in Missouri was codified in the state constitution and protected by statutory law (Frievoegel, 2002; Heaney & Uchitelle,

2004, Wells & Crain, 1997). Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*<sup>7</sup> making *de jure* segregation unconstitutional, the Jim Crow Era of segregation continued in practice as certain residential ordinances maintained racially distinct neighborhoods. This included redlining, exclusionary zoning, and restrictive covenants (Gold, 2018).

After those ordinances were removed, integration occurred at a glacial pace mainly due to community push back and the notable absence of oversight, stalemating progress (Spring, 2010). Though St. Louis's struggle with segregation dates to its founding, the impetus for the local desegregation movement started with Minnie Liddell and a group known as *Concerned Parents* back in August of 1972 when they initially filed their lawsuit (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004; Rias, 2019). This lawsuit argued that Black students in SLPS were not receiving similar educational opportunities as their White counterparts and were therefore being discriminated against.

Though this study did not focus on exclusively market mechanisms and desegregation, it is still instructive to understand the genesis of magnet schools in St. Louis which came about as a district-wide strategy to deal with the lingering vestiges of racial segregation. Additionally, it situates St. Louis's historical struggle with segregation within the larger conversation that was and, in many ways, still is occurring in the United States regarding school-choice and market-driven educational strategies geared towards achieving desirable racial student body composition.

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<sup>7</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the legal framework for "separate but equal" schooling.

In their book, *Unending Struggle: The Long Road to an Equal Education in St. Louis*, Heaney and Uchitelle (2004) detail the judicial landmarks which brought about the rise of magnet schools in SLPS. In response to the class-action lawsuit *Liddell v. Board of Education of St. Louis* in 1972, Heaney and Uchitelle (ibid) outline the consent decree reached between both parties wherein they state:

Under the degree, the school board was permitted to deny that it had knowingly operated a segregated school system, but it explicitly agreed to affirmative action that it believed would result in integrated schools. This included building new schools in areas where they were least likely to become segregated; realigning the school system to prevent racial isolation of city high schools. Hiring more minority teachers, and serious consideration of a concept called ‘magnet schools’” (p. 86).

A few years later in the Fall of 1976, SLPS was operating nine magnet schools for which Minnie Liddell was one of the staunchest proponents (ibid, p. 86). Thus, what started out as a ‘serious consideration’ escalated into a district wide push for comprehensive magnet school reform which is still in existence today.

Around the same time as the Liddell case, the United States Supreme Court during *Milliken v. Bradley (1976)* ruled that court ordered efforts to meet racial quotas for segregated school districts in Detroit (whose Black inhabitants were experiencing similar discrimination vis-à-vis educational opportunity and housing redlining) through planned transportation and busing programs was “wholly impermissible and not justified by Brown (1954).” Specifically, the ruling stated:

A federal court may not impose a multidistrict, area-wide remedy for single-district de jure school segregation violations where there is no finding that the other included school districts have failed to operate unitary<sup>8</sup> school systems or have committed acts that effected segregation within the other districts, there is no claim or

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<sup>8</sup> Unitary status is granted and supervision of a particular school district is transferred back to the state per the 10<sup>th</sup> amendment when a school district has eliminated the effects of past segregation to the extent practicable.

finding that the school district boundary lines were established with the purpose of fostering racial segregation, and there is no meaningful opportunity for the included neighboring school districts to present evidence or be heard on the propriety of a multidistrict remedy or on the question of constitutional violations by those districts (*Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974, pp. 418 U. S. 737-753).

This ruling had profound consequences in terms of operationalizing strategies geared towards achieving racial balance in St. Louis Public Schools—as intradistrict<sup>9</sup> busing had been a wide success in recent years and was generally viewed by the school board and community as a promising approach (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004).

To recap, changing demographics of urban areas such as St. Louis during the era of White Flight combined with the *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling that made busing students to achieve desegregation unconstitutional, pressured SLPS to become creative in how they were going to achieve unitary status.

Despite varied approaches that were then exacerbated by the phenomena known as White Flight, SLPS did not meet their court-ordered racial quotas. As a result, the Interdistrict Settlement Agreement,<sup>10</sup> an out-of-court settlement that proffered a *voluntary* desegregation plan, was adopted in 1983 by the St. Louis Public Schools in conjunction with many of the surrounding, predominantly White St. Louis County districts. Specifically, the agreement called for four major steps towards desegregating the SLPS, one of which was the creation of a robust magnet school program in SLPS designed to increase learning outcomes and attract White students with a target ratio goal of 2:3 White to Black students by the end of the millennium. It was a response to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in *Adams v. United States*

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<sup>9</sup> The *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling did not apply to within district busing (intradistrict)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2013/10/25/stlouis1999.pdf>

(1980) finding that Saint Louis Public Schools did not adequately desegregate following *Brown v. Board of Education* (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004; Smith 2009).

It was during that case that Dr. Gary Orfield, now professor of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), testified that, “A magnet school plan in itself has never been successful in desegregating a big city. It almost always produces no significant White transfers into predominantly Black and Latino schools...[It] will not produce substantial desegregation without a compulsory plan backing it” (Adams v. United States, 1980). It was then determined that governance of SLPS was to be turned over to the State *carte blanche* as the enforcer and overseer of the agreement and thus began the long battle to regain unitary status.

The 1983 Interdistrict settlement agreement also ensured that school levels coordinated around “major magnet themes so that any student who completed a final grade in a magnet of a specific theme was guaranteed a seat at the magnet school with a similar theme at the next educational level” (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004, p. 160). In order to expedite integration, the agreement also established what then became known as the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Cooperation (VICC), which organized the transportation of students between school districts, increased funding to SLPS schools and a system of accountability to ensure a quality education for Blacks who still found themselves being educated in racially homogenous schools (Smith, 2009).

Yet, the busing of students, notably Black students to White suburban school districts placed the burden of desegregation squarely on students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Understanding that integration was a shared responsibility, the United States

Court of Appeals for the Eight Circuit based in St. Louis directed the VICC, SLPS and surrounding participating suburban school districts to work together to bolster inter-district student enrollment in SLPS magnet schools with the goal of “1,640 White county students (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004, p. 160). By the end of the millennium, SLPS operated 14 K-12 magnet schools which collectively enrolled over 13,000 students. However, despite the program being perceived as a success, there were always more applicants than seats available, and the achievement gap between Black and White students persisted within magnet schools (ibid, pp. 163-164).

After over a decade of St. Louis Public Schools operating under the purview of court ordered desegregation, a controversial 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Jenkins v. State of Missouri* provided the catalyst that then Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon needed to reclaim control of SLPS. *Jenkins v. State of Missouri* was a decision regarding another urban magnet school program, this time in Kansas City, whose explicit purpose was also to promote desegregation. The case reached the Supreme Court after an Eighth District Circuit ruling required that residents of Kansas City were to fund magnet schools, educational improvement plans, facility repair, and salary increases amongst other initiatives in the Kansas City Missouri School District (KCMSD). Thus, this led justices to deliberate whether it was possible for a court to require a local municipality to increase taxes in order to fund a state mandated desegregation plan (495 U.S. 33, 1990 pp. 39-40).

The *Jenkins v. Missouri* (1995) ruling maintained that the District Court erred in its original decision and went on to describe court ordered funding of desegregation remedies (principally through taxation) an “extraordinary event” and a “drastic step” (495 U.S. 33, 1990,

p. 51). The case claimed that, “Authorizing and directing local government institutions to devise and implement remedies not only protects the function of those institutions but, to the extent possible, also places the responsibility for solutions to the problems of segregation upon those who have themselves created the problems” (ibid). As Heaney and Uchitelle (2004) note, this ruling regarding Kansas City’s interdistrict desegregation remedies, which included interdistrict busing, seriously called into question the legality of St. Louis’s as well (p. 188).

These three court cases described at the outset of this section, but principally *Milliken v. Bradley and Jenkins v. Missouri*, laid the groundwork for Senate Bill 781 (see sections on school-choice, neoliberalism, and the paradox of equity in marketized systems) to pass in 1998, ending court-ordered oversight of desegregation efforts.

Despite not achieving desired desegregation targets, the residents of St. Louis recognized its importance and overwhelmingly decided to approve a two-thirds of 1-cent sales tax to fund district desegregation programs—specifically the VICC. A proposal that, while saving desegregation busing practices, would usher in an era of neoliberal education reform that manifests itself in the form of increased choice alternatives, austerity measures and mechanisms of accountability and school autonomy.

After a politically intense standoff, SLPS, Concerned Parents, and the state of Missouri—with approval from the federal government—relaxed its oversight of the VICC provided that the program continued through the 2009 school year. In 2012, the VICC released a study which showed that transfer students and magnet school students showed increased gains in math and reading during the high school years and were also more likely to graduate (Crouch, 2016). After being extended in 2016, the program is now in a state of flux, as court-ordered financing

of race-based desegregation programs are temporary, and SLPS has adopted more cost-reducing austerity measures (Delaney, 2018). As of now, the VICC is set to be phased out by the 2023 school year.

However, long after the program is dismantled, magnet schools will likely continue to be a mainstay in SLPS. This reflects not only a larger cultural affinity of choice in the United States, but also a targeted neoliberal strategy that ensures that market-driven ideology remains a part of both the public and academic conversation regarding enhancing equitable opportunity (Hoxby, 2003). With the current administration ramping up efforts to encourage states and districts to engage in or develop “innovative school choice options,” by creating tax incentives aimed towards driving increased investment that allows for families to choose the “best educational environment that meets their unique needs” (see The Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act)—parents and students are likely to experience an explosion of school alternatives. As of 2019, table 1 below provides an exhaustive list of every high school in SLPS disaggregated by type and theme.

TABLE 1: COMPLETE LIST OF SAINT LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS HIGH SCHOOLS DISAGGREGATED BY TYPE AND THEME.

High School Name	Type	Theme
Center Science Academy	Charter	Science, Technology, Engineering, Math
East Bridge Academy	Alternative	<sup>11</sup> General Academics for “At-Risk” Youth
Edgewater Naval Junior ROTC	Magnet	Military
Grapevine Academy	Charter	College-preparatory
Incubation Academy	Charter	College-preparatory
Independence High School	Comprehensive	General Academics
Marshall Academy of Law	Magnet	Law & Law Enforcement
Northview Career Academy	Magnet	Career and Technical Education
Oakwood School of Medicine and Bioscience	Magnet	STEM & Pre-College Curricula
Pleasant Hill	Comprehensive	General Academics
Shaw Classical High School	Magnet	General Academics
River Fork Classical Leadership Academy	Magnet	Accelerated Secondary Education
Riverdale School of the Future	Magnet	Technology
Rutherford STEM	Magnet	Science, Technology, Engineering, Math
Sierra International Studies	Magnet	International Studies
Silverleaf Leadership School for Girls	Charter	Science, Technology, Engineering, Math & College-preparatory
Somerset Academies	Charter	General Academics
Summit Visual and Performing Arts	Magnet	Visual and Performing Arts
Woodcreek High School	Comprehensive	General Academics

Source: slps.org; dese.mo.gov

There is no single explanation for why school-choice programs are commonly associated with low-income, high need, urban school districts. Yet, most convincing explanations are likely a combination of inadequate resources and parental dissatisfaction with comprehensive/neighborhood schools. Yet, by situating school-choice programs within the specific historical context of St. Louis's struggle with desegregation and acknowledging the ideological turn towards neoliberalism in public education, this research utilizes the unique landscape of SLPS to better understand how refugees' educational experiences are shaped by the historical injustices of their new communities while remaining attentive to the contemporary forces that condition their school-choice experience. It is with that background knowledge that the next section explores the theoretical basis for introducing market dynamics into education and as well as a critique of its efficacy in both a national and international context.

### **School Choice: A Critique**

School choice operates under the presupposition that traditional public schools are not only ill-equipped for overcoming structural (i.e., racial and socioeconomic) barriers to educational equity but have, in fact, also played a historical role in maintaining systemic barriers as well (Levin, 2009). To school choice proponents, what is then required is an alternative institutional model operating on market ideology, governed according to market principles via per pupil financing, and sustained by consumer/parental preferences (Bosetti, 2007; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955).

Thus, the relationship between schools and the families that they serve changes on many fronts. Firstly, the balance of power in curricular decisions shifts away from the producers towards the consumers. Shifts towards information societies created a demand for more technical coursework which offers narrower conceptions of actionable knowledge that might be useful in the marketplace (Castells, 1997). The provision of educational services becomes increasingly transactional within the dynamism of the provider/consumers relationship. Consumers (parents) signal to providers (schools) the kinds of programs and characteristics deemed most desirable for their children based on a human capital view of education, wherein acquired skillsets and knowledge are associated with economic prosperity (Foucault, 2008; Rizvi, 2013; Savage, 2017). To the extent that a school district, like that of St. Louis, adopts such a regimented view, schools become subservient to the needs of the knowledge economy and are seen merely as an instrument by the State, or as a means by citizens for achieving economic prosperity. This promotes an educational ecosystem wherein parental choices, guided by market trends and access to information, determines where students will attend school and for what purposes.

Neoliberalism, or the imposition of market fundamentalism in education policy also reshapes school and district governance structures in addition to the social arrangements they have to the communities they serve. In practice, transparency, adequate dissemination of information, and utilization of grievance procedures are thought to help enhance institutional performance (Fox, 2015). Yet, the ability to take advantage of these safeguards is mediated by degrees of social, cultural, economic, and navigational capital (Bell, 2009; Foucault, 2008; Goldring, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

After a bill was passed by the Missouri senate in 1998<sup>12</sup> numerous reforms took aim specifically at urban school districts like SLPS. Bill 781 of the Missouri Senate considerably shifted power to the state board of education and granted members the jurisdiction to: identify schools they deemed to be “academically deficient, terminate teachers and administrators’ contracts at that school and reconstitute the school with new teachers and administrative staff—and develop incentives and rewards systems for teachers” (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004, p 196). These punitive reforms, combined with the power to strip specific schools and districts of accreditation if failing to meet state-standards as measured by student performance of standardized tests or other criteria such as truancy and graduation rate targets, constitute the *modus operandi* of neoliberal approaches to ensure “accountability” from schools.

In the context of school choice, parents also have a role in holding schools accountable. The idiom *voting with their feet*, refers to one’s (in this case parents’) ability to express their preferences by enrolling in or withdrawing from a school. Yet efforts to ensure accountability by parents are still predicated on certain market axioms such as, “information is power, and transparency will necessarily leverage accountability” (Fox, 2015 p. 346). That is to say that barriers to informational access and comprehension are negligible and the organizational and/or procedural inner workings of school systems are clearly understood by those opting into choice schools. These assumptions may be undermined in education systems when information is incomplete, incorrect, unevenly distributed, or inaccessible due to technological, linguistic or/and cultural barriers or when transparency is not an explicit policy goal of a school or district.

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<sup>12</sup> See Senate Bill 781,

Critics of school-choice often express concern that such policies unintentionally increase social stratification, as those with more economic capital or those who come from higher educated families (i.e., those with more economic capital) often choose higher-performing schools (Apple, 2006; Rizvi, 2013; Yosso, 2005). The decision-making capacities of families in educational markets operate under a litany of assumptions that, if violated, dismantle the intended outcomes of efficiency and equality (Apple, 2006; Bell, 2009; Klees, 2017).

Assumptions of a perfect market include: equal access to information, also referred to as information symmetry, equal opportunity for market entry/exit or perfect mobility (parental decision to move students from one school to another, i.e., voting with their feet), and no discrimination. Noting that perfect markets do not exist in practice, Michael Apple (2006) takes a critical perspective on the increasing encroachment of neoliberal approaches to education policy. In particular, he is concerned with ensnaring families into engendering cycles of intergenerational struggle stating:

Economic and social capital can be converted into cultural capital in various ways. In marketized plans, more affluent parents often have more flexible hours and can visit multiple schools. They have cars—often more than one—and can afford driving their children across town to attend a ‘better’ school. They can as well provide the hidden cultural resources such as camps and after-school programs (dance, music, computer classes, etc.) that give their children an ‘ease,’ a ‘style,’ that seems ‘natural’ and acts as a set of cultural resources. Their previous stock of social and cultural capital—who they know, their ‘comfort’ in social encounters with educational officials—is an unseen but powerful storehouse of resources. Thus, more affluent parents are more likely to have the informal knowledge and skill—what Bourdieu would call the habitus—to be able to decode and use marketized forms to their own benefit. This sense of what might be called ‘confidence’—which is itself the result of past choices that tacitly but no less powerfully depend on the economic resources to actually have had the ability to make economic choices—is the unseen capital that underpins their ability to negotiate marketized forms and ‘work the system’ through sets of informal cultural rules. (pp. 61-62)

In the context of an urban, quasi-marketized school choice system, information asymmetry is likely to be exacerbated due to gross differences in financial, social, and cultural domains (Novak, 2007). Thus, the paradox of educational equity as a criticism of neoliberalism continues to remain a salient feature of ongoing school-choice debate.

### **School-Choice in the United States**

Arguably, the United States has always maintained some degree of choice as it relates to education. Depending on the circumstances and one's station, it was possible to receive formal education at a religious or non-religious private school, be educated at home, learn a trade through an apprenticeship or simply relocate to a preferred school district (Levin, 2009). The proliferation of public schools in the U.S. throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries drew attention to the larger goals of education as it relates to society, who it was meant for, and how it was to be distributed. Court rulings, like the ones mentioned previously, assisted in establishing precedents; however, the use of educational and social science research to inform policy has also played an influential role in crafting state and federal policy.

Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equality of Educational Opportunity (EEO) report of 1966—commonly known as the Coleman Report—was commissioned by the U.S. government to understand the extent and degree to which “the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions” exists (Civil Rights Act of 1964). At the time of the study, the methodological and analytical techniques used by Coleman and his team were considered innovative and sophisticated by social scientists. The goal of discussing this report is not to poke holes in the validity of the findings, which have been systematically critiqued by others, but to

provide the historical context for how this study has and is still being used by school-choice advocates to buttress neoliberal ideologies.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which came 10 years after the Brown ruling, made it clear that, “the notion of equal educational opportunities transcends a listing of school resources” (Wong & Nicotera, 2004, p. 127). Therefore, the report, as Dickinson (2016) observes, desired to understand variation in outcomes “rather than simply look at the resources and funds going into schools as directed by the government” (para. 3). Despite the study’s implementation as being far from ideal (many districts declined to participate, narrow proxies for family attributes were gathered, expenditures per pupil were gathered at the district—not school—level, etc.), the report was the first of its kind to gather large-scale data on the status of the U.S. education system.

The conventional wisdom at the time the EEO study was being conducted was that predominantly Black, segregated schools lacked the necessary *inputs*<sup>13</sup> thereby undermining the very notion of equality of opportunity (Alexander & Morgan, 2016). Yet to summarize the findings succinctly, Coleman’s study found that differences between races were not large, and those that were distinct varied as a function of geographical location “with the south lagging behind the rest of the country, and rural areas behind urban” (ibid, p. 3). Furthermore, the Coleman report suggested that student achievement appeared to be more strongly driven by family background and not inputs, where it was found that students attending Catholic schools saw an increase in standardized test schools compared to their public-school counterpart

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<sup>13</sup> Inputs is the term used in the report to refer to a myriad of biotic and abiotic resources such as: qualified teachers, abundance of books, computer and science labs, counselors etc.

(Wong & Nicotera, 2004). To restate, the Coleman report found that the attributes of other students (peer effects), not inputs, accounted for most of the variation in minority student outcomes (Coleman, 1990). This seems to also support the idea that student performance is more closely associated with socioeconomic status of districts and a school's culture of learning and not so much the students who enter them.

This was not the only finding that the Coleman study reports. It also found that Black students benefited slightly from the policies that allowed them to be bussed into nearby predominantly White schools. Although this validates the need to integrate Blacks and minorities, who are still suffering from the historical legacy of chattel slavery, racial capitalism and other forms of oppression, it also opened a Pandora's box when it came to policy mechanisms geared towards achieving adequate desegregation. Furthermore, when the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling, which held that suburban districts were not responsible for urban segregation, alternatives to desegregation busing strategies emerged. One of the attractive strategies for achieving adequate desegregation is through advancing a school-choice schema. Although the Coleman Report makes no mention nor policy recommendations regarding the privatization of education or the introduction of market mechanisms in the pursuit of equal educational opportunity, the EEO findings are still oft-cited by school-choice vanguards as they craft their argument for the insistence of neoliberal reforms in the interest of equality.

Jump forward to the mid-80s, Chubb and Moe's (1990) influential study analyzed High School & Beyond<sup>14</sup> (HBS) data that consisted of longitudinal test scores and surveys as a part of

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<sup>14</sup> Data that was gathered by Coleman in a separate study in 1979.

a large-scale nationwide project undertaken by the United States Department of Education between 1980-1984. Chubb & Moe's (1990) regression analyses included school organization, bureaucratic influence, and private control as independent variables. According to some conventional inputs such as class size, pupil-to-teacher ratios, access to resources, teacher development and high salaries yielded little evidence for increasing student outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hanushek et al., 1994; Shleifer, 1998). This buttressed the criticism that government regulation was the problem and that, if left unfettered by governmental involvement charters, and magnets, parochial and private schools will likely outperform public schools. Thereby, reifying the *raison d'être* of the time that choice- as it relates to competition- will ultimately ameliorate disparities in learning outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged groups. This reinvigorated the debate surrounding school-choice and provided the *evidence* policy makers needed to move forward in establishing a wide variety of choice schemas in urban cities across the United States.

The study done by Chubb & Moe is not without its detractors. Specifically, research re-analyzing their data found issues with a large variability in response rate per school, moderating and mediating variables treated as independent variables, and unclear rationale for weighing effects (Sukstorf, Wells & Crain, 1993). This research stands out as a necessary countering force that acknowledges that school-choice and market-based solutions in education should not be beyond reproach. Such scientific dissent highlights the need for examining the ideological and political underpinnings of research practices and paradigms in the production of knowledge.

Although the perplexities of Chubb & Moe's methodological and analytical decisions are disconcerting from a researcher perspective, Lubienski and Lubienski (2012) reminds us that our work has political and social implications as well stating:

The quality of the research conducted by choice advocates, the strategies used in disseminating their findings, and the relative success of this approach in steering the school choice debate are troubling for at least two reasons. First, traditional scholarly processes of review for quality control have largely been circumvented, requiring policy makers or laypersons lacking methodological expertise to draw their own conclusions about the quality of the data presented. More important, substantial reforms to the public educational system are being implemented based on questionable conclusions about the likely effects of these reforms. An expansion of school choice not only appears unlikely to significantly improve student achievement but also might increase segregation along racial or socioeconomic lines. Other goals for school choice, such as curricular innovation or an expansion of opportunities for the most disadvantaged populations, may also suffer as schools of choice orient their priorities toward meeting elevated expectations for student achievement (p. 184).

This speaks to not only policy intent, but the unintended consequences of policy implementation and the effects it has on the population it is meant to serve. Although a smattering of choice schemas in the international context and an overview of their educational outcomes will be examined in the following sections, it is important to note that an exhaustive written account of research associated with school-choice is an impossible task. This is likely due to the fact that neoliberalism in education is now a global phenomenon (Rizvi, 2017). Thus, the selected cases illustrate the main critiques of choice systems that could possibly illuminate ways in which unintended consequences of school choice might preclude the possibility of expanding opportunity for refugee students domestically.

## **School Choice in the Global Context: The Case of Chile**

In 1981, Chile, under the direction of Pinochet's dictatorship, introduced sweeping reforms that decentralized the South American country's education system and created the first universal voucher system. Although other countries have also implemented voucher programs that range from being universal, such as Sweden's experiment in 1992, to more tailored ones designed to assist the lower SES strata, as was the case in Colombia; Chile remains prominent in the literature primarily due to the rich data made available from such a longitudinal study.

Under the Chilean government's plan, public schools continued to receive funding via individual grants each month on a per pupil basis, whereas non-tuition charging private schools would also be eligible for the subsidy (Barrera-Orsorio & Patrinos, 2009; Carnoy, 1998; Santos & Elacqua, 2016). Heavily influenced by U.S. neoliberal economist Milton Friedman, these reforms were the first large-scale voucher program testing of whether such systems were capable of expanding access to quality education in an efficient way (McEwan & Carnoy, 2000).

Examining the effects of the voucher program, Carnoy (1998) describes three major takeaways in his analysis: the net decrease in total spending on education as a percent of gross national product; the mass exodus of students from public schools to subsidized private academies; and a correlation between increased spending and student outcome that occurred following the reestablishment of democracy in 1990 (pp. 317-318). The latter finding, as insightful as it is, did not dissolve the voucher system; rather, it substantially increased the spending on education overall-including vouchers. Thus, one should be cautious in ascribing an increase in student achievement to the effect of introducing competition in education systems. "Hsieh and Urquiloa (2006) find no evidence that choice improves test scores, repetition or

completion rates” (cited in Heyneman, 2009, p. 83). Yet, what most of the evidence on Chile seems to suggest is that parents are choosing private schools over government schools.

There have been, of course, other educational reforms that have often emphasized parental choice and market-based solutions in countries around the world. In particular, the burgeoning rise of charters, magnets, and low-fee private schools illustrate just how commonplace decentralized solutions are in the global policy scape. Of note is the Netherlands whose largely privatized education system is consistently held up as the model alternative for developing nations to adopt, so much so that the World Bank states in their much-cited 2004 World Development Report that, “The Netherlands has had full school choice among public and denominational providers since 1920, without terrible repercussions (p. 127).

Yet, if we accept the premise that a quality education is a necessary precursor for social advancement (Labaree, 1997), then it follows that schools that are perceived as delivering differential levels of success in market-driven education systems will become more attractive to parents and students. However, the evidence regarding educational outcomes for students participating in school choice systems is mixed (Berends & Waddington, 2018; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Wolf, Kisida, Gutmann, Pump, Eissa & Rizzo, 2013). Therefore, instead of focusing on cherry-picked outcomes of certain cases, it seems more appropriate to discuss their unintended consequences, specifically segregation.

### **Segregation and School-Choice**

There is an ongoing debate regarding the link between school choice systems and segregation occurring worldwide (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Siegel-Hawley, 2014; Ritter, Jenson,

Kisida, & Bowen, 2016; Saporito, 2009). This scholarship highlights possible perverse incentives that often pock schools that operate within a competitive educational marketplace which include: creaming, admissions restrictions, parental self-selection to schools that are racially or economically similar to themselves (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Saporito & Lareau, 1999), and disparities of type and amount of capital (Bell, 2009; Lareau, 2002), among other structural constraints.

Selective enrollment based on ability, academic achievement, history of behavioral conduct, or other student attributes refer to a practice commonly called *cream skimming*. This results in schools that are perceived to be academically superior or more resourceful reproducing or solidifying their status within the larger community. This unwritten policy is generally thought to be accompanying schools that operate with a great deal of autonomy and/or little oversight regarding enrollment practices. Although it is illegal to discriminate based on race, religion, or sexual orientation, many public choice schools do require students to submit an application or interview wherein transcripts, materials, and subjects are screened against desired qualifications.

In a comparative study of magnet school enrollment between St. Louis and Cincinnati, it was found that “magnet schools tend to enroll students of higher socio-economic status with reference to income, education, and employment” and that “these differences are consistent across all racial groups” (Smrekar, 2009, p. 400). Cream skimming, if engaged in, represents just one of the mechanisms in which schools in choice districts seek to distinguish themselves from the competition. Although initially theorized that the use of lottery systems in the form of educational vouchers would assuage concerns regarding re-segregation, cream skimming

practices by institutions who have selective enrollment or require a criterion-based application process is just one of the ways schools can achieve their desired racial student body composition.

Returning to the case of Chile, by all common indexes of segregation which include: GINI coefficient comparisons, isolation, clustering and dissimilarity (Massey & Denton, 1988), Chile remains one of the most segregated countries on the planet. So much so, the School Inclusion law of 2015, and the New School Admission System were recently passed to curtail what is now aptly described as a culture of choice.

The School Inclusion Law is described as a controlled school choice policy that regulates school admission processes (Carrasco, Gutierrez, & Flores, 2017; Elaqua & Santos, 2013), empowers families with choice, and desires to increase social mixture and cohesion (Rojas & Armijo, 2016). These efforts have been recognized as being necessary countermeasures to the elimination of exclusionary practices that were common in Chile throughout their decades-long experiment with vouchers. Yet Chile's 35+ year experiment with vouchers has led to a pernicious culture of individualization wherein parental choice is unevenly distributed and availability of access to first-choice schools is not always secured. This cultural shift, which started in 1981 created "a market-driven education system in a country with gross social and economic inequalities [which] provides people with more opportunities to realize their fears - of affordability, academic failure, an education inadequate for social mobility - than their aspirations and desires" (Matear, 2007, p. 62). St. Louis's desegregation plan has also been described as being a form of controlled choice. In that regard, the context of St. Louis, with its hyper-emphasis on expanding school-choice options, may represent a microcosm of the Chilean

experiment given the similar length of time each has spent experimenting with market-driven education reform.

## **Chapter III: The Educational Experiences of Refugees**

### **Education in Emergencies**

The field of Education in Emergencies (EiE) is relatively new and has recently gained much traction since the 9/11 attacks. Historically, the field of EiE grew from the recognition that interrupted learning due to the events of World War II had profound impacts on individuals, nations and economies. Though crises, such as natural disasters, diseases, and wars are often unforeseeable, organizations and non-state actors around the world are able to respond to affected populations and ensure that the provision of educational services continue. Two of the main actors, the United Nations and the International Rescue Committee formed the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in 2000 to “support education in countries affected by conflict and disaster” (Burde, Kapit, Wahl, Guven, Skarpetieg, 2017).

Youth studies and EiE research are seen as complementary fields. This is likely because schools are the primary site that facilitates the expressed policy goals of integration, assimilation, acculturation, or inclusion into the host community. Education systems and schools in particular are thus placed under increasing scrutiny as places that can facilitate the policy goals of intercultural understanding or operate as sites of discrimination.

The legal framework for buttressing the obligation of host nations to guarantee the provision of education for refugees is based on Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Munoz, 2008). The former states that, “everyone has the right to education” and that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)—thereby coupling educational access and school-choice. Similarly, Article 28 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that, “Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular make primary education compulsory and available free to all.” Though it should be noted that the United States is the only country to have not formally adopted the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Frameworks enshrining the right to education for all children are necessary, but insufficient by themselves, for enforcing and securing the adequate provision of basic educational services at the local level. Additionally, simply securing access to basic education for refugees is also insufficient given what we now know regarding the educational needs of refugees and displaced children (McBrien, 2005). From the Education for All initiative of the early 90’s to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of 2030, international standards and policies geared towards establishing the basic right to education have undergone several permutations. The United Nation’s SDG 4, which pertains to education, provides several aspirational targets and indicators of performance for countries wishing to monitor the extent to which they are achieving progress towards their goals.

As it relates to refugee education, paragraph 11 of the Incheon Declaration specifically articulates a commitment to refugee education in conflict-affected areas, whereas the Framework for Action (2015) states that if inclusive education is to be achieved then, “policies should aim to transform education systems so they can better respond to learners’ diversity and needs” (p. 44). Yet, it would be a mistake to believe that the transformation of educational

systems toward neoliberal market orientations would necessarily create conditions needed to advance inclusion—given the several social, cultural, and financial barriers to entry to and exit from the educational marketplace. Therefore, in an educational landscape theorized to respond to the wide range of individual student preferences, such as a school-choice district, the many ways in which local schools respond—through policy or practice—to the introduction of refugees from conflict affected areas provides a more granular view of the extent to which SDG 4 is becoming actualized.

### **Refugees and Displaced Persons**

*A refugee* is an individual forced to flee his or her home country generally in pursuit of asylum from economic, religious, and/or political persecution. Refugees often navigate state bureaucracies to formally request the right to emigrate to another country like the U.S. Much like asylum seekers, refugees are involuntary migrants that cannot remain in their home country for fear of their lack of safety.

According to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (2013), section 101(a) (42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 contains the legal definition of a refugee. This act defined a refugee as:

The term "refugee" means (A) any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, or (B) in such special circumstances as the President after appropriate consultation may specify, any person who is within the country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, within the country in which such person is habitually residing, and who is persecuted or who has a well-founded fear of persecution on

account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952, §101(a) 42).

Refugees differ from other migrant populations, such as voluntary immigrants and legal permanent residents, for a variety of reasons. Ogbu and Simons (1998) were among the first to draw a distinction between voluntary and involuntary immigrants in the context of educational research stating, “Refugees who were forced to come to the United States because of civil war or other crises in their places of origin are not immigrants or voluntary migrants. They did not freely choose or plan to come to settle in the United States to improve their status” (p. 164). Thus, one of the major differences between voluntary immigrants and refugees is that the former are individuals who have actively and freely chosen to emigrate to another country to seek work, opportunity, or an enhanced livelihood (US. Department of State, 2014). These individuals often carry across international boundaries a certain level of capital (social, linguistic, financial, cultural, etc.) during the relocation process. Voluntary immigrants’ often tap into formal and informal social networks sooner as they often have the added advantage of choosing where they wish to live based on family ties or connections to economic opportunities.

Finally, the resettlement process for voluntary immigrants differs greatly from involuntary refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2012b) described *resettlement* as “the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State that has agreed to admit them - as refugees – with permanent residence status” (p. 1). In the context of St. Louis, there currently exists only one resettlement agency which is a nonprofit subcontractor of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) (International Institute of Saint Louis, 2019). Thus, the resettlement process, specifically

as it pertains to information regarding educational choices, is likely to be consistent for all newcomers. This allows the possibility of examining variations in choice and the underlying decision-making processes of refugee students, while also scrutinizing the role of this non as a consequential actor throughout the resettlement process.

## **Educational Experiences of Refugees**

Young people who have been displaced from their country of origin—fleeing from war, famine, persecution, poverty and other insufferable forces have overcome incredible odds upon resettling in their respective country of refuge. There is considerable variability in the time between refugee families first applying for asylum and the time resettlement begins (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). By one estimate, the average length for the entire process was slightly more than seven years (Mott, 2010, p. 14). During this time, there is also considerable variability in the amount, consistency, and quality of education refugee youth are exposed to during their wait (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2018).

The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report is charged with the task of monitoring and reporting data trends and relevant research regarding Sustainable Development Goal 4: education. The most recent publication of the GEM in 2019 entitled *Migration, Displacement, and Education- Building Bridges, not Walls* directly addressed numerous aspects of refugee education. This suggests that one cannot fully achieve the vision of SDG 4 without a greater emphasis on understanding the educational experiences of refugee students. Table 2 below captures the effects of migration on education and vice-versa, which is helpful as a general overview of the relationship between the two.

TABLE 2: **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND MIGRATION**

		Effects of migration/displacement on education	Effects of education on migration/displacement
Origin	Migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration leads to education provision challenges in slums.</li> <li>• Education systems need to adjust to the needs of populations moving in seasonal or circular patterns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The more educated are more likely to migrate.</li> </ul>
	Left behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migration depopulates rural areas and challenges education provision.</li> <li>• Remittances affect education in origin communities.</li> <li>• Parent absence affects children left behind.</li> <li>• Emigration prospects disincentivize investment in education.</li> <li>• New programmes prepare aspiring migrants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emigration of the educated has consequences for development of affected areas, e.g. through brain drain.</li> </ul>
Destination	Immigrants and refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational attainment and achievement of immigrants and their children usually lag behind natives.</li> <li>• Refugees need to be included in national education systems.</li> <li>• Refugees' right to education needs to be ensured.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migrants tend to be overqualified, their skills not fully recognized or utilized, and their livelihoods altered.</li> <li>• Internationalization of tertiary education prompts student mobility.</li> </ul>
	Natives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity in classrooms requires better-prepared teachers, targeted programmes to support new arrivals and prevent segregation, and disaggregated data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and non-formal education can build resilient societies and reduce prejudices and discrimination.</li> </ul>

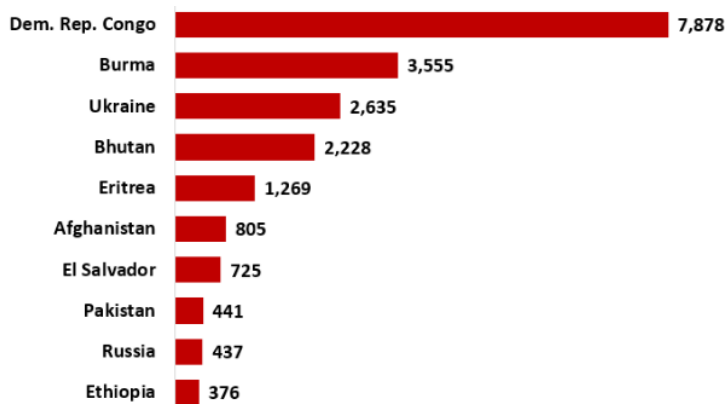
Source: Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2019.

Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2015) notes, the “educational trajectories of resettled refugee children can be divided into three periods: pre-resettlement, at arrival and post-resettlement” (p. 133). This has led to an explosion of government organizations, non-profits, religious organizations, and other actors that seek to aid in the transition from pre to post resettlement. I argue that although for research purposes it may be prudent to divide the refugee experience along those lines, it runs the risk of overlooking how previous experiences continue to play a factor in their ongoing education. Although it might be convenient to discuss experiences in this way, as a caveat, the researcher understands that the journeys embarked upon by refugee students and their families’ seldom end upon arriving to a new host country.

Before discussing the context of St. Louis, it is important to note the countries of origins of those seeking refuge in the United States, as the national policies regarding language and

inclusion often shape educational experiences. As Dryden-Peterson (2016) observes, “Refugee education depends on the laws, policies, and practices in place in each national context. Importantly, the countries of first asylum where 86% of the world’s refugees live are generally characterized by already over-stretched education systems and often fragile political and economic institutions (p. 135). Figure 3 below depicts the top 10 countries of origin for those admitted to the U.S. in 2018.

**FIGURE 3: TOP 10 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES**



Source: Refugee Processing Center

In the U.S., refugees’ educational experiences differ from their non-refugee counterparts attending similar urban schools in profound ways. Firstly, their schooling has been entirely interrupted—often for multiple years—which puts them at a distinct disadvantage compared to others their age who benefit from a seamless transition to more advanced coursework. Most notably, refugees often relocate involuntarily and face immediate hardships stemming from discrimination, a lack of social, linguistic and navigational capitals, and unfamiliarity with western pedagogical practices and the bureaucratic red-tape of marketized education systems (Bartlett, Mendenhall, M. & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; McBrien, 2005; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Yosso, 2005).

For many refugees, the process of replenishing their stockpile of social and cultural capital—who they know, their ‘comfort’ in navigating social encounters with educators, counselors, and peers—occurs over a lifetime. Thus, the conditions and context in which refugees are asked to make important educational decisions and the degree to which those decisions expand or restrict purported programmatic opportunities warrants further exploration.

### **Pre-Resettlement Educational Experiences in Countries of First Asylum**

In the global context, refugees face numerous obstacles that can be categorized as bureaucratic as it involves navigating complex processes for submitting an initial application to the Department of Homeland Security for asylum. The application must further be approved by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) before the process of resettlement can occur. Recognizing that education must swiftly recommence for refugee youth, especially during formative years, numerous governmental and nonprofit organizations have joined in providing educational services during these uncertain times. Therefore, it seems prudent to understand the pre-migratory histories and education experiences of refugee youth in this transitional phase, as it could help elucidate their educational aspirations upon relocating to the United States.

Refugees that have been educated in countries of first asylum have surmounted indescribable obstacles to better their condition. Oftentimes their presence in their new surroundings presents them with a different set of problems than they would have been exposed to in their homeland. In terms of reception, the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers to a host nation and the concomitant absorption of their children into their education

system may put additional strain on already stretched resources (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; GEM, 2019). In turn, this could lead to tension between refugees and nationals. Thus, instead of understanding the unique educational needs of refugee students in a culturally appropriate way, “Cohen (1997) argues that nation states have coped with ethnic diversity by demanding exclusive citizenship, border control, linguistic conformity and political obedience” (As cited in Merks, 2000, p. 2). Additionally, the classroom is not the only place where these types of impositions, designed to acculturate and assimilate refugees into dominant society, occur. This has caused many working in the field of EiE to examine the interplay between in-school and out-of-school factors.

A recent case study conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo identified both personal and institutional challenges in providing refugee students adequate educational services in emergency situations (Save the Children, 2014). Personal challenges included lack of food and shelter, long walks to school, or hostile school environments; whereas lack of proper teacher remuneration or training and resources was listed as an institutional factor (ibid, 14). Despite these challenges, refugee students in pre-resettlement camps still maintain high educational aspirations. However, these aspirations tend to be attenuated not only by pre-resettlement factors, but also by post-migration conditions that make adapting life in their new communities challenging (Brenner & Kia-Keating, 2016; Bonet, 2018; Matthews, 2008). Since refugee students arriving to the U.S enter with very different histories and educational experiences, understanding their unique journey is crucial to meeting their individual needs.

### **Post-Resettlement Educational Experiences**

Scholarship written and published regarding the educational experiences of refugees always runs the risk of essentializing a population that is incredibly diverse in their origins, cultures, beliefs, and journeys. It is no surprise when research regarding refugee students is translated into education policy or professional development, it ends up doing just that. Upon arrival, refugee students are often placed in transitional programs that are meant to acclimate them to a new educational system and style of learning (Brenner & Kia-Keating, 2016; Picton & Banfield, 2018; Steinhoff, 2018). These programs also serve as an opportunity to evaluate students on a number of criteria from English language proficiency to reading comprehension to socio-emotional intelligences (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; McBrien, 2005; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Pryor, 2001). Transitional programs, although instrumental in socializing students to new education systems, can also serve as sites of segregation or as a sorting mechanism for future school placement (Crul et al., 2019).

### **Discrimination and the struggle for inclusion**

Global policy shifts for refugees to be included in classes alongside their peers is a recent phenomenon (Picton & Banfield, 2018). Although widely recognized to be vital to the learning outcomes of refugee students, inclusion in mainstream classes has moved slowly and many refugees are still being educated in parallel systems. The term 'parallel' refers to educational systems or policies that educate refugees and asylum seekers in facilities separate from the national or native population. This is a strategy that the UNHRC emphatically states should be "avoided, and the focus must be on integration into national public education systems (UNHCR, n.d., p. 4). A recent international study comparing inclusion policies by Crul et al. (2019) found:

In Turkey, the separation of refugee children in temporary centers with a curriculum taught in Arabic resulted in the children not learning Turkish, which then made it almost impossible for them to transfer to regular classes. In Greece and Lebanon most of the children were attending separate afternoon classes which caused segregation effects and often a lower quality of education. The most contrasting case compared to these three cases is Sweden, where children are placed in temporary classes for the shortest period of time with the aim to prevent segregation (p. 9).

The rationale for these policy shifts is also important to remember. In the global context, inclusion is justified if it is found such integration leads to a mutually beneficial arrangement for both the refugees and their hosting community. This remains one of the critical challenges in working towards refugee inclusion in their new communities, as their presence can often be seen as detrimental to the hosting community (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2018). Furthermore, this may be exacerbated by the kind of schools that refugee students have access to in national education systems, which are generally the same schools that marginalized nationals also have access to. It may be that the feelings of marginalization, that already exist, may inadvertently trigger anxiety towards welcoming new students. This can lead to discrimination as “refugees often arrive in underserved areas of host countries, stretching already limited resources” (GEM, 2019, p. 58).

Although inclusion has been adopted as a national policy in the United States, its implementation looks different depending on the resources available. How nationals and refugees might be separated from each other or placed in different classes in school-choice districts is an interesting question as opportunities to work towards social cohesion and establishing a sense of belonging is an important consideration in the refugee experience.

## **Identity**

Schools in the U.S. are the typical locations where identity formation occurs. Castells (1997) distinguishes *identity* from *roles* stating, “[roles] are defined by norms structured by institutions and organizations by society. Their relative weight in influencing people’s behavior depends upon negotiations and arrangements between individuals and these institutions and organizations” (p. 7). Taking Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) education as an example, a student involved in STEM related activities and coursework might view themselves as playing the role of a (prospective) scientist. Yet one would surmise that Castells would not ascribe a STEM identity to this individual. Identity formation occurs “when and if social actors internalize them and construct their meaning around this internalization” (Castells, 1997, p. 7) This generally unfolds in one of three forms, all of which are characterized by pluralities and power dynamics—as a “legitimizing identity, resistance identity, or a project identity” (ibid., p. 8). As it pertains to refugee students, the next section discusses only legitimizing and resistance identities.

The function of a legitimizing identity is the promulgation of a “set of organizations and institutions as well as a series of structured and organized social actors, which reproduce the identity that rationalizes the sources of structural domination” (p. 8). In the space where education research is carried out (i.e., schools, classrooms, etc.), these structures can act as the machine for which a legitimizing identity is produced. Conversely, resistance identities define themselves in opposition to dominant culture/practices where the end result is not assimilation or acculturation, but the formation of “communities of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, usually on the basis of identities that were, apparently, clearly defined by history, geography, biology, making it easier to essentialize the boundaries of resistance”

(Castells, 1997, p. 9). For students, schools often represent the place in which identity is disarticulated and reconstructed dialogically often mediated or moderated by unequal power relations (Giroux, 1983). The extent to which social actors, such as teachers, peers, and other school personnel in the network intentionally or unintentionally preserve, dilute, or destroy refugee student identity is well documented (McBrien, 2005; Thomson & Hall, 2008; Lockwood, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011). However, the ways in which school choice systems, with their emphasis on particular themes (i.e., STEM, visual arts, foreign language) or certain curricular pathways (VET, vocational), shape refugee identity remains a black box.

In the United States, dominant discourse and research pertaining to the intersection of race, identity and education has historically adopted a binary view of Black and White domestic students (Barton & Coley, 2010; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Hartney & Flavin, 2014; Spring, 2010; Tatum, 1997). Furthermore, when discussing the transfer of students to new educational environments, important research that looks at the intersection of identity and the educational experience of diaspora is informative (Patterson & Kelley, 2000). This is of particular interest in the case of refugee students who are often caught in a tug-of-war between acculturation and integration into the dominant culture at the expense of their unique and individual identities (Barlett, Mendenhall & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; Dryden Peterson 2015; McBrien, 2005; Merckx, 2000; Spring, 2010; Zhou, 2001).

## **Trauma**

Burde et al. (2017) recognizes the need to think not only holistically but temporally when it comes to the use of the word emergency to describe phenomena. They emphatically state that the “emergencies framework is imperfect, particularly in its use of the term

emergency, which implies a temporary condition and seems ill-suited to describe crises that endure over time” (p. 623). The impact of trauma for some refugees extends beyond being removed from the context in which the emergency is occurring. The 2019 GEM report, citing Fazel (2018), states, “Displaced learners have often had traumatic experiences of violence and conflict. Studies in high income countries have reported post-traumatic stress disorder prevalence rates ranging from 10% to 25%; in low- and middle-income countries, rates as high as 75% have been reported” (p. 72).

Although this study did not directly focus on refugee trauma, this is an important consideration for a few reasons. Firstly, as a researcher who cares deeply about the reconciliation process for people affected by trauma, I must remain sensitive to their experiences and validate their feelings (Birman, 2006). Secondly, trauma also can play a role in the decision-making processes as feelings of hopelessness often subvert agentic actions. Finally, the services available to students suffering from trauma might vary by school in a choice district. Thus, this element of refugee experience is relevant.

## **Conclusion**

Student experience in marketized education systems involves complex navigational capacities that require refugee students to simultaneously translate and interpret a variety of social situations that are likely to be culturally unfamiliar to them. Possible outcomes of these experiences include opposition, subversion, strategic compliance, acculturation, assimilation and integration. Yet, the role of agency undergirds all of them and functions as the catalyst which initiates refugee educational trajectories in school-choice districts.

Education is often touted as an equalizing force. In part, this refers to closing the achievement gap between minorities and their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lockwood, 2010; Sadowski, 2001; Wells & Crain, 1997). As they are typically subsumed into the wider minority student population--the immigrant category or English as a Second Language (ESL) population--the experiences of refugee students within quasi-market education systems represents an area that remains unexplored (Bonet, 2018). If we are to understand how choice during turbulent times expands or restricts educational opportunities, then practitioners are better equipped to assist refugee students during arrival and post-relocation. It goes without saying that careful consideration to the removal of structural and systemic barriers (lack of specialized/certified English as Secondary Language (ESL) or Special Education (SPED) teachers, transportation, fees, etc.) is a continued endeavor. Yet, understanding refugee's perspective on their locus of agency may yield insight into ways in which the type of school chosen may circumscribe refugee students on a certain trajectory that diminishes the equal opportunity for quality education. Therefore, this research serves to fill the current gap in the literature while prodding at one of the most crucial questions facing school-choice programs in the U.S.—choice for whom?

## Chapter IV: Methodology

### Overview

The purpose of the study was to capture the educational experience of refugee students in quasi-market education systems. In particular, this study sought to generate new knowledge geared towards mapping the influence of networked actors engaged with and alongside refugee students as they make decisions regarding the future of their educational life trajectories. The qualitative methodologies employed include a case study approach using narrative inquiry to guide the analysis of refugee student experiences in SLPS. To recap, based off previous literature regarding educational experiences in school-choice districts, I have considered the refugee experience as comprised of the following components: 1) motivations to select a particular school; 2) access to information regarding the school choice process; 3) curricular opportunities and educational attainment; and 4) agency & empowerment.

This chapter is meant to communicate the rationale for utilizing a specific qualitative methodology called narrative inquiry to investigate this topic, as well as describe how the boundedness of SLPS also constitutes a case study. Both were needed to address the stated research questions. Case studies are meant to capture the uniqueness and complexity of social phenomena, particularly regarding its interaction within a specific context (Stake, 1995, p. 16). Specifically, this was an *instrumental case study*, which is described as, “a type of case study with the focus on a specific issue rather than on the case itself. The case then becomes a vehicle to better understand the issue (Creswell, 2007 paraphrasing Stake, 1995, p. 245). The issue in this case study is school choice in the context of St. Louis, wherein an examination of refugee experience yields unique insight into the phenomena. Methodological strategies to

successfully elicit refugee students' personal histories with this issue are of relevance. I elected to use *narrative inquiry* as a qualitative methodological technique to do just that. A narrative is a story with temporally demarcated periods that are often stitched together through a series of meaningful events called a plot. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as:

The study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants. Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation (p. 189).

It might be helpful to think of narrative inquiry through a theatrical lens with particular emphasis being given to the setting, stage, actors, central issue and so on; all of which are emplotted<sup>15</sup> by careful analysis of each participant's expositional and dialogic prose. The social and political landscape of school-choice (issue) in St. Louis has created a unique environment (setting) for which to investigate the narratives and counter-narratives of refugee students' (actors) educational experiences within such structures (stage). Counter narratives, in particular, provide researchers an opportunity to "disrupt or interrupt" dominant discourses in social science research (Mertens, 2015, p.295). Counter narratives, in the context of this study, are also helpful to avoid essentializing refugees' experiences by allowing student narratives to convey the ways in which school-choice can be both empowering and a hindrance for that individual.

As a single case study design with multiple embedded units of analysis (former students), the methodology presented in this chapter is well-suited for understanding the ways in which refugee students navigate and negotiate their way through complex school-choice

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<sup>15</sup> Defined by Polkinghorne (1997) as the process of drawing out participant narratives and organizing them into a coherent plot through analysis and interpretation of text.

systems. It is my hope that this research will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the interactions and impacts that market systems have on refugee students and that the findings will be relevant for practitioners as we look to create learning environments that allow our most vulnerable populations to reclaim their lives.

This study used narrative inquiry precisely because the research questions are directed towards understanding the historical, political, social and economic conditions that influence refugee experience in school choice systems. Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative approach, was most appropriate to address my research questions that sought to unearth specific information regarding the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of culturally diverse populations (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies, specifically those concerned with exploring student experience and behavior, have a distinct advantage over their quantitative counterparts in that they focus on individual interpretations of socially constructed systems (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2016). Furthermore, qualitative researchers employ advanced analytic techniques to understand and explain recursively throughout the duration of the study. Data captured in the inquiry process is both descriptive and detailed. In order to establish validity, qualitative researchers acknowledge themselves as part of the process of knowledge production and, therefore, scrutinize ways in which they are influencing the research. The analysis and interpretation of data that follows this chapter utilized case study methods to expand our understanding of how refugee students engage with school-choice, while highlighting context specific processes identified by refugee students as being influential in shaping their educational experience in St. Louis.

## Theoretical Orientation

I addressed the research questions in this study through a critical realist lens, which combines a constructivist outlook on social experiences with a concrete view of the nature of reality. Easton (2010) on the subject of a critical realist approach to case study methodology states, “Critical realism is particularly well suited as a companion to case research. It justifies the study of any situation, regardless of the numbers of research units involved, but only if the process involves thoughtful in-depth research with the objective of understanding why things are as they are” (p. 119). Combined with a constructivist view on the social, economic and political interactions between myself and the participants, critical realism also considers the role of the qualitative researcher in the meaning-making process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Drawing on both constructivist and critical theoretical perspectives allowed me to reflect on the human understandings of truth and knowledge as partial, contextual and socially constructed, while also acknowledging that these understandings of truth and knowledge exist in a lived reality, which may be influenced by unequal power dynamics. Creswell (2007), regarding research rooted in social constructivism, states: “The goal, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (pp. 20- 21). Informed by critical realism and trained in qualitative methodology, this study examined the school-choice experiences of refugee students. The following section outlines the specific case study design and protocols that transpired when conducting this research.

## Case Study Design

This study used qualitative methodology, as the research questions were directed towards understanding the historical, political, social and economic conditions that influence refugee experience in school choice systems. Informed by an exhaustive review of the literature, the research questions are purposefully crafted to address specific lacunae in the field of refugee education. As Yin (2009) observes, "'how' and 'why' questions are more explanatory and likely to lead to the use of case studies, histories, and experiments as the preferred research methods. This is because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (p. 9). As a reminder, the research questions were as follows:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1).** How do refugee students describe their secondary educational experiences (navigating, accessing, and attaining desired programmatic and thematic curricular opportunities) in school-choice schema?

- a. Who are the stakeholders identified by refugee students as influencing decisions to attend a particular secondary school, and for what purposes?
- b. What factors do refugee students (alongside their parents) consider when making a decision on where to attend secondary school?
- c. What are the recruitment/marketing strategies, if any, that are specifically directed towards refugee students and their parents?
- d. What are the barriers identified by refugee students, if any, to accessing/processing pertinent information and how are those overcome?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2).** How do refugee students describe their own sense of agency when it comes to deciding their educational future in marketized systems amidst obstacles and opportunities?

- a. In what ways, and to what extent are refugee students actively participating in desirable thematic/curricular opportunities marketed to them?
- b. How, if at all, do refugee students describe feeling in control or not of their educational pathway in school-choice environments?
- c. If educational trajectories are misaligned with their future aspirations, how do refugee students conceive of their own reasons, and what actions did they take, for remaining in or transferring to a different school?

The investigation of these questions was guided by the four theoretical frameworks: actor-network theory, human agency theory, funds of knowledge, and critical race theory. Actor-network theory allowed the researcher to identify key influences (actors/actants) during the sharing of participant narratives regarding the high school selection process with particular emphasis on those actors who operated as obligatory points of passage (OPP). Thus, ANT allowed the researcher to map the network as experienced by refugee students, noting both consistencies and contradictions in experience. The three other theoretical frameworks were then guided the analysis of narratives to understand how refugee experience within SLPS as it relates to the structure of school choice that is imposed upon refugee newcomers to the marketplace.

The decision to do a qualitative study, particularly using the method of narrative inquiry, required the researcher to envision how the process of eliciting individual narratives would unfold. Clandinin, Caine, Lessard, and Huber (2016) recommend positioning participants within a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 23). Regarding each of these dimensions they state:

Temporality draws our attention to temporal transitions. Events, places, and people always have a past, present, and future. Sociality draws our attention to personal conditions and, at the same time, to social conditions. By personal conditions we mean the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both inquirer and participants. By social conditions we draw attention to the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form each person’s context. Place, the third dimension, draws our attention to the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place (pp. 23-24).

These dimensions were also situated within the context of this study. Firstly, *temporality* as it pertains to refugee students’ experience was captured by their unique and historical

educational experiences in both pre- and post-relocation. These interactions and experiences remain influential in shaping their educational trajectories within the structure of school choice schemas. Building upon ANT, *sociality* attuned the researcher's line of inquiry to solicit student understandings of the interplay between their individual interest and the influences of others on their decision to attend a specific high school. Furthermore, ANT allowed the researcher to examine the structure of sociality, drawing attention to specific gaps in information, barriers to access, and under what conditions important life decisions have been made. Lastly, narrative inquiry proved useful in this case study research, as the *place* in which this study occurred is a bounded, quasi-market school district.

### **Participant Eligibility and Sampling Strategies**

Merriam & Tisdell (2015) clearly states that if a case study methodology is adopted as a research approach, then two distinct levels of criterion must be established: 1) selecting the case and 2) selecting the sample of participants (pp. 294-295). As established previously, an argument for the context of St. Louis as the first level selection has clearly been made. As it pertains to the context of this study, the eligibility criteria for participant selection into this study was restricted to those students who have 1) held refugee status when enrolled in a St. Louis high school and 2) who have graduated from a high school in St. Louis, MO within the last 5 years. The former criterion acted as a filter to distinguish eligible candidates from other non-native students residing in St. Louis; whereas, the latter mitigated issues of recall during the interviewing/data gathering process.

For reasons of practicality, I was required to impose boundaries on this study. Excluded from consideration were refugee students who elected to attend private-school choice options

in the area, such as the Catholic or nonreligious schools, as my intent was to understand the experience of school-choice for those who are most vulnerable. Therefore, eligible participants were selected with intent, as my goal was to capture multiple permutations of the school-choice experience. Thus, sampling strategies geared towards elucidating that experience, specifically purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, were the most appropriate. The following sections provide a more fine-grained description of the sampling strategies to be employed.

### ***Purposeful Sampling***

Purposeful or criterion-based sampling is a selection strategy that allows the researcher to choose participants in a deliberative way in an effort to maximize the richness of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2015). This sampling strategy is appropriate to maximize the capture of variations within and between experiences of refugee students within quasi-marketed education systems. Furthermore, maximum variation sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as a subset of purposeful sampling was useful in both capturing the widest variety of data and in determining when *saturation* was reached. Several participants were selected using this strategy, specifically participants who did not choose/attend schools known for having a large refugee and immigrant population, as well as participants who selected magnet schools focusing on atypical themes such as career, ROTC, or visual and performing arts.

### ***Snowball Sampling***

Snowball or chain sampling occurs when the researcher asks eligible participants or those knowledgeable about the community to recommend other people to interview (Mertens, 2015). Participants instrumental in facilitating this type of sampling will be former teachers, administration, counselors, or members of the community that often act as the gatekeepers to obtaining access to the population under study (Wanat, 2008). By gaining the trust of the gatekeepers, the researcher can then expand the initial pool of potential participants and identify other potential informants with relevant information or perspectives. Many refugees remain close to their initial placement communities upon relocation to the host nation or a part of the same social organizations (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Due to the shared history as a migrating refugee, snowball sampling was used to complement purposeful sampling in an effort to yield acceptable sample sizes for the purposes of this study. Snowball sampling occurred in this study through several modalities. Firstly, my connections with several current and former SLPS colleagues allowed me to easily access a network of communication that an outsider would not traditionally have access to. Their willingness and amenability to connect me with participants who fit the eligibility criterion of the study greatly accelerated the data collection process. Additionally, at the end of each interview I asked the participant if they knew anyone who also fit the description of eligible candidates with specific priority given to those who choose different schools, where from different countries of origin, or to meet targeted gender ratios. Several participants were selected through this means.

### ***Convenience Sampling***

Convenience sampling occurs when a researcher justifies selection of a participant due to personal connection or lack of resources (money, time, etc.) to commit to other sampling techniques. This type of sampling, by itself, is universally viewed as sampling at the expense of credibility (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2015). From my history as an educator in St. Louis (see positionality statement below), I am still deeply connected to former students and the communities in which many still reside. Thus, convenience sampling as a strategy to transition to purposeful sampling was useful in conducting this case study in a timely fashion. Convenience sampling occurred through my attendance at a soccer game. Many of the refugee students I coached for soccer continue to play for a local developmental soccer organization whose talent pool is predominantly African refugees and immigrants. During my time conducting field work, I was surprised to learn that several of my former refugee students would be participating in a season opener hosted by the aforementioned organization. After the match, I was able to distribute my call for participants and discuss in detail the purpose of the study with several potential candidates; many of which agreed to be a part of the study.

As Yin and others observe, there is no formulaic approach to determining the appropriate sample size of case study research. Yet, it is suggested that data gathering should continue as outlined until saturation, generally defined as the point where “no new information or insights are being produced (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199) is reached. Yin (2015), building off of Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) notion of *selection to the point of redundancy*, emphasizes that the researcher is likely “not able to state ahead of time, the number of instances to be covered” (p. 98). Thus, this case study was cautious to ascribe a maximum sample target, as the desire to

remain flexible in the selection process insulated the study from the deleterious effects of oversampling on research credibility. Yet, during the IRB process a specific number (as opposed to a range) was required. I proposed 18 participants instead of the 12-15 at the counsel of my dissertation committee to provide me with the flexibility needed when using snowball and convenience sampling. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, a total of 15 interviews with 16 participants<sup>16</sup> were conducted. Owing to the amount of rich data that was captured during the interviewing process, it seemed reasonable to stop collecting data as I reached my target sample size and was nearing the maximum number of participants. This research strived for a balanced representation of male and female participants, a proportionate representation in terms of country of origin (see Appendix A), and a diverse selection of high schools (see Table 1) attended by refugee students. Of course, such representation is not always easy to come by, and it is regrettable to report that of the participants sampled, there is an overrepresentation of males, a point that will be further examined in the limitations of the study. As for the other targeted representation goals, an interesting discussion is to be found in the analysis section of this dissertation.

Lastly, regarding diversity of origin, Appendix A depicts refugee arrivals to St. Louis disaggregated by country of origin from 2002-present. Therefore, from Appendix A one can get a general impression of the culturally diverse populations that are being asked to participate in school-choice systems. As illustrated in Appendix A, the five major countries of origin for refugees relocating to St. Louis are the Kingdom of Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Burma, and the

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<sup>16</sup> One interview occurred with a pair of brothers, both of whom had markedly different experiences choosing schools.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2019). Therefore, 4 out of 5 countries are represented in this study with Iraqi participants being notably absent from the sample. However, prior to the Trump administration's decision to drastically reduce the number of refugees entering the United States, Syrian refugees comprised the largest group of the most recently arrived refugees to St. Louis. Syrian refugees are also represented in this study.

### **Data Sources and Collection Methods**

Prior to conducting this study, all procedures and protocols were reviewed and cleared by the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All data gathering instruments described in the following sections did not include requests for identifiable information that could hinder or negatively impact participants who have recently graduated from SLPS.

Data sources that are common in case study methodology include: interviews, document analysis of relevant current and archival public records, personal documents and physical evidence often referred to as artifacts (Stake, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; O'Leary, 2014; Yin, 2014). To examine the contextual and structural factors that refugee students identify as impacting their educational trajectories, this narrative case study relied primarily on data gathered from semi-structured interviews.

### ***Interviews***

In-depth semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to capture refugee experiences in quasi-market education systems from a student perspective. Narratives co-created from the interviews provided a space to amplify the voices of refugee students by

examining the extent to which certain desirable programmatic coursework was offered/attained. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, providing the respondent with the flexibility required to craft their individualized narratives, while ensuring that important questions are being asked to facilitate the story-sharing process. Face-to-Face interviews allowed me to gather attitudinal and dispositional insights from participants regarding their experience in the school of their choice, in addition to eliciting factors that might have influenced their decision to stay or transfer to a different school. Personal narratives of historical events and prior education in their home country was also discussed, in addition to the process of finding a school in the host country.

Acknowledging that identity is a complex construct, particularly in the case of transient refugee students, the interview protocol did not contain specific questions regarding demographics (see Appendix C). Instead, several open-ended questions regarding their family history and how they arrived in St. Louis was administered wherein students are free to respond to them to the extent they feel comfortable. Of course, identity for refugee students is a topic that remains close to them and one that commonly manifested itself during the interviews themselves.

During each interview, participants were asked if they were willing to consent to an audio recording to ensure the integrity of responses being captured. All participants agreed to be audio recorded. Additionally, all participants gave permission for me to conduct follow-up interviews/questions if needed. The researcher used member checks with each interviewee to ensure that their voice was heard and not that of the researcher only. Although interviews are the primary form of data typically collected in narrative and counter-narrative inquiry, “this

type of study can also make use of print and visual materials” (Mertens, 2015, p. 294). My dissertation study also uses relevant and emerging materials, which is the subject of the next section.

### ***Documents & Artifacts***

Visuals and documents can be helpful when encouraging participants to elaborate on their histories with the school selection process. Visual cues can elicit specific details to rise to the surface or trigger certain memories that may be relevant. “Recognizing the faults of human memory, researchers should be concerned with two aspects of the data: consistency in the testimony (reliability) and accuracy in relating factual information (validity)” (Mertens, 2015, p. 297).

Documents of interest for this study included recruitment artifacts and school-specific mission statements. Student transcripts would have provided a detailed scope and sequence of each student’s educational coursework (pathway) as they matriculated through their school of choice. Specifically, student transcripts can be used to stimulate recall of certain coursework, school-level interactions, and events. Yet, given the sensitive information found on transcripts combined with the likelihood that participants themselves would be required to reenter the schools to obtain copies of them, I felt it might have placed the participant at undue risk to be identified. Thus, transcripts were not used in the interview process and I instead opted to explore information course offerings or pathways publicly available on the school website along with the participant. This directly addresses RQ2.a-- the extent to which refugee students can access and attain the thematic programs marketed to them. Particularly in the context of school-choice, school mission statements signal to students the types of value systems and

curricular preferences that make it unique from other competitor schools in the district (Savage, 2017). Furthermore, throughout the duration of the study, the researcher kept a journal chronologically logging data, wonderings, and monitoring any subterranean biases that might creep to the surface. This acted as an additional data resource that is helpful when conducting follow-up interviews or member checks.

### **Data Analysis & Interpretation**

In qualitative research, the recursive process of gathering and analyzing data often happens concurrently (Mertens, 2015). This allows for findings to emerge from the rich dataset when specific analytical techniques and strategies are applied. “Narrative inquiry uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Polkinghorne (1995) identifies two main types of narrative inquiry analysis: Analysis of Narratives and Narrative Analysis. Both types of analysis are further outlined in the following sections. Yet, it is important to note that the story itself (i.e., the narrative) forms the “text” of the dataset. Thus, the data first underwent open coding to identify and categorize emerging themes while the theoretical frameworks outlined in previous chapters guided the interpretation of the data. All coding was performed by the researcher using Nvivo software while applying the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to check emerging themes against the other forms of data and identify similarities and differences in and between cases.

## ***Analysis of Narratives***

Analysis of Narratives is an inductive process that “builds categories or themes from the ‘bottom up,’ by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2007, p. 38). Yet, Creswell warns against applying a priori theories to this analytical strategy insisting on researchers keeping a “focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issues, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature” (p. 39). Although theory can guide the interpretation of data, it is markedly different than applying a theoretical framework to the dataset. Thus, the result from performing an analysis of narratives is the presentation of findings that are generally thematic and emerge as the result of open coding followed by axial coding (Kim, 2016). This is similar to other types of analysis performed in qualitative studies. By systematically pouring over the narratives looking for commonalities, patterns, relationships, and particularities, the researcher can construct an overarching, general narrative about how refugee students experience selecting high schools in St. Louis, MO. These generalities are useful as a point of departure when seeking to generate new knowledge regarding refugee experiences. Categorizing emerging themes from interviews combined with public artifacts of interest is necessary, but by itself insufficient when it comes to communicating the full variation of refugee experiences navigating and negotiating their way through quasi-market education systems. For that, one would need to re-analyze the data, “attending to the particular and special characteristics of human action...in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome” (Kim, 2016, p. 197). Therefore, after constructing the architecture of influence as identified by refugees when they

first arrive in St. Louis, a network map can be assembled which identifies key actors and the obligatory points of passage that shape the experience of school-choice in St. Louis.

### ***Narrative Analysis***

Narrative analysis, as an analytical strategy, differs from an analysis of narratives in fundamental ways. As Kim (2016) observes: “The purpose of the narrative analysis to help the reader understand why and how things happened in the way they did, and why and how our participants acted in the way they did” (p.197). She then goes on to identify an aspect of narrative analysis that aligns with my philosophical orientation which I consider to be located in the transformative paradigm. Kim (ibid) states, “Narrative analysis has appeal to readers in a way that helps them empathize with the protagonist’s lived experience as understandable human phenomena” (p. 197). This is an important step when addressing educational inequality at a structural level. It is plausible, if not likely, that users of any particular system are impacted differently, and those unique experiences can and in many ways are subsumed into larger “themes” and “categories.” In the context of this study, an uncritical application of an analysis of narratives, especially that of particularly unique cases, runs the risk of exonerating the structure of the system from playing a crucial role in bounding student perceptions of school choice. Thus, narrative analysis allowed the research to interrogate the extent to which external structural forces were shaping refugee students’ perceptions of choice at the time in which they were required to make a decision on where to attend high school in St. Louis. Table 3 below juxtaposes key elements of both types of narrative inquiry analysis and highlights the strengths and limitations of each.

TABLE 3: KEY ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY ANALYSIS: ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES VS. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

	Analysis of Narratives (paradigmatic mode of analysis)	Narrative Analysis (narrative mode of analysis)
<b>Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describes the relationship between categories of themes.</li> <li>• Reveals commonalities that exist between multiple narratives or sources of data</li> <li>• Outcome is the production of a general knowledge of a lived experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assembles events, actions, and happenings into an organized plot.</li> <li>• Fills in the gaps between events and actions (narrative smoothing).</li> <li>• Not merely a transcription of data but a means of showing significance of experience in the phenomena under investigation.</li> </ul>
<b>Limitations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritizes the general over the specific thereby downplaying the uniqueness of each narrative.</li> <li>• Distilled themes may not fit neatly into a predetermined or constructed category.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of diminishing participant voice as the researcher makes, interprets, and assembles of range of disconnected data into a coherent story.</li> <li>• Final narrative is congruent with the data, but often not explicitly stated in the data itself.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Kim, J. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. pp. 196-197.

From table 3 one can get a sense of just how limiting it would have been to employ one analytical strategy at the expense of the other. Thus, my study also used narrative analysis which allowed me to discover the ways in which some refugees were able to use the system to their advantage in order to “get what they wanted out of it” while also acknowledging cases in a lack of agency was partially the result of a vulnerability in the design of the educational system. The analytical framework presented here is built upon the assumptions that inherent within each individual decision regarding which school to attend, are issues of power and opportunity that inevitably impact refugee students’ educational experiences. Issues of power extend to the role of the researcher. Regarding oral history and historical writing, Mertens (2015) warns that researchers “need to be concerned about the amount of involvement the

interviewer has in the process and in presenting the results” (p. 298). This is a nice segue into issues of validity and reliability, which is the subject of the next section.

### **Validity and Reliability**

There are two commonly identified categories of validity-- internal and external. They emerged from and are traditionally associated with quantitative methodologies, but also have parallels in qualitative research. Internal validity is comparable to credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in qualitative research and remains a salient feature of case study methodology. According to Creswell (2009), credibility of findings can be thought of by asking the question, “Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants’ meaning?” (p. 206). As noted previously, the researcher operates within a constructivist research paradigm and, therefore, constructed participant perceptions of reality are of keen interest. As Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) point out, “interpretivist case studies attempt to understand participants’ sense-making of events or phenomena. Rooted in a social constructivist notion of reality, they emphasize symbolic aspects of experience, asking how and why people act in certain ways and exploring the meaning that generate” (pp. 32-33). Therefore, mechanisms, such as peer-debriefings and member-checks and a close monitoring of researcher biases, were built into the design process to ensure that the interpretation of data best matches participant meaning. This was accomplished by providing each participant with their interview transcripts for review, revision, and final approval. This, in my opinion, is sufficient to establish credibility. Furthermore, my close relationship with members of the community increases the *trustworthiness* of my results (Yin, 2015).

External validity, or the generalizability/transferability of findings to other contexts is sometimes viewed as less crucial for case study research. This is captured by Stake's (1995) oft cited line, "The business of case study is particularization, not generalization" (p. 7). Yet, I find myself in disagreement with such a simple view of case study research because I believe it is important to push back on dominant narratives positioning qualitative research as less generalizable compared to qualitative methodologies. Although the context in which school-choice policies are implemented may be a function of disparate political, social, and economic histories, school level responses to issues of access are, in fact, quite generalizable given widespread mechanisms of policy-borrowing in education. Although a comparative case study between two school-choice districts with sizeable refugee student populations would be required to support notions of generalizability, the fact that this is a single case study does not refute the potential of the findings to be generalizable. Therefore, the intent of the research was to understand the experiences of refugee students who are thrust into the school-choice environment of St. Louis, specifically, and make specific policy suggestions that will meet the needs of future refugee newcomers based off the analysis of data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Maryland was gained prior to the study being conducted. Although this was a necessary first step in assessing whether the researcher appropriately considered his ethical responsibility to the participant, it does not, by itself, guarantee that the study will progress without ethical dilemmas. While describing their educational and life histories, a handful of my participants became emotionally stressed during the interview as the act of reflecting induced trauma-associated memory recall

(Birman, 2006). As a researcher, I was sensitive to their needs and periodically paused the interview with the participant to provide them time and tissue and to ensure that they were comfortable with the questions being asked. All of the participants were able to complete each interview and answer specific questions to the best of their ability. Many participants thanked me afterwards for showing interest in their lives and described the process of telling their story as “enjoyable” or “fun.”

Additionally, all participants in the study were informed in advance of the purpose of this study and its implications as it pertains to refugee education in St. Louis. The purpose was also reviewed with them immediately prior to the first interview question followed by a request for audio consent. A recruitment email and the attached consent form was sent detailing the types of questions the study seeks to elucidate as well as a clear description of their role and responsibilities as participants. This document also communicated that necessary precautions are taken to protect their identity and that participation is completely voluntary. Before each interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participant so that they could ask questions before agreeing or not.

Other precautions deemed appropriate for the context of the interview were taken to ensure that the participants felt safe and that they trusted me. Creating a relationship of trust and an atmosphere conducive to refugee students disclosing personal experiences in high school also assisted in conferring validity to the relevant findings. Lastly, all participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason, free of penalty.

To maintain each participant's anonymity, the researcher created pseudonyms for each individual interviewee. Given names, email addresses, and other forms of contact information, although collected voluntarily, are omitted from this dissertation. Documented responses during the interview were transcribed electronically and stored as a password protected word document on the researcher's secure hard drive. All data will be destroyed by deletion or document shredding upon completion of the study, but not before a minimum of 5 years after collection.

### **Positionality Statement and Reflexivity**

It is common knowledge among social scientists that those conducting research bring with them prioritized perspectives and biases that influence the interpretation of data and how it's presented (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, in the interest of transparency, this section seeks to reveal my biases prior to conducting fieldwork. In the introduction, I described the impetus for this doctoral study in addition to my relation to the context in which this study transpired. As an affluent, white male conducting research in a low-income, high poverty, majority-minority school district, my privilege in this space is not beyond reproach. Informed by critical theory, my academic training has impressed upon me the importance of monitoring the influence of my positionality during the research process. Although reflexivity starts with the researcher acknowledging their status as an "outsider" and as a "researcher" in the eyes of those they are researching, it proceeds cautiously alongside participants in the co-construction of knowledge. Additionally, my experiences as a former teacher of refugee students in St. Louis for six years and my international work as an emerging

researcher inevitably color the ways in which I approach the purpose of research. As Bartlett and Vavrus (2016) quoting Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) remind us, “we cannot study the social world without being a part of it” (p. 57). By being a social actor with disparate interests enmeshed within a social reality, I seek a more inclusive methodology that broadens the participation in the production of knowledge. I heeded the advice of Clandinin, Caine, Lessard, and Huber (2016) regarding narrative inquirers, “we first co-compose a field of experience with participants and then begin to engage in processes of co-composing field texts (what is often called data)” (p. 24). Thus, I would like to reiterate my personal connection to the refugee student population in St. Louis. As a former educator, soccer coach, and mentor of many refugee students, there is an element of trust between us that allows me to explore the topic of this dissertation. Therefore, the narratives you will be introduced to overflow with an abundance of rich information that will not only help me communicate their stories, but also further advance my commitments to the refugee community in St. Louis.

Reflexivity is an integral and continuous component of the research process that can and often does challenge the methodological approach adopted at the outset. By being reflexive, the researcher is able to assess the extent to which the methods chosen are appropriate for capturing the experiences of refugee students residing in St. Louis. In order to interrogate and mitigate the assumptions that I might have brought into the research process, I kept a detailed field journal that cataloged wonderings and impressions throughout the data collection process. This is not only important in terms of justifying the rationale for any departure from the methodology outlined in future chapters, but also provided me with the

opportunity to examine the ways in which my positionality is inadvertently and unduly influencing the research process, if at all.

This methodological approach combined with a particular vision of how the research process is to unfold, taken together, helped mitigate the influences of both conscious and unconscious biases that would have otherwise crept into the interpretation of data. “Reflexive member checking seeks to illuminate a better representation of the lived experiences of the participants being studied (Mertens, 2015, p. 275). How reflexive member checks are effectuated through the “constant backward and forward confirmation” between the researcher and the researched (ibid, p. 276). Thus, the result of this research has the potential to amplify the voices of refugee students and capture ways in which school-choice schemas may work towards their future goals, while highlighting areas for improvement, as well.

### **Significance of Study**

As stated before, much of the extant literature adopts *rational choice theory* as a theoretical framework in which to view preferences, specifically that of parents, vis-à-vis school-choice educational research. It is only natural that parents want the best education for their children. Yet, parental decisions in school choice educational reform, as Andre-Bechely (2005) observes, leaves families “no choice but to become entangled in existing inequitable schooling structures and practices that are historically related to racial and social class issues” (p. 124). Thus, parents, as the unit of analysis, often overlook the students as individual agents with interests who are embedded within the social network of both the school system and their communities. A choice, from a sociological perspective, is decided with regard to larger social,

organizational, and economic structures that shape future consequences—particularly as they relate to life prospects and outcomes. As with the case of many refugee students, their ability to comprehend their new surroundings linguistically, culturally, and socially often surpasses that of their parents after resettlement (Pryor, 2001). Some refugee parents perceive their role as being constrained to the home or obligated to financially provide for their family and thus defer to educators and professionals for matters relating to school.

There remains a dearth of research on the students themselves as it pertains to navigating school-choice markets, either choosing to remain, transfer or leave the system entirely. A decision for one can be categorically feasible in terms of action (e.g., students can and do change schools/programs of study) while for others remains operationally impractical when structural, historical, or psychological constraints are what govern the perceptions of what is and what isn't a realistic possibility. Determining whether an action is realistic inevitably entails pragmatic considerations of the consequences by the student and ontological considerations by the researcher regarding what counts as agentic evidence.

Since Saint Louis is a quasi-marketized district, the structural component of agency is imposed upon refugee students from the outset; however, it requires that students exert individual agency to engage with it. Furthermore, viewing agency as bounded by certain institutionalized criterion and requirements while tracing the discourse that emerged from each interview back to the structure of refugee students' social networks elucidates the degree to which refugee students are able and willing to act. Therefore, the way in which opportunities to engage with information and dialogue regarding educational pathways in magnet schools, how that time is organized, and what processes are made transparent to students leads to varying

degrees and forms of agency. The extent to which adequate focus is being given to refugee students within this context remains an unexplored area of research.

When building an adequate understanding of how refugee students experience school choice education systems, it's important to consider how my doctoral research might address specific lacunae in the field in the hope of promoting more equitable practices and policies for refugee students. No extant research, to my knowledge, specifically addresses the intersection of school choice and agency as it pertains to the context of refugee students in the United States. Thus, this study may also have practical significance for the various stakeholders involved as it posits to deepen practitioner understanding of the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape refugee experiences in educational marketplaces.

The findings of this research can provide insight for administrators and district leaders in terms of engagement with refugee families. Furthermore, case workers at refugee resettlement agencies in St. Louis may also benefit from the sharing of research findings. This study provides crucial insight and data regarding the caliber of information refugees receive and/or would like to receive when determining to participate in the Saint Louis educational marketplace. Thus, the relevant findings presented in the following chapters can be useful for translating research into direct advocacy regarding the educational needs of refugee students in St. Louis. It is with that in mind that the following sections are designed to provide an exposition of each individual participant in the study. The structure of the exposition consists of three major components, which may or may not be told chronologically, but will be present in each participant profile. The three components are: Cultural background & ethnicity, salient memories of life prior to

relocation to the U.S., and experiences as a refugee in St Louis, Missouri, a large urban quasi-marketized school district.

## Chapter V: Participant Profiles & Narrative Analysis

### Overview

This chapter begins by explaining the organization of the following three chapters, which presents my findings in the form of student narratives and subsequent thematic and cross-case analysis. The chapter specifically comprises participant profiles and their pre-resettlement experiences. These experiences would be difficult to communicate absent any historical or contextualized understanding of the conditions that reproduce conflict in and between the neighboring countries that my refugee participants fled. Thus, I have decided to categorize refugee participants into 3 regions: Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with several subregions for Africa. Although global conflict is not restricted to these geographic areas, these regions contain the countries of origin of my participants and, thus, enables me to present information in a slightly more systematic way. Each country's section will briefly describe a historical and/or contemporary account of the conflict, in addition to the participants' individual profiles and pre-arrival educational experiences. Therefore, what brackets each section's conflict depends on the degree to which the participant can describe the reason/s why they had to leave their homeland. Descriptions of a conflict's origins may share partial or overlapping histories with neighboring countries (e.g., Eritrean independence from Ethiopia and the ensuing border conflict) or may be due entirely to other factors identified by the refugee participants such as socio-political, cultural or economic insecurities. Therefore, several countries accounted as belligerents in the conflict are juxtaposed in order to fully capture the dynamics that sustain refugee migration.

As stated in the previous chapter, one of the most difficult tasks of the researcher in narrative analysis is to make categorical thematic comparisons without essentializing the unique experiences of each refugee. Thus, I have decided to categorize refugees by region, while discussing the relevant and contemporary origins of the conflict which led to each participant fleeing their homeland. It must be noted that the specific historical conditions were identified during the interview and subsequent research was conducted into order to complete the narrative, a process known as narrative smoothing (Kim, 2016). This is important for gaining a sense of the cultural, political or ethnic roots of conflict specific to each participant's experience. Then at the individual level, participant profiles will primarily highlight their pre-relocation experience, reserving chapters 6 and 7 for themes that have been identified from their post-arrival, school choice experiences.

### **Participant Profiles**

The participant profiles are distilled from the interviews I conducted which examined student perceptions of 3 major elements: demographic background information, pre-resettlement educational experiences, and other salient features or defining life metanarratives. Although these three elements will manifest themselves in some capacity within each participant profile, they will not, however, be specifically delineated by each element. Instead, they will be woven into a story or narrative that communicates them in a way that prioritizes the "centrality of emotions in lived experience (Denizen, 1992), which are then aesthetically posed to the reader through familiar story forms" (Coulter and Smith, 2009, p. 578). This is the task charged to the narrative researcher. The final storied bricolage is the

outcome of a process of uncovering events and describing lived experience retrospectively alongside the participant during the interviews and is itself a transformative technique (Freeman, 2007).

What occurs in the next sections is the careful, co-constructed crafting of an account of participant narratives that powerfully expounds the ways in which refugees' educational histories continue to shape their school-choice experiences. I use a variety of prosaic, and literary elements to, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest, "represent storied lives in storied ways" (p. 141). Included in these researcher decisions are storytelling elements which contain survivor narratives, first and third-person points of view, flashback, imagery, and dialog to name a few. Furthermore, participant profiles may not be told chronologically either. As is often the case with dialogic/hermeneutic methodology, communicated stories tend to flow organically. In many cases, the events or situations that are retold are not merely the musings of an individual, but of the multiplicity of interacting voices of profound influence. According to Dewey (1963), "situation and interaction are inseparable from one another. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with him he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also part of the situation" (pp. 42-43). Thus, prevailing narratives of historical significance are re/shaped not only by experience, but by reflection and recitation of that experience in relation to an audience. Hence, the appeal of performativity when it comes to storytelling is not beyond reproach. Yet, the vividness of participant recollections, their willingness to be vulnerable, and their patience in the co-producing personal narratives increases the validity of findings. The richness of each

participant's pre-arrival narrative is a function of memory recall and how willing they were to share details about that tumultuous period of their life. Thus, the profile narratives are presented in such a way to bring the reader into the world of the participant. Written not to only captivate the reader, but to relive their experience, just as they did when they sat down with me to conduct the interview. My role as a researcher is to ensure that I am presenting their narratives in a way that captures their purest recollection of events. Thus, each participant profile necessarily includes emotional and affective responses to events in which they were uniquely exposed to. These are findings in and of themselves. However, thematic and cross-case analysis will specifically address the research questions.

Each participant narrative contains a short prelude to the origins of the conflict as identified by the participant. Lastly, it must be said that the conflicts mentioned here are likely to be a pretext or a manifestation of festering political, cultural and social issues. It is far beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine the extent to which the origins of each conflict can be traced back to European colonization, as in the case of Africa and its partitioning after the Berlin Conference of 1884. Yet, it would be colossal oversight if a few sentences were not dedicated to the historical legacy that colonization had on the continent and others. For example, the medium of instruction in certain countries' education systems are a vestige of colonialism. However, in an effort to remain fixated on capturing participant experience, each conflict overview provides the reader with only essential background information. Excluded from this chapter is an exhaustive explanation of the roots of these conflicts as this chapter is intended to highlight participants' perceptions and understanding of the conditions which lead to their migration to the U.S.

## Cases by Region: Africa

### The African Great Lakes: Congo

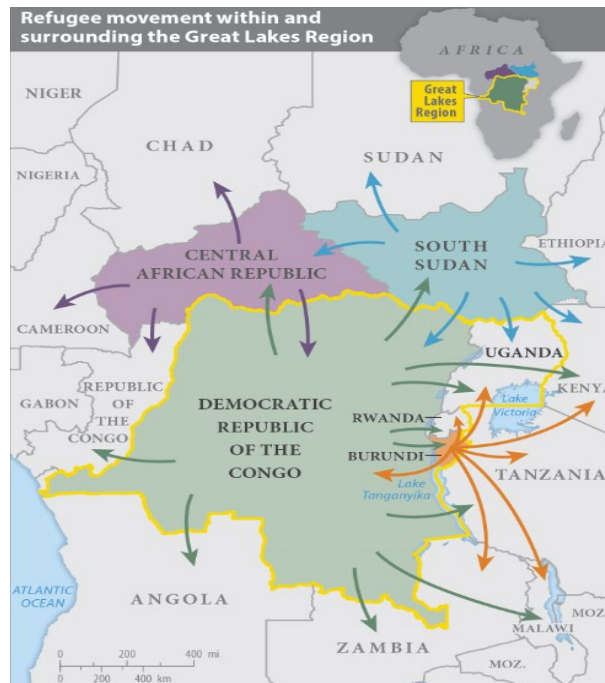
The African Great Lakes include several countries, but several participants claimed The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly known as Zaire) as their home or country of origin. However, as you will learn, many of the Congolese participants in this study fled from or to other surrounding African Great Lakes nations such as: Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania to name a few. Though a portion of each interview was dedicated to understanding their view of the historical events for their family's migration, this section seeks to provide a contemporary understanding of the political, cultural, and social complexities of the region.

Since the early 1990's, the African Great Lakes region has been a crucible of violent conflict. The historical conditions that have reproduced violence in the area requires an investigation into the roots of the conflict. However, such a thorough examination is not necessary for the purposes of this study. Instead, I will start in 1994, the year millions of Rwandan refugees (see Rwandan genocide) fled to the eastern region of the DRC or Zaire, as it was known as at the time. This event, in which thousands of Tutsis were massacred by the warring Hutu tribe, engulfed the region in war precipitously. The genocide and Rwandan civil war ended when Tutsi forces known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front claimed a decided victory at the capital, forcing remaining government loyalist and extremist Hutu sympathizers to also flee to neighboring Zaire (Shearer, 2007). Fearing insurgency from Hutu rebels who were organizing there, Rwanda, Uganda, and anti-Mobutu rebels lead by Laurent Kabila invaded eastern Congo to stamp out the remaining perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, sparking the

First Congo War (1996-1997). The First Congo War ended with the ousting of Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who's contribution to Zaire is a legacy of internal ethnic tensions and utter economic ruin.

The Second Congo War began shortly after the end of the First, when President Kabila, the former leader of anti-Mobutu rebel groups, ordered all non-Congolese forces to leave the DRC in an effort to protect the region's rich supply of natural resources. The move to do so sparked what is now known as "Africa's World War," which involved 9 African countries<sup>17</sup> and countless armed civilian militias. Figure 4 shows the movement of refugees around the African Great Lakes region from several countries that were mentioned during interviews with the following participants.

FIGURE 4: **REFUGEE MOVEMENT WITHIN AND SURROUNDING THE GREAT LAKES REGION**



Source: U.S. Department of State, Humanitarian Information Unit (HIU) available at <https://hiu.state.gov/>, 2020

<sup>17</sup> Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Chad and Sudan

From the participant's perspective, I will elaborate on these countries' conflicts with particular emphasis given to how it has shaped their educational opportunities and impacted their lives in fundamental ways.

***Case 1: Kevin, Rutherford STEM class of 2019***

Kevin is a soft-spoken, 18-year-old male of Congolese heritage, but identifies as Ugandan. This is because the Kyaka II refugee camp in Uganda was the only home he's ever known until his family relocated to St. Louis, MO in 2015. "I am a wartime baby," he states nonchalantly. "I was born in Bukavu, Congo. It's just on the border near Rwanda. I am the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 8 kids. We were just running away from the war. The Great African World War is what we call it."

Speaking amicably through a thick accent, Kevin describes his childhood at the camp and how he never really thought about what he didn't have until he came to the U.S. He recalls,

I remember life in the refugee camp as being mostly peaceful. More peaceful than my family's time in Congo. No one told us what to do or where to do. We could leave if we wanted to. It was also fun. We used to do a lot of things together with friends and family like play soccer, work in the garden, go to church and visit each other. I was never lonely back then. I would go to church with my family several times a week. I am a Christian and church is really important to me. I used to sing in the choir too. I was really good back then. One time I even got to travel to the Fort Portal to sing at a big church that was a part of our branch. I went with my dad, that was a good time.

I ask Kevin to describe his most precious memory. I catch a flicker of glee in his eyes as he dislodges his gaze from its fixed position on the coffee cup before him. "I loved the Christmas parties. When everybody comes together to dance and sing. That was the best. They would give

us different foods to eat, something we never had before. Once I got to drink this big soda,” he recalls fondly moving his arms to gesticulate its size.

Kevin lived in Kyaka II refugee camp for the first 14 years of his life. During that time, he went to school taught by Ugandan teachers, which he described as being “a little bit hard.” He described a smattering of ways that he and his friends would pass the time during early morning walks to school, which he estimated to be “nearly 5 miles.” “We used to kick a rock to each other or toss a ball made from all these socks.” The camp was full of refugees from all over Central Africa, but most people chose to live in sections of the camp occupied by their own people to “speak the same language” and observe “cultural behaviors and practices.” School, however, was the one place where everyone from all backgrounds would be together. “English was a little bit hard because my parents didn’t speak English at home,” he stated before reminding me that, “In Congo they spoke Lingala, Swaihli, and French mostly.”

Although the camp had limited resources compared to the U.S., Kevin remembers that he had access to books, places to sit, and writing utensils. Funded by the Uganda Red Cross Society, Kevin studied history, English, math, science, and Christian Religious Education (CER) and would often play sports during recess. “Back there it's different. If you don’t pass the test at the end of the year you have to retake the grade. Many people stay in 1<sup>st</sup> grade for 2 or 3 years,” he states matter-of-factly. “But me, I didn’t fail a single grade.” He attributes his success in grade school to be combination of “focus” and “fear of getting whooped.” Upon relocation to St. Louis, Kevin would attend the Welcome School and then finish his high school education at Rutherford STEM. Kevin is currently enrolled in a for-profit private college located in an urban area of St. Louis, MO.

### **Cases 2 & 3: The Ngoy Brothers**

Having awoken from a deep sleep, Sam and his cousin emerged from the reeds on the riverbank where they would often spend their afternoons catching fish. They meandered in a desultory fashion back towards their tent. Gatumba, Burundi, a small village near the border of Congo, had been home to Sam and his family for nearly three months. They journeyed there from their hometown in eastern Congo called Uvira, he explained. Now 23 years old, Sam is a tall, slender man who enjoys playing sports and visiting his mom. He is currently unemployed but will start working for Amazon in a few weeks. He speaks with a midwestern, American accent, as does his brother Ian, since both relocated to Boise, Idaho when they were 7 and 2, respectively. Sam remembers more about their time in Central Africa compared to his brothers Ian and Eric (not interviewed). “We would eat dinner with my auntie and my cousins every night, and play with other kids in the camp,” Sam recollects. Ian was too young to go to school, but Sam recalls his previous educational experiences in the Congo stating,

There was no school in the camp, but I did go to school for until the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in Congo. My mom was a hustler and would find jobs here and there to scrimp and save to send me to school. Back there, you had to pay. Schools were far too, and you would have to walk miles it felt—and they made you wear uniforms. I remember doing well, but that might mostly because of fear. I learned my lesson the first time I showed up without my full uniform. I was hit with a belt. But I mean, as for the refugee camp, we were only there 3 months, so we didn’t go to school.

Gatumba is a refugee camp in Burundi for Tutsi, an ethnic tribe that reside primarily in Rwanda and Burundi but have sizable populations throughout the African Great Lakes due to

forced displacement during the Rwandan Revolution<sup>18</sup>. Tutsi's have been at war with the Hutus for as long as Sam and his brother Ian can remember. "We are Tutsi msinzira," Ian interjected proudly. "It means tribe." Ian is a stocky, charismatic Freshman at a small liberal arts school in central Missouri where he plays American football. He studies political science and has expressed interest in returning to the DRC to live and work after he graduates college. Sam continued where he left off. "And even though we were born in the Congo, our ethnicity is Rwandese, actually. But my mom even grew up in the Congo. She speaks Lingala instead of Kinyarwanda, which is the language of Rwanda. She taught us a little Lingala, so that's why most of the time we just say we're Congolese or African if someone asks."

Disoriented, Sam arrived back at the site of his camp just as the sanguine sun reached its zenith. "Our family was small to begin with, but was smaller after August 13, 2004," Sam stated, as he continued to recall the horror of that night. As he and his cousin made their way back to the camp from the Rusizi river, blurred details of Tutsi bodies, mutilated and motionless, became increasingly vivid with each step. "That's actually when we came across my babysitter. She was the one who told us to cover ourselves in some blood that was on the ground and go hide near the river." All but two family members survived the Gatumba Massacre, which claimed the lives of 166 Tutsi refugees that day. Amidst the chaotic aftermath Sam heard a woman's voice calling. "Get on the bus, your family is looking for you," a friend of the family called out to Sam as he sat on a rock chiseling away at the dried, cracked blood from his arms and hands. Sam and his cousin made their way toward a line of buses near the edge of the

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<sup>18</sup> A 1959-1961 period of ethnic violence between the Hutu and the Tutsi as Rwanda was transitioning from being a Belgian Colony to a Tutsi-dominated monarchy.

camp before being directed to get on one. Through the cacophony and confusion on the crowded bus, Sam eventually found his family. “We thought you were dead,” Sam’s mom wept as she gingerly placed one arm around Sam, the other still holding Ian. Minutes later the bus’s engine sprang to life. Shocked into silence, Sam wondered what happened to his other brother, Eric, as they traveled along a bumpy dirt road. Potholes and sharp turns produced a concomitant scream of pain from his mother to jolt him away from the catacombs of his mind.

These deliberate acts of violence were perpetrated by the Forces of National Liberation, a rebel political group made up primarily of Hutu members. Ian has always wondered why he was so angry as a child growing up in Boise. After listening to his brother recount the events of August 13, 2004, Ian quite shrewdly remarked,

The only reason I am here is because I was carried on my mom’s back. Other than that, I cannot remember details or any specifics like my brother can. But because I lived through it, I feel like I also carry the pain with me. So, what broke my heart was when my mom told me that she was angry too. She told me that when she was taking a shower, she used to look down at her stomach where they shot her and just break down and cry. She never got over it. And she never forgave the people that did that to her and to us. But I think now, she has learned to forgive the people that did that to her. Now she is whole. So as a kid I always wondered ‘why am I so angry?’ I know there could be a bunch of reasons, but I know that one of them was because she was angry too. So, you see trauma never really stays with one person. It affects everything, the whole family. After letting go of her grudge she is doing a lot better. She is really a spiritual woman.

When the bus pulled up to the local hospital outside of the refugee camp the morning after the massacre, triage workers quickly assessed the most severe cases. One of those cases arrived on an earlier bus—Eric Ngoy. Retelling how his mom described Eric’s injuries Ian stated,

My other brother’s leg was severely damaged from a bomb, so he had to get his leg amputated. That’s the main reason why I think we came here, honestly. Well, we still

did the interview to come to America, but we *had* (emphasis) to get that leg amputated because it was just dead. The leg was just dead. So that was pretty much what happened. That's the only reason we were able to come to America. And I am glad we did because I don't think he'd ever get a prosthetic leg and I don't think we would ever get a chance to fulfill our full potential.

Sam confirmed Ian's recollection of the sequence of events stating, "After they stabilized my mom, my aunt and my brother, it must have been not even a month later before we found ourselves on a plane to Boise. We considered ourselves the lucky ones because we were chosen, and others had to stay behind." The concept of luck appears in several participant accounts of their pre-arrival history. Participants describe themselves as lucky to be chosen even though it seems as if this nebulous term is in part a matter of suffering just enough to warrant rapid application processing. It is the consequence of you or someone you know requiring immediate mental or physical attention that can only be delivered in the United States. And in that act of relocating to the United States one can only be considered as being lucky.

Ian and Sam would eventually relocate to St. Louis, MO from Boise after their mom remarried. Both would navigate the complexities of school-choice in SLPS and have disparate perspectives on how it has influenced their educational opportunities. Sam would eventually convince his parents to move out of St. Louis City to one of the surrounding counties and would finish his education in the local comprehensive high school he was zoned. Meanwhile, Ian would remain in SLPS and graduated from Independence high school in 2019.

***Case 4: Joel, Woodcreek Transfer, Class of 2018***

Joel stood out among the masses that casually promenaded along the Loop, a commercial area in St. Louis. When I first met him, he was wearing a light blue three-piece suit and gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses. Joel had to report for this shift at a local food manufacturer later that afternoon. We quickly exchanged pleasantries before agreeing to start the interview forthwith. Originally from the Congo, but spent several years in Kenya, Joel speaks in a Kenyan-English dialect. Now at 22, he walks me through what he remembers about leaving Congo for Kenya when he was 13 years old.

There is always tribalism in the Congo. That is what people are fighting the war about. My mom and my dad are from different tribes and those tribes were fighting each other. As it turns out my mom's tribe eventually won. However, it was during that time that my dad was killed. I was about 3 years old when he died. We stayed with my mom's family, and I went to school for a while. But things did not improve, and there was always violence, so my mom and I fled to Kenya to stay with my uncle. That's how it happened.

Joel emphasized that he was different from many of the refugees in Kenya. "First of all, you have to understand that I am an African refugee who has never lived in a refugee camp," he states emphatically. "When my Mom and I arrived in Kenya and saw the conditions in the refugee camp, we said no, and we left for Nairobi." According to Joel, refugees who do not need support in the form of living accommodation, food, or security are allowed to live outside of the refugee camp. "The camp," he begins before pausing briefly, "It was just too hot to live there, and where I come from, we don't want to be too hot." With the assistance of Joel's uncle, a Congolese-born refugee in Kenya himself, and other family friends, Joel and his mom safely relocated to Nairobi. He soon found himself back in school and described how his view of education changed in Nairobi stating,

At first, I did not want to go to school at all. Because when I lived in the Congo I studied in French. I spoke in French. Then when I moved to Kenya, it's all English or Swahili, but mostly English. So it was initially very hard for me to make friends. There are different types of schools in Nairobi and the best schools are the public schools. But you still have to pay. This organization, Tushirikiane<sup>19</sup> (TUSA), it means *let Africa join hands*, they provided my family with a scholarship to help pay for books, uniform, and other things. Also, with the help of an aunt who lives in Colorado, I was able to go to school and have everything I needed. So yeah, I went to middle school then to high school there before moving to St. Louis in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Joel would go on to spend his next 7 years in Nairobi where he quickly became well-liked amongst his teachers and his peers. Weekends for Joel were spent hanging out with friends at the park or catching a flick at the local movie theater or playing video games. In school, he excelled academically and socially. Regarding the latter he reminisces,

In my school in Nairobi, I was the only Congolese, out of 300 kids who used to go to that school, so I felt safe. Everybody liked me and everybody wanted to know what I knew. I was friends with everybody. I was treated like this special—I don't know—because of the way I used to be intelligent in school. I'm not bragging. I was intelligent in school. I used to speak 8 different languages<sup>20</sup> and I was good at IT, you know—information technology? I helped the teachers with IT. So that gave me a ticket of being the school president. When I was in middle school, I was the school president. But after that experience they told me to be a class monitor. At first, I was the school monitor as president and then the class monitor of my grade. So, I was being given leadership opportunities for all these places [I went] since I was in middle school.

From the time Joel and his mother arrived in Kenya to the time his family's (including his uncle) application to resettle to the U.S was approved, Joel would be 20 years old and entering his

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<sup>19</sup> TUSA is a Jesuit organization whose services include education, conflict resolution and non-violence workshops, financial assistance, pastoral mentoring and youth-in-need groups for refugees from the African Great Lakes region.

<sup>20</sup> Joel can speak English, French, Lingala, Swahili, Kikuyu (Kenya), Kimbenbe (Congo), Kitabwa (Congo), and Kimeru (Kenya)

senior year. Joel, as you will learn in the next chapter, became disenchanted with St. Louis and the school choice system as evidenced by his final comment during our discussion. “Kenya was good. But this is the dream country, right? The American dream. I don't believe in that. Kenya was beautiful.”

***Case 5: Michel, Sierra International Studies High School, Class of 2018***

Michel’s heart was racing, stretching the muscles in his barrel-like chest to capacity. “I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” he recalled. Wide-eyed with wonder, he narrowly escaped being struck by an oncoming motorbike as he was pulled away from the clattering street by his close friend. From the buildings to the motor cars, Michel was in awe. It was the only time that he was able to clandestinely leave the refugee camp and witness what world existed beyond the confines of the camp fence. He replayed the day in his mind as he lay in bed later that night, safely returning to the camp without being noticed. “I want to move there,” he thought as he drifted closer toward that calm, fuzzy place somewhere between consciousness and sleep where the rigidness of reality becomes malleable. Always hoping that those ethereal images would revisit him in his dreams.

Michel is a stocky 22-year-old male who wakes up early most mornings to start work at a local bakery in St. Louis. “Right now, I just operate machines,” he states stolidly. “But I love the smell of the place.” Although originally from the Congo, Michel spent most of his formative years in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Although he can’t tell you exactly the specific reason for why the Congo has been at war for so long, he knows that his family left seeking a better, more peaceful life. Comparing his life in Tanzania to his time in the United States he states,

Back on the camp, sometimes it was easy, but most of the time it wasn't easy. There are different cultures, different people from different countries like from Burundi or Rwanda. We are all in the same camp and all speak similar languages. But it was hard at the same time because in the camp, there's not a lot of jobs that you can do that pays you good. So, sometimes other kids didn't have the option to go to school because they would have to work and work and work just to get something to eat or to get enough to take care of yourself, you know? So sometimes they don't even have enough money to buy clothes, buy a food. And life was just very terrible. It wasn't very easy.

Michel spent 15 years living in the Nyarugusu refugee camp, which is located in Kigoma province, Tanzania. The camp was established in 1996 when civil war broke out among various factions in the Zaire. At its peak, over 150,000 refugees once called Nyarugusu home. Michel remembers his favorite street corner café, the name of the barber who would cut his hair, and his time spent playing soccer on the weekends. His weekdays were spent attending school from 6 AM until 6 PM. He feels his education would have likely been similar had he never left Congo stating:

We were going through the Congolese school system in the refugee camp. What I mean to say [is] that we were speaking French at school, and that was kind of simple for us because in Tanzania they speak English and Swahili. But in the camp, they allowed you to use their own country's school system. So, it was just French, and it was easy for us. When you go to school, it felt similar to going to school in Congo. So, we were not a part of the Tanzania school system which they taught English. We spoke French or our African language. So, it was much easier to learn all the subjects. But at the same time, it was a bit challenging. We had like a hundred kids, only one classroom and the class is not big enough to hold all the kids. There's not enough chairs and sometimes we had to sit down on the floor. It's dirty and dark, but you have no choice but to just sit on the floor for eight hours. There was not enough supplies to go around. You have to buy that for yourself. So sometimes you don't have money. So, students often go to school without books, pencils, pants.

Michel would move to the United States in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. His expectations of the U.S. were shaped primarily by movies and the vibrant economic hum of Kigoma—the busy Lake

Tanganyika port city he furtively visited the one time he absconded from the confines of Nyarugusu. The motorbikes, tall buildings, fish markets, and rail stations that filled his dreams were well worth the risk of being caught by the officials. When Michel arrived in the U.S., his feelings were mixed at best. He saw the tall buildings and the motor cars. Having left behind a future of what he believed to be penurious, Michel saw the possibilities that St. Louis offered. Yet, he also saw its perils. He described his confusion to me in a dimly lit corner of the bakery in which he works,

They call it hoods or something like that. That's where they put us. And before I arrived, I didn't believe that in America it would be like that. I didn't believe in America I would see a broken-down car, or a burnt down house. I didn't believe in America that I'd see people in the street asking for money, you know, homeless. I didn't believe all that. But when I got here, that's all I saw.

### Horn of Africa: Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia

FIGURE 5: MAP OF THE HORN OF AFRICA



The countries of the Horn of Africa represented in this study are Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. This section seeks to provide a succinct, yet substantive, account of the political and economic instability that has caused many to seek asylum as a refugee in the U.S. or elsewhere. The conditions that led to the increase of refugees in each country is multifarious and, once again, a full historical analysis is far too pithy for the purposes of this research. Instead, I will focus on the recent causes of unrest, first discussing the Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict before moving onto the warlord clannism of contemporary Somalia.

Firstly, it is important to note that Eritrean refugees were understood to be Ethiopian refugees prior to Eritrea gaining its independence in 1991 (Bariagaber, 1997). Therefore, the distinction between the two populations and the historical context of the conflict will focus on the years leading up to this point of departure. Thus, the post-World War II expansionist campaign of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie into much of the Horn of Africa, although relevant, will not be examined. Instead, we began in 1998, the year that a border dispute evolved into war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Deteriorating relations between the two nations eventually led to an all-out war that killed nearly 100,000 people. The war initially started as a series of armed incidents wherein Ethiopian militiamen loyal to the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front from the northern Tigray region were responsible for claiming the lives of several Eritrean officials in the border town of Badme. These skirmishes escalated tensions in the area and sparked a series of airstrikes that indiscriminately killed civilians on both sides. After the attacks waned, the conflict entered into an arms race as both countries spent several months and millions of dollars solidifying their territorial claims and stockpiling munitions. Figure 6 depicts the areas under dispute.

FIGURE 6: MAP OF THE DISPUTED BORDER REGIONS BETWEEN ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA AND TERRITORIAL CLAIMS BY COUNTRY



By one estimate, nearly 100,000 have been killed and more than 650,000 individuals were displaced before the signing of the Peace treaty in the middle of 2000 (Barry and Gilkes, 2005). Although a boundary commission established by the UN ruled that Badme belonged to Eritrea, it and several other regions of the border continue to be claimed by Ethiopia. The signing of the peace treaty, although a crucial step towards a peaceful resolution, has not had the desired impact and tensions between the two belligerents persists. Direct violence, mostly by rebel factions, continues to destabilize the region. So much so that the Eritrean government “uses the conflict with Ethiopia to justify suspending the constitution, banning free press and quashing any dissent” (Araia, 2018, “Remembering Eritrea-Ethiopia border war: Africa’s unfinished conflict,” para. 3). Over the protracted dispute turned conventional war, hundreds

of thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians have fled into neighboring countries, spawning several proxy wars. One of those countries, Somalia, a recipient of several Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee participants of this study is the subject of the next section.

Somalia, which comprises the eastern tip of the horn of Africa, shares the majority of its border with Ethiopia and Kenya to the West, and the Indian Ocean to the East. Instability throughout the 1990s stirred the international community to support mitigating the precipitating humanitarian crisis that was taking shape. The United Nations Operation in Somalia (USOSOM) from 1993-1995, occurred in two stages. The first stage was to provide humanitarian relief to nearly half of the population who were at risk of malnutrition or starvation due to an extreme famine brought about by prolonged record setting drought (United Nation, n.d.). Although attempts were made to deliver resources to those most vulnerable to starvation, distribution proved difficult and was compounded by the frequent robbing, looting, or destruction of supplies in addition to the potential risk of harm for humanitarian workers (ibid). Mogadishu, caught in the maelstrom between warring rival factions of Ali Mahdi Mohamed and Mohamed Farah Aideed, lacked a central government to effectively coordinate the UN-led humanitarian response. Further deteriorating conditions on the ground for Somali citizens led to their mass exodus into neighboring Ethiopia (which was also experiencing internal instability) and Kenya.

The second stage of the UN Operation started in 1993, after it became increasingly evident that the supplies provided to Somali by NGOs and the international community would remain undelivered until there existed a secure environment for working. To that end, the Secretary-General to the Security Council submitted a report which recommended that,

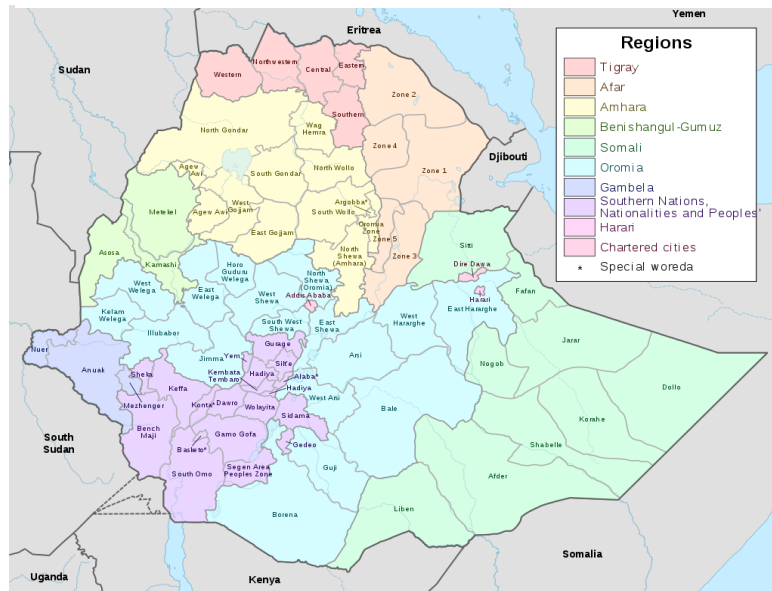
UNOSOM II would seek to complete, through disarmament and reconciliation, the restoration of peace, stability, law and order. The mandate would also empower UNOSOM II to provide assistance to the Somali people in rebuilding their economy and social and political life, re-establishing the country's institutional structure, achieving national political reconciliation, recreating a Somali State based on democratic governance and rehabilitating the country's economy and infrastructure.

The transition to UNOSOM II committed 22,000 troops to the region. The battle of Mogadishu would be one of the defining moments of the U.S. involvement in the Somali Civil War wherein Somali Militia and armed civilians shot down two Black Hawk helicopters. In the aftermath of the ensuing battle, images of the violence were internationally broadcasted sparking domestic and global outrage. With no viable path for peace in sight, the UN would eventually withdraw all troops. Infighting between the two dominant factions continued for several years, even after the death of Farrah Aidid and his son Hussein. It was during this time that Fatima, who you will be introduced to shortly, became a refugee in Kenya.

Lastly, it must be mentioned that the political structure of the government of Ethiopia at the federal level plays a role in contributing to tensions between the Somali and the numerically dominant Oromo ethnic group. Basically, Ethiopia has a representational government wherein elections typically reproduce states that are distinctly ethnically defined (Peralta, 2019). This type of government, is known as ethnic federalism, was established to circumvent irredentists' inclinations by neighboring Somaliland and Puntland by stitching together factions based on the promise of consensus and power sharing. This political arrangement differs from federalism in a crucial way. Although powers are divided between the national level of government and the local subsidiaries that comprise it, ethnic federalism institutionally legitimates territorial dominion via ethnicity.

As Abraham (2006) explains, “Adopting ethnicity in the political realms was a decisive precondition for preserving unity and political stability in the country. This implied the reconstruction of the polity on the basis of unity-in diversity whereby all national groups would enjoy political autonomy and self-government through constitutional guarantees of devolution of sovereignty in a federal framework” (p. 90). Although this was theorized to reduce infighting between ethnic groups, the ambiguity of the framework coupled with fact that each of the 11 administrative regions<sup>21</sup> exhibits differential levels of development, educational access, resources and ethnic composition, marginalization of certain groups continued. Peace after the decision to decentralize the federal government along ethnic and linguistic lines was short-lived as us vs. them mentalities operated the day-to-day affairs of Ethiopian peoples (Abraham, 2006). Figure 7 below is a map of Ethiopia showing the distinct regional states, conveniently named for the titular language or dominant ethnic group that inhabits them.

**FIGURE 7: MAP OF THE REGIONAL STATES OF ETHIOPIA**



<sup>21</sup> There are nine states and two city administrations, the latter being Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa.

Though disputes between various ethnic groups are not uncommon, this section specifically highlights the contemporary disputes between the Oromo (light blue) and the Somali (green), as such topics dominated the discussion during a participant interview. Tensions rose to fixation after a 2004 referendum decided that 336 of the 420 kebeles<sup>22</sup> were to be reconfigured into the larger Oromia state—sending thousands of ethnic Somalis fleeing (BBC, 2017). Since ethnic Oromos and Somalis are an agro-pastoralist people who peregrinate between the respective borders in search for suitable land for grazing, the consequences of the ruling were worrisome (Lefort, 2017). Exacerbated by periods of drought, these two groups continue to contend over finite resources such as verdant grazelands and access to water. As you will learn from Amir, the tensions between these two groups have continued to internally displace Ethiopians with little government intervention for fear of State disintegration.

***Case 6: Amara, Valedictorian of Sierra International Studies High School, Class of 2016.***

Amara stared at the entrance of the small restaurant. It was strange to see how much Mai-Aini, a refugee camp for Eritreans located in Shire, Ethiopia, had changed since she left. Amara having graduated at the top of her class is now a Junior at a prestigious private university in central Missouri where she is majoring in Biology and Physical Therapy. Having relocated to St. Louis in 2012, she returned to Ethiopia to visit some old friends and family members in the summer of 2018. She recalls the experience fondly,

They were all waiting for me right when I arrived. And they showed me photos of them during holidays, during birthdays and everything, and they're all together and they seem like they are actually getting together more often than we do in the United States.

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<sup>22</sup> A kebele is Ethiopia's smallest administrative unit and is analogous to a ward.

And when I see it right now, it's, it feels more a little bit like a part of Eritrea is in Ethiopia because, well, the people living there are all Eritreans, the refugees and they basically made it their second home. So, it feels, I mean, it's not an ideal place to live in, but it sort of feels a little bit a second home.

Amara's family left Ethiopia primarily because her father was imprisoned several times for speaking out against the political system, specifically, the Eritrean dictator (her father's words) Isaias Afwerki. Serving in this capacity since 1991, President Afwerki is the first and only president of Eritrea, having led the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and securing independence from Ethiopia. After nearly a year and a half spent in prison without being given a clear reason for his arrest, nor appearing before a judge, Amara's dad was released. The prospect of life in Eritrea became untenable for Amara and her family, so when she was 10 years old, they fled to Ethiopia with the help of a family friend.

The escape from Eritrea was fraught with uncertainty and danger. Several times during the planned escape they would be caught. Recalling the transition, she states,

The plan was to first go to Sudan and then to Ethiopia. My dad thought that he was a target by the government at the time, so he traveled to Ethiopia separately and we were to meet him there. But when we got to a border city near Sudan, we were arrested and kept in an area surrounded by rocks and thorns and guarded 24/7 by men with guns. It was a scary time.

Amara's grandparents eventually gathered enough money to pay for their bond, and they were released, but not until 3 months had passed. Amara and her family, which includes two other siblings, stayed with her grandparents until an alternative solution to get to Ethiopia could be devised. Concealed by the cover of nightfall, Amara and her family continued their journey by foot.

I think it took two days to get there, but we weren't walking the whole two days because we were only walking at night. After a man drove us close to the border, we left Eritrea and then had to stay somewhere in between. We weren't in Ethiopia yet, but we were a little bit farther from Eritrea. We were in a place that people used to live or something. It was an abandoned village that the guy who was leading us to Ethiopia basically knew. So, we stayed there for a whole day so that we could wait until it was night to start walking again. Because if we were to be seen by Eritrean soldiers, we could have been arrested again.

When they arrived at Mai-Aini, most of her family was sick with a stomach bug. After being nursed back to health, Amara remembers never really fully adjusting to her new life in the camp. This is partially because her family only stayed there for three months before reuniting with her dad who was living with her uncle in Addis Ababa. It was during her time in the capital that she would resume her education, this time in a formal private school setting.

They [private school staff and students] were very welcoming, at least to me. I mean at first you do feel like you're out of place because everybody is speaking their own language and you don't understand what they're saying. It was a little hard for me because I had to learn the language, the main language, which is Amharic, the main language. Because in Eritrea we speak Tigrinya. They even taught in Tigrinya in the refugee camp. So I had to learn Amharic, which made learning all the other subjects a little more difficult. But besides that we were still taking the English classes, history, math and all that. So until I adjusted to the language and made some friends, I was actually considered the quiet kid. I actually had a teacher who told me he thought I was a really quiet student, then he realized "it's because you didn't know the language, but now that you do you are always asking questions and answering in class!"

This positive trend of meaningful participation and engagement in class would continue throughout Amara's academic life. Her family's application to relocate to St. Louis was approved and she arrived in St. Louis in 2012 during her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. She would first attend

the Welcome School and then transfer to Sierra International Studies High School, where she would graduate as valedictorian of her class—a title that she accepts, but with a few caveats.

***Case 7: Amir, Sierra International Studies High, Class of 2016***

Amir was born into an upper middle-class family in Yebelo, Ethiopia. His father identifies as Somali,<sup>23</sup> while his mother is Oromo. His father worked for the government, first in a city called Moyale, then as a high-ranking official in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, a large administrative city comprised mostly of Oromo people. His parents separated when he was very young, and he has always felt that it was in part due to their ethnic differences. “My identity is complicated for most to understand,” he told me before providing me a full explanation.

So growing up, I didn't know like which to identify as because my dad is Somalian and my mom's fully Oromo. So now when I reflect on my time growing up in the Oromo region of Dire Dawa, where I spent most of my time with my dad, to others I am Oromo-Somali. I can speak both languages fluently, understand fluently and I can write both. So, like I'm both Somali and Oromo. It matters in Ethiopia, but I really don't care if someone calls me one or the other here.

Prior to moving to Dire Dawa when he was six, he was living in Moyale, a market town that straddles two woredas, or regions in southern Ethiopia. One of the regions being Oromia, the other Somali.

My father was what you would call a mayor of Moyale. But he was eventually transferred to Dire Dawa. That's when my biological mom was forced to flee to neighboring Kenya because of the political situation. Like, I don't know a lot about it, but I know that I couldn't go to Kenya with my mom because she didn't know where she would live and there was no formal education system there. So, after my dad was transferred to Dire Dawa, and because she was not with my dad, the Somali officials discriminated against her. They took away her house even though she was paying the same money as before. She lost her job and did not want to ask my dad for money. So

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<sup>23</sup> Note that this means ethnically Somali, i.e., from the Somali regional state in eastern Ethiopia.

she just went across the border as a refugee to Kenya. She had family who came to the U.S. that way.

It would take Amir's mom 14 years before her application would be approved to come to the United States. During that time, Amir spent most of his life living with his stepmother and father in Dire Dawa where he attended private school until his senior year. "I probably saw my mom like 2 times during the summer," he recalls. "Even after my dad passed away, I just lived with my step-mom because I needed to finish school." Amir attended a private, Catholic school his entire K-12 career. He explains how class sizes were smaller, and he had access to quality teachers and resources.

The [private school] teachers really cared, and they were a lot more serious because our parents were paying them money. They would check my homework, we had after school tutoring, and test prep. All the kids would listen to the teacher and behave properly. It was completely different than the public schools in Ethiopia. The behaviors from the students who went to those public schools were not compatible with what the teachers wanted to teach and the way they wanted to teach it. Public school students are not very receptive to teaching and the teachers in turn don't care about students learning.

Amir was in the throes of preparing for the national exam that he describes as "a test that determines the rest of your life." Ever since he was young, Amir wanted to be a doctor and he knew he had to perform well on the national exam. Therefore, it came as a shock to him that his application to come to the United States as a refugee was approved three months before he was set to graduate high school.

My mom started the application for me in 2010 and I was approved in 2015. They gave me like two weeks to decide if I want to fly out. I didn't want to pass up that chance simply to finish up school, and I wanted to be back with my mom, as well. At the

same time, it was hard though because I made all these friends. We grew up together and went to the same schools all through middle and high school. But I think I made the right decision to come here.

Upon arriving in the United States, Amir would be required to redo high school. After graduating from Sierra High at the age of 21, Amir received a large scholarship to attend a prestigious Catholic university in St. Louis where he studies Investigative Medical Sciences and Biology. He calls Ethiopia his home and dreams of returning to someday. He said:

When I was home, I was like more free than when I'm here. Here like you have to analyze every interaction we have with people-- if it is genuine or not. Back home you don't have these kind of thoughts. And then even when people smile at you in the U.S. You think, okay, why are they smiling? Like you have to question every little interaction. But when I was back home I believe I would have achieved the same thing and would have went to the medical field. I am happy to finish my education here, but eventually I will return to Ethiopia and open my own clinic.

Amir's case is unique for several reasons, but most notably because he never lived in a refugee camp and his first encounter with public school wasn't until he came to the United States.

***Case 8: Fatima, First African Prom Queen of Sierra High, Class of 2016***

"This is ruining my makeup." Fatima softly sobs as she carefully dabs a teardrop away from her long eyelashes. Fatima is a 23-year-old, Somali female who currently dropped out of college to be a full-time caregiver to her mother while pursuing a modeling career. Her family left Somalia for Kenya to escape war and famine when she was very young. Relocating first to the coastal port city of Mombasa and then to the capital, Nairobi, she recalls how the harrowing trek across Eastern Africa as we revisit her earliest memories.

“So, I guess you could say that my job has always been a caregiver to my mother,” she states lightheartedly. As the train rattled towards the Kenyan coast, Fatima witnessed her mother acting strange. “She was pregnant at the time too,” Fatima states. Her mother suffered a stroke on that train ride that she would only partially recover from. Fatima believes it to be the consequence of the heat, the journey and the stress of family drama that caused her mom to suffer this fate. After losing several children including what would have been a baby brother, Fatima has been told that her mother was cursed. “They said he does sihr. Sihr is like black magic,” she stated in reference to her father. “My mom’s family always hated my dad, that’s why we couldn’t stay with them after my mom’s stroke. My grandma thought he would do black magic on her. That’s why they stopped giving us money.”

Life was hard for Fatima after they moved to a mostly Somali community in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Mombasa when she was eight years old. Every day would be a slight variation of the previous day. In the mornings she would rise from the bed that her, her dad and her siblings all shared to assist her mother to go to the bathroom. She told me as I handed her another tissue,

She would always pee or poop on herself. So we would have to clean her. Since I was the oldest, I was responsible for learning how to cook and take care of my siblings. My dad left really early in the morning. Most times he wouldn’t eat because we didn’t have enough food. He would just sleep so, he wouldn’t be hungry.

Fatima then went on to tell me about a time that she devised an elaborate plan to dupe the owner of the small motel to whom they owed back rent. Between taking care of her mother and searching for recyclables to exchange for money, Fatima and her siblings had little time for schooling. She stated, “I never went to school back in Africa. When I came to America was when

I started becoming smart. Because back then, I was common sense smart, but I wasn't like book smart." She remembers a time when her dad had a relatively decent job with a steady income. She recalled having private English lessons for a little while because it was cheaper than paying for school.

In Kenya, school is money. It's not free. And we were pretty much homeless, so we didn't go to school. I mean we went to *doxy* in Mombasa, which is Islamic education-like learning about the Koran. That was free. But in Kenya we struggled just to eat, so school was just out of the question. Like, I would see my friends go, but we just couldn't afford it.

Her English tutor was a Kenyan man who would eventually grow frustrated with Fatima and her siblings, and he beat them one day when her father was out looking for work. "We were troubled kids, and I think I might have said something that I shouldn't have. I kind of have a mouth on me," she admitted.

Her only time in a refugee camp would be when her family was preparing to come to the United States. Fatima was 11 years old when she first entered the camp near Nairobi to be interviewed and receive medical checks. Eventually, her family's applications to resettle in the United States were approved. Her first impressions of the United States were mixed:

I thought St. Louis was so gorgeous. I was like 'Oh my God this is America!' and at the same time [I was] like, 'this is America?' [bewildered]. Why does it look like what I just left? I guess the way I imagined America, it was like the gorgeous places, big buildings--and I don't know. I imagined it wouldn't look like some of the poor parts of Mombasa.

Her U.S. educational experience would start by being bullied as a foreigner in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and end with her being crowned Prom Queen of Sierra International Studies High School in 2016—

the first time a “foreigner,” as the American kids called her, was conferred the ceremonial crown.

***Case 9: Yonas, Rutherford STEM, class of 2018***

Yonas hesitated. He lowered his head as a contemplating look swept across his face. He asked me, “Wait, what day is it today?” I told him the date and he smirked before he provided the answer to the first question. “Actually, I am 20 not 19. I just remembered today is my birthday,” he states nonchalantly.

Yonas has been living alone since his mother died from breast cancer his junior year of high school, nearly two years ago. “She is the reason I am here. The reason we left Eritrea and went to Kenya and then eventually to the United States.” I can tell that he is still grieving her loss. Yonas’s mother divorced his father, and although he has family back in Eritrea, he rarely speaks with any of them. Instead, he attends community college fulltime and goes to church every Sunday. He is an Orthodox Christian and tells me about his life in Kenya.

My mom and I lived for one year in the capital of Kenya. Then we moved to a refugee camp called the Kakuma refugee camp. I didn't go to school in Nairobi, it was in Kakuma that I started school. But because of my mom’s medical case, we were there for only two years. The camp was full of East Africans. There was South Sudan community, Bruni community, Congolese community, and I lived in the Ethiopian community. We East Africans, we share everything. The same culture is the same religion. So my time in Ethiopian community was good, of course I play soccer. I was a guy that loved sports and church in my time in Kakuma.

Kakuma is one of the largest refugee camps in Kenya and is currently home to over 188,794 registered refugees and asylum seekers (UNHRC, 2019<sup>24</sup>). Located in the northwestern region of Kenya, the camp was established in 1992 and is very diverse with 22 different nationalities residing in the camp. With 85,124 students across 52 schools (ibid), class sizes are large.

I ask Yonas to tell me about his time in school before he relocated to Kenya. Yonas holds a positive view of school back in Eritrea. “The teachers in Eritrea are really good. Knowledgeable. Teachers are smart and they just try to help you. They try to improve you as a person as well.” Yonas attended school in Eritrea until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It was the need for more advanced cancer treatment for his mom that led them to Kenya. School in Kenya was very different. Although he was bitter initially when he was moved from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade back to the third grade in his school in Kenya, he eventually accepted it. “You have to study the language in order to be in the right grade. And I did not know English or Swahili, so I was moved back.” I asked him to describe a typical school day in the refugee camp. He tells me,

In terms of school, classes were big. I think I had like 130 kids in my class. And of course, they hit you if you do wrong stuff. Sometimes people get hurt and they don't want to come back to school. But in my case, I was a class monitor so I never got hit. I was the guy that writes the name of the people that disturb the class. Then they get hit. If I don't write the name, the teacher hits me. So, I always make sure to do my job.

It wouldn't be long before Yonas and his mother would move to St. Louis. However, by the time their application was approved his mother's cancer had metastasized to several areas of her body. “I don't know why they call us that, but they say we are lucky. I saw a lot of people

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kakuma-refugee-camp>

that I know who waited for 20 plus years to just come to America. But we were lucky enough to come within two years or around three years almost. So that's like one of the quickest process, but it wasn't quick enough," he says despondently.

Yonas held many unrealistic expectations of what life was like in the United States.

Among them are the material goods such as a home with a swimming pool and free money. He also expected the healthcare system in the U.S. to save his mother.

What I expected was not like what I saw. So I learned. I learned that when you come to America you have to study and if you don't study, you work. If you don't work, then nobody's going to help you or give you the money you need. That's what I know about America right now.

## North Africa: Libya

FIGURE 8: MAP OF LIBYA



The civil war in Libya is a confrontation between the government and anti-Gaddafi rebel forces vying for state control. Inspired by the political movements collectively known as the Arab Spring in the neighboring countries of Tunisia and Egypt, what would start as anti-government protests would quickly escalate to civil war. The fighting in Libya has occurred in waves. Fearing a similar fate as his Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, then Leader Gaddafi, responding to violence in the eastern portion of the country, specifically Benghazi, decided to use military force to subdue the rebel militants that were organizing and reclaiming lost territory. This move sparked outrage which begot more violence and cries for humanitarian intervention from western nations. Intervention would come in the form of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and through the enforcement of a no-fly zone, arms embargo, and other means; consequently, the war would tip back in the favor of the rebels (United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

It would be eight months before Libya's capital city and regime stronghold, Tripoli, fell under rebel control by the end of August 2011. The popular revolt against Gaddafi ended when he was captured and killed outside of his hometown of Sirte in October of 2011 (BBC<sup>25</sup>, 2011). Yet, even after the colonel's death, Libya became even more divided as the institutional arrangement devised to check warring tribal rivalries completely collapsed (Paoletti, 2011). It was during this time that the global community became inundated with jarring images of boats capsizing and horrific stories of human trafficking, exposing the lengths civilians would take to escape the conditions in Libya. Over 30,000 people died in Libya's first civil war (Kuperman,

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15390980>

2015), and of the nearly 1 million refugees who fled, the majority have returned after the war ended. As of today, Libya has disintegrated into a second civil war (2014-present). It was during the first civil war, that Mona's family would leave Tripoli for Tunisia and eventually the United States.

***Case 10: Mona, Sierra International Studies High, Class of 2018***

Mona is a 20-year-old healthcare hostess at a large hospital in St. Louis. She is currently a sophomore at a local community college. Born in Libya to two Sudanese parents, Mona lived in Tripoli for 12 years where her father earned a living as a physician while her mother went to school part-time. She describes her life and schooling to me before the war forced them to flee to Tunisia.

Libya was very different from here. Life there was much easier than it is in the United States. From transportation, to environment, to how people are, literally, everything was easier. We could walk to schools because we went to like a neighborhood school. It was safe to walk, and we didn't have the need for school buses. We had 8 different periods and learned similar subjects as we learned here. In the morning we would say our national Anthem and then go to our periods. There the teachers would come to us--like they rotate for each class.

Due to the no-fly zone imposed by the UN resolution 1973, Mona's family, which consisted of her parents and 4 younger siblings, drove across the border to seek refuge in Tunisia. She doesn't remember the name of the camp, but she remembers that it had refugees from all over northern and eastern Africa. She describes education in the camp as "limited" and interactions with the Tunisian population as "friendly."

It wasn't like an actual school [in the refugee camp]. It was just having something for the kids to do. Instead of just sitting at home and not doing anything, they set up this

tent where we could go to school, learn a few languages, do some math, stuff like that. And the staffs were like mostly refugees who helped, who volunteered to help teach us. I think a few were Tunisian citizens who also volunteered to help.

Mona and her family lived in the camp for 3 years before their application was approved to come to the United States in 2014. She remembers being very excited, mostly because she wanted to attend a “real” school.

I loved going to school and I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor. So I always kept that in my mind that I need to do good in school, always attend school and not miss school, stay on top of my work, respect my peers and my teachers, and all that. So I was excited to start at the Welcome school. They got me prepared to go to an American school.

Mona would choose Sierra International Studies High School to attend all 4 years. She took several types of courses including advanced placement classes, computer science and business electives among others. She could not, however, describe any of the courses or day-to-day operations of the magnet school as being “internationally focused.”

### **West Africa: Liberia**

The United States and the State of Maryland specifically, have direct historical connection to the country of Liberia. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century and with the support of several prominent political figures, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe (for whom the Liberian capital of Monrovia is named after), the American Colonization Society (ACS) was founded to facilitate and encourage the voluntary migration of manumitted slaves to West Africa. Maryland specifically established its own chapter associated with the ACS and at one point established a small republic that was later annexed by what is nowadays known as

Liberia. Although familiar with their country's history and its ties to ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, Emmanuel and Meriam's stories recall a more recent back-to-back conflict that fundamentally altered their lives, the First and Second Liberian Civil Wars.

The Republic of Liberia, as Figure 9 shows, is a West African nation on the coast bordered by Sierra Leone and Guinea to the North and the Ivory Coast to the East.

FIGURE 9: MAP OF THE WEST AFRICAN COAST



The First Liberian Civil War (1989-1997) was an internal conflict that killed an estimated 250,000 Liberians and displaced over 750,000 (UNHRC, 2013). The cause of the conflict could be traced back one decade before. Starting as a popular rebellion and ending with a successful coup d'état and concomitant establishment of a military junta, Samuel Doe became President of Liberia in 1980. Many saw the overthrow of the government as the end of a continuous timeline of Americo-Liberian political control and initially welcomed the Doe regime. Yet, with a

suspended constitution, the infrastructure and political institutions to facilitate the post-conflict transitional processes of disarmament, democratization, and peace-building in Liberia was a dismal failure. Promising elections in 1985, which would be condemned internationally as corrupt and fraudulent, Doe, backed by the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) became increasingly totalitarian and repressive—at one point quelling an attempted coup as well.

It was Charles Taylor's rebels, many of whom were mere children, and their use of guerilla warfare tactics that eventually initiated the first Liberian civil war. Trained in Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, Taylor organized and commanded a rebel militia known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in the neighboring Ivory Coast. Taylor and his army launched an incursion from their location in the Ivory Coast in December of 1989. "AFL responded with a ruthless counterinsurgency campaign, indiscriminately killing civilians, burning villages, raping women and looting. The brutality served to swell the ranks of NPFL recruits, many of whom were boys orphaned by the fighting or enraged by the AFL's conduct" (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

A year into the war, Doe was captured and killed. With the absence of Doe and his military junta, Taylor's rebels quickly gained control of large swaths of land wherein his men/children were said to have committed "heinous and brutal crimes." Taylor eventually captured the capital of Monrovia by force in 1992 and consolidated power despite several intermittent upsurges of oppositional violence in the capital. War between rebel factions continued throughout the early 1990's before a peace agreement followed by a general election saw Taylor elected president of Liberia in 1997. It was during the era of conflict that both Emmanuel's and Meriam's parents fled to neighboring Ivory Coast, where they were born.

They both lived in a refugee camp throughout the Second Liberian Civil War, which started shortly after the first and ended in 2003 with the resignation and exile of Charles Taylor.

***Case 11: Emmanuel, Sierra International Studies High, Class of 2015***

“I call it my welcome to America story. All Africans have one,” Emmanuel stated with a wide smile. As he describes his first interaction with neighborhood kids upon relocating to St. Louis in 2009, he chuckles intermittently and needs periodic breaks to catch his breath. Emmanuel has an imposing physique, standing at 6’2 with well-defined muscles. He recalls being confused, but not necessarily injured. “I guess you could say I was jumped. I mean I really didn’t know what was happening.” Emmanuel spent most of that morning in the driveway of his sister’s house who they were living with when they first arrived in St. Louis. “I remember they had a bike, and I had never been on a bike before, so I was learning how to ride it,” he explains. After mastering balance, Emmanuel decided to check out his new neighborhood and started exploring on the bike.

I was riding towards a group of 7 kids, 5 guys and 2 girls. I was just minding my own business when one of them ran up to me and stood in front of my bike. I can’t remember what they said, but I remember saying ‘huh’ because I don’t speak English that well. Then out of nowhere I got punched in the jaw and before I could think about what was happening, they all started pounding on me. So, I grabbed onto the bike and swung it around. I was literally swinging a bike at these kids. I hit a couple of them and they all spread out. Then, I just hopped on the bike and peddled home as fast as I could. Needless to say, I never went on that side of the neighborhood again. I call that my welcome to America story.

Emmanuel relocated to the United States when he was 14 years old with the help of his sister who gained refugee status a few years prior to his arrival. He is of Liberian heritage but was

born in an Ivory Coast refugee camp in 1995 after his parents fled Liberia in 1992 due to civil war. He describes his life and education on the camp,

We didn't have school in the refugee camp. I didn't go to school until I came to America, actually. Even though I did not go to school I was still being educated. I was mostly homeschooled by my mom because she used to teach whenever she was in Liberia. So I learned basic English mostly. And she's a Christian, so she tried to teach me the Bible a lot. So that's one thing I learned from her. I'd say it was mostly outside of school learning. I can remember when I was around the age of eight to nine, I would just help out around the house. There was nothing much to do. All the kids would just hang loose around the camp, play soccer when we could and try not to get into trouble.

Reflecting on his expectations for life in the United States he describes himself as foolish:

Living in a refugee camp, you hear all these stories about how America is really great, it's this place, the streets made out of gold, people would tell stories that, you can get anything you want. So of course, I was shocked when I saw that the streets aren't made out of gold and we had to work for even basic needs like food.

Despite not living up to his expectations, Emmanuel feels blessed to be living in the U.S. He is currently interning as an accountant at a large financial firm in St. Louis and is set to graduate with his bachelor's degree next semester. He describes Sierra International Studies High School as a second home but attributes his success at the collegiate level to his mom having high expectations for him. "I saw Sierra and education in general as an opportunity for a better future. Better than the one I would have had in Cote d'Ivoire," he tells me. "But it could have easily been any other school. My mom would have still pushed me to study and work hard."

***Case 12: Merriam, Northview Career Academy, Class of 2016***

On a Sunday in 2006, Merriam's grandmother called her into the small hut in which they were living. Speaking Grebo<sup>26</sup>, Merriam's grandmother yells, "Hurry, there is someone on the phone who wants to talk to you." Clutching her blue UNICEF notebook in her arms, Merriam quickly obeyed her grandmother's command. She initially had been living in an UN-sponsored refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, but eventually relocated to a house just outside the camp that was provided by a distant relative. Her parents owned a small distribution business in Liberia where they would frequently travel within and between countries, purchasing and selling goods. However, since the beginning of the Second Civil War, Merriam has lost contact with them.

Merriam remembers learning how to garden and grow food alongside her grandmother. She would often sell the produce which was mainly eggplant and peppers as a means to get by. During the weekdays, she would attend school in the refugee camp where the medium of instruction was English. Recalling her educational experience, she states,

I remember getting my first notebook from UNICEF. I still remember that name because they always put their logo on the notebook which is like a little bird nest with people in it. I loved that notebook. But I would say it was more like a gathering instead of a formal education. Someone who was educated in the camp at that time would just gather the kids and adults and try to go over the ABCs to keep the memory flowing, I guess. There were no grades, no blackboard, everyone was in one little room or under a tree and they just teach you little things as well as basic math, phonetics and writing. I remember we did a lot of writing. That is where I first learned how to write in cursive though I don't write in cursive anymore. The teachers were all from Liberia and they were really great. There were no good seats. You were sitting on rocks. If you can find a rock, you can sit on the floor. It was really unstructured.

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<sup>26</sup> Grebo is part of the Kru language and is commonly spoken in the southwest region of Liberia.

Merriam feels a strong connection to her culture and where she came from. Her curiosity about the events of her past have shaped her into a strong-willed and independent woman. As we sat and sipped coffee together, she explains:

I asked my parents a lot of questions about the war, about Cote d'Ivoire, about me in general as a person. To me that's very important. I think that's also how I was able to learn much more growing up about where I came from and who I am. Because I knew I wasn't French because my grandma speaks Grebo. She speaks Grebo at home and pidgin English. Everyone did in the camp. And it's not like we were stuck on the camp 24/7. You're allowed to leave the camp, go to the market where they speak French in the market. That's when I first heard the word *Toblahleh*, which means "war drove them away." That's what they would call me. It's a pejorative term they use for the Liberian refugees living in Cote d'Ivoire. So I knew I was different and was treated differently.

Merriam considers herself to be highly self-reflective and is committed to social justice. With a bachelor's degree in psychology and currently pursuing an MA in counseling, Merriam clearly describes living what she calls her double life. In her double life she embraces her Liberian roots yet rejects entirely its cultural aspects that do not align themselves with women's empowerment. Education in the United States, for Merriam, has enabled her to name systems of oppression which has had profound consequences on her relationship to both people in the U.S. and her Liberian family, specifically her dad.

It was Merriam's dad who was on the other end of the receiver when Merriam first learned not only that he was still alive but was living in the United States. Merriam looked at her grandmother incredulously. "Every other day someone comes into the camp who has visited Liberia and tells us 'Oh, this person is dead. That village has been destroyed,' So I'm just waiting to hear that he is dead and when I found out he wasn't—my initial reaction was 'oh shit, he is alive,'" She tells me through a wide grin. She kept her father's plans to request her

relocation to the U.S. a secret. “As an African I am very superstitious. I thought someone was going to steal my luck or maybe do something to me out of envy,” she muses.

In 2007, after an arduous interview process, Merriam finally got approved to relocate and reunite with her dad in St. Louis, Missouri. It was when I asked her to describe what the process entailed that I learned Merriam has been sexually abused by a medical professional. Although I initially struggled with its inclusion in this chapter, I feel that how Merriam describes this moment is a testament to her strength, resolve and dedication to human/women’s rights, of which she considers herself to be a staunch advocate. Meriam also gave me permission to include this aspect of her story. She tells me,

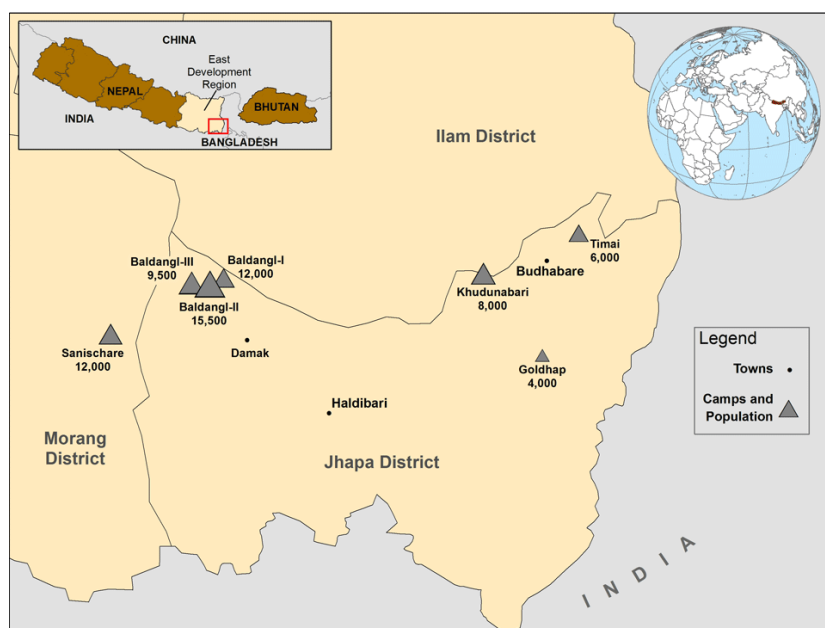
During my medical interview to come to the States, I feel like some things that happened shouldn't have happened, because I ask other people who came here as refugees, "Did you go through this process with your doctor and [from what they told me] it's not the same. And some people confirm that yes, that happened. When I was 11 –and I feel like I can tell you this because you said, my name won't be identified—I was sexually abused. I was assaulted in the examination by my doctor and I didn't know any better. I figured that out later and so I'm still going through some issues with it. And the more I learn about myself and educate myself, I am in a better position to make peace with this incident and help other children who might have also been a victim of sexual assault.

Merriam arrived in December 2007. She remembers everything about that day. The plane ride, the long line in the airport and the tall white man who gave her his coat when she arrived amid a blustery Midwest winter. War drove her away, and St. Louis would be the farthest she had ever been.

## Cases by Region: South East Asia

### Kingdom of Bhutan

FIGURE 10: MAP OF THE EASTERN NEPALESE DISTRICT OF JHAPA AND THE LOCATION OF SEVERAL KNOWN REFUGEE CAMPS



Colloquially referred to as the Land of Thunder Dragon, Bhutan is an ancient, land-locked kingdom located at the base of the Himalaya mountain range. In the early 1990s, an estimated 100,000 ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan fled from the Kingdom after a series of protests against the government's "Bhutanization" policies shook the kingdom. Many ethnic Nepalis, known throughout Bhutan as Lotshampas, which means "southerners," have lived in the region for several generations and whose ancestors cultivated the land for farming in the early 20th century (Piper, 1995). However, after a controversial 1988 census was carried out to determine citizenship based on a narrow set of criteria, the relationship between the Bhutanese government and the ethnic Nepalese southern Bhutanese population became increasingly

complicated. Coupled with the “One Nation, One People” policy to promote a greater sense of unity and national identity among its citizenry, anxiety and alienation among the ethnic Nepalis culminated into public denunciations of the government and engendered a conflict that would last several decades (Piper, 1995). Since the official religion of the Kingdom of Bhutan is Buddhism, Hindu-practicing ethnic Nepalis—who make up roughly 90% of the population in Bhutan—became increasingly marginalized in the process.

Demonstrations turned to violent protest wherein the response by the Bhutanese government was resolute. A royal decree stripped the Bhutanese population of Nepali origin of their citizenship making them stateless and forcing them into exile. Unable to seek asylum in neighboring India, several thousand refugees managed to survive the harsh exodus to southern Nepal. Of the Lotshampas who were landowners, or could show proof of citizenship, evolving methods of discrimination have since driven them away from their home country. As Piper (1995) states, “Where previously they [Lotshampas] were at risk of arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and torture including rape...the continuing denial of public services, increasing depopulation in the south of the country, and the wish to be reunited with family members who have already left the country are also reasons for departure given by refugees arriving in Nepal” (p. 11).

Many of the Bhutanese refugees have since been resettled with the USA hosting the majority (~85,000) followed by Canada (~6,500) and Australia (~5,500) (UNHCR, 2015). The resettlement program has been quite successful and several of the refugee camps deemed no longer necessary have closed. As of 2015, only two camps are still in operation, and the refugee

population within them totals 18,000 (In Camps, n.d.). It is against this backdrop that you will come to understand Bao's story.

***Case 13: Bao, Edgewater Naval Junior ROTC Academy, Class of 2017***

Bao, a 21-year-old, Bhutanese male, recalls living in the Beldangi I, one of the three Bendangi refugee camps called home to nearly 13 thousand Bhutanese refugees. Although Bao was born in the camp which is in the southern district of Jhapa in Nepal, he was never given Nepalese citizenship which he believes complicates his identity. He states,

Identity, it's kind of hard because I was since I born in Nepal. So, if somebody from the United States asks, I gotta tell them Nepal because I speak Nepalese. So everything about me on the outside is Nepalese, and I usually tell them I'm Nepalese. But usually when somebody from Nepal recognizes me, they kind of know I'm Bhutanese because we are easy to identify back in Nepal. Both of my parents are Bhutanese and everyone knows what happened to us, like our history and stuff. Even when I was going to school in St. Louis, I think I was still trying to flee the misery of my people. I was still trying to hide my identity, you know? Almost through high school, I was still trying to fit in by trying to be American. But after junior year, I started to have the realization that I'm still different, and I will always be different. Everything. The way people look at me is different. It was the same when I left the refugee camp in Nepal. I'm still just different.

Bao is one of the Lhotsampa people and is well-informed on the historical events that led his family into exile in Nepal. Both of Bao's parents are teachers with his mom having served as principal of one of the camp's elementary schools for 17 years. He recalls being told and retold stories from Bhutan in the camp in an effort to preserve their family's history. Bao felt connected and a part of a community in the refugee camp often describing the camp as "our own little village" and the interactions with others as being "equal" or as sharing similar language, customs, and religion. When he was of school age, Bao was educated in the camp's

schools until he moved to the United States at the age of 12. He explains that students learn several subjects in several languages.

We had to learn a language called Dzongkha which is the national language of Bhutan. It is pretty much one of the hardest languages in the world. And we also had to learn Nepalese because we were living in Nepal, but that was taught like a foreign language. Then we took most everything else in English, like social studies and math. We had eight subjects a day and it was almost just the same as the U.S. Bigger classes though. Sometimes there are like 50 students to 1 teacher.

Bao describes himself as a hard-working student who did not get into trouble much. His parents are both educators and held high expectations for him. Bao views education as necessary to live a good life. Yet, at the same time as Bao was attending school in the camp, he was also recognizing the different and often unequal types of education available to some.

If a Bhutanese wanted to go to school with Nepalese, you had to go to boarding school or a private school. You have to pay to go there. I saw other kids that got to leave the camp and go to the boarding school. That's how I know. They had different uniforms and they had proper ties and shirt and shoes.

Although Bao could not afford boarding school, he still feels as if his education was just as high of quality as a boarding or private school and perhaps even more advanced in terms of English.

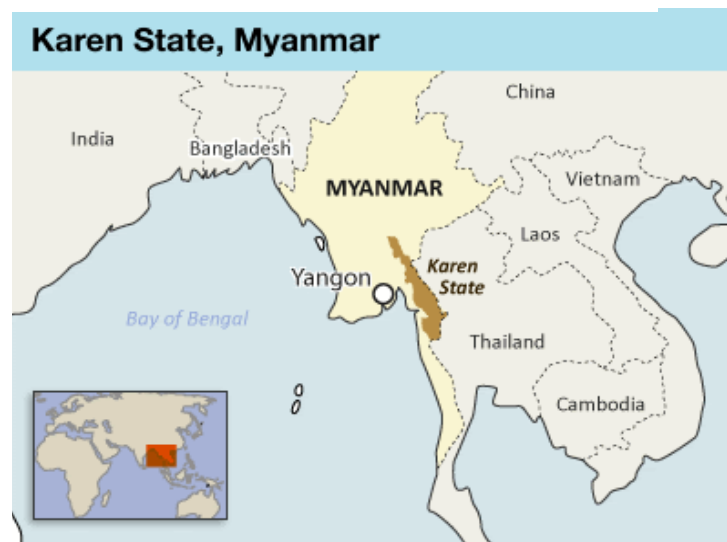
On the weekends, Bao would continue to develop his English and broaden his understanding of the world by going into the city to watch American movies. "We didn't have electricity in the refugee camp, but in the city, there is a little hut with the big screen. So, me and my friends would just go there and pay 10 rupees to watch a couple of English movies. That is how I knew about different parts of the world." He feels that movies have really prepared him for communicating with others in the United States. Bao would arrive to the United States

in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and graduate from Edgewater Naval Junior ROTC Academy. Currently working as a technician at an auto body shop, Bao describes his expectations of life in the U.S. and a deep desire to become self-sufficient.

In the refugee camp we didn't own anything. Everything was given to us, food, supplies, shelter. If we wanted anything more, we would need to work in the cities but couldn't really make lot of money because there is not much work and we are not citizens. But in America everything is available. You can own land, you can own everything you have and you get your own freedom, your own citizenship. And government is better because they give you the freedom. At least that was one of the things I thought. I thought there was really freedom here.

## Burma (Myanmar)

FIGURE 11: MAP OF THE KAREN STATE OF MYANMAR



Myanmar, formally known as Burma, is located on the Bay of Bengal in Southeast Asia and has been in a state of civil war for the last 60 years. It is the longest civil war in history, which began shortly after it gained independence from the British empire in 1948 (South, 2011). Though there was and still is conflict between several warring ethnic factions within

Myanmar both pre- and post-British colonialism, this section examines the half century of armed conflict between the Burmese government and the Karen people, specifically.

The Karen or Kayin are the third largest ethnic group (7%) in Myanmar behind Bamar (68%) and the Shan (9%). Historically, they have occupied the Southeastern region of Burma known as the Kayin State. The Karen separatist movement in Burma is longstanding. Beginning shortly before Burma gained its independence from the British Empire, the Karen National Union (KNU), a pro-nationalist political organization waged arm conflict against the Burmese government in the hopes of securing its own Karen nation-state. Overtime, fighting between these two belligerents has been devastating for the Karen. Summarizing the results of the conflict succinctly South (2011) states,

By the mid-1990s, as a result of decades of armed conflict, tens of thousands of mostly ethnic Karen refugees were living in several small camps spread out along the Thailand- Burma border. In addition, an unknown but significantly larger number of Karen and other civilians were internally displaced in Burma, and about two million Burmese migrant workers (many of them Karen) were living a precarious existence in Thailand with a very uncertain legal status (p. 10).

Many of the Karen fled to the border between Burma and Thailand, which has historically been seen as a buffer zone, seeking safety and protection of their neighbors. However, the Thai government is not a signatory nation listed in the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2015). Therefore, Karen refugees living in Thailand are not provided asylum status and are thereby categorized as illegal aliens. Although Karen people receive temporary protection from the Thai government officials, they are restricted to the designated boundaries of their camp and risk arrest and deportation outside of it.

Opportunities, as you will learn from Dang, are limited under the current arrangement that NGOs and CBOs have with the Thai government. Dang relocated to the United States in 2008. Shortly after his departure from Umpiem Mai, the camp received mobile phone coverage and access to the internet (2009) and was connected to the main electricity grid in 2010 (TBC, n.d.). This greatly helped secure the provision of health and social services including education for the camp's population.

***Case 14: Dang, Sierra International Studies High, Class of 2017***

“They try to genocide my people. My mom said her mom was shot by the Burmese military. So, yeah, my grandmother died during the war. My mom was an orphan, and she was adopted by a family. And, my dad, he is from another village, I guess. He just happened to go to my mom's village. I don't know much about it.” Dang was born on Umpiem Mai, a refugee camp in Thailand located near the border of Myanmar. At 23, He currently works as a sushi chef in the back of a popular restaurant in St. Louis. “My English isn't that good so it's hard to talk to customers.” Despite moving to the United States in 2008 when he was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, learning English remains an obstacle for Dang. His exposure to the language started when he was attending school in the refugee camp. He describes what education was like back then,

We studied Karen language, Burmese, Pa'o—It's another language similar to Karen. And I studied English. We also had reading, math and history. You would think that it would have prepared me for school in USA, but it didn't. They hit me every day because I'm not very smart, you know, although, I study couple of hours a day, but still I didn't do well in school.

Dang converted to Christianity early in his life and is grateful for the missionary work being done in the refugee camp. He attended church several times a week in Thailand, a trend that

would continue in St. Louis. Dang remembers leaving the camp for the first time when it was time to come to the United States. His first impressions of St. Louis were favorable, but he distrusted the International Institute of St. Louis. "I was most worried about people misleading us," Dang admits. "Because after the first day, no one from the International Institute come to visit us and tell us what to do. We thought they just brought us here and left. For days there was no interaction, so that was hard."

Eventually the case workers at the International Institute would check in on Dang and his family. Although they offered to help enroll him in school, Dang declined.

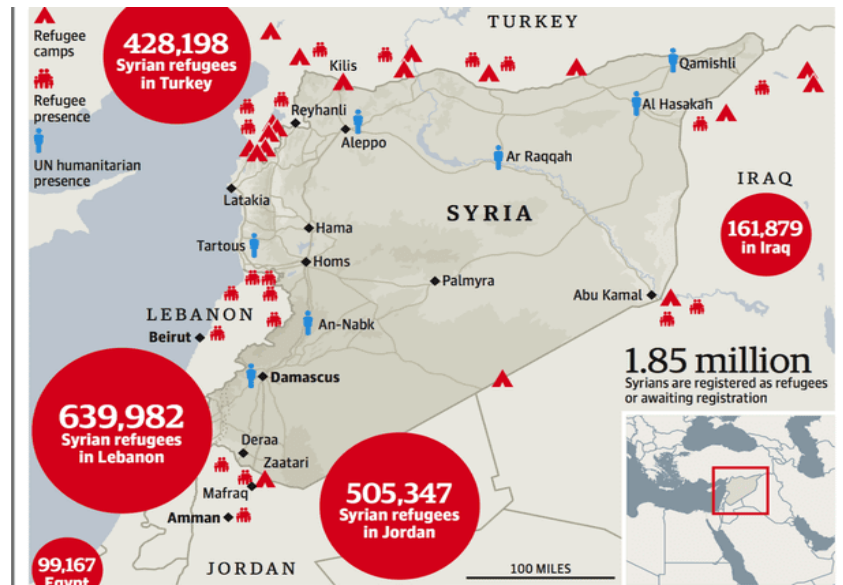
We didn't really get a choice because we don't know much. We don't speak the language and we don't know anything, so they [International Institute] just told us to go to their school. But actually, my first school, Freedom School, was not the school that International Institute provided to us. We found help through a church. They want us to go to that school. So yeah, they gave me a scholarship for one year. But after we had to pay. It was too expensive so then I had to go to Fanning middle school. It was totally different man. It's a public school, there is more violence.

Dang would apply, attend and graduate from Sierra International Studies High School, where he would only hang around with other foreign students. He says the decision to attend was primarily because his sister went there before and was based on his parents' wishes.

## Cases by Region: Middle East

### Syria

FIGURE 12: MAP OF THE SYRIA AND THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES IN NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES.



More than half a million people have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2019) and has internally displaced an additional 6.6 million (UNHCR, n.d.). Of the 5.6 million Syrian refugees (ibid) able to flee the middle eastern country, Turkey (3.4 million), Lebanon (1 million), and Jordan (660,000) are now home of most of them (Connor, 2018). Syrian refugee experience in countries of first asylum is likely to differ from other experiences that you've read about in fundamental ways. First, most Syrians tend to live in urban neighborhoods within their respective host country while approximately 8% live in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2020). After a short synopsis of the Syrian crisis, you will read the participant profiles of both Nabil, who fled Aleppo (the final stronghold of ISIS rebels) and Zain, who once called Daraa, otherwise known as the cradle of the revolution, his home. Nabil and his family would eventually escape to Turkey living outside a camp, while Zain found sanctuary

in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. Yet, both of their lives were changed by the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democratic protests that swept across much of the Arab world in 2010-2011.

Beginning with the Arab Spring in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, the people of Syria went to the streets to peacefully demand democratic freedoms. It was the Bashar Al-Assad regime which fired the first shots of the war on peaceful demonstrators in the southern city of Daara (Asher-Schapiro, 2016). Months later, after a series of crackdowns and inhumane and unlawful practices against unarmed civilians, the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed in retaliation to the Assad Regime and a full-scale civil war ensued.

Civil wars often beget proxy wars. In the case of Syria, several of the Persian Gulf States aided and assisted groups that were unfavorable to neighboring Iran. Mounting international pressure from western countries went largely ignored and in August 2013, Assad ordered the use of chemical weapons on his own Syrian people. This move brought about global condemnation wherein both the United States (backing the rebels) and Russia (backing Assad) seriously considered the use of military action in the region.

Around the same time, the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged on the global stage. This group, which was originally associated with Al-Qaeda, sought to take advantage of the region's instability to carve out a Caliphate mini-state. ISIS's success in capturing large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria through attacks on both the Assad regime forces and rival rebel factions, helped establish their de facto capital in the city of Raqqa. The successes of ISIS reorient the priorities of the U.S. away from the training of FSA rebels towards containing and defeating the terrorist organization.

The eastern part of Aleppo, Syria's largest city prior to the civil war, was controlled by ISIS forces. The battle for Aleppo, which took place from 2012-2016, is often seen as one of the major turning points in the war in favor of the Assad regime (Reuters, 2016). Backed by Russian air-support, indiscriminate bombardment from the air destroyed much of the infrastructure. The Syrian government army was eventually able to surround the rebel-held sections, cutting off the rebel supply routes into the city. The Syrian Army would eventually emerge victorious after a final offensive push forced rebel-forces to agree to a ceasefire, ending the nearly 4-year war of attrition in the city.

***Case 15: Nabil, Independence High School, Class of 2019***

The night before the clandestine border crossing Nabil couldn't sleep. He had been told that an underground bomb killed a person a few nights before. But he did not have any choice. "The gangs, ISIS, they were the reason we had to leave Aleppo. Before, we lived very happy. We had a small tailor company and also, we had a car and two houses. I was always outside playing with friends. Life was good. But after the war started, everything was gone and they stole everything from our house," Nabil laments. They left under the cover of nightfall. Nabil's dad was able to hire a reliable person in Afrin to shepherd them safely across the border. Still, Nabil was worried. Although the journey did not take as long as he expected, Nabil's nervous shake attenuated somewhat only upon reaching the safety of his aunt's house in Turkey. "Until I arrived at my Aunt's house, I always thought the Turkish soldiers were going to capture us and send us back or kill us. Every day I had this thought. Because we are illegal in Turkey, so we were scared to interact with them. We had to hide," he explains.

Nabil's family settled in the coastal city of Izmir, located far from the Syrian border. He recalls traveling several days on several buses to arrive there. Although Turkey provided safety from immediate harm, life was full of hardships for Nabil and his family. "The language was hard of course, but it was more difficult because in Turkey I couldn't go to school because I needed to work," he tells me. "We left Syria when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and in Syria we start to study English in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. So, I didn't speak English or Turkish." For the next four years Nabil would work odd jobs to help his family earn extra income while his dad worked as a tailor in a local shop. He holds a positive view of the Turkish people that he has come to know but recognizes that some of them took advantage of his illegal status.

The neighborhood that we lived in was mostly a Turkish neighborhood and they treated us very well. Most people they were very good and helpful. They help a lot, but the place where we worked some of the managers, they are really bad. Some of them after you work one week--they will not give you your money and they just will kick you out. And you can't even complain or go to the police because we are not citizens. The government doesn't care about us.

Nabil describes his life in Turkey as being "the same most days." Yet, with each passing day the threat of being sent back to Syria during the height of the civil war subsided. Turkey was growing on him. Nabil and his family would have their application to come to the U.S. on a refugee status approved in 2015 and arrive in St. Louis two weeks after receiving said notification of its approval. He recalls feeling frustrated at the prospect of uprooting their lives to move to the United States.

The first week I was telling myself, "Oh, I've been here like two years, and that was too hard to learn new language. If I go there, how am I going to start over again and learn English now?" But after a couple of days, I told myself, "I will learn because I speak Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and now I will learn English."

Nabil is now 19 years old, graduated from Independence High School and is studying auto mechanics at a for-profit technical college in St. Louis. Nabil's case is interesting, as he is one of the only participants who selected to go to a magnet school and then transferred to a comprehensive school.

***Case 16: Zain, Sierra International Studies High School (Out-of-District Transfer)***

Zain agreed to meet me at Sierra International Studies High School because he wanted to visit former teachers. Although he graduated from a county<sup>27</sup> school not a part of SLPS, he attended Sierra before transferring. Zain is a tall, slender young adult with dark features and a light-skinned complexion. Dressed in his patch-adorned, high school varsity jacket, Zain prepares for the start of the interview by pulling his yearbook and a few artifacts from his high school career out of his bookbag. We chat amicably about his time running track and some of his records while he shows me pictures of him competing. He has kept all his report cards and transcripts since he arrived in the United States and lays them out chronologically on the table. I thank him for bringing all of these documents but inform him that they are not necessary. However, he insists that we review them together. Zain is a good-natured and gregarious individual. Zain's enthusiasm to share specific aspects of his school-life with me struck me as unusual simply because no other participant took the initiative to prepare in this manner. From my interaction with him, I got a sense that he firmly believes that education is an empowering, meritocratic endeavor.

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<sup>27</sup> County used in the everyday vernacular of St. Louis residents refers to any school district that is not zoned in St. Louis City. This will be covered in depth when discussing the racialized narratives of schools.

Zain began his story at the time when he left Daraa, Syria on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2011 when he was 11 years old. He can remember vividly his country's rapid descent from demonstration to revolution.

Before the war, I remember all was good. All my neighbors were around. I used to go with all my friends to the school. We used to have fun and the life was good. My dad, he used to work in his coffee shop and me and my friends used to go to the park. Life is easy. We used to ride our bicycles and buy snacks like candy and chips. I would visit with my grandparents and my aunts and uncle every day and they would ask me about my schooling. Life was good. Then the war is start there and we start hearing that the army is not good. And we used to hear the voice of people crying and screaming in our neighborhood, they start shooting. When we start hearing these noises and the places was not safe anymore, we had to leave to Jordan. My dad did not want us to die or be hurt from anyone.

From Daraa, Zain and his family would reach the border of Jordan within an hour. After a two-day processing period, they would end up being transferred to Zaatari refugee camp, where they would live in first a tent followed by a small trailer for approximately three years. Life in Zaatari was lonely for Zain at first, but after 5 months he started going to school again where he quickly made friends. He tells me that all the school supplies were provided to him and describes his educational experience to me.

I studied Arabic, English, biology, government, history. We used to take tests too. They all was in Arabic except for our English tests. It was different than in Syria. For example, history was Jordan history and Jordan government in Amman and all the places in Jerash. But I didn't mind. I liked everybody there. Everybody liked me, the teacher, I used to work very hard and with all my friends and I still talk to a lot of them. They still go to school, or they already graduated.

Zain would be educated in the camp from 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Although Zain was sad to leave his friends in the camp, he quickly became “plugged in” to the Syrian community in St.

Louis upon arrival in 2015. He describes his first impressions of St. Louis and the people he met.

There was all these refugees in the apartment complex from the middle east. Mostly Iraq and Syria. We went with them to the mosque. We pray al-jumu'ah, because we are Muslim and they take us to the park, to the mall to shop, you know? Then after time, we started to get to know the city. They come to my house, we went to their house. I meet their children and then life is become good.

Zain’s dad would continue to rebuild his coffee shop business in St. Louis, just as he did in Daraa and again during their family’s stint in the Zaatari refugee camp. Zain has grown to enjoy life in the United States despite being away from his extended family in Syria. He still has a grandmother and three uncles whom he stays in contact with regularly.

Now I work to help my family and go to community college. My dad is not working because he is sick. So I got to help my parents and then everything become alright and I start to like school and I started to like the U.S. My brothers too. They like the U.S. because the school is good, everybody is respectful, no one is racists, and everybody believe that everyone is equal. No one is better than others. I also am still working to help my family, to protect my family. Sometimes I take care of my little brother if my parents are not at home because I am old enough now.

Zain would spend approximately a year and a half at Sierra International Studies High School before his family relocated outside of the SLPS school district and into South City. Describing his understanding of why the family moved to South City, Zain tells me, “Our house was too small. We lived in a small apartment and we needed more room for my brothers and me. Also, the schools were not as good we heard from people we know. There was also a new mosque that opened in South City, and it was easier for us to be there and be with our neighbors.” Although

he calls St. Louis home now, Zain envisions working in Syria or Jordan as a translator or in the international developmental sector.

I just want to help poor people. I was thinking to be a social worker to go to different countries to help all the poor people. Because I see there are a lot of poor people now, not just, not even Syrian, from everywhere. So, I am going to the community college for the first two years, then transfer to University of Missouri, St. Louis.

### **Summary**

I have presented each participant's profile which introduces their individual historical educational experiences, both formal and informal. Of note is the diversity and variation of educational experiences prior to relocation in the United States. These experiences suggest that families who have been able to endure the hardships brought about by conflict and instability do so by drawing upon their strengths. These strengths can be categorized as types of capital that refugee families bring with them to St. Louis. The upcoming chapter reveals how pre-arrival educational experiences and the forms of capital mentioned are viewed/valued by SLPS representatives (actors) upon engaging with the school system.

## **Chapter VI: Analysis of Narratives: Key Findings of Actor-Network Theory**

### **Organization of Findings: School-Choice Structure**

This chapter uses Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a framework to organize, analyze and assemble data distilled from participant narratives into a coherent and recognizable structure for understanding refugee student experiences with school-choice upon relocating to St. Louis. Experiences are provided by way of opportunity, and opportunities are often shaped by several forces including access to information, perceptions of possibilities, and certain institutional structures. Although several narratives are included in this chapter, they are used to highlight their relation to ANT in the construction of the institutional structure of school-choice. Full narratives regarding unique participant experiences within the revealed structure will be thematically analyzed and compared in the next chapter. This chapter, however, focuses exclusively on the actors and their assemblages within the school-choice structures which often act as conduits for informational exchange regarding school choice options for newly arrived refugee families.

After the transcription of each interview, Nvivo-assisted narrative analysis was performed that allowed for the researcher to trace/identify strategic actors and events upon the participant entering into the actor-network (i.e., through obligatory points of passage). What were revealed were insights into the assemblage of the actor-network from the participant perspective which was then compared to their experiences as they matriculated through the K-12 public school system in Saint Louis. Using Latour's (1999) conceptual diagram in figure 1 as a guide, a contextualized analytical model for understanding the structure/s that

shape refugee student experiences with school-choice in St. Louis was built. The experiences shared, partially shaped by the actor-network itself, take the form of personal narratives. Understanding refugee experiences with school choice cannot and must not be decoupled from the structure that curates the conditions in which that choice is made. Therefore, mapping the actor-network that refugee students engage with when it comes to school-choice is the primary purpose of this chapter.

### **Typology of Student and Participant Trajectories**

In narrative inquiry, data is gathered and analyzed concurrently. So, when analyzing participant narratives in situ, it quickly became apparent that experience within the SLPS school-choice system was categorically different depending on if one entered during primary school or during secondary school. My first objective after the interviews were conducted and analyzed was to construct each student's trajectory within SLPS. This was an important first step as it revealed common trends in school choice. An exchange with Bao who relocated from Nepal provides evidence for the emergence of these trajectory categories,

(Bao) The International Institute will figure out what school for you to attend. So, if you are in middle school, elementary school age, then it depends on where you live. So, if you are like young, you just go to the closest elementary school or middle school wherever. But my English was good and I was 12 [when I arrived], so they put me in seventh grade. But if you arrive later on in your life and your English is not good you go to the Welcome School and you stay there for some time to work on your English.

Bao avoided having to spend a lot of time at the Welcome School, instead entering a SLPS public school at the start of the new semester. Although this seems like a minor detail, it can become a deciding factor as it pertains to the perception of choice during the middle school

to high school transition. The type of information provided, exposure to peer narratives about each school, and general understanding of each of the magnet school themes differed as a function of if the decision was modulated by the Welcome School or made independent of it. Thus, two distinct categories emerged during data analysis that participants were then placed in.

**Type I:** The decision to attend a specific high school (magnet or comprehensive) was made independent of the Welcome School.

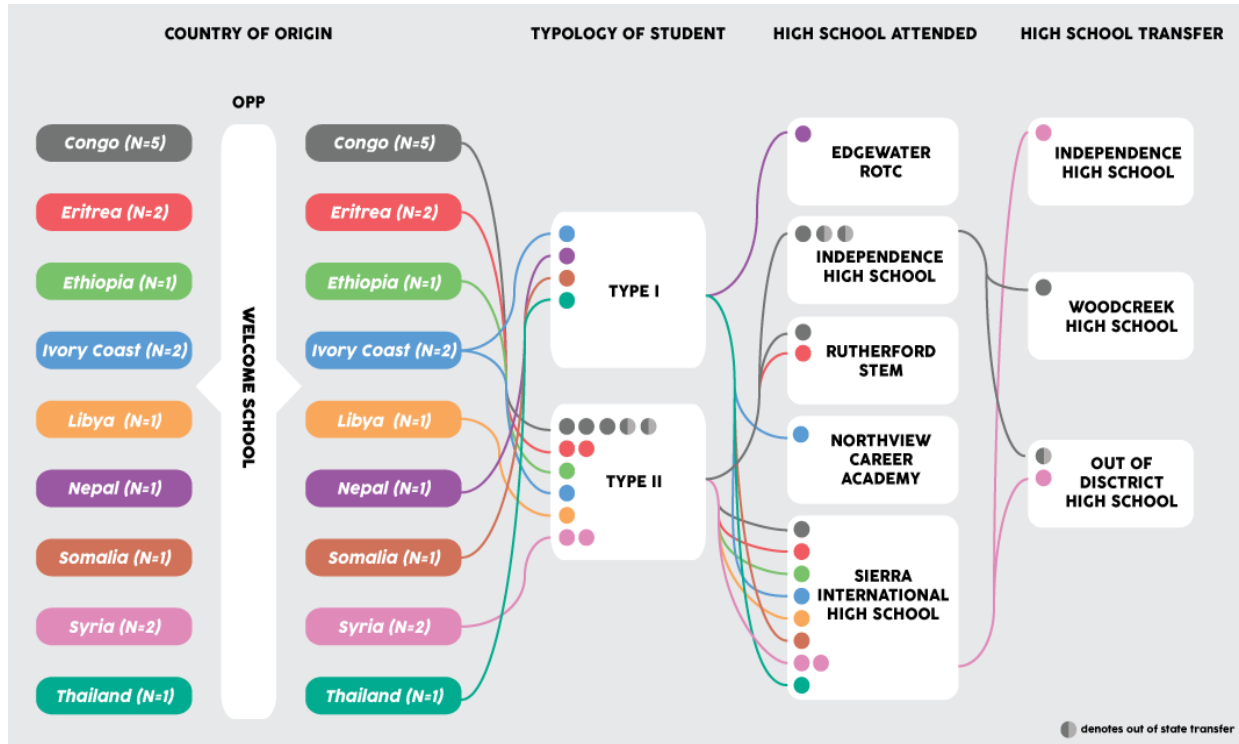
**Type II:** The decision to attend a specific high school (magnet or comprehensive) was facilitated/modulated by the Welcome School.

Within my sample, four participants<sup>28</sup> were enrolled outside of the Welcome School during the time in which they were required to make a decision. These four were coded as *Type I*. All other participants made the decision to attend a specific high school while enrolled in the Welcome School (*Type II*). It is important to remember these two distinct typologies as I will be referring to them periodically in the analysis section of this study. Figure 13 below shows the trajectory of each participant upon engaging with the Welcome School and serves as a starting point for understanding the movement of students according to their typology.

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<sup>28</sup> Merriam, Fatima, Bao and Dang

FIGURE 13: PARTICIPANT SCHOOL CHOICE TRAJECTORIES BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AND BY TYPOLOGY OF STUDENT



What stands out in this schematic is that for students who are categorized as type II, those students who selected a high school under the guidance of the Welcome School, the majority overwhelmingly selected Sierra International Studies High School (n=7), followed by Independence (n=3), and then Rutherford STEM (n=2). This suggests a possible school narrative about Sierra may be circulating around at the time that refugee students are making their choice at the Welcome School. Additionally, a myriad of other reasons could exist to explain the popularity of Sierra International Studies for refugee students. Thus, one of the goals of this research was to uncover these reasons and influential actors during this critical choice period.

For type I students (n=4), all of whom relocated to the United States at a young age and were enrolled in elementary schools in SLPS, a half of those students attended other magnet schools while the other half attended Sierra International Studies. None of the type I students

attended a comprehensive neighborhood school. This would also lead to an important finding about the perception of choice and how it might differ based on where and under what conditions that choice was made within the purview of the Welcome School or outside of it.

### **Constructing the Actor-Network**

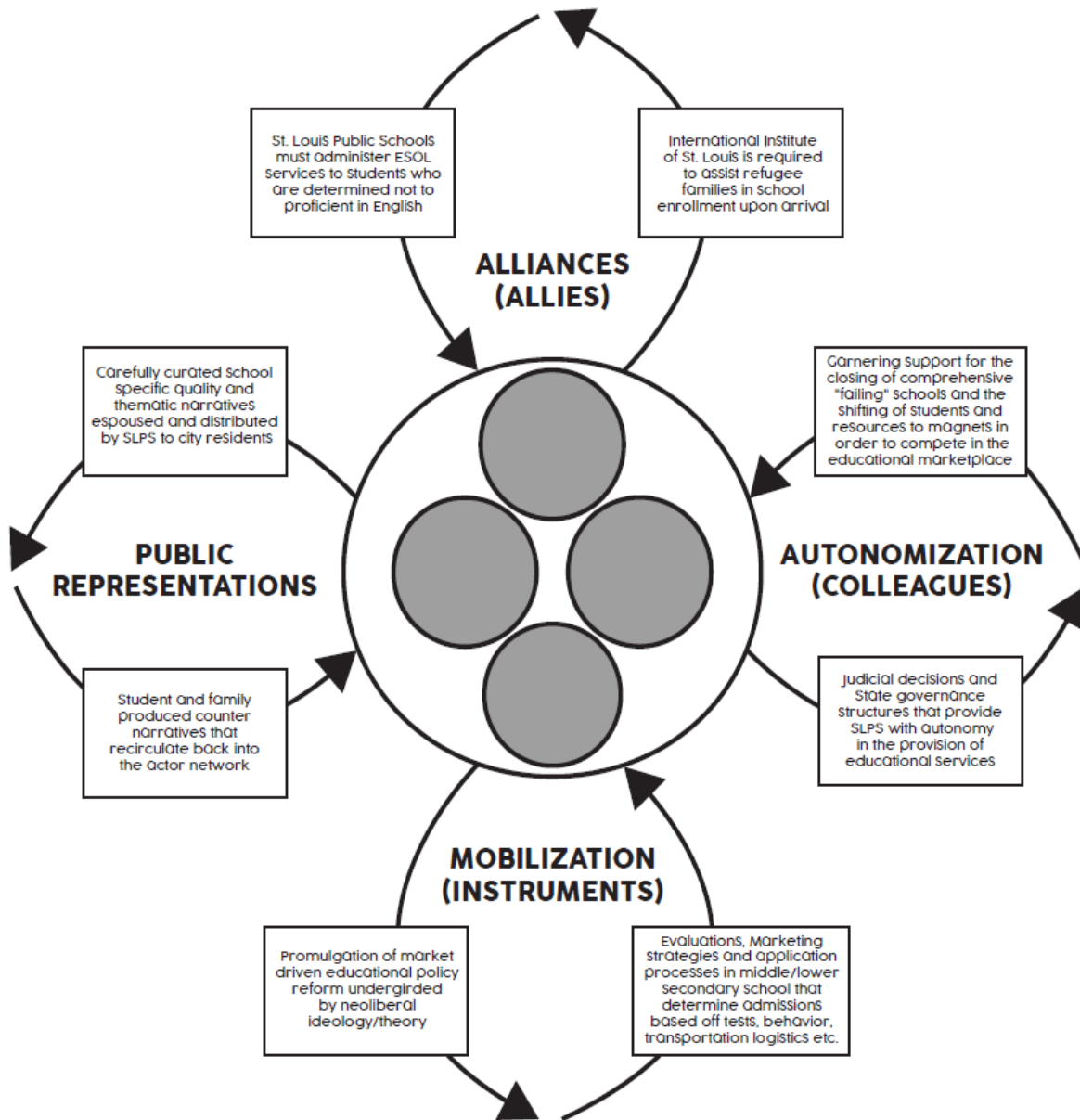
This section begins with a brief discussion of the theoretical framework used to identify from the participants' perspective the actors present in their educational network. As a reminder, within any network, actors that are involved in its formation, exert influence, and contribute to its maintenance are collectively known as actants and can be both human or non-human. Thus, ANT is useful in the sense that from the distilled interviews vested actants emerge and are coded as such and the structure of the school-choice network, as experienced by the participant, becomes increasingly revealed. The next logical step in this qualitative study is then to bring that structure into focus by assembling the relationships of the networked actors and analyze their impact of refugee educational choice.

Nvivo-assisted thematic analysis of each interview captured the extent to which participants were able to identify and describe how each human and non-human actant impacted their experience upon entering into and engaging with the school-choice network. ANT posits that each individual within the network is an interested actor and is involved in the reproduction of the structures that not only keep the network intact, but also confer authority to the system, overall. ANT as an analytical framework in this study identifies, analyzes, and assembles the material and social arrangements and political dynamics that form network alliances through a process known as mapping. These alliances are then seen as a manifestation

of an aligned, mutually beneficial interest. Conversely, there can also be partial alignment of actor interests as well as a conflict of interests.

Applying Latour's conceptual diagram, figure 14 depicts how SLPS's school choice program (core/nucleus), as an embedded actor-network, is involved in sustaining the existing culture of school choice in St. Louis through its continued translation. The four grey circles within the core, which will be unveiled in figure 15, represents the visible (and incomplete) actor network map of as experienced by refugee students. Therefore, figure 14 is useful in portraying the ways in which actor-networks engage with their surrounding contexts in order to establish themselves as major players, and to a certain extent gatekeepers of school choice information.

FIGURE 14: TRANSLATION OF THE ACTOR-NETWORK INTO THE LARGER CONTEXT OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN ST. LOUIS



Note: Adapted from Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*. Harvard University Press, p. 100.

If you recall, *translation* describes the process of reifying the social structures or ideological beliefs required for a certain phenomenon to overcome obstacles (e.g., legal, cultural, or political) to its promulgation. The outcome of translation addresses Latour's (1999)

central question, “How could one produce a discipline (or in this case an ideology, i.e., school-choice) that would modify everyone’s opinion and nonetheless expect passive acceptance by all?” (p. 105-107). This diagram is useful in understanding how the historical emergence of the quasi-marketized education system interacts with the existing contemporary context of St. Louis to promote an unquestioned, devout belief in the efficacy of market-based solutions to educational issues. The education system is organizationally complex, yet at the same time autopoietic in the sense that it is able to reproduce the necessary outcomes, beliefs, and dispositions that sustain its continued existence. Therefore, the central task of the actor-network theorist is to present a cogent rendering of the state of affairs by taking into consideration the actors and the nature of their involvement in the continuation of that state. In this way, figure 14 represents the theoretical application of ANT in the process of ensuring SLPS’s involvement as a large, urban, quasi-marketed school district to the reproduction of a culture of choice through the institutionalization of neoliberal reforms (autonomization), use of filtering mechanisms such as application processes and admissions criteria (mobilization), formation of alliances (allies/actants) and crafting school-specific narratives (public representations).

Public representations in this diagram are the SLPS marketing and promotion strategies used to attract parents and students to enroll in a school by highlighting school-specific successes and each magnet’s corresponding curricular theme. Yet, public representations circulating the network usually never remain in an unadulterated form as they are often co-opted by users of the actor-network and distributed to others through informal channels of communication. Vis-à-vis school choice, altered public representations may represent counter-

narratives to the dominant discourse which are then reabsorbed into the larger community's understanding of school-choice and educational quality. The extent to which counter-narratives emerge and supplant the dominant narrative of a school is not an aberration in ANT, it is a consequence of a counter-network working to reshape and use the actor-network to its advantage. Refugee decisions on where to attend high school, particularly as it relates to ethnicity and race, are partly informed by these counter-networks.

Yet before one can discuss the role of counter-networks understanding the actors of the *legitimate* network is appropriate. Only after one has identified interested actants can we pivot to their assemblage of the network and how they work together to affirm its legitimacy. Thus, the next section describes the categories of actants that were identified in the interview data and subsequently coded as either human or non-human followed by an explanation of their relationship among each other and to the participant.

## **The Networked Actors and their Interests: Human Actors**

### **International Institute of St. Louis**

The International Institute of St. Louis (IISTL) is the singular resettlement agency for the greater St. Louis region and operates as a non-profit subcontractor of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. As an organization, they have served the St. Louis community for over a century providing essential information and integration services for foreign-born newcomers. Employing several individuals from distinct fields, in addition to over one thousand volunteers, the IISTL can be considered to be a distinct actor-network in itself. However, for the

purposes of this study, I have opted to include it as a human actor as several participants detailed their interactions with the staff there and can describe the type of assistance provided to them by the institute. As Fatima told me, “The International Institute helped us out a lot. They helped us get furniture, beds, chairs, and everything. They also enrolled us in school.” This was confirmed several times in several separate interviews. Mona, whose family fled Libya during the civil war wherein Ghaddafi was killed, explained her relationship with the IISTL.

(Mona) The international Institute of St. Louis was very helpful. They helped us with everything from transportation, food, clothing, school, literally everything. In the first few months they were helping us find different places, going places, try to get settled, know where to go, if we needed something, know who to ask if we needed to go somewhere or do anything like that. They were able to help us pay for our rent. Because the first few months we didn't have jobs, they helped my parents find jobs and stuff like that. And yeah, they helped us for about like six months or so. And then we were able to like to do everything on our own after that.

As a resettlement agency, the IISTL is responsible for providing crucial services to recently relocated refugee families. These range from material and basic physiological needs such as food and shelter to more supporting services for adjusting and adapting to their new surroundings. Yet, not all participants held a positive view of IISTL. Dang who is Karen and grew up in Thailand already indicated that he was suspicious of the IISTL. He described his first interaction with them after he and his family met a representative of the IISTL at the airport.

(Dang) So my first impression when I got here, it was awesome. St. Louis has a lot of lights. I've never seen that many lights. Then the International Institute brought us food and stuff. The house looked amazing. It was nice. But the day after that, nobody came to visit us. So, it's a little bit hard. Because the international Institute, nobody come visit us and tell us what to do or we don't even know what to do. We just thought okay they brought us here, then they just going to leave us. So that was hard. So, for the first couple of days there was no interaction with the International Institute. Maybe people are misleading us, you know? The International Institute provided us with a place to stay and food for three months. I guess we had to find a job after that. I was

worried about my parents not finding one. I was worried we couldn't stay or they would take it away from us when we couldn't pay.

Dang's response illustrates how refugee families are under a tremendous amount of pressure to secure a sustainable livelihood and become independent of IISTL support from the start. It is common knowledge that refugee families must repay the debts incurred throughout the relocation process which includes airfare. Recall that Dang grew up on a refugee camp in Thailand where he was "provided with everything he needed." Therefore, relocating to an individualistic country with only 90 days of social services and the ensuing apprehension when it comes to securing a sustainable income, is understandable. His parents would eventually find jobs, but Dang still believes that the IISTL did little to show that they were welcoming.

Financial security and the need to repay debts is not the only negative sentiments associated with the IISTL. Safety and personal security were also discussed. Joel, who relocated to St. Louis from Tanzania after leaving the Congo with his mom and who also was the only participant who said he "hated St. Louis" upon arrival described how the IISTL placed him in low-quality housing in a tough neighborhood.

(Joel) So, when I moved here, I just had this feeling. The feeling that you get whenever you just don't feel connected to be there; you don't feel connected to the place. I guess that's why I hated St. Louis when I first arrived. I didn't like the place where I they put me because the neighborhood where they first relocated me, Hodiament, there is many crimes like prostitution and drugs. I don't want no more crime. I guess I wanted to live somewhere where I can feel at home. I just want peace. That's why I didn't like St. Louis.

Although neighborhood effects will be analyzed as a theme, I include Joel's response here because it is important to highlight how decisions made by the International Institute prior to being involved school-related matters continue to influence refugee experiences with

school-choice. Particularly and most notably if refugees are asked to choose schools in or near their neighborhoods. Although a peripheral actor, IISTL impacts perceptions of school-choice based on the strategic placement of some groups of refugee families within certain neighborhoods or communities. To the extent that these neighborhoods are violent or unsafe, as Joel as suggested, will be scrutinized using critical race theory in a separate section.

Apart from the institution's government-mandated obligations outlined in their cooperative agreement to provide resettlement assistance, job placement, and other helpful services, the International Institute also operates as an obligatory point of passage (OPP). As a reminder, in ANT, an OPP is a temporally conditioned space or threshold wherein actors converge to engage with one another in the process of partially or fully satisfying their respective interests. According to Yonas, he and his mom, “went straight to the International Institute from the airport.” This is likely to be true for many other refugees too seeing as how Bao unequivocally told me, “So every refugee who comes here, that's where they go. We all go to the International Institute.” Even refugees who were resettled to a different city initially and moved to St. Louis later, as was the case with the Ngoy brothers from Boise checked in with the IISTL upon arrival. They recount their experiences navigating the complexities of school choice in those first days and also provide commentary on how it compares to their educational experience back in Idaho.

(Sam) I don't think anybody gave us any information on the schools here when we arrived. We kind of just had to look at it ourselves on the internet. Also, there's this place called international Institute or something. But we felt like we didn't need them because we are capable of having conversations in English. But it was weird there, they wanted us to take English tests.

(Ian Interjects) --and we already took those classes they wanted us to take back in Boise, but they wouldn't believe us. All of us. Me and both my older brothers had to take the refugee ESL classes. But I just took one year of it at Independence. So, I graduated with 5 English classes and you only need 4. Then, when I got into regular classes, people thought I thrived in that school just because it was easy, but I also didn't get nothing out of it. I didn't feel challenged because the stuff I was doing in Boise was far more advanced.

(Sam continues) Right—so the International Institute tried to reiterate that we had to take those classes again and I was telling them though, "come on, do you not hear me? You and me are speaking here and I speak better than you. So, what are we up to?" And we left when they tried to send us to the Welcome School. Like, they tried to get us to go through that process again. We did this huge packet. They told us they were going to find the right school for us and by default the right school was Independence. Because they said no one was accepting people at that time. And so this was back in November when we were trying to get into Rutherford and they told us to wait until next semester because they thought it would be too hard for us to start in the middle of the semester. But that doesn't make any sense because that's exactly what we did when they put us into classes at Independence. So why can't they just let us in? I was really mad about that. That and then making me and my brothers retake all these English classes that we obviously didn't need. And I am not just saying that. My brothers and I are more articulate than the majority of the kids that we went to Independence with.

Despite their impressive command of the English language the Ngoys had to also undergo the same processes as refugee arrivals to the St. Louis district since they were not yet US citizens. Therefore, access to information during the choice process, in addition to the temporality of enrollment windows, presented obstacles for newcomers to the system.

I would like to reiterate that the existence of an OPP within ANT is not necessarily problematic, but it does invite further problematization and scrutiny. The IISTL provides essential services to recently arrived refugees. Yet, as an OPP it also represents a node of power within the network, particularly when it comes to being viewed as the ultimate source of information and authority on where refugee children attend school. It is this aspect that this

study elucidates—the relationship between institutions, the larger structure of school-choice, and the ways in which it impacts refugee educational choice.

## **St. Louis Public Schools**

### ***Welcome School***

The Welcome School is a K-12, 2-year transition program for immigrant and refugee students who have been identified as needing additional English language support and/or educational adjustment services. These services may include socio-emotional support, culturally and linguistically appropriate materials, or food and nutrition or any other wraparound service deemed crucial to their success in school. There are two campuses, a primary school campus that serves refugee students determined to be in K-8, and a high school campus located within the basement of Independence High School. The Welcome School at Independence High School is a school-within-a-school model that houses a sheltered program that caters to immigrant and refugee ESOL students in ninth and tenth grade. “Part of the St. Louis Public Schools, the Welcome School helps children coming from war-torn countries who have experienced trauma and do not speak English well. Students study at this school until both they and the faculty agree they’re prepared for regular public school” (Steinhoff, 2018). This study primarily focuses on the impact that the Welcome School at Independence has on shaping refugee participants’ perceptions of their school choice options due to the majority of participants being categorized as type II.

The academic classes at the Welcome School are conducted primarily in English and highly emphasizes literacy and language development. Core subjects include reading, writing, and arithmetic, while peripheral subjects such as science and social studies are covered through

comprehensive reading program. As stated on their website, the Welcome School at Independence works to bridge academic and language gaps for high school immigrant and refugee students by providing intensive English and content instruction by certified content and ESOL teachers with special training in working with newcomers.

Administrators, teachers, and support staff at the Welcome School deeply care and love the population of students that they serve. Several participants expressed that they enjoyed their time attending classes and praised the work that their teachers put in every day. I visited the Welcome School several times and observed firsthand the commitment and compassion that each teacher brought to their profession. Any excoriating impressions of teachers, at the Welcome School or in SLPS, or their work is a misinterpretation of this dissertation. It is my opinion that teachers at the Welcome School have invaluable expertise and strengths that other SLPS teachers can draw from when it comes to educating refugee students in their classrooms. This point will be expanded upon further in policy recommendations section in chapter eight. That being said, this dissertation remains focused on examining and critiquing the structure of the Welcome School and its practices, as just one actor in a network, that impacts refugee student trajectories upon transition. This dissertation does not seek to deride or disparage the importance of the work that teachers and other professionals are doing at the Welcome School, nor is it able to evaluate the readiness of refugee students who are transitioning to a local high school. Rather, the inclusion of the Welcome School as an actor is to understand how institutions come together to operate in the context of school choice, and by doing so, influence refugee student understandings of their possibilities within such a system.

Like the IISTL, the Welcome School is also a networked system comprised of several human and nonhuman actors. Furthermore, the Welcome School, which is a part of SLPS, is in partnership with the International Institute through a signed memorandum of understanding (MOU). As someone familiar with the internal processes of the Welcome School explained to me,

So officially, we have an MOU with the International Institute. They send us all the resettled refugees for testing and placement so that we can provide them with the resources they need to succeed and prepare them for when they transfer to one of the other schools. Unofficially, the International Institute is just right down the road, so it's just easier for everyone. A lot of the refugee families are resettled in and around this area anyway, so that has helped us out a lot. (Personal Communication, 2020).

Refugee experience corroborates the requirement to undergo placement testing at the Welcome School after first settling into their new homes. Amir, who was educated in a private Catholic school in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia for most of his life, confirmed the International Institute and the Welcome School's arrangement.

(Amir) I couldn't apply to Sierra from the beginning because I had to go through the Welcome School which is affiliated with the International Institute in some way. So, the International Institute sent me to the Welcome School to take exams to see like what my English, Math, and Science levels are. I went to the Welcome School and they gave me exams. After I turned them in, about a week later or by appointment they told me my scores in Math, English and I believe just like some chemistry and biology. So I pass all those exams and they said "We don't want you to stay here" and "Your scores were a lot higher than people that usually come to the Welcome School," and that was true because when I was back home [in Ethiopia] I was in my senior year of high school.

As stated in his profile, Amir would eventually apply, attend, and graduate from Sierra International Studies. However, he would be required to go back and to the 10th grade to start his coursework for completing graduation requirements.

Per their website homepage, the Welcome School at Independence is a “sheltered program for newcomer English Language Learners.” It is a part of SLPS and serves students who “score of 2.0 or below on the ACCESS Screener.”<sup>29</sup> This assessment, somewhat ironically named, operates as an additional OPP and acts to filter those students who are able to readily transition (access) to public school from those who will attend the Welcome School until their English language skills improve. If determined to fit into the latter category, students attending the Welcome School may only remain enrolled there for a maximum of two years before it is required that they transfer to one of the other schools. Ostensibly a parallel system<sup>30</sup>, the Welcome School is comprised of entirely refugee students separate from the native student-aged population. Additionally, students are retested every semester to assess if they meet the language requirements to enter a SLPS high school prior to remaining at the Welcome School for two whole academic years. Thus, the Welcome School, by design, is meant to serve as a transition school for students with refugee and immigrant backgrounds. Michel, a Congolese-born refugee who grew up in Tanzania, was one of the first participants I interviewed. He recounts his first experiences with the Welcome School for me.

(Michel) I first had to go to the Welcome School then transfer from there. Yeah, so after they see that your English is getting better and better every day. Someone from the Welcome School will call you in the office or counselor's office and tell you now that your English is good, you can go to real American school. Then they give you a choice of schools and they tell you where you can meet people from your country, so you don't feel lonely over there. You can find a buddy to talk to that speaks your language. So, they give you a list of all high schools that they have ESOL programs. So, they give you like Rutherford, Sierra, like all different schools. So, you have to choose. And if they have an ESOL program at the school, that means they have some people from your country there. So you have to look how far is which school from your house and choose the

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<sup>29</sup> An identified non-human actor listed below.

<sup>30</sup> Parallel educational systems have been critiqued as being institutionalized segregation. This is not an oversight but will instead be addressed in a later section.

school. I was living close to Sierra, so I just choose Sierra mostly because it was close to my house and I had a lot of friends going there who spoke my language. So, it was easier for me to make the choice.

Curious about who directed him to first go to the Welcome School instead of going downtown to SLPS district headquarters for information and to enroll, he elaborated.

(Michel) The International Institute will tell you that to go to the Welcome School first, but if your English is good then someone at Welcome School will say, "We think his English is good enough to go to American school system." So once that happens, then they tell you what school to go to. But they make sure that they [schools to choose from] have ESOL classes over there because when you go to schools that don't have ESOL classes, it's very hard because the English words are tough, and the teachers don't have that much time to explain to you and the American students already understand. Teachers don't have time for you to understand that word correctly. So, they'll make sure you go to the ESOL schools because those teachers that they have time to explain everything. So, when your English is good, when that happens, the Welcome School just contacts them. Then [they] make sure you go to the right school.

Transferring from the Welcome School to a "real American school," as Michel states, is contingent upon several factors identified as non-human actors. Yet, in regard to the human actors at the Welcome School, one such person was identified several times as being the purveyor of information about each of the schools available for refugee students to transfer to. As Kevin, a Congolese refugee who grew up on a refugee camp in Uganda explained to me,

(Kevin) Basically, I met this this lady who was registering all the kids from Africa. She worked at the Welcome School, that's where all students who are refugees go first. She told us about the public schools. She named all of them and told us everything about the schools. She told us about Sierra International, Rutherford STEM and Independence.

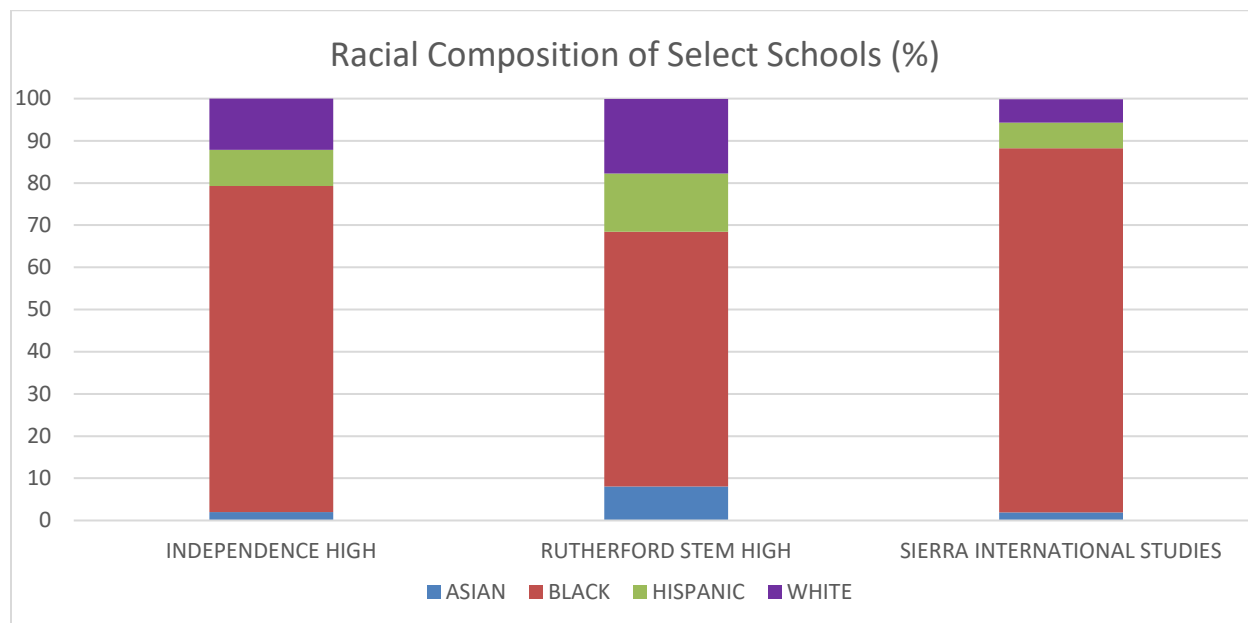
For confidentiality, anonymity and out of concern for the individual identified by Kevin, their

name will not be used and will be instead only referred to by ambiguous pronouns. However, this human actor was identified by name by several participants who were required to make their choice upon listening to their descriptions of the possible schools. When I sat down with this individual for an informal discussion during the course of a school-day, the person was kind enough to share with me the PowerPoint presentation used during the selection process. Although this will be further expanded upon in the thematic analysis (see Circumscribed-Choice), the exchange and the artifacts I received confirmed that students enrolled in the Welcome School during the transition from middle school to high school were provided only three school options to select from. As Kevin who chose Rutherford STEM told me, "So [they] actually applied for us, so basically, they came to class and built a little information presentation, we told them and they applied for us." The three schools that provided to students were Independence High School (the high school in which the Welcome School is housed), Rutherford STEM, and Sierra International Studies High School. A short description of each of these actors is provided below in addition to table 4 comparing all three high school's racial composition in 2019<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations also explicitly define white as "original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East."

TABLE 4: RACIAL COMPOSITION OF STUDENT BODY BY SCHOOL, 2019.



Source: DESE.gov

***Independence High School***

Independence High School is a public high school located the Tower Grove East neighborhood of St. Louis, MO. As a comprehensive, neighborhood high school serving all students and with no admissions requirements, Independence is one of the largest high schools in SLPS and enrolled 970 students in 2019. According to its official SLPS website, Independence High strives to promote “a culture of care, support, and high expectations that builds achievement from potential.” Students attending Independence take the general educational requirements for graduation as well as select from a number of different elective courses. As of

2019, Independence 19.82% of student were classified as English Language Learners (ELL) and 20.72% had an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). One of the unique aspects of Independence High is that it plays host to a separate and distinct school, the Welcome School, who occupies the basement of the school building. Four participants attended Independence (Ngoy brothers, Joel, and Nabil), with Joel and Sam Ngoy transferring to a different school prior to graduation. The narratives of students attending the Welcome School during their high school years will be analyzed in sections to come.

### ***Rutherford STEM High School***

Rutherford STEM is a large magnet school that was renamed following a court order mandating the establishment of a technology magnet school in 1992. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, which is a strong focus of the school's curricula. Students who elect to attend and are accepted to Rutherford are able to declare majors. These majors are career based and strive to prepare students for to be both college and career ready. Such majors include agricultural, biological and health sciences; pre-veterinarian; business management and marketing; aerospace; and applied computer science and mathematics among several others. As of 2019, the racial composition of Rutherford's student body was 60.41% Black, 13.81% Hispanic, and 17.63% White. Additionally, 21.55% of students were ELLs and 15.36% of students in 2019 were on an IEP. Rutherford's mission is "embracing diversity and inspiring critical thinking through innovative career and college pathways." Two participants, Yonis from Eritrea and Kevin, who grew up in Uganda both attended and graduated from Rutherford STEM.

### ***Sierra International Studies High School***

Sierra International Studies is a magnet school located in the Academy/Sherman Park neighborhood of St. Louis and focuses on foreign languages, international relations including international law, and international business. In the past, students attending Sierra strived for proficiency in several language pathways including Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Russian and Latin. Due to funding structures and departmental budget cuts, in addition to the hyper emphasis on standardized testing with the passing of No Child Left Behind, students only had the option of taking Arabic or Chinese during my time teaching there. Since my departure several languages including German and Spanish have now returned to Sierra. As of 2019, the racial composition of Sierra's student body was 86.34% Black, 6.07% Hispanic, and 5.5% White. While 19.92% of students attending Sierra were considered ELLs, only 3.8% of students were on IEPs in 2019. In the 2010-2011 academic year, Sierra's feeder middle school was absorbed into the third floor of the magnet high school due to budget and financial difficulties of maintaining separate school buildings. Eventually that feeder middle school would shut down altogether. One of the participants interviewed, Fatima, attended during that year. The uniqueness of her narrative will also be captured in the upcoming sections. Of the sixteen refugee participants interviewed, half of them (n=8) of them attended Sierra International Studies High School.

### **The Networked Actors and their Interests: Non-Human Actors**

Like human actors, non-human actors also play a significant role in shaping the possibilities and opportunities provided to refugee students upon engaging with the network.

Non-human entities are often mobilized (Latour, 1999) by human actors and are therefore seen as integral to the maintenance of the network. Additionally, as it pertains to this study, non-human actors (e.g., transcripts, test scores, GPA) can also be viewed as a mediator—as differential levels or quality of each can restrict or expand school-choice possibilities. How human actants utilize non-human entities and for what purposes is of great interest. Furthermore, non-human actors can also exert influence on each other, as with the case of English proficiency and attending a school with an ESOL program. The following sections delineate the non-human actors identified by the participants as playing a crucial role along with a brief description of each. These will be expanded upon during the discussion of the narratives that emerged during analysis.

### **English Proficiency Tests**

Much research regarding school-choice has attempted to understand the role of testing in shaping educational opportunity and holding schools accountable. Yet most of the research as it relates to school-choice views the distribution of test scores and student achievement as a proxy for understanding parental decisions (Cooper, 2005; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Test scores, specifically high stakes standardized tests such as the ACT, SAT, or EOCs are often aggregated and analyzed at the school level then made publicly available in some form to stakeholders (i.e., parents) in the system. When refugees relocate to the U.S. and enter SLPS, the use of English screening tests, specifically ACCESS, emerged as a non-human actor that has a tremendous impact on student trajectories.

A score of 2.0 or below on the ACCESS test determines whether or not a newly arrived refugee student will be required to enroll in the Welcome School. Describing the test itself, Amara told me, “The test was just being able to interpret a question and respond. Basically, being able to understand what was being said to you and being able to respond to them. It wasn't a test from a specific subject or anything. I think it was just an English proficiency test.” From interviews it became clear that this test was imbued with legitimacy as a non-human actor and refugee student performance on it greatly determined student prospects with school-choice options. Upon first checking-in with the International Institute, families are then sent to the Welcome School to establish a time in which a series of assessments are given to refugee students. As Bao explained, “So they [Welcome School] would test you first to see how good is your English is, you know? So, if your English wasn't that good, they will keep you there.” Mona confirms this stating, “It's not required to stay at the Welcome School the entire time, but you have to go there first. They help you and then you take a test at the Welcome School to see if you need to stay or not.” Thus, not only is the English test a non-human actor but it can also be categorized as an OPP, as all refugee students are required to take it. Furthermore, like all OPPs, there is a power dynamic that exists as the Welcome School establishes itself as a gatekeeper to other SLPS schools as the sole administrator of the ACCESS test. Refugees understand the importance of performing well on standardized tests in the American educational experience, an outlook that would be reinforced even after their departure from the Welcome School.

### **Transcripts, Grade Point Average & School Records**

Physical artifacts such as transcripts and school records communicate essential information about students. Discussion surrounding the extent to which these controversial non-human actors accurately convey student knowledge, ability, or potential is beyond the scope of this study. However, interviews conducted with refugee students suggest that such artifacts, or lack thereof, reinforce what could be considered to be a deficit view of refugees by teachers and administrators. In one particular exchange with Joel, he opened up to me about what a transcript and degree means to him stating,

(Joel) Look, I am kind of a person who likes to keep my paperwork. It doesn't matter what it is I keep it because I believe that even if you have a degree and you don't work in the same field, you want to perform, and a degree shows that. It's going to help you someday because it's going to backup you. It's going to be the information that people are going to say, "Oh, he's capable of doing this." So I get all my paperwork and that's what I just presented to them [Welcome School]. Actually, I gave them my IT<sup>32</sup> certificates on top of everything. They took it and put it on the bottom. So I think they just underestimated me. They didn't know that I can speak English, that I can read and write English.

For others, transcripts, school records and the information they convey can be used strategically in the admissions process. As Merriam communicated, "I think you had to have at least a 3.0 to get in at the time. And I think I had a 3.5 or maybe 3.8 at that time I applied to Northview Career Academy." Yet, Merriam represents the exception of all the participants I interviewed. Most of the refugees, especially those who relocated to the United States entering secondary school, did not bring any school records with them.

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<sup>32</sup> IT refers to Information Technology coursework that Joel successfully completed back in Kenya.

Understanding the leverage that having a decent GPA provides in the admissions process, Michel states, “Also a few of them [magnet schools] have all these testing requirements and you need to show the paperwork. The paperwork you had to have from back home, in Africa. Many of refugees do not have that. We do not have GPA and things like that back in refugee camp.” Confirming this, Emmanuel succinctly summarizes the pre-relocation educational experiences in relation to school records stating, “As far as school they [Welcome School] didn't really know what grade to put me in because I don't have no report card, no transcript, no nothing from my time back in the Ivory Coast and on the refugee camp.” Therefore, the lack of transcripts, school records and the information they convey may serve to reinforce the districts position that refugee students need to attend a separate school for evaluation prior to entering public schools. When such positions become institutionalized as they have become as evidenced by the Welcome Schools continued operation, it effectively operates as a parallel system of education for the time that refugee students are in attendance.

Grade Point Averages (GPA) are a uniquely American construct to refugee students. Yet, through their introduction of them and other indicators of student performance, a deficit view of refugee students is reinforced. It is an attitude that views refugee students as lacking sufficient proof of their ability and therefore must attend an institutionalized, structured program in order to gain access to other available options afforded by a robust school-choice market. This is captured by Mona’s explanation of the Welcome School,

(Mona) At the Welcome School, the way they select to see if you're ready to go to different school is through your grades and if your English is good. If they feel like you're ready to go to a different school, they would look at your grades—they see that your grades are good or not. And then every year they select a group of students and

they tell them that you are ready to go to a different school--we think that you belong in an American school with the other American students.

Lastly, given the nature of the environments in which refugee families are fleeing, the notion that such transcripts/paperwork is a priority it is somewhat naïve. Refugee families are often asked to travel with only the necessities and/or leave their home frantically. Describing the precipitous events that lead to this family's departure from Aleppo Nabil tells me,

(Nabil) We left Syria with nothing, no paperwork because we had to leave Syria very fast. And so when they [Welcome School] asked, there was no document or—how do you say—transcript. I didn't have it. I was just starting at the Welcome School in 9th grade maybe because I was around that years old.

As a non-human actor, recorded accounts of student performance have remained an unquestionable feature of educational systems. As I stated at the beginning, it is beyond the scope of this study to point out the fundamental assumptions such instruments of evaluation carry with them. Yet, transcripts are not beyond reproach, especially in highly competitive marketized school systems. For refugee students, the importance of such documentation has been internalized. Over coffee, I asked Merriam if she had any recommendations for newly arrived refugees now that she has been through the entire process. She responded stating,

(Merriam) You know, I have been working with my stepsister on her exact issue. She goes to Independence now. So, I want her to make a choice. I want her to first know that she does have a choice. Even as the African here, once you get your name in the system, after your first year you can change schools. You can go to Independence for your first year but after that you have a choice. You have a GPA now so you can apply anywhere you want to.

Transcripts, school records and GPAs are the primary means in which human actors within a

school system use non-human instruments to mobilize the system. Although perhaps commonplace, convenient and standard on the surface, these instruments are by no means unbiased or neutral. For refugee students enrolling in SLPS, they are crucial in restricting educational opportunity within the architecture of a structural deterministic educational marketplace.

### **ESOL Programs**

English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs were identified as a key non-human actor by all participants who made their decision at the Welcome School. At whatever point during their time at the Welcome School it is determined that the students are ready to transition to another high school, one of the stipulations is they must attend a school that provides ESOL services. ESOL services are a condition placed on refugee students leaving the Welcome School and, therefore, act to shape their perceptions of available options. According to Amir,

They [International Institute of St. Louis] had already determined I needed to go to ESOL, but the exam they gave me at the Welcome School, it was to determine whether I would get ESOL services at the Welcome School or if I was going to go to local high schools for ESOL Services.

Once again, human actors use non-human instruments such as tests to mobilize students into certain branches or domains of the network. As it turns out the absence of an ESOL program being housed in a magnet school has profound consequences on the options available for refugee students to select from. Although this will be covered in the key findings chapter,

Michel summarizes how the presence or absence of ESOL services impacts the choices available to refugee students transitioning out of the Welcome School. He states,

(Michel) The Welcome School gives you a list of all high schools that they have ESOL programs. So they give you like Rutherford, Sierra, like all different schools. So you have to choose one. So yeah, the magnet schools we choose from that I remember were Sierra and Rutherford because they have ESOL programs. We also looked at Independence too because the Welcome School is in the same building. Those are the three schools that I know they have ESOL program in St. Louis.

### **Time**

Time is a determining factor that intersects with other non-human actors in shaping possibilities for refugee students. Communicating the role of time as a nonhuman actor in the network, Nabil told me, “At the Welcome School, you can only be there for 2 years and then you have to leave. You cannot stay longer than 2 years there.” This confirmed the transitional nature of the Welcome School. Regardless of refugee students’ English levels, GPA, or other identified actants, after two years they must leave the Welcome School by “selecting” a high school to attend. Other than English proficiency and school records, time also intersects with the application processes of SLPS. From my discussion with Sam and Ian Ngoy, the Rwandan brothers that first relocated to Boise, I got the impression that both are high performing individuals, both academically and in terms of their linguistic ability. Therefore, I pressed Sam on the process of ending up at Independence if they were able to partially circumvent the need to be accessed by the International Institute. His response is captured below.

(Sam) Okay, so let me take a step back and I'll explain how that happened. So actually, we didn't really have a choice to why we went to Independence High School. Independence was not our first choice. So, a little bit of history—we asked around and people recommended Rutherford STEM. We actually went there in person and they told us they wasn't accepting anybody at the time. They said it was full or something like

that. Then, we try to get into Sierra International and they said the same thing. So, Independence was not our first choice but at the time that we came to St. Louis, it was our only choice. We had to go to Independence because we missed the application cycle. Independence was the only school that's open to everyone, and also the one that was closest to our house that took us. And from the first moment I walked in [to Independence High School], seeing metal detectors, seeing security guards and it just didn't seem very welcoming. They would yell at you to hurry up, "come on, let's go, let's go, let's do it, let's go, let's go. You know the routine, man." It literally felt like a prison.

Their experiences at Independence that prompted them to elaborate on why they felt imprisoned there will be explored in a separate section. What's important here is that time, in this sense, is also restrictive as SLPS does not implement a form of rolling admissions for their magnet schools. Thus, by default the only school available to Sam and Ian were the comprehensive, neighborhood high schools. Independence just so happened to be the closest to their home and was able to provide them with transportation; another non-human actor that interacts with time.

### **Transportation & Bus Routes**

Transportation is much cited in the research as being a clear and obvious factor considered by students and families operating in the context of school-choice systems (Bell, 2009; DeArmond, Jochim and Lake, 2014; Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004). Transportation could be conceptualized as having access to personal transportation or in the case of a newcomer as experiences with public transportation. Confusion as it relates to bus routes and travel patterns are likely to intersect with how newcomers to both the school-choice education system and the transportation system of a large municipal city grapple with what is feasible when it comes to attending a desired school. Though SLPS provides city bus fare free of charge to all students

who are not on a school-bus route, a certain level of navigational capital and assistance is needed to ensure that students are able to arrive and return from their school of choice safely and efficiently. Perceptions of the transportation system quality and opportunity costs associated with choosing a distant school are of relevance. Though identified by several participants as an influential non-human actor, transportation was not much of a barrier when it came attending SLPS schools. It remains unclear the extent it is a barrier for other choice options such as private schools and charters.

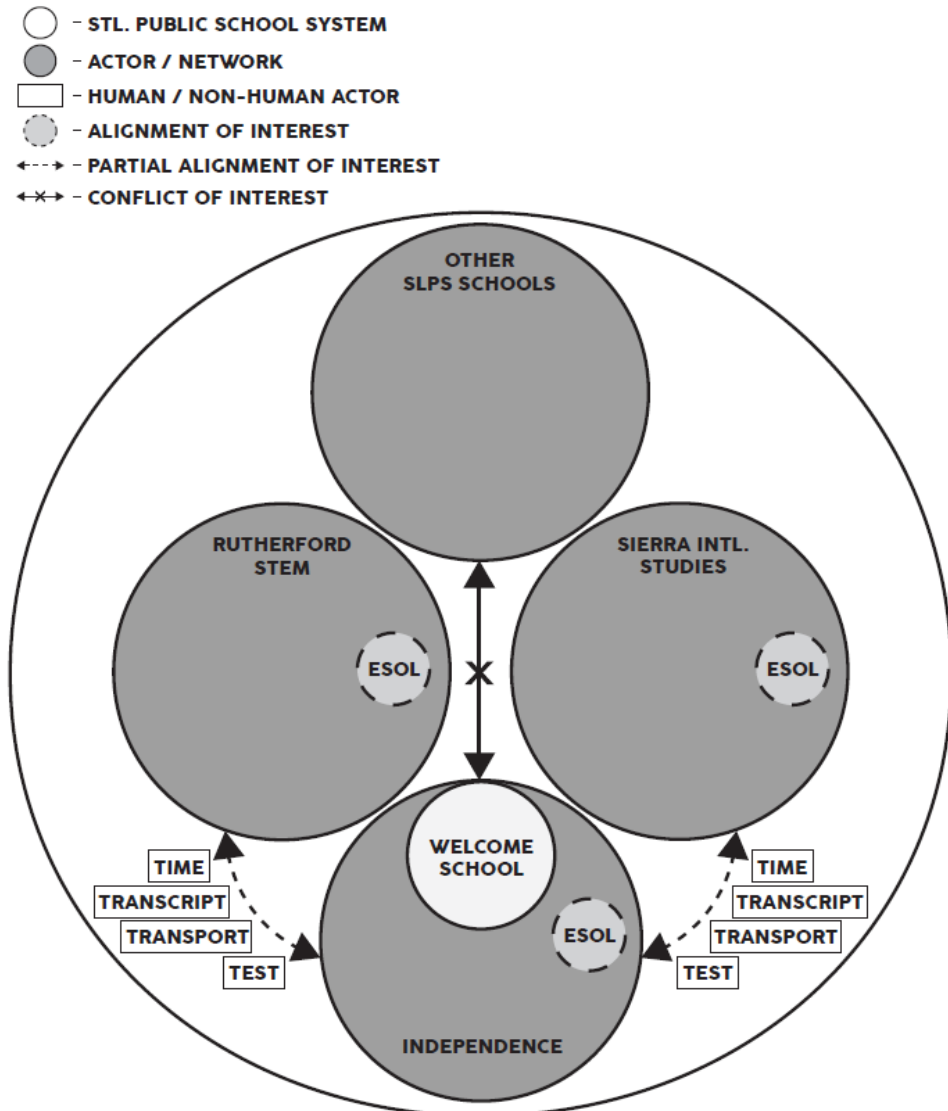
### **The Actor-Network Map**

With regard to refugee experience upon engaging with the SLPS, the data did not suggest that refugees were familiar with school-choice systems even after graduation. As Bao told me prior to his interview, “I always wondered how schools choose students and how some students got into all these other schools.” This is somewhat expected, given the limited background knowledge regarding the education system in the U.S., which is not only highly decentralized, but also differs from district to district.

The concept of school-choice is one that is foreign to recently resettled refugees. Therefore, what remains relevant to ANT are the first interactions with the actor-network itself, as these are times of vulnerability for refugee students and their families. Analysis of interview data provides the Actor-Network Theorist an opportunity to enucleate or dissect the core of figure 14, the ‘Links and Knots,’ as Latour would say, revealing the relationships among actors and how they intersect to shape refugee perceptions of school choice during those introductory moments. Afterwards, the network must be reassembled alongside the participant in the

interest of validity. The process of network construction is more akin to Clarke's (2003) situational mapping, which "allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment—to analyze complex situations of inquiry" (p. 554). She goes on to say, "situational maps lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive and other elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them. These maps are intended to capture and discuss the messy complexities of the situation in their dense relations and permutations" (ibid). Therefore, situational mapping of refugee perceptions of school possibilities during the time in which their decision was being made is harmonious with the goals of ANT. While the former partially reveals the actors and conditions that structure refugee school choice the latter seeks to incorporate and explain how those structural renderings fit into the shape of the actor-network, overall. Once again, I remind the reader that this dissertation does not present a completed map of the school-choice actor-network, as interviews and data gathered from all known stakeholders (native v. non-native, public v private, parents, NGOs, teachers, administrators, and so on) would be necessary to construct such a thing. But by demystifying the process of choice for refugee students through narrative inquiry, imperceptible connections between school choice structure and educational experience are rendered increasingly visible and take the form of a map or sociogram. Figure 15 (the core of figure 14) below is the partial rendering of the school choice actor-network which used the responses from refugee participant interviews to understand how they perceived their choices of where to attend high school.

FIGURE 15: THE ACTOR-NETWORK MAP AS EXPERIENCED BY REFUGEE PARTICIPANTS



**Note:** Excluded from the actor-network are charter schools and private schools as they were not represented in the participant sample.

The central actor identified by all participants is the Welcome School, as all refugee families with school-aged children are asked to first report there for evaluation and assessment. Thus, the Welcome School is also one of several Obligatory Points of Passage. The staff at the Welcome school are human actors working to carry out the primary functions of this singular node of power, which involves the use of non-human actants such as tests and transcript

evaluation. Tangential, but by no means less influential, are the high schools hosting ESOL programs. Those schools include two magnet schools (Rutherford STEM and Sierra International Studies High School) and one comprehensive school (Independence High School) in which the Welcome School is located, thus, the nested circles depicted in the schematic. There were no reported ESOL programs at any of the other 8 magnet schools in SLPS, as well as limited publicly available information. Yet, I have been informed by several sources that SLPS does not provide sheltered ESOL programs in high schools other than the three identified.

The non-human actors include those identified by refugee students to shape their understanding of what is possible. As stated before, these include performance on English proficiency tests, transportation services, transcripts and student records, as well as time, as they can only remain at the Welcome School for 2 years.

Although understanding the varied interests of each actor was ancillary to the research questions, the arrows in the actor-network indicate the extent to which the actors involved may have partial or conflicted interests. The only fully aligned interest identified in the interview data formed between the International Institute of St. Louis and the Welcome School. Yet, for the purposes of this diagram, I did not include the International Institute, as this actor-network map pertains specifically to the SLPS education system.

ESOL programs housed inside of schools may be partially aligned with the interest of the Welcome School. During analysis, a few respondents indicated that the three schools provided by the Welcome School have too many “refugees” or “African kids.” This suggests that counter narratives emerge among refugee students as to the nature of the school and

classroom environment for the school in question. Counter narratives, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, are of interest because they work to subvert the institutionalized dominant narrative that students enrolled in a magnet school have access to exclusive thematic curricular opportunities.

It might be in the interest of Sierra, Independence or Rutherford to have ESOL programs, however. Although their presence deterred Merriam from applying, having an ESOL program may also serve as an effective means to recruit refugee, immigrant and ESOL students. Although there is no indication that Sierra or Rutherford actively target these populations for recruitment, an increase of student enrollment corresponds to an increase in funding—as magnet schools in SLPS are provided financial compensation on a per-pupil, per-day basis. Thus, Merriam’s response highlights the trade-offs between preserving thematic magnet identity and increasing enrollment of a target population. Additionally, the Welcome School determined that it was also not in their interest to establish relationships with “Other SLPS Schools” explicitly because of the lack of ESOL services. As you will learn in the next chapter, such actions that advance the goals of the actor-network have considerable impact on the perception of choice and agency of refugee students.

## **Chapter VII: Narrative Analysis: Cross-Case Analysis and Thematic Findings**

### **Organization of Findings: School-Choice Experiences**

Actor Network Theory (ANT) which is rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), aims to evaluate and understand how a concept or object of inquiry establishes itself as a core component of a larger system. ANT rejects entirely the notion that users/actors engaging with a particular system are homogenous or that they experience system processes similarly. This chapter expounds upon the themes that were conclusive regarding the refugee experience within the structure of school-choice in St. Louis. As chapter III explained, the emergence of an actor-network that sustains a culture of school choice can be traced back to the surrounding sociopolitical and historical exigencies following several judicial rulings. Thus, the contemporary teleological explanations and justifications for a market-oriented view of education must not overshadow the historized context in which it was initially conceived nor the rationale for its implementation. Present-day SLPS is in part the product of the enduring effects of segregation, demographic shifts in student population due to White flight, intra-district busing and transportation complexities and the battle for integration which spurred the creation of a robust magnet school district. The introduction of sizable refugee populations within this setting adds yet another layer of complexity to the processes of student-school assignment and for whose purposes.

It is with that understanding that this chapter explores the salient findings by describing how ANT interacts with the ideology of school-choice to produce certain outcomes for refugee students. The previous chapter assembled the apparatus in which Type II refugee students

make their choice. This chapter pivots to synthesizing Type II participant responses to the following research questions while comparing those narratives to participants who fall under the Type I category. As a reminder the research questions addressed in this dissertation include:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1).** How do refugee students describe their secondary educational experiences (navigating, accessing, and attaining desired programmatic and thematic curricular opportunities) in school-choice schema?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2).** How do refugee students describe their own sense of agency when it comes to deciding their educational future in marketized systems amidst obstacles and opportunities?

Participant narratives presented in this chapter explore the themes that emerged after the decision was made to attend a specific school. Therefore, the findings presented not only analyze the effects of the school choice structure on refugee students, as outlined in the previous chapter; but also, the ways in which participants interpret and make meaning of their experience. The process of narrative inquiry is conducive to eliciting such experiences. However, the richness, descriptiveness or detail of each participant's narrative is also partially shaped by access to certain funds of knowledge, forms of capital, personality, and openness to share their stories. Furthermore, each narrative can also vary as a function of recall, command of the English language among many other factors. Therefore, a researcher decision was made to include select participant narratives that were both unique, descriptive, and rich so that the subject of each story may take a central role in the storytelling process. This decision does not

discount or ignore the experiences of other participants. Their accounts of events are included as supporting statements which can be found in each theme's corresponding table.

Although my study was designed to investigate how refugees experience school choice, it also sought to expose the ways in which the system itself acts in ways contradictory to its intended goals. Critical analysis of participant interviews produced several themes that are both integral and some tangential to the research questions. The integral themes include *Circumscribed-Choice, Magnets-in-Name-Only, Identity and Discrimination, Racializing Schools and Neighborhoods* and *Bounded Agency*.

Finally, before we move on to the themes that emerged during the data analysis, a few prefatory remarks are warranted. School-choice policies and their wide-ranging implementations are not beyond reproach. My field of International Education Policy not only seeks to understand their immediate impact on users at the local level, but also evaluate the efficacy of their intended long-term goals. The historical justification of a magnet school program in St. Louis was to not only facilitate, but also expedite the integration of SLPS following several important judicial rulings. Integration is more than just achieving a targeted racial student-body composition. Integration strives for social cohesion, recognition, connection, belonging, peace-building and other domains that counteract the forces of isolation, exclusion, and marginalization. The Refugee Council (1997) describes integration as “a process which prevents or counteracts the social marginalization of refugees, by removing legal, cultural and language obstacles and ensuring that refugees are empowered to make positive decisions on their future and benefit fully from available opportunities as per their abilities and aspirations. (p. 15). It is by these metrics that we should evaluate whether SLPS,

and school-choice strategies in general are useful in achieving their intended goals of integration.

### **Theme I: Circumscribed-Choice**

*Circumscribed choice* is a term I coined that aptly describes the experiences of Type II refugee students in SLPS when selecting high schools to attend. It is a portion of the actor-network working to determine and distort the trajectories available within a robust school-choice marketplace. It is often easier to understand circumscribed choice by distinguishing it from *controlled choice*, which is a desegregation strategy adopted by districts seeking to grant parents the opportunity to choose schools while also striving for diversity by maintaining a target racial composition. Alves (1996) describes Controlled Choice as,

a comprehensive, transparent, educationally sound and equity driven universal choice-based methodology for assigning students to public schools that consciously promotes diversity in a manner that is family friendly and fair to all students and practicable to implement. (p. 1)

SLPS implements a form of controlled choice that strives to assign students to their preferred schools of choice (Ehlers, Hafalir, Yenmez & Yildirim, 2014) through vertical feeder school arrangements and a series of placement priorities. Placement priorities prescribe a descending set of categories for prospective students based on a myriad of conditions. These conditions range from a continuation of thematic education (e.g., transitioning from a STEM middle school to a STEM high school), whether the student under review has had family members or siblings that attended the selected school (i.e., legacy preference), access to transportation (bus or walking), and so on. Facilitating the movement of students is an

application process that seeks to match student/parent preferences within an architecture of controlled choice which Alves and Willie (1987) operationalized as a way to,

Provide educational opportunities for individuals by permitting each student to choose a number of schools that he or she would like to attend and rank-order these by personal preference. Regardless of one's residential neighborhood, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, aptitude, or other attributes, each student may choose any school in the city or any school in a large zone of the city (pp. 12-13).

This is corroborated in the online final edition copy of the Magnet School Handbook for St.

Louis Public Schools which states,

All magnet high schools have entrance eligibility criteria established specific to the school's theme and curriculum. Any student wanting to attend a magnet high school must submit a continuity form or application and must meet the high school's established entrance criteria in order to be considered for placement. (Magnet School Handbook Final Edition, n.d, p. 21)

The placement mechanisms of controlled choice as a specific form of school choice in St.

Louis, outlined above, are not universally applied, or homogenously experienced by Type II refugee participants. The following narratives illuminate the degree to which *circumscribed choice*, orchestrated by the Welcome School, seeks to render the options typically afforded to both the native St. Louis residential population and to participants categorizes as Type I, invisible.

You will first hear from Yonis, an Eritrean refugee who attended Rutherford, followed by Amir, a privately educated refugee from Ethiopia who attended Sierra. Both participants provide an account of the conditions in which they made their decision at the Welcome School. Additionally, you were already introduced to Michel, who described the role of ESOL courses in shaping refugee's school choice options. These narratives will then be compared to Merriam

and Bao, two participants who are categorized as Type I did not make their choice under the counsel of the Welcome School.

(Yonis) the way they [Welcome School] select students to see if you're ready to go to a different school is through your grades and to see if your English is good. If they feel like you're ready to go to a different school; if they think that you belong in an American school with the other American students, then they will tell you that you are ready and you need to choose. So, they give you a little bit of information, answer questions and sometimes they will take you on a field trip to the schools. Then after that you have to choose and then you have to apply.

So, I was good in school and all the high schools accepted me. So they [Welcome School] told me okay you got accepted to them all, you can go to Sierra, Independence, or Rutherford. Those were the three choices, actually. Those are the three choices they give me, and they give the other student as well. Everybody who was a refugee was going to one of those three schools. And nobody told me anything really about Sierra and nobody told me about the Independence. So, I just went to Rutherford. I also knew a friend that went there, and he told me it's a good school. He said, Rutherford is a magnet school so it's better and they do STEM. So, I just decided to go to Rutherford.

Yonis's response expounds upon several confirmed accounts of the Welcome School providing a curated list of schools to choose from for Type II refugee students, different than the list depicted in table 5. From his narrative, the usefulness of applying ANT as a theoretical framework becomes evident. Several influential actors coalesce temporarily to shape Yonis's perception of which schools are possible for him to attend. Without belaboring heavily any further on ANT, which was covered in the preceding chapter, Yonis's account of how he chose Rutherford invites scrutiny and comparison to Michel, who said, "The Welcome School gives you a list of all high schools that they have ESOL programs. So you have to choose one."

Both Michel, who attended Sierra and Yonis, who chose Rutherford, were given the same three high school options: Sierra International Studies (magnet), Rutherford STEM (magnet) and Independence (comprehensive/neighborhood). These are the only schools in

SLPS that have ESOL programs and therefore, are the only ones presented as viable options for them to attend. The institutional arrangements between the Welcome School, the schools with ESOL programs and the power dynamics inherent within them, combined with the lack of clear understanding of the educational system in St. Louis led to several Type II participants expressing a range of emotions from anger to confusion over the process of choosing school.

Frustration over each school's eligibility criterion, in addition to the lack of clearly communicated school options, provoked Amir to elaborate on his experience choosing Sierra after attending the Welcome School. He went so far as to describe the entire system as unfair.

(Amir) So my friend Sarah, she knew a lot more about what I needed to do when I arrived from Ethiopia because she was my neighbor. That's actually how I met her. She's also from Ethiopia. She told me that there are different schools, but you don't get to just go there and apply. You have to go through the Welcome School. She underwent the same process previously, so she told me based on her experience that that's what I had to do. So I went to the Welcome School and they said I had to first go to the International Institute. I went to international Institute, then they gave me some paperwork. Then I went back to Welcome School. They told me to come back after a week to take a placement test. Then that's when I took the exam.

The exam was an English test. Like all the questions were in English and they cared about comprehension and small grammar. I still had to go to like ESOL for some reason. They had already determined that I was going to go to ESOL, but the exam they gave me, it was to determine whether I would get ESOL services at the Welcome School or if I was going to go to local high schools for ESOL. So, going to school when I first arrived in America was just based on people telling me what to do, I had no clue.

At first, they told I was going to stay there [at the Welcome School] because when new refugees arrived to St. Louis, that's where they go for education first. But, I was a lot older than the students there and at the time my skill level was a lot better than most of the students they had. They're like, "Okay, you can go to schools near your area. Rutherford, Sierra, or stay at Independence, but either way you have to apply. And one of the representatives there, she was a refugee too. She did all the paperwork and applied for me and Sierra called first. But my friend, Sarah, she was going to Sierra so at the time I was okay with it. But I just didn't know about how the education system worked.

There are similar threads between Yonis's recounting of events and that of Amir's. Specifically, both describe being provided limited high school options for them to select from, as well as dissatisfaction with the information they were given during the selection process. Therefore, it seems prudent to focus on how Amir's testimony advances several well-known critiques in the literature regarding school-choice.

Firstly, rational choice theorists would have us believe that consumers make choices based on maximizing utility largely driven by self-interests. What seems to be driving Amir's decision is more personal than it is utilitarian. Amir became friends with his neighbor, Sarah, who was also Ethiopian and who assisted him in navigating the complexities of application and enrollment processes. Sarah was a resource for Amir, not only because of her previous experience with the same procedures, but also because he trusted her. This trust was partially due to their shared cultural background.

Yet, Amir's involvement with Sarah may not be entirely coincidental, a topic that will further critiqued under the neighborhood effects section in Theme IV. What can be determined is that these crucial first encounters, which can be thought of as informal channels of communication, became part of Amir's life experience (funds of knowledge) and have implications for his perceptions of school-choice. As stated previously for refugees, shared perceptions regarding school choice are the result of tacit and acquired knowledges that are internalized in spaces that transcend the physical boundaries of a school building. For Amir, Sarah served not only as a friend during the lonesome months prior to his first day of school, but also as a central node in his nascent, informal network that directed him to the

International Institute and from there the Welcome School. This neighborhood-facilitated nexus of communication between Amir and Sarah also represents an indirect connection to the actor-network itself. Therefore, to what extent Amir's funds of knowledge are being co-opted to serve the interests of the Welcome School invites greater scrutiny.

Though it is likely that Amir would have eventually found his way to the Welcome School by the directive of the International Institute, Amir's account of navigating SLPS suggests that refugee communities can and do act as important pools of informational resources. They can also, unfortunately, be exploited through the inadvertent recruitment of previously settled refugees to assist newly arrived refugees who are unfamiliar with the school-choice process and how to obtain access to all available high school options.

Amir reflects on what he now knows about SLPS and the educational marketplace. Blame, for Amir, is shared between himself and the actor-network that he engaged with upon arrival to Saint Louis. Although ignorance regarding school-choice, shame and perhaps a tinge of naiveté can be heard in Amir's reflection, the actor-network escapes sentiments associated with blame precisely because such feelings are often a manifestation of individual error. Owing to the fact that the actor-network is comprised of countless, unnamed individuals, blame is not only partial shared, but also disproportionately distributed—as one can sense from the following exchange with Amir where he refers to his own inadequacies as the cause of his educational disillusionment.

(Amir) I didn't know about all the other schools available. They [the Welcome School] didn't give me any option. They said you *have* to apply to *these* schools near *these* areas. If I had known I would have probably applied to more rigorous schools. It is kind of unfair when I think about it. Because I just didn't know anything and I didn't have the confidence to ask questions.

I just didn't know about how the education system worked. I thought, "I'm in America. I am going to get like the best education. Better than home." But it wasn't. It was better back home [in Ethiopia] than here, I believe. It's just like when you come as a refugee, they're [Welcome School] probably like, "I'm going to send you to a different school that is similar to the Welcome School."

I think they cared that I went to a school that had a lot of immigrants and refugee students because Rutherford is the same as Sierra. Both have lots of refugee students. They cared more about my refugee background than my skill level, I believe. They just knew that I was going to attend one of the schools that has a refugee and immigrant population. They just did not see any other options.

Amir's perception of equality of quality education and his realization of its myth is perhaps the most disheartening. Yet, it also highlights a possible intervention if school-choice is to remain a part of a local strategy for delivering education based on preference. By exposing the myth, it can theoretically open the space for refugee students to actively voice what they value in an education with the hope that the Welcome School will respond in kind.

Yonis, Amir, and Michel's renditions of their school-choice experiences differ greatly from the experiences of Merriam and Bao, who applied to high schools outside of the purview of the Welcome School (Type I). Merriam and Bao made their decision alongside the native student population and both were provided information on wider range of schools to select from. As a reminder, Merriam, whose case will be discussed first, relocated to the United States in the sixth grade from the Ivory Coast. Knowing that most refugee students needed to first go through the Welcome School, I first asked her how she was able to enroll directly in the American schools.

(Merriam) Like I said I am Liberian and even though school wasn't much of a thing for me back on the refugee camp, I still grew up speaking English. It was not like proper English, its pidgin English, but it was still English to us. All my family, aunties and

uncles and grandma we all spoke pidgin English and Grebo. So, anyway when I got to St. Louis, the international institute took me to this place where I had to take almost like an IQ test sort of a thing. [*I interject to inquire name of the place*]. It was called the Welcome School.

So there, they like gave me a picture and asked me a bunch of questions. For example, they would show you a picture of a door and ask, “What is this?” You would have to respond in English, “That's a door” Then they would ask you a series of other questions such as, “What is a door used for?” or something. I can't remember exactly, but I felt like it was silly. And then after that they told me that I'm going to be in the sixth grade. And I was like, “Okay. I mean, this is great. I guess I passed.” And so I started school at Green Hill elementary and I was in the sixth grade. And at the time I lived on Chippewa up the street from the elementary. So, I could walk to school and I didn't have to ride a bus.

This exchange with Merriam highlights the way in which language acquisition in pre-resettlement educational experiences impacts post-resettlement educational opportunities in St. Louis. Preference is given to those who have acquired and demonstrated a base level of English ability. If such a threshold was not met, as in the cases of Type II refugees, they are temporarily segregated from the American student population until their English improves to a level determined by the Welcome School. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the impact of separating English Language Learners (ELL) from the native population, even if it's only temporary. Furthermore, since I am unfamiliar with the test itself and the classroom pedagogical practices for teaching and learning English at the Welcome School, I feel uncomfortable commenting on its efficacy. Instead, I choose to remain focused on how these elements interact with school-choice for refugees. Merriam spoke to this point in the subsequent exchanges after she explained what the choice-process at her middle school entailed.

(Merriam) I was in the AVID<sup>33</sup> program. I was always in like special little transitioning programs. I really did seek out all my resources everywhere I went. So I was in the AVID program and I knew of all the schools, my AVID teacher was really good. So when researching schools we had to be organized with special note-taking strategies. We went on tours to different high schools. Yeah, it was the AVID program that made me more aware of my options because it was through that program that I discovered Northview Career Academy.

So after I learned that I didn't have to go to Independence—that's the community school. If you're in high school and a refugee, you're going to Independence because that's the community high school. They just send every African that comes to St. Louis there. I didn't want to go where all the refugees were going. So after I learned that I didn't have to go to Independence with all the other refugees, I did my own research at the computer lab. I look up all the magnet schools.

So it was in middle school that I discovered magnet schools. I wasn't going to go to public schools if I could go to a magnet school because magnet schools were more selective. Not anyone can go to a magnet school because you have to apply to get in and be chosen. It was like applying to college when you're in high school. And I am very competitive when it comes to my education. So I wasn't just going to just go to any school that anybody can just walk through the door. If you go to a magnet school that means you earned it. So that's how I discovered that Northview Career Academy was a magnet school.

And then once we decide on which schools to apply to, we give the list to our AVID teacher. On the application you put three choices, you put your first choice, your second choice and your third choice. More than likely you want to get your first choice. But that second choice is like your fallback in case you don't get into your first choice. So, I applied to three schools. I applied to Shaw Classical Studies, I applied to Northview Career Academy. And I think my third choice was Summit VPA. Afterwards, they set up tours of those schools and we get to decide.

What is telling about Merriam's application process compared to other participants' isn't that she ranked her three choices, which is what is asked of all applicants; but rather, the options available to her included several if not all of the available high schools participating in

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<sup>33</sup> AVID, which stands for Advanced Via Individual Determination, is a program "designed to help underachieving students with high academic potential to prepare for entrance into colleges and universities" ([www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov))

the SLPS Controlled Choice system. Merriam clearly states that she first held the belief that as a refugee (immigration status/non-US citizen), she was under the impression that it was required for her to go to Independence. It was only after she “learned that I don’t have to go to Independence,” that she started seeing SLPS schools as a part of a larger strategy to access and attain a certain type of education—in this case one that focuses on career readiness.

Merriam’s high school, among several others, were not presented as viable options for Type II refugee students transitioning from the Welcome School due to the lack of ESOL support. Merriam was only able to attend one of them upon testing out of ESOL services during her visit to the Welcome School. Therefore, ESOL services, as a non-human actor within the structure of choice at SLPS, discriminates against non-English speaking refugees by limiting their high school options. Merriam identifies as a struggling Liberian English speaker and was also extremely vocal on what she believes to be the harmful consequences of sending refugee students to schools that enroll significant numbers of refugees.

(Merriam) I wasn't going to Independence and I didn't like Sierra because there were also a lot of Africans there too. And like I said, I wasn't going to the high school that every African was going simply because they needed ESOL classes. I'm a struggling Liberian English speaker too and if you just took me to Sierra because there's a Liberian community there and placed me in a regular class, I won't know how to communicate with the rest of my crowd. I would just speak broken English or pidgin or my native language, even though I'm supposed to be learning standard, proper English. And then as a result, I've seen some of these kids that are 25 years old in community college and still taking ESOL classes, paying extra money because they didn't have access to what they needed because you thought you were protecting me. But you were hurting me in the long run. That's not healthy.

From Merriam’s passionate response one can infer two things. First, that the existence of ESOL programs at Sierra and Independence made those schools undesirable options for her,

and secondly, that choice for those with tacit knowledge of each school may also be driven by social considerations. This becomes increasingly clear as one compares Merriam's justifications to attend Northwest to Type II accounts of their school-choice experience. For Merriam, factors not to attend Sierra or Independence had little to do with the thematic, public-facing representation promoted by the schools, nor the type of education she would have received had she attended them. Her perception of what each of those schools' offer was likely partly shaped by her experience and perpetuated by a counter-network. In this case, the counter network consists of informal student and community relationships that are formed outside of the formal school-choice information structure. This counter-network promotes alternative narratives of what each school is known for among the student population during the application/enrollment window. In Merriam's case, Sierra and Independence were known as the African/refugee school.

To the extent that other prospective students, both refugee and native, are selecting schools based on the demographics of students they typically attract suggests that school narratives are susceptible to ethnicization and racialization (see Theme IV). Joel (type II) also lends credence to Merriam's belief that the Welcome School adopts a strategy of sending refugee students to attend schools that have students from their cultural background. A structure that she suggests is making the choice on refugees' behalf as evidenced by her statement, "you just took me to Sierra because there is a Liberian community there." Joel states, "They wanted me to be somewhere where I could feel ---just to be with the people from my country, Africans. So because many Africans, either go to Independence, Sierra or Rutherford, those were my options."

Lastly, the case of Merriam sparked my curiosity into ways in which ESOL programs and *circumscribed choice* may present fewer opportunities for refugees to adequately learn English even after they transfer into an “American” high school, to use Michel’s terminology. In Merriam’s experience, the best way to become proficient in a language is to be forced to interact in that language. Therefore, it follows, that if students are being sent to one of three schools under the rationale that it’s better for them to be with people from their own background, then it may complicate the extent to which language proficiency is achieved in these environments. Thus, trade-offs exist, as Theme III discusses, between identity preservation and integration, as well as intraschool self-segregation or avoidance. It is there that we will once again return to Merriam’s case.

Bao’s experience as the only other type I participant to attend a school other than Sierra, Rutherford and Independence, is also informative as a point of comparison when problematizing circumscribed choice. Recall, Bao arrived from Nepal in the seventh grade and only spent a few months at the Welcome School. He recalled those first few months and also described his difficulties adapting to his new middle school and, specifically, overcoming his struggles with the English language.

(Bao) So they [Welcome School] would test you first to see how good your English is. So, if your English wasn't that good, they will keep you there. And if it doesn't improve enough by the time you get to high school, they will send you to Independence. But if its better, then they started sending you to different high schools or middle schools. My English was good enough to go to middle school since my dad and mom were teachers back in Nepal. I had plenty of books and I would read books all the time. That's what I used to do for fun. I used to read books and draw in Nepal. So reading and writing wasn't that hard for me. The hardest part was mostly pronunciation and learning to use better vocabulary. Other than that, the rest came pretty easy. So yeah, I spent

like two or three months at the Welcome School and then transferred at the start of the new semester.

I went to a middle school with mostly American students. The teachers would treat us [refugees/ESOL] the same as the other [American] students, so I didn't have a lot of time to learn all the English and the subject during class. So, it was kind of hard for me. But I kept adjusting. Also—I was trying to learn proper English, but at my middle school everybody spoke slang. So, I stopped speaking proper English and I started learning American slang. That is kind of my spoken words now.

Bao was able to draw on his familial and linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) to overcome several initial hurdles in his new school. Bao felt the education in his Nepalese refugee camp provided a solid English foundation for him to transition to school in the United States. Additionally, as it relates to school-choice, Bao underwent the same school-choice processes as all the other students at his middle school. In other words, when it came time for school faculty to provide information and assist students and their families in choosing a high school in SLPS, Bao did not feel that he was treated differently as a refugee and also perceived his options to include several schools not available to his Type II counterparts. Part of the choice process, for Bao, included each SLPS high school sending their own representative to speak in front of the transitioning eighth grade students as a recruitment strategy.

(Bao) I was enjoying school and I was just listening to all the people (school representatives). Students from different high schools come in at different times, and they would try to tell us why we should come to their school. I think they call them school ambassadors. They are like the best students from each school come to talk to you about the school. All the schools were there from what I remember.

When it came time for Edgewater ROTC, I saw that they had guns. They said that I could be a cadet there. So yeah, they came and I thought that was pretty cool. Also, I spoke to a few friends from middle school and they had the same choice as me. So, I think that also influenced my decision. I liked the school, but I think I also picked it because of my friends. You know, I was still learning and adapting to school and it would have been hard to go to a different high school that my friends didn't go to.

Merriam and Bao's experience can be juxtaposed with the experiences of refugee students choosing at the Welcome School. By their lights, all of the high schools in SLPS were theoretically available for them to apply to. They just needed to meet the requirements.

Type II refugee participant narratives regarding the process of school choice were similar enough to be described as functionally regular—in the sense that their descriptions explained a uniformity in the high school selection process that worked to produce a set of specific outcomes. Through the mechanism of circumscribed choice, the creation of a parallel process of high school selection comes into focus and the experiences of type II refugee participants engaging with these parallel processes serves to sharpen the critique against misleading notions of evenly distributed choice within school-choice districts. Facilitated by network and work-net arrangements between institutions and their representatives, the information and processes of choice for type II refugees are categorically different compared to type I refugees or their American peers. Furthermore, driving these differential experiences for type II refugees are a separate network of actors (e.g., Welcome School, IISTL, ESOL programs, etc.) that exists partly for the purposes of facilitating refugee student movement through the SLPS education system in a certain way. The logics governing these parallel processes are driven largely by deficit models of thinking that evaluate refugee students' "readiness" to attend school and be educated alongside their American peers based on narrow criteria of linguistic proficiency and other assimilative processes that overlook the wealth of cultural knowledge refugees bring into their new communities.

So, to understand the emergence of a parallel process of choice and its functionality one must account for form or structure. Assembling the situation map in figure 15 allowed for this to occur and Table 5 below shows supporting statements to back testimonials provided by Yonis, Michel and Amir, to buttress the notion of *circumscribed choice* as a consequence of structural arrangements between institutions. These supporting statements service as further evidence that perceptions of school possibilities for refugee students who make their decision on where to attend high school at the Welcome School are restricted considerably. While the public-facing image of choice in St. Louis and, in general, market-oriented educational reform is one of a “free market,” it is quite clear from the disparity between Type I and Type II refugee participants that it resembles anything of such.

TABLE 5: CODED THEME AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS FOR CIRCUMSCRIBED CHOICE

Coded Theme: Circumscribed Choice	
<u>Participant</u>	<u>Supporting Statements</u>
<b>Zain, Sierra International (transferred out-of-district)</b>	"I remember it was between Rutherford and Sierra. They [Welcome School] tell you the schools and then you will choose and they will talk to you more about how is Rutherford and how is Sierra High School and also Independence-- because there's some immigrants that went to Independence too. So it was Independence, Rutherford, and Sierra. Those were the choices"
<b>Joel, Woodcreek (Independence Transfer)</b>	"They gave me Sierra, Rutherford and Independence and I think Pleasant Hill. I didn't like the choices that they gave me. They only give me four options though."
<b>Kevin, Rutherford STEM</b>	"Basically, I met this this lady who was registering all the kids from Africa. She worked at the Welcome School, that's where all students who are refugees go first. She told us about the public schools. She named all of them and told us everything about the schools. She told us about Sierra International, Rutherford STEM and Independence."
<b>Nabil, Independence (Sierra Transfer)</b>	"They gave me the information about Independence High School and Sierra International High School and the Rutherford STEM."
<b>Mona, Sierra International</b>	"For those who were going to go to a different school they took us to Sierra International and to Rutherford STEM, but I knew I was going to go to Sierra. It was just Sierra and Rutherford that they told us about because we already saw Independence. The Welcome School is a part of Independence."
<b>Michel, Sierra International</b>	"The magnet schools we choose from that I remember were Sierra and Rutherford because they have ESOL programs. We looked at Independence too because the Welcome School is in the same building. Those are the three schools that know that have ESOL programs in St. Louis."
<b>Sam, Independence (Out-of-State Transfer)</b>	"The International Institute sent us to the Welcome School and they [Welcome School] told us they were going to find the right school for us and by default the right school was Independence High School. Because they said no one was accepting people at that time. So this was back in November when we were trying to get into Rutherford STEM and they told us to wait until next semester because they thought it would be too hard for us to start in the middle of the semester. But that doesn't make any sense because that's exactly what we did when they put us at Independence. So why couldn't they just let us in? I was really mad about that."

Table 5 displays supporting statements from distilled interviews that confirm that Type II refugee students hold perceptions and understandings of high school options that are restricted in scope and in range. Nearly all students reported that of the 16 available public schools in SLPS to choose from, only three of them were presented as possible options for them to apply. Those schools include Rutherford STEM, Sierra International Studies, and Independence. Therefore, circumscription of choice is imposed upon Type II refugee students as a result of the actor-network effectuating its policies alongside its allies. Several of the participants, namely Joel and Sam, even expressed frustration over the lack of choices upon reflecting on their experience with school-choice as facilitated by the Welcome School. This is revealing, as it suggests that upon learning of differential access to schools, these students became resentful of the process.

Returning briefly to the theoretical presuppositions of controlled choice, a basic assumption regarding student assignment identified by Alves and Willie (1987) is that “every child’s group should have access to all educational opportunities that a community offers and that no child and no child’s group should be educationally disadvantaged because of personal or situational circumstances” (pg. 12). Yet, this is exactly the case for students who were required to make their decision on which high school to attend at the Welcome School (Type II). From participant narratives, it is evident that Type II refugees are provided a narrower, more circumscribed range of high school options to select from. Furthermore, as you will read in latter narratives, refugees also perceived their own schools to be both inferior to others and less diverse upon reflection.

That being said, I have identified two fundamental ways in which *circumscribed choice* differs from *controlled choice*.

1. In controlled choice, students rank schools from all available options, whereas in circumscribed choice students select from a predetermined list of schools.
2. By funneling students from a target background into predetermined schools, *circumscribed choice* undermines the intended goals of *controlled choice*, namely, equity and diversity.

With that understanding, I define *circumscribed choice* to be the intentional and institutionalized restriction of movement of a targeted student population between schools within a school-choice district in the strategic interest of the institution and its partners. These interests are as multitudinous as they are multifaceted, but often include several plausible justifications, such as financial, pragmatic, managerial, convenient, educational, equity and so on. Furthermore, those affected by the restriction, in this case refugee students, may be aware or unaware that such differential treatment is occurring.

I was able to sit down with an individual at the Welcome School who was familiar with the process and protocols for an informal interview. This person will remain unnamed to protect his/her anonymity. This individual explained that,

Students that are selected to transfer out of the Welcome School into another magnet school must meet that school's criteria to be accepted. That criteria could be attendance requirement, certain GPA and score a minimum proficiency level on the English assessment. They still have to apply, but generally there is an understanding [between the institutions] that they will be accepted. So, we tell them that we think they are ready to transfer to any school that has ESOL programs at the school provided they have space. And there are only three schools in SLPS that provide ESOL services: Sierra International Studies High School, Rutherford STEM, and this one, Independence

High School. It is rare that the [transferring] student's first choice is Independence, however. (Personal Interview, 2020)

When pressed further on why students were not provided with the full range of school-choice options that are theoretically available to all native St. Louis City residents, which include charter schools, the individual told me,

The only way for a student to attend those schools [schools without ESOL services] is if they meet all of the school's admission requirements and one of the following occurs: 1) test out of ESOL services or 2) their parents opt-out of ESOL services. As for charter schools, the International Institute cannot guarantee the provision of ESOL services or any other need unique to our [refugee] students if they enroll there. So, like I said, we have a MOU with the International Institute and part of that is that we are responsible for making sure all refugee students are provided all the educational services they need. (Personal Interview, 2020).

Although this individual's justification for why refugee students might need to attend a transition program at Welcome School is understandable, what remains unclear is the need to circumscribe their choices thereafter. Such circumscription, as you will learn in the next section, has reverberating effects on the narratives regarding the magnet schools in question and may also undermine the intended outcomes of an educational marketplace.

When discussing the ideology of school-choice, an inadvertent slippage seems to occur in academic and political circles when talking about education as a public monopoly (controlled by the State) and education as a natural monopoly, which are largely driven by economic determinants.

In the forty-year educational experiment with quasi-markets, it appears as if the attempt to carve out a middle ground between the two forms results in policy makers being

pinned down somewhere between the motte and the bailey.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, the ability to send one's children to a school that performs at a high academic level is desirable for parents (motte). Yet, on the other, the push for more choice (the bailey) in education or viewing market-lead reforms as a *natural* way to increase academic rigor is dubious—given the preponderance of empirical research that suggests that there is not really any statistically significant gains in academic performance when attending a choice school versus a comprehensive when controlling for important family characteristics.

So, it remains unclear when SLPS should surrender the bailey (i.e., school-choice) in favor of constructing a more equitable educational system based off the inclusive architecture of a rights-based framework instead of the ephemeral whims of the market. The idea that free-markets and consumer preferences somehow reflect the state of nature and, therefore, choice in education is just an extension of that natural state, is a product of an ideological shift towards neoliberalism. If that is indeed the case, then there is nothing *natural* about *circumscribed choice*, as it intentionally strips some consumers of the ability to act on their preferences which makes any objective evaluation of market-driven approaches in education impossible and any empirical claim to their efficacy specious.

Once again, it is not as if a refugee student cannot have an enjoyable and/or rewarding educational experience at one of the high school options provided to them. *Circumscribed choice* does not attempt to distinguish or make value judgements in quality between schools or

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<sup>34</sup> A Motte and Bailey fallacy is a rhetorical move that relies on faulty intuitions to advance an untenable position or opinion (the bailey) by conflating it with one that is less controversial or more readily agreeable and, therefore, easily defended (the motte).

experiences within them. It only describes how structural determinants shape the perceptions of school-choice possibilities for a target population. For newcomers to the U.S. and to school-choice educational marketplaces specifically, it is likely that they may not have enough experience to make cross-school comparisons on their own. Thus, in order to understand the quality of the schools selected, the data were analyzed according to whether student perceptions of what the school offered (i.e., magnet theme) matched their lived educational experiences. This is the next theme to be discussed.

## **Theme II: Magnet-in-Name-Only**

Another theme to emerge from the analyzed interview data highlights the ways in which magnet schools deliver differential educational quality to students enrolled within the same school. Additionally, it prods at the question of how, and in what ways, education at a magnet school in SLPS differs from that at a comprehensive school for refugee students? Therefore, this section attempts to address not only refugee student educational experiences at magnet schools, which is the goal of RQ1, but also to understand how circumscribed choice interacts with magnet school identity.

As I poured over interviews from my participants it seemed appropriate to group participants by school category (e.g., magnet or comprehensive) and by typology for cross case analysis. Since circumscribed choice for Type II participants at the Welcome School led to only two magnet high schools (Sierra International Studies and Rutherford STEM) being presented as possible options, I compared participant narratives across these two schools in terms of their understandings of their respective magnet school themes and the types of coursework they

were able to access. During each interview, I read to the participant each school's specific mission statement which can be found in Appendix D and asked a series of probing questions regarding the delivery of each school's thematic curricula in addition to the extent to which the school achieved their stated mission. For organizational purposes Type II participant narratives for this theme will be introduced by magnet school starting with Sierra International Studies before moving on to Rutherford STEM. Afterwards they will be compared with Merriam and Bao once again.

(Amara) I don't know if Sierra actually had a theme that I know of. But if you are eligible you can take AP classes. Like if you had one subject that you were really good at or you were interested in, you could start taking AP classes in the subject or in that area. So I guess that's one thing, but I don't know if that'd be considered a theme. I don't think it would because many schools have AP courses.

This initial response expresses unfamiliarity with the theme of Sierra International Studies, the magnet school where she worked diligently to become the valedictorian of her class. I asked several permutations of this question before reading her the mission and vision of Sierra and ask her to describe some of those courses. She grins sheepishly and states,

(Amara) International studies, of course. It's in the name. So international courses [long pause]—maybe they had classes that I maybe didn't know about, but I don't know besides world history. A lot of schools have that, so I don't think that it can be considered as a thematic course. I mean—outside of class people had interactions with the international students from other different countries could be considered internationally-focused kind of thing? But a specific class or studies doesn't come to my mind.

I mean most of the classes that I took they were required classes. They were the class that I actually had to take to graduate, but the AP classes or some other classes that I took that weren't required. Also, I wasn't in ESOL classes after sophomore year, so I had more room in my schedule. I mean there were other international students

there that were in ESOL. But other than that, I cannot think of a single class that is internationally focused.

Amara could not identify a single thematically-oriented course at a magnet school which professes to focus on international studies. Furthermore, she communicated that all of the classes she took sans her advanced placement (AP) courses, were required for graduation. This suggests that even if could take coursework that aligns with the purported thematic focus, it's likely that the state-imposed requirements for graduation would interfere with her schedule. Additionally, Amara highlights another interesting aspect of coursework selection within schools. She positions ESOL classes as being an impediment to the selection of optional, more rigorous elective AP courses. Her schedule would allow her the space for these courses, only after her ESOL requirements were satisfied. The prioritizing of English competencies at the expense of accessing selective, thematically shaped coursework is a reoccurring finding in this chapter.

Several other participants seemed to overlook the “studies” component of Sierra International Studies, which historically focused on foreign languages, international business, social studies including geography, and international law which had a strong Model United Nation team. As for foreign languages, at one point in Sierra’s history they boasted several language paths for students including Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Russian and Latin. Yet when speaking to a colleague who has worked at Sierra for several decades, the individual told me that all the courses that make them unique are “long gone” and that they found themselves in an “identity crisis” (personal communication, 2020). Sierra’s identity crisis, in part, may be to blame for widespread refugee student belief that Sierra is a magnet school

simply because of the large number of refugee and immigrant students enrolled there. Michel also came to similar conclusions upon reflecting on his high school career at Sierra.

(Michel) I didn't see any international courses that they have. At Sierra we just took the regular classes. The classes that I was taking at the Welcome School--I was taking at Sierra. So for me, I didn't understand why they call it *international* because I thought we were going to be studying all these languages or different types of history, or geography, that's what I thought. But when I get there, it's just like the Welcome School. We take Math, American History, Government, Science. The only thing is that Sierra has was American students going there too and they have an ESOL program. Also, you don't have to be hanging out with American kids if you don't want to. You can meet people from Africa that speak the same language as you. So that's the only difference I saw.

So, it goes back to what I was saying [referring to when he had to choose a high school at the Welcome School]. All them teachers [at the Welcome School] were telling me that Sierra is a very good school. But, on the other side, when I asked about Independence, it was different. They did not say super positive comments. And I wanted to go to the good school. But when I got to Sierra I was surprised. There wasn't any difference [between the school options] because what I was told about Independence High School was the same thing I was seeing at Sierra. I saw people fighting every day, you know, doing bad stuff. They [American students] smoke in the bathrooms. It is the same kind of stuff they were warning me about at the Welcome School. What they said about Independence High School was happening at Sierra. So, no—there was no difference in classes, no difference in American students, no difference in books or learning materials.

Michel's response indicates that his perception of the type of education he should receive (internationally focused) did not align with his lived experience. Academically speaking, Michel did not take any other language courses as his ESOL class met that state requirement for graduation. But what is striking about Michel's response is not his academic disillusionment, but the dissatisfaction with the learning environment that he was promised in the "good" magnet school.

(Michel) At first, I just thought that maybe this is American culture. Maybe this is what these American kids do. They curse at the teachers. Don't respect the teachers. I remember this one day this one kid was arguing and yelling and made our teacher cry. She just started crying in the middle of class. So back home, children are not allowed to be cursing at teachers—they gonna [sic] whoop your ass. I have never seen anything like that before, like—you'd never see that back home. So, I don't think Sierra is international because we foreigners don't do that.

From Amara and Michel's stories, one can draw the uncomfortable conclusion that Sierra International Studies High School, a magnet school, is functionally indistinguishable from the comprehensive alternative option of Independence High School. Other descriptions of academic and school life that corroborate these accounts can be found in table 6, with specific reference to Fatima and Emmanuel's responses.

TABLE 6: CODED THEME AND OTHER SUPPORTING STATEMENTS FOR MAGNET IN NAME ONLY

Coded Theme: Magnet In Name Only	
Participant	Supporting Statements
Michel, Sierra Int'l	"There wasn't any difference [between the school options], because what I was told about Independence High School was the same thing I was seeing at Sierra. I saw people fighting every day, you know, doing bad stuff. They can smoke in the bathrooms. It is the same kind of stuff they were warning me about at the Welcome School. What they said about Independence High School was happening at Sierra. So no—there was no difference in classes, no difference in American students, no difference in books or learning materials."
Amara, Sierra Int'l	"I mean outside of class people had interaction with the international students from other different countries. Could that be considered international focused kind of thing? But a class a specific class or studies doesn't come to my mind."
Mona, Sierra Int'l	"No, I wouldn't say I had any international courses. We had some foreign language courses. Is that international? We had ESOL classes. I wouldn't say it was very diverse. I don't think there's any school that is very diverse. I remember we had like a culture fair. I feel like that was a good thing that Sierra has. As an international school, doing that culture fair thing was able to help show and teach other students about different cultures, different ethnicities, different dances, and teach us about others basically."
Fatima, Sierra Int'l	"Yeah at Sierra I just took general studies classes, but I mean if I went to Rutherford STEM or to Independence High School it would be the same."
Zain, Sierra Int'l	"I think Rutherford STEM is the same as Sierra because you can do science, technology, and you can take math classes. You can do all those classes at Sierra as well."
Dang, Sierra Int'l	"It's the students. The students make Sierra the International school. The backgrounds where they come from, the language they speak, the ethnicity, that's why makes it an international studies high school."
Emmanuel, Sierra Int'l	"Sierra is an international school. What I mean is to say and that they offer a lot of international languages. I felt like everything was the same across the board other than they had ESL classes as Sierra. But other than that, the schools are all pretty much the same."
Yonas, Rutherford STEM	"At Rutherford, they have majors over there. Like during your junior year you select your major and take like your major classes. So, every day you would take two classes that count towards your major. And in your senior year you take those classes four times a day. A major could be a nursing class—there was sports, sports medicine. I didn't take those. I didn't have a major, but there were things like that."
Kevin, Rutherford STEM	"Well I took a lot of different classes at Rutherford, but I didn't have like a pathway. At Rutherford you can have a major, you know? I wanted to do computer science, but I had to take more English and ESOL classes first. Actually, most of the African students don't have a major. But I wanted to take a physics, the high-level physics, the college AP physics. Unfortunately, I couldn't because I needed more required courses. I actually didn't take any AP courses."

From table 6, one gets the impression that there is not a collective agreement regarding the type of education, STEM-oriented or internationally oriented, one would likely receive attending either of the magnet schools. Similarly, to Amara and Michel, several other students interviewed from Sierra could not articulate the public-facing thematic orientation of Sierra International Studies. Despite SLPS and actor-networks attempting to carefully curate each respective magnet schools' theme, refugee students' experiences do not align with the public representation. Therefore, what recirculates among refugee communities and back into the actor-network itself is not only an adulterated form of that theme, but also an ambiguous one. This is a crucial finding as it suggests that for many Type II refugee students choosing between Sierra, Rutherford STEM or Independence, perceptions of educational opportunities appear to be uniform between schools in addition to perceptions of curricular content as general—despite magnets espousing to deliver a specialized course of study.

SLPS promotes Sierra International Studies as a magnet school and showcases its thematically structured international curricula, in addition to having a competitive, more selective admissions process. Yet, refugees who have graduated from Sierra cannot communicate a unitary vision of its theme that even remotely resembles the public-facing image that is marketed to students and parents. This leads one to speculate as to whether Sierra International Studies can be considered a magnet-in-name-only (MINO). Therefore, it leaves one to speculate as to whether SLPS, and specifically Sierra, is using the influx of refugee students to St. Louis to maintain its image as the international school despite providing limited coursework in this field, whether funding incentives govern their acceptance of refugee students, or perhaps a combination of both. What of Rutherford STEM, the other magnet

school refugees are circumscribed to choose from—are refugees describing similar struggles attaining a STEM-oriented education?

As this emerging theme became more salient, I began to modify my line of inquiry during interviews and member checks to include questions geared at understanding the type of coursework delivered at each of the magnet schools. If you recall, Yonis’s friend told him that Rutherford was a better school because “it was a magnet school, and they do STEM.” Turning to Yonis and Kevin’s experience accessing and attaining the thematically shaped, STEM curriculum at Rutherford, their narratives reveal an even more sinister internal, exclusionary structure.

(Yonis) The school is called Rutherford STEM, so I think science, technology, engineering and math. That is the theme. Like they also have majors over there. During your junior year, you select your major and take your major’s classes. So, every day you would take two classes that count towards your major. And in your senior year you take those classes four times a day. A major could be like a nursing class—there was sports, sports medicine. I didn't take those. And as far as classes go, I took a biology class, a chemistry, math, English, history, art, music and government. I didn't have a major, but there were things like that.”

Yonis differs from participants at Sierra in the sense that he could name the magnet theme of his school and identify the types of STEM-related programmatic pathways. I wanted to understand more on why he did not select a major, so I asked him to elaborate.

(Yonis) If I wanted, maybe I could have chosen a major. But my mom died my junior year and after that I did not do so well in school. That is why. But my friend was actually smart. He finished all his English classes quick and did not have to take ESOL. If other refugee students were like him and be a little bit more serious, they could have done it as well.

Maybe I shouldn’t say they were not serious. Even if they are serious, learning a new language is hard. I know like four languages because when I was trying to come to

America, we have to skip from one country to another country and then to America. So we have to learn multiple languages and then learn English. So, it's hard so that is why we take ESOL classes.

This is an important subtext to understanding the conclusion of Yonis's narrative. Similar to Sierra, it can be determined that in order to be fully enrolled in a particular major's pathway, a refugee must first have completed all language proficiency requirements or as Yonis states, "finish all English/ESOL classes." That is not to say that a refugee student couldn't perhaps sample a few courses from a major of interest, as with the case of Kevin. But once again, the ability to declare a STEM major at Rutherford is dependent on the English language ability of the student. I ask Yonis if he could perhaps share with me his estimates on how many refugee students were like his friend and were able to have a major.

(Yonis) I can say this because I know almost all the refugees that went there. I would say almost none of them had majors from the people that I know--almost none of them. Maybe 80-90% of the people I know, they didn't have a major because they had to finish the English classes and the English is hard, I guess. So, there are like two schools almost. A regular school and a STEM school. And most of us Africans we would go to the regular school and the African Americans they get the STEM school.

I would like to be very clear about this next finding. It is likely that even though Rutherford STEM positions itself as a selective enrollment, STEM magnet school, it is probable that admitted refugee students will still not be able to fully access the types of STEM opportunities available to other, non-ESOL students in attendance. Therefore, school choice, as operationalized in the context of both Sierra and Rutherford, not only fails to deliver on its promises of providing a specific type of thematic education, but also perpetuates intra-school

inequalities for refugee and ESOL students. Therefore, such practices can only be considered as institutionalized discrimination against the refugee and ESOL student population.

Kevin, the only other participant who attended Rutherford STEM, further corroborates this notion of intra-school inequalities. Like Yonis, I asked him to first identify Rutherford's theme, then share with me some of the educational opportunities there.

(Kevin) You see Rutherford—it's a STEM school so it's usually focused on math, science, and technology—engineering, but, Sierra, I never knew what their focus was and neither for Independence. So that was one piece of information that I really wanted to know when I came here [to Rutherford]. But unfortunately, I didn't ask or they [the Welcome school] didn't tell me.

I took a lot of different classes at Rutherford, but I didn't have like a pathway. At Rutherford you can have a major, you know? I wanted to do computer science, but I had to take more English and ESOL classes first. Actually, most of the African students don't have a major. But I wanted to take a physics, the high-level physics, the college AP physics. Unfortunately, I couldn't because I needed more required courses. I actually didn't take any AP courses.

These narratives suggest that regardless of attending one of the two possible magnet schools or the default comprehensive school, the differences of what type of education they will be receiving at any given school is negligible. This is somewhat paradoxical, given that market-mechanisms in education typically promote school specialization and differentiation. The question then becomes, how does circumscribed choice influence these perceptions and what are the experiences of refugee students who selected a school outside of the three options presented by the Welcome School? For that we must return to the cases of Merriam and Bao who were both categorized as Type I and made their decision to attend Northview

Career Academy and Edgewater ROTC, respectively, absent of the influence of the Welcome School.

Merriam and Bao share similarities when it comes to accessing and attaining the thematically shaped educational curricula of their respective magnet schools. Each demonstrated a firm understanding of their school's magnet identity, and both articulated clearly how the magnet school delivered their thematic content to all students enrolled. Recall that Merriam explicitly stated that she did not want to go to a school where "all the Africans go." So, when I pressed Merriam on her thought process for choosing Northview Career Academy she explained,

(Merriam) So then I discover the Career Academy and I went for a tour there and I loved the campus itself. It was, it was this beautiful glass building. I could see myself through the glass and I was like, that's the one. And I wanted to go somewhere where that when I get out, I don't necessarily have to go to college if I can get a job right away and that's what they do there.

So, I enrolled there because they have a pathway program. You can take your regular classes to graduate, but then you also have a pathway. For example, you can decide to do culinary arts or multimedia or rehabilitation or a certified nursing assistant program. I wanted to do the certified nursing assistant pathway because remember at the time I was going to be in the medical field and make money. That was the one that I'm going for. And I did it. I did my pathway. I took my certified nursing assistant test. Finished my internship, because you had to do an internship in your pathway, and I got my license. So as soon as I got my license and before I went to college, I applied to a nursing home. I worked a little bit at the nursing home and got me some cash and then move away to college with it.

Public representations promulgated by SLPS showcase Northview Career Academy as a school that "provides students with access to a traditional academic program, as well as in-depth exposure in our career and technical program" (slpsmagnetschools.org). This description

closely matches that of Merriam's who was able access and attain Northview's pathway programs and secure her CNA license.

As for Bao, recall that he attended Edgewater ROTC, a "military school with a strong emphasis on leadership development and academic achievement" (ibid). Bao and I talked at great length about all the courses he took at Edgewater. In his recount, he discusses the general classes that every student in Missouri must take in order to graduate. However, he also described how Edgewater was unique in their curricula stating,

(Bao) Everyone had to take every year—one class that's just Navy and ROTC. It was just about the military discipline and values and history of the naval academy. There was just one class every year you had to take that was military themed. Everyone has to take it.

When I asked Bao to elaborate on what type of content that each class taught and what a typical day looked like at Edgewater ROTC, he told me,

(Bao) When you first arrive, you are a cadet and you start by following, you know? They teach you how to press your suit and shine your shoes. That builds discipline. They also teach you about foreign military. Then, after a while, you start leading the classes when you get to higher grade level. So leadership is a big part of it too. So, it depends on your grades and level of discipline, but you can earn different ranks. So, every morning we had to go to gym, and we had a kind of military march. We have the student commanders and the Lieutenant commanders and stuff, and you have two leaders for freshmen, two leaders for sophomore, and two for juniors when you are a senior. So, I was the leader of the sophomores when I was a senior there.

Merriam and Bao's experiences as Type I participants are unique compared to other refugees who did not select a magnet high school from the options presented to them at the Welcome School. The type of education that they received closely resembled the type of education advertised to them. This suggests that the structure that circumscribes refugee

choice may also be the structure that excludes them from accessing curricula that adheres to the thematic magnet foci. Where Merriam's and Bao's educational experiences align with the public-facing representation of the school, students attending Sierra International Studies and Rutherford STEM have disparate and often conflicting understandings of the school's theme and many reported being unable to access specialized pathways due to lack of English proficiency. Either way, for the majority of Type II refugee students, Sierra and Rutherford operate as magnet schools in name only.

Although the Welcome School may not have intended that their transitioning refugee student population would experience their new schools in this manner, the actor-network itself is ill-designed to correct for the lack of equal educational opportunities when they circumscribe choice. It is only when a decision is made outside of the Welcome School's scope of influence that students are able to perceive a wider range of school-choice possibilities, and once again, only if they meet certain admissions requirements. Therefore, MINOs are not some regrettable irregularity of the school-choice system in SLPS but may be the direct consequence of circumscribed choice—an actor-network facilitated process that funnels refugee students into strategically selected schools thereby re/shaping the identity of those schools who are now tasked with administering prescriptive language programs for its burgeoning ESOL population.

### **Theme III: Identity and Discrimination**

This section discussed the impact of school culture on identity, as well as analyzes several forms of discrimination experienced by refugee participants as they negotiated their

cultural identities within the school and classroom environment. Where possible, connections to the previous two themes, circumscribed choice and magnet-in-name-only, will be explored to ascertain the extent to which they impact identity negotiation which is considered a performative process “through which people strike a balance between achieving their interaction goals and satisfying their identity-related goals” (Swann & Bosson, 2008, pp. 448-449).

Identity negotiation can be understood by examining the ensuing responses of refugee students to pressures of integration within the host school. Immediate and visceral examples of identity negotiation can typically be found in refugees’ experiences with discrimination. For example, Sierra International Studies High School’s counternarrative as the *African school* or *refugee school*, may have inadvertently created the discriminatory conditions that led to several refugee participants reporting acts of self-segregation, or avoidance of/by the dominant group. These acts of avoidance, for some participants, provided the opportunity to escape the social pressures of integration by creating a foreigner community within the magnet school that facilitates identity preservation.

As a point of departure, I begin by assuming that integration is a desirable goal for a school, a community, and a society. However, a few clarifying remarks regarding the competing problematizations of integration theory are appropriate. There is an unfortunate dichotomization that occurs when problematizing integration as a societal goal or that of individual, the smallest unit that can then be aggregated, theoretically, to level of society (Schinkel, 2018). The divergence between the two is in the form of measurement and is most easily distinguished in the public discourse between the United States and its northern

neighbor, Canada. Dominant cultural attitudes have historically regarded the U.S. as a melting pot, whereas Canada is often referred to as cultural mosaic. While the latter emphasizes integration as a process that is measured structurally at the system level and demands little in terms of cultural conformity, the former views integration as a state of being and necessarily positions it as primarily a problem for certain individuals, namely migrants, immigrants and refugees (Schinkel, 2018). As a result, any deviation from full integration in the U.S., an idealized state of being that may never be fully achievable in the first place, frames immigrants and refugees as socially maladjusted until they effectively stop being immigrants or refugees. This shift from integration as a feature of society to integration as a feature of an individual is a deficit model that as Schinkel (2018) put it, leads to “some people being evaluated in terms of their ‘integration’ while others are not” (p. 14).

Though the salad bowl metaphor is slowly replacing that of the melting pot, such descriptions characterize the traditional one-way view of integration, wherein outsider groups are asked to assimilate into the dominant group. This one-way view of integration in the U.S., ossified by the current rhetorical political obsession over real and imaginary borders, “presents a contradictory picture of foreigners...as conceived of as physically within our borders yet not within our people, necessary but threatening to the integrity of the nation (Cisneros, 2011, p. 33). Integration, then, is transformed and reconceptualized as the end result of a lengthy process that seeks to restructure the relational social dynamics between groups to promote social cohesion and through individual and group performances of what it means to be American (Cisneros, 2011; Klarenbeek, 2019). If social cohesion operates on a continuum (Jenson, 1998), then integration for refugees is the result of consensual (to say nothing of

normative) individual responses to processes of identity preservation (resistance), assimilation (cultural loss), and acculturation (cultural adaptation/adjustment) (Berry, 2008). Thus, integration by extension is also on a continuum, wherein some individuals are “more integrated” or “less integrated” than others (Schinkel, 2018). A deficit framing that works to only privilege those considered to be a part of the ingroup. This view of integration, of course, is not without detractors, some of whom have argued that the rhetoric of integration acts a façade for the continuation of practices geared towards assimilation, acculturation and cultural imperialism (Bowskill, Lyons and Coyle, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyze participant narratives along the lines of cultural imperialism. Instead, I wish to focus on exploring the intersection of school-choice experiences and identity negotiation.

Schools are typically seen as an extension of the community and, therefore, play a role in mediating social integration towards an end state where, “there are no social boundaries between ‘legitimate members’ and ‘non-legitimate members’, or outsiders” (Klarenbeek, 2019, p. 2). Boundary theory is essential to understanding identity and group dynamics that either facilitate belonging or conversely, isolation within schools. There are many terms that participants used to describe their experiences and their position in relation to social constructed boundaries that you will come across the narratives below. These are polar terms and include: insider vs. outsider, us vs. them, American vs. non-American, native vs. foreigner, and (Black) African vs. (Black) American. These terms correspond to Klarenbeek’s (2019) encompassing terminology of legitimate members vs non-legitimate members, which is useful when analyzing participants’ experiences with identity negotiation and discrimination.

Furthermore, ethnic identity and cultural identity are distinct terms that were often conflated by participants in this study. Ethnic Identity is the self-identified membership to a specific ethnic group and is largely driven by self-conceptions of a common genealogy or ancestry. Cultural identity often unites ethnic identities through overlapping histories, shared linguistic, religious, or behavioral practices, among several other factors. Feeling connected to one's culture and having a strong sense of identity is extremely important for refugees, who have often spent most of their lives outside of their countries-of-origin (UNHCR, 2018). Other forms of identity, such as gender, religious, disability, and so on did not naturally emerge during the interview process, and therefore, will not be examined from that perspective.

Finally, the following sections analyze participants' perceptions of how interactions with some American classmates have impacted their cultural identities and describes several types of discrimination that they experience as they engaged with the certain members of the dominant group. As a reminder, narrative inquiry tends to elicit stories that participants believe to have had the most impact or are the most memorable, especially when discussing emotionally scarring topics such as discrimination. Participants in this study would often speak in generalizations regarding their negative interactions with some of their American schoolmates, thereby essentializing how a typical American behaves in the process. However, several participants also described having congenial relationships with American students as well. Therefore, any impressions of essentialization when reading participant narratives of their experiences with discrimination is unintentional.

### **Identity Negotiation**

As discussed in theme II, Sierra International Studies' public-facing narrative as a foreign language and international relations magnet school was debated by commonly held perceptions of it being a high school for Africans and/or refugees. Several participants discussed how attending a school with a large composition of refugees impacted their opportunities to socialize with their American peers. In other words, by absorbing large numbers of refugee students in their student population, the pressures of social integration within the school may have been attenuated. In fact, several participants stated that they were able to retain their identities despite the pressures of assimilation, acculturation and/or integration. Cultural and ethnic Identity often came up when interviewing participants who graduated from Sierra International Studies. Michel told me his thoughts on the connection between school and identity stating,

(Michel) I think some of the other African refugees have lost their identity. I can't say for sure because I don't know all of them. But I know some choose friends that are Americans to hang out with at their schools, and then later on they act like the Americans. But to me, I didn't feel like I was losing my identity because I chose to hang out with all my African people at Sierra.

The counter-narrative of Sierra as an African/refugee school, which was explored in theme II, yields interesting insights into how refugee students use the structure of school-choice in order to preserve their identity. For some refugee students or their parents, it may be that decisions to attend Sierra are driven largely by the desire to retain essential aspects of their cultural heritage. That is not to say that other crucial outcomes of education, such as social mobility and democratic equality (Labraree, 1997), are not important to them. Rather, the counter-narrative that reshapes the image of Sierra as the African or refugee school, may

also be serving the needs of the refugee population in a way that differs from its original magnet focus, and offers refugee families something that would have been otherwise overlooked in the educational marketplace, identity preservation. Of course, belying the connection between Sierra and identity preservation may be the effect of circumscribed choice which imposes identity preservation instead of presenting integration as an equally desirable option.

Still, it is plausible that refugee communities are using Sierra as a way to retain or preserve their unique ethnic and cultural identities. Yet, this may come at the cost of social integration and inclusion within the daily academic and social affairs of school life. Emmanuel, who still keeps in touch with all of his soccer friends despite attending and graduating from a university in another city, explains.

(Emmanuel) I hate to say it, but as a foreigner I honestly can't say I made any American friends at Sierra. That being said, I kind of feel like going to Sierra and meeting my soccer guys who are also African still kept me in tune with who I am and my culture. I didn't have to change so much to fit in or become more American because I already had people I fit in with. At least I didn't have to change much compared to all the people who went to different schools, for example, Independence. I know a lot of people who went there, and they had to change so much to fit in at Independence. Most of them kind of lose themselves a little bit.

There are so many cases where people who went into a school like Independence got caught up in something and ended up in jail or ended up on the streets really. And then you compare that to me and my friends who went to Sierra, we stick together. We didn't have to try to fit in anywhere. So, compared to other people who didn't have the opportunity to meet people who look like them, or people who had similar experiences as them—maybe they were forced to adapt to the American way too fast. So, I saw myself as different [from Americans] and I should accept my differences. But those other people, they had to change and adapt the American culture and I feel like it led those people the wrong way.

It cannot be assumed that Emmanuel's experience failing to establish friendships with American students is the result of prejudice and discrimination, which will be examined later on in this section. Reflecting on high school interactions at Sierra, Emmanuel states that he "saw himself as different" and he should "accept his differences." This suggests that attempts were made to integrate into the dominant, receiving community and that those experiences did not result in the establishment of meaningful friendships with Americans. Yet, his failure to befriend American classmates may also be partially explained by easy access and acceptance into a large African student population that provided the space necessary for him to retain his Liberian heritage while attending Sierra. If feeling accepted and loved is the driving force behind integration, then it makes sense that Emmanuel did not feel the need to negotiate his cultural identity to fit in with the American's because he already felt a sense of belonging among his African peers—many of whom were quite diverse in terms of ethnic and cultural identities. He describes the presence of Africans in Sierra, along with a shared interest in playing soccer, that helped create the conditions to feel comfortable regarding their ethnic and cultural differences. This is perhaps one of the unintended surprises of circumscribed choice in St. Louis.

Interestingly, Emmanuel then evaluates his experience as it relates to identity by comparing it against other refugees who elected to attend different schools, namely Independence. He claims to know of other refugees who lost themselves due to adapting to the "American way too fast<sup>35</sup>" which led to detrimental ends. He posits a possible reason he and his

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<sup>35</sup> This is one example of a participant essentializing Americans/the dominant group when simply referring to some students at a particular school.

friends did not follow similarly is that they stuck together and in doing so were able to avoid a similar fate. From Emmanuel's reflections, one can infer that the process of integration into the dominant group may come with certain risky consequences in the context of St. Louis. Consequences that he would rather avoid altogether. Therefore, for Emmanuel, he likely experienced fewer opportunities to negotiate his identity with the insider group and instead passively resisted integration through affiliation with the outgroup. Yet, feeling a sense of belonging while also remaining apart of the outgroup is somewhat paradoxical. It seems that it can only be explained when the outgroup itself, which in this case is the foreigner student body represents a sizeable portion of the student population.

Of course, there are several opportunities within schools for social interactions to occur between the in-group and the out-group. Within the American public education system that typically promotes standardization and conformity, several participants expressed that Sierra celebrated cultural and individual uniqueness. Mona describes how Sierra was able to accomplish this.

(Mona) I remember every year we had a culture fair. I feel like that was a good thing that Sierra has as an international school. By putting on that culture fair, students were able to help teach other students about different cultures, different ethnicities, different dances, things like that. We would show why we dress a certain way and how others would dress, how they would dance, and what they would eat. It was like a display of all the different countries represented in Sierra. So yeah, I feel like that helped show more of us to the Americans. To us foreigners—who are like from different places and stuff like that—it felt nice to show it and wear those types of outfits again.

There is a large body of literature that would critique Mona's assessment of the benefits of hosting a cultural fair describing the once-a-year celebration as superficial at best. Yet, Mona's response suggests that such events were special times for refugee students seeking to

awaken their cultural heritage by practicing their diverse customs in their new *home*. Apart from the cultural fair, Mona also describes feeling a sense of belonging that is broader than Emmanuel's and extends to relationships with Americans as well.

(Mona) I was able to hang out with everybody. Everybody was friendly to me and I was friendly to everybody. I would hang with like literally everybody during lunchtime during like that five minutes break between classes, I would interact with others walking down the hallways—with different groups of people. I was able to be with, you know, the Americans, and the foreign friends of mine, stuff like that.

But, going to Sierra really didn't change the fact that I'm African or black, African female, anything like that. I know who I was at the end of the day, I was able to go to school knowing that I am Mona. I feel like I was able to show people who I am going to school, you know? So, for me personally, they [Americans] treated me well because they know I'm a person that will defend myself. I wouldn't let anyone try to bully me or anything like that. So, they knew better. They knew not to try to talk about me in a bad way.

Combined with the unintended transition from being known as Sierra International Studies High School to Sierra International Students High School, school-choice and, more specifically, circumscribed choice—which led to an increase in the refugee student population of Sierra—may have created the conditions for some refugees to feel accepted and included in school—at least among their own.

Of course, this is not without its own set of assumptions and trade-offs. In today's political climate, public discourse regarding immigration and processes of marginalization have also led to profound social exclusion for some migrants. Several participants reported that they were only able to “feel comfortable” when they were among their “own people.” Therefore, the connection between the actor-network that circumscribes choice may also be responsible for the patterns of self-segregation, or avoidance that will be explored later in this theme. For

now, we will return to the connections between identity negotiation and magnet schools using Sierra's cultural fair a backdrop.

(Fatima) So the culture fair kind of brings everyone together as a school. I feel like that had a really big impact and I was always part of it. That's actually how I became popular and known was from that. Because I wore my cultures clothes, which I normally don't wear and danced. So, when I first started to become more popular at Sierra, there were some Somali girls that were like, "Oh my God, look at her like she thinks she's better than us," or they will call me the S word. Can I curse? [*I give Fatima approval*] They called me a slut because I changed my style and the way I dressed was more American and I started becoming more popular. I started having more of a sense of style and everything. So they would judge me. Basically, all the foreigners were judging me before they got to know me and then they were telling me later like, "Yeah we thought you were bitchy or like we thought you were snobby because everyone knows you. You are that popular girl that the Americans loved—the black Americans."

But it was because of the way I was dressing. And in high school that's where you like come into yourself. So for me, my sense of style was also changing to like fit in. So other foreign people will like judge me and at the same time more of the Americans were also welcoming me because I was the pretty foreign girl who knew how to dress. I mean I was told everyone loved me because I was pretty, which kind of made me insecure too because it was like—how would they treat me if I wasn't wearing makeup? You know? Would they still even like me? And I didn't like that because I think everyone is pretty, but it was just that they're [other foreigners] just not as outgoing as I am. So, it's like they were more reserved because they were still foreigners that were just starting off in high school. So, after I became popular, I was communicating both with the Americans and with my foreigners, so I was well-known in both circles.

I would like to state at the outset that Fatima's experience in Sierra is the exception, not the rule. In her participant profile, I highlighted the fact that she was Sierra's first African prom queen—an honorific that she requested that I add to her short biography. This gives the reader not only insight into her personality, but also a proxy to individually assess her popularity in high school. Yet, from Fatima's narrative emerges several alarming issues within the school culture of that magnet school. Firstly, an us-vs-them mentality seems to be at the core of what

is driving the social/relational dynamics of Sierra. Fatima's experience is similar to that of Michel's and Emmanuel's in that regard.

Where her experience diverges from several other accounts is in her ability to oscillate between her foreigner friends and her American ones. She negotiates her in-group status with the Americans through the appropriation of a sense of fashion that is culturally distinct from her Somali heritage and, also, because of her gregarious personality. By rationalizing her in-group status in this way, she seems to overlook the length of time she has spent exposed to American culture, integrating at her own pace. As a reminder, Fatima relocated to the United States in the fifth grade and it seems that she no longer considers herself a "foreigner" as evidenced by the statement "they were still foreigners that were just starting off high school." She has spent longer within the American education system than Type II refugees and that experience, in addition to her English language level, has better equipped her to interact with American students. Yet in the interview, it must be noted that Fatima stated that she identifies as East African. Thus, Fatima's experience with identity negotiation resulted in purposeful cultural adaptation so that she can feel accepted by both groups while still retaining a sense of her Somali identity.

When juxtaposing Fatima's experience with Emmanuel's, one can draw the conclusion that she was more "integrated" than he was, while neither fully felt accepted by American students at Sierra. Yet both of their experiences are examples of one-way integration wherein non-legitimate members are asked to reconcile or relinquish portions of their identity so that they conferred membership into the legitimate group. A one-way view of integration is insufficient for achieving full membership because, as Klarenbeek (2019) notes, it

“disproportionally emphasizes the responsibility of ‘people with a migration background’ and underestimates the role of the receiving society” (p.1). Emmanuel when asked to elaborate on some of his interactions with Americans and why he felt he was not able to make any American friends, shared similar experiences that can be described as one-way.

(Emmanuel) I mean I tried to talk with them [Americans]. I try to tell them, like "yeah, we're African, but we do the same things you do. You stay after school. I stay after school. You play sports. I play sports. Things did start to change a little bit, but only when I started to open up a little bit. It was me. I had to open up. But as a foreigner, I feel like I shouldn't always be the one who should start the conversation since I am new and I don't even speak the language. I feel like the Americans should have opened up to me a little bit as well.

And it was really because I ran track and a lot of Americans run track. I ran track to stay in shape for soccer and that's when I started interacting with the Black Americans. Like our soccer team was all foreigners so I didn't get much opportunity there. So with track I had more exposure and I think it helped them too because it kind of opened up their eyes to see who we really are. We are just alike and there is no need to have that tension between us. So that was just—it was a realization you know? Because you would think that somebody who looks just like you, has the same skin as you, won't to say anything racists towards you or discriminate towards you. But it happened all the time.

To recap, Identity can be shaped relationally, by associations with specific group members and also through processes of social closure. Jenkins (2008) claims that “identity works first and foremost because it has capacity to exclude” (p. 23). These interactions effect how refugees perceive their educational environments. Recall the case of Amir wherein he explained how his lack of community and outsider status in St. Louis compels him to return to his home country of Ethiopia.

(Amir) As someone who grew up in a community not having to deal with being discriminated against, like, having small interactions have a bigger impact. When I was home, I was like more free than when I'm here. Here like you have to analyze every interaction we have with people-- if it is genuine or not. Back home, you don't have

these kind of thoughts. And then even when people smile at you in the U.S. You think, okay, why are they smiling? Like you have to question every little interaction.

For Amir and other refugee students like him, quotidian actions and interactions undergo an intensification of scrutiny as they negotiate their identity within American school and classroom environments. Refugees, whose lack of American performativity, further confirms their immigrant and foreigner status and is often used to buttress boundaries of exclusion. Exclusion results in the social (re)construction of boundaries that perpetuate ingroup and outgroup dynamics as group members, who are able to distinguish each other through verbal and nonverbal cues, then perform group membership through imitative forms of boundary building. One of these forms of boundary building is through acts of discrimination. Therefore, the next section discusses several forms of discrimination experienced by refugee students.

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination is a key indicator that processes of social integration are incomplete. The lived and temporal, experiences of young refugees with discrimination continues to remain relevant not only when they enter their new host communities, but also their new schools and classrooms. This section includes refugee accounts of detailed moments of discrimination, specifically instances of bullying, within urban schools. The subtle shades of discrimination that are often encountered in urban schools differs greatly than the textbook definition of traditional discrimination, which are generally intentional and explicit (e.g., White individuals overtly acting on negative associations and/or stereotypes of non-Whites). Yet this dominant-subordinate framework, “does not adequately incorporate the experiences of present-day

urban students” (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004, p. 423). Therefore, a more nuanced definition of discrimination is warranted to capture the complexities of refugee experiences not exclusively along racial lines, but also accounting for the ethnic, cultural, national origin, and linguistic bigotry that occurs in urban schools.

When skin color is no longer the primary way of identifying who is a part of the ingroup and who is not, distinction by ethnicity, culture and accent seems to be a more noticeable determinant. Lee (2015) refers to this as *neo-racism* which is discrimination “on the basis of culture and national order” and states that, “neo-racism justifies discrimination on the basis of cultural difference or national origin rather than by physical characteristics alone and appeals to “natural” tendencies to preserve group cultural identity—in this case the dominant group” (p. 4). Participant narratives will therefore be analyzed by this broader, more encapsulating definition regarding school-based experiences with subtle forms of neo-racism discrimination. Amir succinctly summarizes the characteristics that determine who is a part of the ingroup in Sierra and who is not.

(Amir) If you grew up in St. Louis and you kind of speak like them [Black Americans] or have a similar accent, they care more about that. I mean the majority of the students [at Sierra] were black. They didn't care about your skin color as much. They care more about like your cultural background and like the way you speak and the way you look. Like if you speak in a different way than them, even though you're black, they will still make fun of you. They would call you like "that African student". They do it right in front of you even though they know your name, they still call you that African student. So, like they kind of give you names that can isolate you and make you think, okay I just really shouldn't care. I mean at first, I made an effort of being friendly but after a couple of months of being treated that way I kind of knew where I belonged. So, I just spent my time with my African friends who are like the same background and I just found my own clique too.

Subtle forms of discrimination, described as “a set of unconscious beliefs and associations that affect the attitudes and behaviors of members of the ingroup” (Blank, Dabady, & Citro, 2004, p. 59), are often experienced in several aspects of school life. These unconscious beliefs contribute to a school’s culture regarding inclusivity and acceptance of refugees and refugees’ acceptance of and inclusion with various groups of Americans. Kevin, who attended Rutherford STEM confirms that although he couldn’t recall an overt encounter with racism, he does remember instances wherein his Black schoolmates communicated a type of stereotypic thinking that made him feel culturally discriminated against.

(Kevin) Well it didn't always but most of the time, whenever you crossed the hallway around the black kids you just feel that they're saying something bad about Africa. One time someone asked me if I spoke African. It's like saying do you speak United States of American. This just kind of sounded a little bit like a stereotype. But there's not much racism there. I mean most of the students were black.

Experiences with cultural discrimination are important to include because they are not typically captured in traditional critical race studies on discrimination in education, which often analyze White/Black relational dynamics. That being said, it is important to remind the reader of my history witnessing several forms of cultural discrimination as a former teacher in SLPS and my positionality as a researcher. When teaching previously at Sierra, I often overheard hurtful remarks made by Black American students toward my students from refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, as a researcher, I feel it’s important to stay true to the data regarding participants’ reflections on their experiences with discrimination. Rosenbloom and Way (2004) remind us that, “to understand variations in students’ experiences of discrimination, we need to not only understand the act of discrimination but also understand

how students' construction of discrimination interacts with ethnic/racial categories, stereotypes of these categories, and experiences that are indirectly related to particular ethnic/racial categories" (p. 425).

Within a country such as the U.S. that has a renewed focus and fervor for addressing increasing racial injustices—at least among a sizeable segment of the population—it's important to view discrimination between racial minorities as a subsystem enmeshed within a larger system of structural racism and oppression. Therefore, acts of discrimination in schools (e.g., bullying, verbal abuse, etc.) directed towards refugee participants by Black American students cannot be adequately understood without also acknowledging that underlying processes and mechanisms that drive racial stratification between White Americans and other groups. One of these systems is racial capitalism wherein socio-economic interactions between White and non-White peoples are mediated by or depend upon unequal relations between groups. In the context of urban areas, we see these inequalities manifested as intergenerational poverty and labor income disparities, disparities in education and healthcare access, affordable housing, among several other factors. The desire to be a part of the dominant White group has led some Black immigrants to distance themselves from Black Americans citing concern for downward mobility (Waters, 1999; Imoagene, 2015). Although the types of discrimination described by several participants can be categorized as intraracial (e.g., Black Americans discriminating against Black refugees), critical race theorist would not "dismiss the sustained role of Whites in the racialization of systems" (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew and Freeman, 2010, p. 446). However, for the purposes of this section, I would like to reiterate that the data collected were on the perceptions of discrimination as told by refugee

participants. No American participants narratives were captured that thus limits the extent to which intraracial discrimination can be objectively communicated.

Intraracial bullying on the basis of physical characteristics such as skin-tone and bone structure and/or immaterial characteristics such as economic status or linguistic ability is a form of discrimination that has been well documented (Tatum, 2003; McBrien, 2005; Smith & Jones, 2011). Thus, intraracial discrimination within urban educational contexts is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Refugee families are typically concentrated within urban contexts, in neighborhoods with whom they share similar socio-economic statuses, and attend urban public school (Bartlett et al., 2017; Ottaviano and Peri, 2013; Tselios et al., 2015).

Discrimination, for them, must also be scrutinized as a consequence of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, in order to understand neo-racism, I decided to organize the participant accounts of discrimination into categories and sub-categories, which made it easier to analyze. The focus of the next subsections is to examine how both overt and subtle forms of cultural discrimination against refugees, precipitate identity negotiation and the maintenance of preestablished boundary formations.

### **Verbal Cultural Antagonism**

Discrimination can be verbal and nonverbal. Several participants reported their school environments as hostile wherein they were the recipient of racialized epithets or outright vulgarities. Nearly all of those interviewed (14 out of 16) described experiencing or witnessing verbal discrimination regularly. Experiences with antagonism occurred both with student peers and with staff/faculty within the school in which participants attended. Additionally, Black

refugee participants recalled vivid moments of direct discrimination, while a few non-Black participants reported indirect experiences. Interestingly, the two Syrian participants in the sample did not report experiencing any form of discrimination directly despite the hostility toward Arab and Muslims that was apparent in the broader U.S. context at the time. This section includes accounts of instances where participants were the recipient of verbal antagonism based largely upon their cultural background.

“Verbal antagonism includes casual racial slurs and disparaging racial comments either in or out of the target’s presence. Together with nonverbal expressions of antagonism, they can create a hostile environment in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods” (Blank, Dabady, & Citro, 2004, pg. 56). Although narrative inquiry typically admonishes censoring participant responses, it is my judgement that there needs to be a delicate balance between verbatim accounts of refugee experiences with verbal antagonisms, which captures their emotion and responses, and remaining sensitive to the possibility that the voices of those antagonizing might also be amplified in the process of retelling refugee stories. Therefore, I have decided to select strategic and singular participant narratives that illustrate the variation of discrimination faced within urban schools in SLPS. For example, a common form of discrimination that several participants described was regarding bodily hygiene. Yet only one of these narratives will be included in an effort to avoid excessive recounts of this particular type of discrimination. Additionally, if it was a direct participant experience with discrimination as opposed to overhearing or witnessing these harmful acts, I have removed their names as an added precaution.

### ***Student-to-Student Verbal Antagonism***

The host communities' understandings of historical global events play a role in shaping their stereotypic thinking regarding peoples from certain regions of the world. Education in general and classrooms specifically, then become the arenas in which the (mis)teaching of historical events can inadvertently promote othering encounters for students from culturally distinct backgrounds. One participant described the moment when she first heard the word terrorist.

(Participant) I remember being called a terrorist in two separate incidents. My first time, I didn't know what the word was, I just went along with it and laughed because it was from this guy who was my classmate and I thought we were friends. He's said something in class and I laughed, and he said turned to me and said, "Shut up you terrorist." I don't know why he said that, and I didn't know what the word was. I just laughed and I was like, "okay." And then later, as I got educated, I heard the word again. I was called a terrorist by a black American and then that time I reacted. I'm like, "Why would you call me that?" He said he was "just joking." I told him that's not funny and I didn't like how he made me feel. And that's when like we were learning about 9/11 and everything that had happened and all that. I'm not a terrorist just because I dress differently. That doesn't make me a terrorist. I don't even kill bugs first of all.

This participant describes what is commonly referred to as microaggressions, derogatory slurs or petty name calling that is the result of a larger historical event, in this case the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Such interactions have cultural and racialized undertones. They can sometimes be used in jest, as in this case, but are by no means less harmful to the recipient. Although any person who commits an act of terror can be described as a terrorist, the particular context that the word was used confirms that it was meant to be ethnically disparaging. Imoagene (2015) quoting Croom (2011) states that, "the purpose of using a slur is to increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among the interlocutors in the specific conversational context or among the groups to which they belong more generally (p.

177). This highlights the need for classroom practices that unpack terminology sensitively and deconstruct tensions that can develop when learning about events that reshape the global community and have lasting effects. Perceptions of who belongs to which cultural groups based on attire, as in this case, solidify the boundaries that perpetuate stereotypical thinking regarding those group members. It is difficult for refugee students to defend themselves in their new environments when they are still learning the lingua-franca, which in the context of the United States is by default, English.

(Dang) Some of them [Americans] were nice, others were not. Sometimes people can be racist, you know, it just, it just a person personally. It's not the whole of American students. Like I remember, I think my junior year that's when the Ebola outbreak happened. One of the Americans made fun of the Africans about the Ebola. And It bothers me, you know, that kind of stuff. But my English is not that good so I can't even like stand up for people.

Dang describes not having the linguistic confidence to be able to combat stereotypic thinking among his American classmates. This not only has consequences for classroom level dynamics, but also impact the extent to which exposure to other cultures is shut down in the process. One can infer that Dang also seems to hold personal prejudices against Black Americans by referring negatively to Black “culture” and lionizing predominately White schools. Although he wasn’t the recipient of disparaging remarks himself, he also did not wish to associate with Black American students thus leaving his biases intact. Although Dang did not feel like he had command of English to stand up for his African peers, another participant reported attempting to correct misconceptions of their culture. After repeated experience with disparaging remarks, one participant decided that efforts to correct American schoolmates was futile, and instead opted to conceal their cultural background entirely.

(Participant) I don't know the exact words, but it was like a stereotype. Sometimes they [American students] say really bad stuff, but mostly they always compare me to the Chinese and Japanese—and I wasn't them. I don't know anything about the Chinese or Japanese, but I knew that they were making fun of me. They called me suicide bomber or something that. I would try to explain to them where I am from, but it didn't matter. So, I just got comfortable just telling them I'm just Asian. I didn't really care to explain anything to Americans anymore unless they actually wanted to know about me.

Even to American friends, they barely knew who I was because one thing I always did was hide my past about where I lived on the refugee camp. I never really told high school friends or middle school friends mostly because I knew I would get made fun of. I knew [that] if I poured [my heart] out, they would make fun of me. So I hid my past from them.

Concealing one's cultural background breaks the connection that they have to their country of origin, its history, their sense of belonging and complicates how they view their identity which aspects of identity should be retained. For this individual, the risk associated with combating negative stereotypes regarding their culture did not yield desirable results. Therefore, their response was to hide their past and in doing so, left those who are misled regarding their cultural background unchallenged in their views. Such responses will only strengthen negative associations already present and is not conducive to combating prejudice perceptions of refugees or the distinct cultures that they come from.

### ***Staff-to-Student Verbal Antagonism***

Verbal antagonism is not restricted to student-to-student interactions, either. Several participants reported cultural discrimination occurring during passing periods or at lunch by school staff. Amir describes an instance in which he witnessed another foreigner being verbally antagonized by a safety officer at Sierra. He tells me,

(Amir) there was one instance where one of my friends she was wearing a hijab. So she had like a religious background. She usually didn't wear it, but one specific day she

wore a hijab. This is not uncommon at Sierra, like everybody wears a hijab at some point and the security officers know that. So my friend told them that she is Muslim. They're like, "Take it off. We've never seen you wearing a hijab." So when she didn't take it off they started yelling at her and saying they will write her up for a dress code violation. So she was scared and just took it off.

And this stuff would happen all the time. Even though all the students at Sierra have the same dress code, when an American is violating dress code and they pass by and the security officers don't say anything. But when they know you are—like—a refugee or immigrant, they are more strict and they tried to enforce those rules, but they don't force it on the Americans.

Amir's response indicates that rules are being applied or enforced discriminately by nonteaching staff working in his school. In this particular exchange, Amir recalled that the safety officer was also a Black American and felt that maybe that was why they were relaxing the rules for American students. He recognizes that there is a double standard when it comes to enforcing policies within schools and that he was not alone in experiencing subtle forms of discrimination. My line of questioning focused initially on classroom experiences with discrimination, so Amir's narrative was interesting as it also accounts for out-of-classroom or hallway discrimination by non-teaching school staff, who also play an integral role in shaping refugee experiences.

(Amir) Even with the lunch-people. The people that will serve lunch, they give you different treatment. When let's say someone who is American is like standing in front of me and I'm standing behind them. When they [lunch staff] saw them, they say "Hey, how are you?" Like they have that human connection and when she would turn to us [Africans/foreigners], they give you some attitude and start yelling. They're like, "Here, just take it. Take the food!" And if you ask, "Oh can I get more mayo?" One time they said, "There's no Mayo." Right after that, I saw her give an American more Mayo. So, we were treated differently by the lunch staff too.

The teachers were a lot nicer than the people who were working there. Even the people who are working at security, they give you a different treatment than they give the Americans. Their treatment of Americans was better. They act friendlier with the

American students when they talk to them. They will answer their questions or tell a story and laugh and then when you come, they change. When you ask for something, they're like, "huh?" Even though they heard, they blame the accent. Same with the lunch lady, I know they can hear me when I say "Mayo," like you can have an accent or not, it's not that hard to pronounce. But they pretend like they don't understand you. You have to say it a couple of times louder and it's frustrating. They just don't want to give us the food.

Such experiences with struggling for trivial goods such as Mayo stem from a larger issue of how refugee populations are perceived by their host communities. A larger refugee presence within a school, driven by economic determinants regarding the distribution of ESOL programs, facilitates social closure through the intensification of social competition between in-group and outgroup students. Teachers and non-teaching staff alike are also caught up in those processes. To the extent that boundaries are drawn based largely on ethnic identification or national origin, social competition and discrimination then becomes the way in which group membership is signaled to others. Therefore, it is not surprising that refugee participants reported instances of self-segregation or avoidance, which will be discussed in the next section. "While educational institutions may aspire to be inclusive and welcoming spaces for all, these aspirations are often caught in the dilemma of limited resources and the consequent decisions on how much hospitality should be extended to noncitizens through formal public institutions, like schools, mandated to serve its citizens" (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, nd, p. 29). This research confirms that one of the biggest obstacles to refugee integration within receiving communities is that they are typically seen as draining resources within urban environments whose resources are already stretched thin.

### **Linguistic Antagonism**

Discrimination and ostracism for refugees can be related to historical events taught through the curricula or result from contemporary situations around the globe, as we saw in the previous narratives. Additionally, nearly all refugee participants also reported instances wherein they had direct experience with linguistic bullying, or bullying based off proficiency in the dominantly spoken language. These are in-class experiences that affected how they engaged with course content and shaped how they communicated with their teachers and their classmates.

(Yonis) So if I was given a schedule and my class has only Americans in it, I would not like it. And that's the time that you will go to your counselor to change the class. So, at that time you feel like, man, what am I even doing here? Because American students would just talk to each other and sometimes we [refugees] don't understand the teacher. If they go fast and you don't even want to talk. You don't ask the teacher questions because your English is broke. That's what they say, Americans say our English is broke. So sometimes you feel like outsider, maybe.

In class, I just be quiet in the class and try to listen. Half of the things I listened to, half of them I don't listen, and I get a decent grade like C or B. If I asked a question the teachers would answer, but only if you don't care about the embarrassment because the other [American] students would laugh at you maybe. That's why the refugees don't ask that much questions when they are in a class with mostly American students. Especially if you're by yourself. If like 20 students are American and you're the only one and you don't talk to them. All you do is just come to class, be quiet for 90 minutes.

I remember we had a group project or presentation, and the teacher asks you to speak. Like go in the front [of the class] and present, right? You have to speak the other guy have to speak also and you split in the half, like you divide the poster. I decided to be absent on that day. That's how much pressure it is on refugees, I guess I would say.

Yonis describes an educational environment wherein verbal participation in his mainstream classes alongside American students were a stressful and, at times, hostile experiences.

Classroom norms and expectations established and continually reinforced by teachers can help create classroom environments that embrace between group interaction and commination.

Mendenhall, Bartlett, and Ghaffar-Kucher's (2017) qualitative study in an urban school in New York City demonstrates that "refugee students need a safe, welcoming environment that builds on their knowledge, assets, and language repertoires, as these approaches help them find a new place, socially, in the U.S., and progress toward graduation requirements" (p. 4). Yet Yonis' experience is one of passive learning instead of the active approach needed to develop his linguistic ability alongside his content knowledge. Amir had a similar experience.

(Amir) I think the black students were very cliquish. They had their own group. And they also tried to make fun of you in class when you answer a question or-- like at the beginning when I was back home, I would always sit in the middle and when we needed something, I would ask for the teachers help-- like just raise my hand, ask and nobody cares. Then the teacher answers. Explains. So that's how I learned. I learned better in question and answer.

So when I came to America, I started asking questions and because my accent, people laughed and they would also give me these strange looks. So, after a couple of weeks or so I just stopped asking questions. Even when I didn't understand something, I just wouldn't ask. I think they [American students] made me question if asking questions in classes was worth it or not.

Not only is English ability used to distinguish who is a part of the in-group and who isn't, but the presence of an accent can also indicate where one falls in the social hierarchy at SLPS schools.

(Joel) One of the challenges I had--actually I have no language barrier—I would say I had an accent barrier. When I came here my accent was strong, but my English was good. I have the African-English accent right now and to be honest, I still like it. It's the African accent mostly closely to the British English. So that's one of the barriers because most of the time when the teachers are talking, okay, I can understand it. But when I ask a question, they say "I hear you but it's hard for me to capture what you're saying." So, with them, I used to just write my questions and then show them. Because when I used to speak in class and try to express myself, but it's hard for them to understand me.

Although Joel did not mention that he personally felt discriminated against based off his accent, several other participants mentioned that their accent was a barrier to connecting with

American students. One participant recalled an experience in class wherein students were participating in debate, discussion, or public deliberation.

(Amara) I mean, this doesn't include all of the black Americans, but they were insulting. Sometimes whenever you get into a discussion in class or if you were asked by the teacher to take opposite sides in a history class or something, and I remember one argument that instead of focusing on whatever I was saying or your argument, they just focus on the way you were saying it and make fun of your accent. That happened a lot to foreigner students at Sierra.

Group membership and acceptance in the context of SLPS schools that the majority of refugee students attend are mediated by several linguistic and cultural characteristics. These characteristics are the target of personal prejudices that seek to socially stratify the student body population within schools. Additionally, refugee students' physical and behavioral characteristics were also subject to forms of discrimination.

### **Other types of Antagonism**

Several Black refugee participants' described experiences with verbal antagonism that were categorically different in severity and intensity than those who experienced teasing or petty name calling. Ethnic slurs that were specific to African refugee participants in this study came up in several interviews. One of those experiences is shared below.

(Participant II) Just walking in the hallway—the way American students look at you and what they say whenever you walk by—you can feel it. You can feel the tension. They say things like, "Oh, you African booty scratcher." I even got told one time, "Oh, you can't speak English just shut the fuck up, you African piece of shit. You should go back to your country." And I'm just looking around like--I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be here. It's not my fault I'm here.

But yeah, you'd think it'll be different seeing as how we are all Black. But I know I felt a discriminated against and so did many of my friends. And that was another thing.

Like if you are darker, like I am, they [Americans] would make fun of you. Say things like "ugly ass, you hella dark." It was—you know—better in their mind to be a light skinned black person. Everyone was jealous of the light skinned girls. Hell, I even wanted a light skinned girlfriend you know what I mean? [smiling].

But yeah, you could feel the tension between some of Black Americans and us and we really don't do much in school. We go to school, go to soccer practice, leave after that and go home. But you could still feel the tension and sort of the hate that some people had against us because we were different, I guess.

Imoagene's (2015) research on discrimination between second generation Nigerians in the U.S. and African Americans note that African Americans call Nigerians "African booty scratcher because African Americans saw themselves as more civilized and superior to Africans" (p. 181). Another participant said "a lot of black Africans went through an *African booty scratcher* phase. But, I didn't take being called African booty scratcher as racism to me because it was coming from a black person. White people didn't call me African booty scratcher. It was black Americans that said those mean things to me." I do not wish to belabor the historical origins of the slur, but to only say that it serves as a way of identifying who is where on the social hierarchy in urban schools a part of SLPS. Some Black American students use this slur to target and label African refugees and in doing so, signal that they are not a part of their group.

Apart from the slur, this participant's experience with verbal antagonism highlights a common occurrence in the literature regarding within-group racial stratification, colorism. Burke (2008) defines *colorism* as the allocation of privilege and disadvantage based according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin (p. 17). From this participant's response one comes to understand that skin tone is also important in the formation of social status within the context of urban schools. Hunter's (2016) research in urban education demonstrates that "people of color and Whites, alike, internalize skin tone hierarchies so even at schools that are extremely

racially segregated, there will be hierarchies that benefit the lighter-skinned students and disadvantage the darker-skinned students” (p. 57). For this participant, s/he was also discriminated against based on the darkness of their skin tone. Several other participants also confirmed that this was a common experience.

Lastly and more commonly, hurtful remarks towards African refugee participants regarding personal hygiene came up several times. These remarks did not come up in the experiences of Asian or Middle eastern refugee participants, but they were both under-sampled populations.

(Ian) In terms of discrimination, Americans would say that Africans have a smell, you know, that was probably the biggest one. They say we have an “odor.” In general, I would say that the vibe I get from Black Americans is that, "Oh Africans, they smell or they do too much or they know too much." But even then, us Africans would say things about the Americans too. So, it goes both ways. It’s not a one-way street. Some Africans don't like black people from America. They would say that the Americans are lazy. They have all these opportunities and everything all around them and they don't use it to the fullest extent. So, I think it was mostly just about having someone to hate.

Attacks on personal hygiene are common for refugee students. Li and Grineva (2016) note that this particular form of discrimination, can be embarrassing for refugees who are still socially adjusting to the standards of the host nation. Yet, personal hygiene discrimination is also a function of socio-economic status, wherein refugee students are seen as not able to afford basic goods. Therefore, it may be that attacks on students in this manner is used as a mechanism to remind African refugees (and perhaps some Black Americans) of their relative location on the socio-economic ladder while also further positioning those levying the attack as superior.

A few participants, including the one above, recognized that discrimination between Americans and foreigners was not a “one-way street.” This speaks to the downward mobility theory of African assimilation in urban areas. Yet, Ian seems to think it is more about the innate, adolescent tendency to be hate. Yet when viewed through the lens of boundary theory, the ability to act on hate is a powerful exclusionary force. Amara, also spoke to a common sentiment shared among her foreigner groups at Sierra stating,

(Amara) the foreigner students also had a negative perception of the Black Americans because we viewed them in a negative way as well. So it wasn't just a one way street where the Black Americans were the ones discriminating and saying racist things about the foreigners. We also have a negative perception of the American students at Sierra. We would say that whenever Americans talk, they talk loudly, and they curse or question why didn't their parents raise them right? So it was just some stuff that we would say about them.

### **Syrian Integration: Negative-Case Analysis**

Conversely, neither of the two Syrian refugee participants reported feeling discriminated against. Nabil told me that he has “never heard anyone being racist or saying anything bad.” Zain had more to say on his lack of experience with stereotypical remarks or discrimination.

(Zain) I like the U.S. because the school is good, everybody is respectful, no one is racist and everybody believe that everybody is equal. No one is better than others. But at first, I thought they [Americans] were a little bit weird. They used to dance and play in class. It's different than my school back in Syria. Then I thought that's just normal here. Then we had lunch together and worked on some things in class and then I feel they're all good. So I say, "Hey what's up bro? Good morning. How are you doing? Where are you going? Hey, did you do the math homework, let's do it together?" They were good.

After he confirmed that he did not experience any negative remarks regarding his Syrian background or his language ability directly, I asked him if he perhaps might have witnessed someone else experiencing something similar. His response is captured below.

(Zain) Yeah maybe some of the Americans will say these things, you know, but not all because not everybody is same. Everyone's different. Americans maybe say negative things like that like they [referring to foreigners] are not from our country. Maybe, I don't know. But the most of them was positive. They were good to me and to everyone else who, even from Syria, Iraq, you know what I'm saying? It's like they say, "Hey, what's up bro? Where are you from? From Syria. I'm from America. Welcome to Sierra!" You know what I'm saying?

With a sample size of only 2, little data was gathered to fully tease out the lived experience of Syrian refugee students as it pertains to discrimination. Yet, Zain's response does convey a sense of belonging and acceptance among the American student population at Sierra. Though it cannot be conclusively stated that positive associations with Zain's skin-tone or cultural or SES background may be driving his perceptions of American schools as meritorious and welcoming, his experience and Nabil's are unique in the sense that they provide an alternative and somewhat contradictory experience when compared to other participants. This suggests an avenue for further inquiry in future research endeavors.

## **Avoidance**

Schools, and in particular, cafeterias, gyms, and hallways, as spaces of observational inquiry, are fascinating within educational research. In her national bestselling book, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Dr. Beverly Tatum interrogates racial identity development and the psychological implications of group identity theory in diverse school settings. While her seminal work focuses primarily on Black-White group dynamics this

section takes into consideration additionally aspects of identity discussed by refugee participants and introduces a phenomenon in educational research regarding identity and cultural studies known as avoidance.

*Avoidance*, a type of discrimination, entails choosing the comfort of one's own group over interaction with another group (Blank, Dabady, & Citro, 2004). Typically, in social science and educational research, this has meant Whites self-segregating from Blacks and vice versa. Yet, avoidance is not the same as segregation. Segregation, which is the enforced separation of different groups, generally along racial lines, is illegal in the U.S. and universally viewed as abhorrent. The introduction of ethnicity complicates the distinction between ingroup and outgroup, as with White versus Black. Therefore, self-segregation or avoidance is a better term and to describe what occurs in spaces where affiliation with certain groups is a matter of preference and individual discretion yet are also modulated by in-group and out-group dynamics.

When reflecting on intraschool dynamics with American students, avoidance was experienced by most of the Type II refugee participants involved in this study. Before we turn to individual narratives, it is necessary to define who comprises the ingroup and outgroup. In the context of the three schools Type II refugee students can choose from, the ingroup comprises Black African American students, generally referred to by participants as Americans, and the outgroup are all foreign-born students referred to as foreigners. Amir's experience with avoidance is perhaps the most detailed. Yet, this distinction was reflected in all other participants narratives in this section, even though Amir uses the term *African* and *foreigners* interchangeably.

(Amir) I went to Sierra for two years and during my stay there, I spent most of my time with my African friends. But I wouldn't say that they [Sierra] were isolating us—like the African community—from the black community. But like, I believe when they [Americans] hear people with an accent, they think that we are not like them and so they do not welcome us into their community. From my interactions—just after my first couple of months—Americans just like give you a look when you speak or when you try to interact with them. They just try to look down on you all the time. But when they [Americans] need help with homework, they are very nice to us. But after, they go back to their own circles.

So, after a couple of months I knew I didn't belong in that circle. So, I automatically identified with African people and my African friends. They just give you a different community. Even though we are not from the same region or even countries, they [Americans] think we probably have the same culture, but it's a lot different. We foreigners have like more differences than similarities. But by not belonging in that [American] community, it gave us a sense of unity. You know? Like even though we all don't speak the same language, we are all learning English, and experiencing the same issues. Even though we have a lot of differences, having accent and just like those similarities, being a refugee, being an immigrant, being a foreigner and coming to a country where you don't know anyone—that probably gave us a sense of more similarities than differences.

As discussed previously, prejudice and discrimination occur when ingroup (Americans) acts in ways to that not only advantage their members, but also differentiates the person discriminating from the outgroup (foreigners). Of course, not all members who are a part of the dominant group act in ways that be overtly discriminatory and those refugee experiences that can be categorized as such were discussed in preceding sections. However, Amir did describe several subtle forms of discrimination that likely led to naturally avoiding American students.

(Amir) One of the things I remember was that the Americans were all the time sitting like at different tables in the cafeteria. Like if you stand off to the side and just watch you would see the segregation with Africans sitting on the far left and the Americans were sitting on the other side. We just call them Americans. They call us African.

This is the first instance where a participant used the word segregation to describe relational dynamics within an SLPS school, yet it would not be the lone. It came after I asked him to describe a time that he felt that he was being discriminated against. Amir is not alone in his experience of avoidance. Table 7 provides supporting statements that confirm Amir's detailed account of avoidance between American students and the foreigner population.

TABLE 7: CODED THEME AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS FOR AVOIDANCE

Coded Theme: Avoidance	
Participant	Supporting Statements
Michel, Sierra Int'l	"You can see that [segregation] when you went to lunch break. You can see that there's no diversity. Because when I was at Sierra—all the time American kids separate themselves from African kids. And African kids, we take our own table and the American kids they take their own table, you know? So, like there's no diversity. No mixing. Yeah. Personally, I saw it."
Amara, Sierra Int'l	"I don't want to say we were unified [at Sierra] because I mean, yeah, there are students from different countries, but when you actually go there and look around. Like if you see in class, who sits with who. Or in the cafeteria who is sitting at the same lunch table. And it was a predominantly black school, American African Americans. Even though we interacted with each other the international students and American, the African students, the African American students, mostly people kind of kept to themselves."
Emmanuel, Sierra Int'l	"I honestly can't say I didn't make any American friends at Sierra. We [foreigners] do interact with them [Americans] because you can all go to school and not interact with somebody or get in a fight with anybody for four years. But we mostly to try to keep to ourselves. Us foreigners try to stay away from the Americans and stick together because of the reputation that they have in St Louis and stuff like that. It can be dangerous. So we, yeah, we didn't really interact with them."
Dang, Sierra Int'l	"The foreigners and the Americans don't really hang out much. As a foreigner, I always hung out with the foreigners. The Americans just hang out with each other in between classes and at lunch and the gym."
Nabil, Independence	"I believe they are neutral the Americans and the foreigners. Yeah. Because like they don't do anything with other people. They, they are just by themselves. They are similar to the Americans at Sierra that I saw. They just don't talk much to us foreigners and we don't talk to them much."
Yonas, Rutherford STEM	"From my own personal perspective, they [Americans] didn't treat me that bad. I was just a regular guy. I don't talk to them. They don't talk to me. Only if its needed. The same goes for other refugees too, they don't talk to each other. Sometimes they talk, most times they don't. They just talk to their own people, both of them."
Kevin, Rutherford STEM	"Well, let's just say I don't normally interact with the black American kids a lot. So, I usually be with my own. I didn't hang out with American kids. It would just some African kids. The only time I get to talk a lot is just during the lunch time. And they do divide themselves, especially during lunch time, you will always see this. It is just more of a two-sided thing. The American kids all hung out and ate on one side and then the African kids, they hung out and ate on the other side of the lunchroom."

Avoidance also extended beyond the peer-to-peer ingroup and outgroup dynamics to reflect that of the school environment at Sierra. Amir's example of an experience while waiting in the cafeteria lunch line may reflect a larger issue of school culture that reinforced individual discriminatory practices. Though it is entirely possible that such avoidance occurs in schools that are a part of non-marketized education systems, to understand the extent to which *circumscribed choice* exacerbates *avoidance* within the same district, SLPS, we turn back to the case of Merriam.

(Merriam) Most of my friends were Americans. But, even though I was not among a lot of Africans, I still feel it's important to be with your people and where I feel like some Africans do still struggle with branching out of their own. Liberians will always gravitate toward where Liberians are. But I can't just be stuck with my people. I won't learn anything. I have to put myself out there learn something so then I can come back and let them know, "Hey, it's not like that. It's not as bad on the other side. Come with me." But that's the problem. Foreigners—refugee kids have to explore more than just what they're used to. But now they just go to Independence because all the Africans are there. Or Sierra. I didn't want to go to Independence exactly for that reason—because all the Africans were there. I was trying to know the other people, I wanted to know the other side.

I know that some went to Sierra and they probably just packed up into their own groups during lunch time. You will probably see all of them sitting at the same tables. Africans here, Americans here. It's so separated. But if you can just leave your table and go over there and talk to them, you'll learn something else about them. So me going away to Northview Career Academy and joining a different group, I felt important. I was learning from them [Americans], but at the same time they were learning my culture also. I felt like there was a lot of education we both were getting.

So for me—being in that high school—Americans were forced to interact with me because I put myself in those situations. I'm going to talk like you so we can communicate versus me just speaking my pidgin where they can't understand. So that's why I didn't choose to go to Independence or Sierra. And the students, they accepted me for being African. I never hid that fact. They wanted me to bring food for them to try. They were always curious why I wore what I wore and things like that. I felt like I belonged there.

Merriam's narrative suggests that she is not only brave when it comes to engaging with her American peers, but also that the American student population at Northview was amenable to that interaction. This is a stark contrast when compared to Amir's account. Merriam also described her school as being mostly American with a handful of African kids. It remains unclear the extent to which she was referring to only African refugees or all foreigners. Regardless, Merriam's outlook on school as a space for formal (academic) and informal (social interactions) education is dependent on the absence of mechanisms that generate and sustain avoidance.

(Merriam) When I go to school, it's like I'm living a double life. And I still feel like it's like living a double life, having multiple personalities or something else because I'll go home and I speak pidgin, or talk to my family back home and its Grebo. When I go to this crowd, I have to talk Caucasian. And then when I hang with my African Americans friends, I find myself using slang and like Ebonics. But all that is just superficial, and it just changes based on where I find myself. It has nothing to do with me and who I am.

My identity to me as an African is very important. I'm African first because that's my roots. That's where I'm from. That's what guides my thought process. That's what guides my decision making. And I will always stand for that and defend that. I'm never ashamed to admit that I'm African. Some people are, they'll tell you they're not African. I'm very careful when I'm talking to someone and they're saying things and how I'm processing it because I know it's coming from two different perspectives. And my goal is never to change somebody's perspective, but to share with them mine. So my cultural identity is very strong and like when I'm talking—no matter how polished—my accent will come out. In grad school I always tell people before I have to give a presentation, I'm like "Hey everyone I might mispronounce something, if I do, I am sorry. I am Liberian and still learning English. If you can't comprehend then please stop me so that I can explain."

I asked if she felt loved at Northview to which she responded, "Definitely. Definitely. I did feel loved by my peers and my teachers, I did. I felt connected. And I feel like if you are connected to a school, you feel more when you're more involved. More connected to the content." The same question was posed to Amir and he had a more measured response. "I

mean, I think most of the teachers cared about the students and I met some really good friends. Friends I am still close to.” If one were to only compare these two responses to a simple question, one is left with the impression that the experiences of Type II refugees differ drastically when compared to Type I.

## Summary

Refugee students’ experiences with discrimination lead to avoidance and social closure. This theme portrayed a wide variety of forms of both overt and subtle forms of discrimination that maintain group boundaries between refugee/foreigner students and their American counterparts. These take place within the classroom and also outside of it. Market forces and the effects of circumscribing choice, which intentionally alters student body composition, can create and sustain educational environments that make it more difficult for refugees to socially integrate. In the case of Sierra, refugees are likely to find members of their own group to interact with at the exclusion of the dominant, American group. Whereas Merriam’s case suggests that she was able to integrate successfully into her new school, Bao, the other Type I participant reported that he still felt like an outsider. Although the inclusion of more Type I participants that attended other SLPS high schools would have strengthened this finding, Merriam’s case is still helpful for understanding the differences of experience in schools within the same quasi-market district. Schools a part of SLPS not only deliver curricular and educational opportunities selectively (both within schools and between them), but the within school culture varies considerably as well. This is the ugly face of school autonomy within school-choice districts. As long as it remains in the dominant groups interest to socially exclude

refugee students from full participation in all aspects of school life, then avoidance and identity conflict remain a foregone conclusion.

#### **Theme IV: Racializing Schools and Neighborhoods**

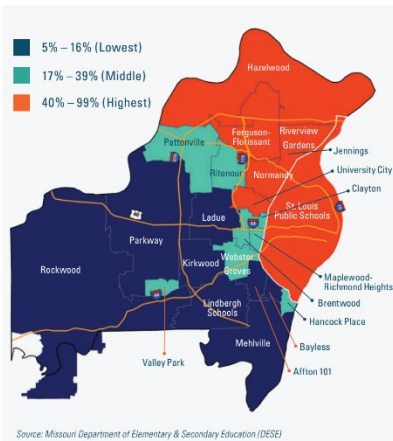
*The neighborhood we moved into was located on the south end of Corondolet park. A few more blocks south we would have been in the county and could have gone to Bayless or Afton. Then we'd been lucky. – Sam Ngoy*

The above quote by Sam, the older of the two Ngoy brothers who both survived the Gatumba Massacre, establishes a connection between counties as a determinant of educational quality in St. Louis. The term *county* used in the everyday vernacular of St. Louis residents refers to any school that is not zoned in St. Louis City. In other words, any school apart of a district other than Saint Louis Public Schools. In the early chapters of this dissertation, I highlighted the historical legacy of segregation in St. Louis and it's more contemporary connections to the educational marketplace of SLPS. As it pertains to descriptions of these schools and their extension to the larger neighborhood/community in which they're embedded, language that would describe a construct generally devoid of racial undertones, such as county, becomes increasingly racialized. Once again, a term like *county*, which when used in the context of education in St. Louis, acts as euphemism for describing a predominantly White more affluent district. Conversely, *city* is used as a referent for black. Figure 16a demarcates the boundaries of St. Louis City and St. Louis County, while figures 16b and 16c depict the percent of African American students enrolled in each school district and the concentration of poverty, respectively.

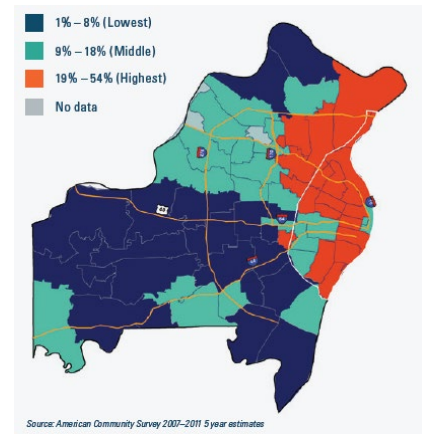
**FIGURE 16A: GEOGRAPHIC DISTINCTION BETWEEN ST. LOUIS CITY AND ST. LOUIS COUNTY**



**FIGURE 16B: PERCENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENROLLMENT IN ST. LOUIS CITY AND ST. LOUIS COUNTY**



**Figure 16c: Concentration of poverty by zip code as a percent of all residents.**



Source: Figures taken from *For the Sake of All: A report on the health and well-being of African Americans in St. Louis and why it matters for everyone.* Washington University in St. Louis, n.d.

The figures above illuminate the degree to which African American enrollment by county and concentration of poverty by zip code coincide. Returning to the quote introduced at the beginning of this section, Sam identified Bayless and Afton as desirable school districts that he would have been “lucky” to attend if he resided just a few more blocks south. Figure 16b illustrates the location of both of those school districts which are in the *county*, but also share the southern border with St. Louis City. From 16b we can also see that both Bayless and Afton have low enrollments of African Americans, indicated by dark blue. When juxtaposed next to figure 16b, what stands out in figure 16c is that those two school districts also have the lowest concentration of poverty by zip. This is just one piece of evidence that corroborates the connection between geographic location and its White, more affluent composition. As you will read about in the next sections, several other racialized narratives emerged in the dataset to suggest that refugees view city schools as undesirable compared to county schools. The desire

to attend county schools are also in part driven, as I will demonstrate, by perceptions of their neighborhoods being dangerous. Additionally, upon understanding that the possibility to attend a county school is not a viable option, participants describe their own racialized rationales and justifications for attending their school of choice. By drawing upon critical race theory as a framework for understanding how schools that are nested within an urban school-choice district also become racialized, connections and perceptions to educational quality can be made.

## **Racialized School Narratives**

### **Sierra International Studies: the refugee/foreigner school**

Both type I and type II refugee students identified Sierra International Studies as the school where most refugees or immigrants attend. However, participants seem to equate African refugees with Black refugees in their responses. Although Rutherford STEM's student body composition also includes many white and non-white foreigners, the dominant narrative of Sierra is that most people attending there do so because its viewed as playing host to mostly Black African foreigners. As you were introduced to in Theme II, Magnet-In-Name-Only, Sierra's transformation from an international studies school offering an array of foreign language courses to one wherein a substantial portion of its student body are non-US citizens is a direct consequence of the Welcome School circumscribing choice for Type II refugees.

Therefore, a new, counter-narrative of Sierra playing host to refugee students supplants the former, public-facing narrative of a magnet school with selective foreign language and international relations curricular options. When I asked Amir to describe the theme of Sierra he

did not hesitate in his response. “It's like Sierra international studies so they probably have more international students.” Although Theme II, Magnet-in-Name-Only, discussed how both Sierra and Rutherford STEM failed to provide the same access to educational opportunities for refugees versus native St. Louis students, this section discusses the now dominant narrative of Sierra International Studies as the African refugee school.

Emmanuel, whose mother was a Liberian educator before they had to seek refuge in the Ivory Coast, stated that his choice to attend Sierra was mostly determined by his sister, who had relocated to St. Louis a few years early and his mother. He recalls the time that he was told about the decision to attend Sierra.

(Emmanuel) They decided that Sierra was going to be the best school for me because it was an international school and it'll have more international students there that I can relate to. So that's kind of the main focus, finding a place while feel more comfortable. There was no information for refugees specifically except for the fact that they were an international school. So yeah, Sierra is an international school. What I mean to say is that they offer a lot of international languages. I felt like everything was the same across the board other than they had ESL classes as Sierra. But other than that, the schools are all pretty much the same. But because, Sierra had that international vibe to it, like—it was branded as an international school—I thought they welcomed international people, like refugees, a little bit more than all the other schools.

Michel shares Emmanuel's perception of Sierra educating more refugee students than the other schools. During his time choosing at the Welcome School he summarizes what he was told by a teacher there.

(Michel) Well my teacher was kind of saying that because she is an American, she knows about the American kids. So as an African, some teachers don't want you to be involved with the Americans. Those bad American kids, they don't want you to be hanging out with them. So they'll tell you, "Hey you should go to Sierra but be careful. You have to look for nice friends. Find people who are like you they will help you. You have to continue getting good grades in school, studying, focusing on school. So you

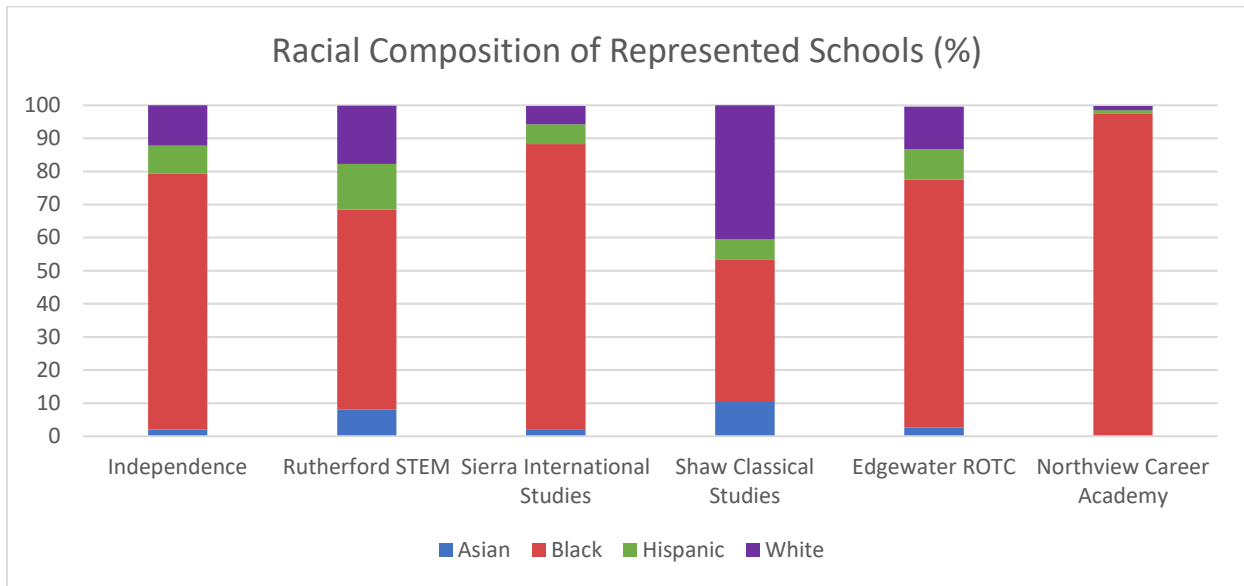
have to be careful." They would warn us about the American kids because some of them are not nice. They hang out with you, but later on they will trip you up. So, got to make sure you find foreigner friends that focus on their education.

Once again, it must be understood that when refugee students in this study are describing American students, they are referring to Black American students. As you might recall from Table 5, all schools represented in this study are majority Black or underrepresented minorities. Therefore, Michel's interaction with this individual at the Welcome School is telling, as his perception of Black American students is shaped in part by this interaction. If Michel accepts the veracity of his former teacher's warnings, then it follows that being friends with Black American students might derail his educational performance in his new American school. Therefore, selecting and attending a school where he can inoculate himself from those "bad American kids," is seen as safe. It is through their connection to the Welcome School and their in-house ESOL program that Sierra International Studies has become known as the school for refugees who want to be around other refugees because being around other refugees also means focusing on schoolwork. Yet, other participant understandings of Sierra, as you will read in the next section, seem to conflate being a refugee with being African, and more specifically a black African.

### **Rutherford STEM: The White School**

Several type I and type II refugee students also identified Rutherford STEM as the White school, meaning that more white students attend Rutherford than the other two options typically available to refugee students. Table 8 below clearly illustrates the racial composition of each school and serves as a point of departure when analyzing racialized narratives.

**TABLE 8: RACIAL COMPOSITION OF STUDENT BODY BY SCHOOLS REPRESENTED IN THIS STUDY, 2019.**



Source: DESE.gov

From table 8, one can clearly see that in 2019 Rutherford STEM did enroll more White students than the other two schools presented as an option to Type II refugee students. Yet, it is significantly less integrated than Shaw Classical Studies, the only school that remains desegregated by proper indices. Refugee perceptions of Shaw in terms of quality and rigor will be examined in a later section. Therefore, this section discusses participants’ perceptions of Rutherford STEM as the White school, the type of educational quality associated with it, and also what White means in the greater context of refugee migration to St. Louis.

(Kevin) When talking with other students especially my cousin who went to Sierra, usually they say, Rutherford is more of an American school. There are more White kids over there and more Black American kids over there. And at Sierra there's more Africans. But for me, really the real reason I didn't want to go Sierra was there's too much Africans over there. The people who I came from the same country with. So, going there would make me not be able to focus on my studies, my English and all that because of the interacting with the African students. Hanging out with all the African students. So yeah, they told me that Rutherford was more of a white school. White kids

usually go to Rutherford STEM, still not many. Mostly Black kids and Mexican—the kids speaking Spanish.

Kevin conflates an American school with being a White school. Although it cannot be determined that an “American experience,” to Kevin, is one in which he is educated exclusively next to White students. However, what can be inferred is that an American experience, according to Kevin, necessarily includes White students as a part of his desired educational experience. Therefore, the counternarrative that has been circulating in some refugee communities regarding Rutherford STEM is racialized, as it suggests that White students are choosing a STEM education, and therefore, it is also a good idea to select Rutherford STEM to attend.

Kevin’s understanding of Sierra as the African/refugee school is consistent with other participants’ perceptions. I wanted to see how Kevin’s perception of Rutherford as the American school lived up to his experience there, so I went on to ask him to describe his group of friends and the people he hung out with. “It wasn't American kids. It would just some African kids. One kid that came from Togo and my other good friend was in the same camp back in Africa with me. And some of them lived in different camps, but they all came from Africa though.” I asked him his thoughts on the that, knowing that he chose Rutherford STEM because he wanted an “American experience.” He stated,

(Kevin) Yeah, well in my freshman year there was less Africans, I think. But as times go by, more Africans kept enrolling at Rutherford STEM for the same reason as me. They were saying they don't want to go Sierra because there's too many Africans over there and stuff. So more of them started coming here and then the interaction with them just got back on. But I still think that if I went to Sierra, I would be more African, like have more of an African accent because there are many Africans there.

Yet, when one delves into the student backgrounds who make up the White population at Rutherford STEM, interesting insights emerge. Fatima, who attended Sierra, describes her encounter with white students from Rutherford on a soccer pitch.

(Fatima) Another thing about Rutherford STEM though--like after I came to Sierra—I saw the whiteness of Rutherford, because I started playing soccer. And when we would play against Rutherford, like all the soccer team was just white girls. I'm like, "Oh my God, why is there so many white girls?" Because the way Rutherford was portrayed was like they have black girls, yeah, but then they also have all of these white girls. I'm like okay that's different. But then when I spoke with them, I learned that they are refugees too. I think from Bosnia or something like that. So that was interesting.

Although I should have asked her to share more, this exchange with Fatima adds a layer of complexity on what it means to be White and attend Rutherford STEM. Whiteness is not monolithic, and neither is the white population at Rutherford STEM.

In order to understand this complexity, I reached out to two former educators who taught at Rutherford STEM for over five years. Conducting additional research is crucial to the narrative smoothing process when school narratives and participant expectations do not align with their experience. After obtaining consent and ensuring that their names and identities would be protected, they shared with me their thoughts regarding Rutherford being pinpointed as the White School by refugees. Although their responses are consolidated below, they provide crucial insight into the breakdown of the White student body population at Rutherford STEM.

(Former Teacher) I would say that in any given year Rutherford has maybe 15-25% White students who attend. Yet, of that percentage, at least half of them are Bosnians. Yeah, I would say half. I mean, it's not your typical White, American kid. I

could honestly name all the White American students that I taught in my time there off the top of my head [*interviewee begins listing White students*].

I remember most of them. I guess it's because they are easier to pick out because there were so few of them. But—I mean—Rutherford still felt diverse. There were students from Mexico, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam. And, of course, there were mostly Black American students. I don't remember a lot of African students, now that you mention it. I might have had a few. That's probably changed since I left.

A few things are important from my casual exchange with these former Rutherford teachers. The first, is that this response explains the perception of Rutherford being identified as the white school. Referring to table 5, the table that introduces racial demographics by school, Rutherford has a history of educating a considerable percentage of White students compared to Independence or Sierra. Yet, what is important is the narrative. For the Bosnian refugees attending Rutherford, they seem to unknowingly contribute to the narrative of the school being White, but do not contribute to it being known as the refugee school—which has already been established as Sierra. Furthermore, as Kevin's response indicates, Sierra's is known not just as the *refugee school*, but specifically the *African refugee school*. Conversely and perhaps even more interestingly, The Middle Eastern or Asian participants in this study failed to identify Rutherford as such and instead said that Rutherford was “similar to other schools” or a identified its STEM and technical focus.

This suggests that the interplay between refugee and racialized narratives are in part driven by individual bias regarding country-of-origin. If individuals from a specific country-of-origin are viewed as undesirable as student peers, as was the case with Kevin and Merriam, two African refugees who expressed several times their desire not to attend a school with “too many Africans,” then decisions to apply for certain schools will map neatly onto individual prejudices. Just as they have in the past with St. Louis's white population fleeing to the county.

Returning to the case of Merriam, a Type I participant who did not attend either of the three schools, she shared her experience in class with White classmates when she first arrived.

(Merriam) I think I was definitely treated differently because I was more black, like blacker than the Americans and the Bosnians look white. So, I thought they were white until they started talking and I realized, “Oh, we all came here, you’re not from here either.” And I just learned that because I made friends with one of the Bosnian girls in elementary.

Although no Bosnian participants were represented in this study, their inclusion would have offered a point of comparison when it comes to analyzing rationales for choosing Rutherford. If provided the freedom to speculate for a moment, it raises interesting questions into the narratives that Bosnian refugees hold regarding Rutherford STEM and how their decisions to attend there might have impacted how non-White refugees perceive the school as being “more White.”

### **Independence: *The Bad School***

Independence High School is a comprehensive, neighborhood school with no admissions requirements. Type I and Type II refugees were unified in their collective perception of Independence’s infamous reputation as the *bad* school. In terms of Type I participants Bao, who grew up stateless in a Nepalese refugee camp, described the overall sentiment held by most participants.

(Bao) I know Independence was pretty bad. Just one of the last high schools you would want to go to. Independence would be your last choice of your list of schools when you apply. I knew a lot of students, actually a few were my cousins, they were first at Rutherford, but because they couldn't do really good in school, got bad grades and they had bad behavior, they [Rutherford] sent them to Independence.

Type II refugees are also quite familiar with Independence, as the school building hosts the Welcome School in which they attended in its basement. Regarding this negative image, Yonis who relocated to the USA from Eritrea so that his mom could receive treatment for her cancer described what his teachers and other students were saying about Independence.

(Yonis) Actually they [teachers at the Welcome School] were saying Independence is a little bit bad and between Sierra and Rutherford STEM, they say Rutherford was the better one. That's what they were saying. But I didn't really believe them because school is school in America. It's all good. That's what I thought in my mind. But since I had a friend that went to Rutherford, that's the reason I went. I could've gone to Sierra or maybe Independence. And I didn't know about what the other students were saying because themselves—they don't even know. They were just refugees like me.

Yonis's perception of Independence as being bad is somewhat vague. He did not mention what made Independence bad, but just understood it to be labeled as the bad school. Nabil from Aleppo, a type II participant who first attended Sierra then transferred back to Independence had more to say regarding this commonly held perception.

(Nabil) Sometimes my friends were saying that Independence was not good because sometimes all the American kids are fighting. Then, some of my friends are saying like, Sierra is good because the teachers care about the refugee students. But when I got to Sierra like the system of the school, it was not good. Because like when I was going to class all the American students they were playing and I couldn't learn anything. They were taking pictures with their phones, throwing things, and screaming. They don't care what's going on.

One time I was in biology class and the teacher put me in a group and my group was all Americans and me. They were not doing anything. I tried to learn what to do, but my English is not good and American students make fun of it. So I just sat there and just got a zero with them. So that's why I didn't want to stay at Sierra, and I wanted to change my school so I can have better grades.

And even though there were many foreigners at Sierra, there weren't many Syrians. I only had one Syrian friend there. He was my best friend and he also left so I

couldn't stay there. He left and he moved to a different district out of the city. He lives in South County and went to Afton. He told me that the city schools, they are not good because like there's more fighting in the city than in the county. He said at Afton schools they are really nice and organized and peaceful.

Drawing upon his experience in city schools and comparing that to what he is told about county schools, Nabil's understanding of the disparity between city and county is also racialized. Yet, Nabil's justification for transferring to Independence, i.e., from one city school to another, was not because of the type of education he could receive, nor did it have to do with his identity. He transferred because he became frustrated with the Sierra's internal grievance procedures and Independence was a school that he was already familiar with—as the Welcome School is there. After his negative classroom experiences, he wanted to talk to a counselor or the principal about his concerns but was dismissed.

(Nabil) When I went to Sierra, I didn't like it because first day I went to the counselor and I tried to change my schedule. In my schedule they gave me like all these extra classes like art and gym that I didn't have to take for the graduation requirements. And it was hard to change because many people were trying to change. Also, I transferred because when I asked to talk to the principal, they said the principal is not here and you have to fill out this paper and put it in a box and then the principal would call you. And I felt like if I fill out this paper maybe the principal will not call me, or it would take a long time. So, I didn't like this school. I just left and went back to the Welcome School and told them I wanted to go to Independence.

Nabil's narrative suggests that he willingly chose the school with the bad reputation because at least he knew he would have the support of the Welcome School, which again, is located in the same building. Additionally, one could infer that he real distinction when it came to educational quality was not between city schools, but between city and county schools. Michel's quote in Theme II, which I include here as well also supports the notion that education

is similar for refugees between city schools, which one can infer is considered inferior compared to county schools.

(Michel) There wasn't any difference [between the school options], because what I was told about Independence High School was the same thing I was seeing at Sierra. I saw people fighting every day, you know, doing bad stuff. They can smoke in the bathrooms. It is the same kind of stuff they were warning me about at the Welcome School. What they said about Independence High School was happening at Sierra. So no—there was no difference in classes, no difference in American students, no difference in books or learning materials.

Yet, there are other reasons for why the perception of Independence as a bad school seems to persist. Even to outsiders such as Sam and Ian Ngoy, who relocated to St. Louis from Boise, Independence was viewed as the *bad* school because of how they treat their student population.

(Ian) So I've seen the hatred of black-on-black, but it's not that much in Boise. But when we came to St. Louis, even in the schools--it's big. I never met people that are the same color hate each other so much. Just because they live five blocks in the wrong direction. You know—It's crazy to see. You can come in and be the freshest dude at Independence and someone will say something. People fighting over name calling.

And they had metal detectors too. People can't get their phone into school, it's like a prison. But it's not because they treated us like prisoners by taking our phones away because you got to have structure. I know people say they don't need structure, but people need structure. People want structure. It was just that there was a lot of tension between people and groups of people.

Sam follows up on several points Ian made and rejects Ian's assessment of the effect of metal detectors in Independence, specifically.

(Sam) For me, we got to St. Louis my junior year. Ian was a freshman when we started going to Independence and what struck me is that I don't think I learned anything at Independence. Everything I knew, I already acquired in Idaho. After graduation, I was nowhere near prepared for college as I should have been.

And the prisoner thing is for real, so I disagree with Ian. I feel like the metal detector is used like it's a symbol. You know what I'm saying? It symbolizes that with this population [referring to black urban school-aged children] something is going to happen. They're putting metal detectors in place because they think it's a guarantee that the students are going to do something awful. So I disagree with Ian, I felt like a prisoner and when we lined up in order to go through the metal detectors, they made us take off our shoes and empty our backpacks just to go into school. They used to pad us down too if you made it [metal detector] beep. I feel that's low-key invasion of privacy, you know what I'm saying?

I mean a lot of these schools are free or reduced lunch and what if my socks stink that day? Lots of kids are too poor to have clean clothes all the time. And our other brother, Eric—the one who got his leg amputated—he came to Independence and he didn't really like it. So, with him, he had to take his leg off every time or leave it on and go through a metal detector and it would beep and stuff. He was cool about it, but it must have been humiliating.

Although several other schools also used metal detectors to assess student threat, Sam believes that they also contributed to the view that independence is a bad school by comparing it to his experience in both his North County school and in Boise. Reflecting on his time spent in two distinct learning environments, Sam communicates what he has come to understand about the impact of location on student educational opportunity. He does this by drawing on his life experience in Boise and compares it to what he went through in St. Louis. He explains,

(Sam) It's only because we've got two different perspectives. My mom, she's all about education because she never got the chance to go to school. So, she maintained those high expectations for us. And when we got to Idaho, those expectations were also a part of the schools there. I mean we didn't go to the number one school in Idaho, but it was pretty good. But seeing what people get here, it made what we had huge. Without question, our life would be much different if we came straight here instead of going to Boise. It almost seems unfair you know, when I compare my education with my Congolese friends here. So those two perspectives just showed me how unequal it is. Just because—if you go to very suburban place, the education is high quality and then if you go to a city school or even North County in St Louis, which is still public school—you're worse off. Those schools are less than average. Yeah. So that just got to show me what was going on in the world.

## **Shaw Classical Studies: The Smart School**

Several participants identified other schools as being superior in academic rigor and quality than the one they attended. Specifically, Shaw Classical Studies High School, which ranks first among not only SLPS high schools, but also in the entire state of Missouri as well as #114 in the national rankings according to U.S. news, was mentioned several times as a desirable school to attend. No participants in this study attended Shaw and when asked if they were knowledgeable of anyone in their refugee community who was accepted to Shaw many could not recall a refugee student that went there. Additionally, from table 8 the racial composition of Shaw's student body differs drastically from the other school options typically available to refugee students, with far more Asian and White students attending Shaw than any other represented school. Yet, in the previous section, Rutherford STEM was perceived to be the White school for many participants, and not Shaw. Instead, Shaw is known to be the school for the smart students due to several factors including school ranking and a more selective acceptance criterion.

School ranking, as a technological educational input, is also a non-human actor that shapes public perspectives of educational quality. Amara, graduated valedictorian from Sierra described her perception of Shaw which is also informed by her experience accessing and attending a prestigious private college in central Missouri.

(Amara) Well, when you see their rank, Shaw has a better ranking in the first place. Way better than Sierra any other school in SLPS. And I have met people who went to Shaw. I have met people who graduated from a lot of different schools in St. Louis and they seem to be more prepared for college and stuff because they start taking ACT prep classes during freshman year or sophomore year. Sierra didn't even have ACT college prep until senior year and even during senior year they didn't have enough

sections of ACT prep for all the seniors to take. So not everybody took ACT prep even if they wanted to. So, I feel I would have been able to have more opportunities if I were to go to a better school like Shaw. Shaw was a school that started thinking about what you would do after you graduated from high school and not just focused on helping you graduate from high school. Because I feel that Sierra mostly just focused on actually getting you graduated and that's it.

Shaw, which as a smaller, yet comparable student body population to Sierra, enrolled 377 to 527 students respectively in 2019 according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Amara's perception of Shaw is partly informed by ranking, but also by comparing personal experiences with students who attended Shaw. She believes Shaw to provide greater educational opportunity and has more educational resources, two indicators of educational quality. Additionally, her description of conflicting school goals for students between Sierra and Shaw (i.e. graduation vs. college entrance) is related to notions of academic rigor. In Amara's view, Sierra is a school that pushes students through the system instead of preparing students for life post-graduation. Although there are several issues with school ranking via student performance on standardized tests, Amara seems to suggest that student's attending Shaw have access to a more coursework that could be considered more intellectually challenging and rigorous and, therefore, are more prepared for college. She tells me,

(Amara) I do feel sometimes proud that I was valedictorian, but there were also times when I feel I wasn't challenged enough and that's why I probably wanted to go to a Shaw. All that was required at Sierra to do well is study a little and do your homework. I don't know what to say. Most of the students that I had a class with were not motivated enough to do even that. If you just consistently do your assignments and actually interact with your teachers outside of class, you are just fine. But now I am struggling in college.

Perceptions surrounding Shaw's academic rigor also extend to the types of students that apply and then selected to attend there. According to Shaw's SLPS website<sup>36</sup>, applicants must score above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on all 8<sup>th</sup> grade standardized tests, have a minimum GPA of 2.3 with no D's or F's, a nearly perfect record of school attendance, letters of recommendation and submit a 5-paragraph entrance essay. These criteria operate at non-human actors that can also be considered as barriers to accessing quality education, which is not uncommon in hyper-competitive educational marketplaces. Yet, as a filtering mechanism, criterion can also act as a deterrent when it comes to applying--given all the conditions that must be met. Therefore, those who successfully enroll at Shaw are considered to be some of the brightest students in SLPS.

(Merriam) Shaw was like a traditional liberal arts school and it was the school for geniuses. That's what it seemed like. Super smart kids go to Shaw. They're all geniuses. Shaw is top. Shaw is number one. I liked Shaw when I was making my decision, but Shaw high school was just too robotic for me. Too serious. Like there were kids in the hallway studying during the lunch period and I didn't like that. I just felt that Shaw was just too stuck up for me.

Merriam, who toured Shaw with her AVID program, witnessed firsthand the academic pressure that students experience there. Additionally, one can infer from Merriam's response that she views students at Shaw to be somewhat haughty. This may be a consequence of such a selective admissions process. Bao, who attended Edgewater also confirms Merriam's sentiments.

(Bao) I always hear good things about Shaw or something. So you had to have higher grades to go there and your teacher push you to do better and better. You still

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<sup>36</sup> <http://slpsmagnetschools.org/site337.php>

had that a little at Edgewater too, but I don't know. I think I would have been better if I went to a different school like Shaw.

Comparative questions regarding what their life might have been like if they went to a different school are difficult for refugee participants. Because their cultural background is distinct from the host community and their educational experience with choosing schools is limited if not non-existent, participants did not comment directly on the type of education they would have received. Instead, they discussed their overall feeling of the inadequacies of their education in relation to the dominant narrative regarding the quality of academics at Shaw. Although not every participant described Shaw as being more desirable to attend than the school in which they graduated from, the overall impression was that Shaw was superior. Given that Shaw also enrolls the largest percentage of White students, such a narrative is not without racialized underpinnings. Dang who grew up on the border of Thailand and Myanmar and repeatedly self-described himself as “not that smart” because his “English isn’t good,” discussed his desire to leave the Sierra for any school with Caucasian students. He starts first by describing his relationship with the Black students at Sierra.

(Dang) I don't talk to them [Americans] that much. I don't like using bad language, me personally. I think they use a lot of bad language and use bad words. I do not appreciate those. And us refugees here, we don't usually say those, you know? So, when I came here, people throw it out a lot. So, it's a new experience and that type of culture kind of turns me off and I didn't really want to be friends with them. I think if I were to go to some other school, mostly a school where there's more Caucasian people, I would speak better English. That's just my opinion. Yeah. I could be wrong. But there are not a lot of schools with Caucasian students in St. Louis.

At one point I wanted to change schools. Like, I had a friend who went to Ladue. It's a county school. I know he got a better education. He also came to the United States at the same time as me, but his parents, they got connection and can speak English. So

that's why he got a better education. He lives out there. They find connection. But my parents did not speak English. I think that's why we stayed in the city. But family is another problem too. My family don't want to move to the county. They don't want to move from St. Louis to St. Charles or to Chesterfield, you know where the good schools are? They just want to stay in St. Louis. Yeah. So, we just had to find a public school that is close that will give us bus ride to school. I thought maybe I can switch because I feel I do not get the education I deserve at Sierra.

Bracketing this section with Sam's quote regarding the geographical disparities when it comes to providing quality education and Dang's response here, highlights the ways in which narratives regarding quality education are racialized both by school and by district. Dang states that he deserves a better education than the one he was provided at Sierra, but does so by also suggesting that quality education can only be attained at a school with more Caucasian students. From his perspective, school choice is less about the type of specific magnet/curricular focus, but more about the social capital that comes from having connections—especially if those connections establish himself apart of a dominant group. Therefore, perceptions of quality, once again, cannot be adequately understood without also acknowledging that historical and contemporary racialized policies that perpetuate educational inequality between city and county districts and their schools. Additionally, these narratives highlight some refugee participant's desire to leave the communities in which they were initially resettled, which provides a nice segue into the next section regarding neighborhoods effects.

## **Neighborhood Effects**

If you ask anyone in St. Louis where to find the best Italian food, they will direct to you the Hill, an Italian-American neighborhood lined with delis, pizzerias and gourmet Italian

restaurants. Dogtown, is the Irish-American neighborhood that is adjacent from the Hill, and at its center you will find the St. James the Great Parish. Soulard, which is French for “drunkard,” has exquisite Victorian style architecture indicative of the Second Empire. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Anheuser-Busch brewery is located there. Despite its misleading name, Dutchtown, derived from the word *Deutsch*, was a booming neighborhood that played host to a large German population. Additionally, what all those thriving neighborhoods I mentioned have in common is that they were all initially populated by European immigrants. Despite drastic population decline, these neighborhoods are still occupied and have seen growth in economic and commercial investment. Yet, several other neighborhoods not mentioned have since been abandoned. Though not a part of the school-choice experience, neighborhood effects are a part of the St. Louis experience and have implications for student success within schools. It is with this background knowledge that this section explores the dissatisfaction that the Congolese participants expressed with being placed in one of these rundown or abandoned neighborhoods and compares their experience to other participant accounts.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) posits that racial injustice and racism are maintained over time through individual and institutionalized power structures that act in ways to preserve the interests of the dominant group. CRT, as a theoretical lens, attempts to not only expose these power structures, but draw explicit connections to how they perpetuate the marginalization of minorities and people of color. As I explained in chapter II, school-choice in the context of the United States has roots in racist ideology, with White families seeking to maintain racially segregated schools. Therefore, this section seeks to learn from refugee participants’ reflections regarding their initial impressions of their neighborhoods and their new homes and how those

first impressions might have (mis)aligned with their expectations. By doing this, one can further interrogate how and in what ways does placing refugee families in urban contexts exacerbate or redress issues associated with trauma and the lack of livelihood. Bonilla-Silva (1997) reminds us that, “Because racism is viewed as systemic (possessing a racial structure) and as organized around the races' different interests, racial aspects of social systems today are viewed as fundamentally related to hierarchical relations between the races in those system (p. 476). One of those hierarchical social systems is socioeconomic status (SES) and its impact on residential affordable housing options for non-Whites in St. Louis City.

Since the funding of public education is primarily due to revenue generated from local property taxes, there is a strong connection between neighborhood valuation, community resources and the quality of public schools. Education is often viewed as a magic bullet to rescue entrapped children caught in engendering cycles of intergenerational poverty. Yet, in the context of St. Louis, funding for public education is compounded by suburban migration which reduces the urban tax base that provides revenue for all city public schools. Thus, the concentration of poverty plays a considerable role in determining the adequate provision of quality education. Additionally, when refugee families move into urban neighborhoods and attend urban schools that are generally populated by young Black Americans, they are often seen as taking resources away from a population that has also been marginalized as well (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). With that in mind, this section revisits refugee prearrival expectations of life in St. Louis and analyzes the ways in which their perceptions of their new environments changed upon arrival.

As explained above, there is tacit knowledge shared among all St. Louis residents as to what one would find if they went to any of these neighborhoods. *Neighborhood effects* is a social science concept that posits that neighborhoods have either a direct or indirect effect on individual behaviors and perceptions, which then mediate social processes and interactions that occur within them. The neighborhood that refugee students and their families are relocated to is determined by the International Institute of St. Louis, a peripheral but continually relevant actor that impacts refugee experience. This is important for understanding the role neighborhoods play in shaping refugee experiences. Historically speaking, neighborhoods in St. Louis have been racialized and ethnicized. This section discusses how regarding participants' views of their neighborhood in terms of safety and community may serve act as reservoirs of strength or strife to newly arrived refugee families.

### **Negative effects: Congolese participants and Hodiament**

Several Congolese participants questioned why they were relocated to St. Louis and in particular, resettled in the Hodiament neighborhood which they believe to be dangerous. Joel's narrative (see International Institute section in chapter IV), is not the only time a Congolese participant spoke freely about the violent conditions in which they live. Yet, these cases are unique to only Congolese participants. Other participants expressed dissatisfaction with the number of rooms or the cramped conditions, but not about their neighborhood environment, specifically.

Michel recalls what it was like when he was first told that he was going to live in America. He describes how his excitement declined precipitously upon seeing his new home.

(Michel) Oh, I was excited when my parents told us that we had one week before we would go to America. I was like, “Oh I can’t wait” because I had been watching all these American movies. So, I saw a lot of nice buildings, nice cars, nice photos and that’s what I thought that America looked like. Then when I got St. Louis, I didn’t believe it. I asked my parents, “Are you sure this is America, for real?” I just couldn’t believe it because everything looks so different than I imagined it. Everything was totally different and not in a good way. In my neighborhood, it’s called Hodiament—the houses, the apartment that we were staying in; everything was broken. I didn’t believe in America that there would be any broken apartments.

They call it *hoods* or something like that. That’s where they put us. And before I arrived, I didn’t believe that in America it would be like that. I didn’t believe in America I would see a broken-down car, or a burnt down house. I didn’t believe in America that I’d see people in the street asking for money, you know, homeless. I didn’t believe all that. But when I got here, that’s all I saw.

You were already introduced to Michel describing Hodiament as being a part of the “hood,” a term he was introduced to by American students. Michel’s response describes the conditions that he saw everyday walking to Sierra from his family’s small apartment. Such conditions he felt were unsafe. Michel tells me, “I can say was I was safer in the refugee camp, they put police officers all around the camp. So, they make sure everyone is safe cause we all ran away from our countries because of war and you’re in the camp and we just want peace. To stay there with them without worrying about anything.” Although there are other aspects of life in a refugee camp that might be considered unsafe, in terms of immediate threat, Michel felt that his neighborhood, Hodiament, presents a possible danger to him. This account is confirmed by Ian, who moved from Boise, attended Independence and is familiar with several Congolese friends living there.

(Ian) After my mom and us survived the attack, when I think about it I feel lucky because we got chosen to go [to the United States], because not everybody gets accepted to America and there were other people who were in bad conditions as well,

they had to stay. So, I thought it was just straight up you living good, no problems. But it was the opposite of that. You know, you still got to work. Parents are always gone, working. People still die. Yeah, just like Africa, but it's just more advanced, I guess.

But, if you relocate to St. Louis, they [International Institute] just move you into Hodiament if you are from the Congo. And in Hodiament, believe me, if you experienced violence and trauma in Africa, you'd be experiencing violence and trauma in Hodiament with all the violence going on around there. Hodiament is violent. It's just violent. The people around there are causing the violence and the Africans when they get here see that. I have a friend who still lives there and he's rebellious because he hasn't really been taught any better from this community. I mean, he is used to wars in Africa and now he's going to different war. And I say it's different because I mean for a lot of refugees, we go through like more of a mental struggle rather than physical. But many of the kids put in Hodiament, they go through both.

Ian's response is interesting for a few reasons. Ian understands that the local community and not solely the school, plays a crucial role in the development of the child. Thus, resettlement agencies, many of whom are funded partially by state and federal governments, can benefit from this research by reassessing the conditions in which refugee families are asked to live in their respective host cities and/or how to better strengthen the connections between the school and the community in which it is embedded in. However, building relationships between family, community and school is likely to exacerbate the market-driven, school-choice schema. If accepted, schools bus students from several neighborhoods of St. Louis. Therefore, the strengthening of school-community relationships in each neighborhood, and the sheer resources needed to do so, is likely not a priority in a hyper competitive school-choice environment. Thus, contradictions may exist in the very structure of the choice system and would preclude the possibility of strengthening those bonds.

Additionally, Ian recognizes that trauma continues to remain a part of some refugees long after they are removed from the source of the trauma. Therefore, the conditions of the neighborhood can trigger a stress-inducing memory, evoke emotional discomfort, or in the case of Joel, question the location of peace.

(Joel) Well the International Institute—I thought was good because they were relocating people to where there's a lot of people from their own countries like the Congolese. They'd find somewhere where you can live in the neighborhood around your own people, that's what it was like for me three years ago. But today, this is from experience, from what I've seen, the just locate you anywhere. I feel like they don't care whether there is a Congolese family there or not. They put you in a house which is not well kept, which is not good. They just put you there because they just want you to be out of their hands.

The International Institute, I think they should have provided a lot more information. They just take you to where you are going to be. Where you're going spend your life the rest of your life and tell you nothing about it. Because America is where I'm going to spend the rest of my life right now. You have to tell me this is where you're going to be, this is how you will be successful.

So, when I moved here, I just had this feeling. The feeling that you get whenever you just don't feel connected to be there; you don't feel connected to the place. I guess that's why I hated St. Louis when I first arrived. I didn't like the place where I they put me because the neighborhood where they first relocated me, Hodiament, there is many crimes like prostitution and drugs. I don't want no more crime. I guess I wanted to live somewhere where I can feel at home. I just want peace. That's why I didn't like St. Louis.

This is a powerful statement from Joel and it highlights the environments in which some refugee families, namely the Congolese, are asked to live in. Joel's youth, much like other participant's, was spent waiting in a warehoused state wherein their U.N. resettlement application for asylum is pending and there are limited alternative solutions within the country of first asylum (UNHCR, 2019). Yet, upon arrival, he expresses the sentiment that he was somehow a burden on the International Institute and that "they want you out of their hands." Therefore, the connection between refugee neighborhood placement and experience is an

important one as decisions may be driven largely by preexisting prejudices and beliefs held about the refugee population by the receiving community.

Several studies indicate that ethnic minorities tend to be concentrated in neighborhoods and areas that resemble their own cultural and economic characteristics (Tselios et al., 2015; Vervoort et al., 2011). Given that refugee families tend to be stripped of their economic and social capital when they flee their home countries, the neighborhoods in which they are placed, and the schools that they attend become important means of replenishing those capital stockpiles. Yet, social capital, for instance, is typically gained through social integration and having access to social networks of the host community. Thus, the strategic placement of refugees from similar cultural backgrounds and similar socio-economic statuses into often deprived and dilapidated neighborhoods, is likely to “hinder to social integration because the statistical chance of meeting natives in high ethnic areas is low” (Tselios et al., 2015, p. 419). Furthermore, if one’s environment is also perceived as dangerous, this exacerbates the unlikely encounter between resettled refugees and the hosting population.

Kevin, a Congolese participant who grew up in Uganda on a refugee camp tells me,

(Kevin) Well, before I came to America, a person at the camp showed me a picture of St. Louis and the arch. I thought it was a beautiful city. And they told us most of the time when you walk on the road, you are just going to find money everywhere. Cause back home, everyone thinks everyone in the U.S. is rich. So, I thought it would be hard to be poor over here. But when I got here, it was different, but somehow true. I mean, it’s true because yes, there are big buildings and all that. But the city is a bit dirty in the day, and at night it’s a little dangerous. Poor people are always on the street asking for money. So, it was different, but what they told me about the schools, that was true. Everything is multiple choice and there is no whooping like back home.

As far as my neighborhood, well, it's not as clean that I thought it will be and I was disappointed in my neighborhood. Mostly about the way people usually just stay inside their house and never come outside. When I talk about not having interactions

with neighbors it's usually because they just stay inside the house. And at the refugee camp everyone was out and interacting.

This provoked me to investigate the underlying rationale for situating refugees from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds in St. Louis. Given the drastic population and demographic changes<sup>37</sup> in St. Louis, it begs the question of whether refugees who are relocated to St. Louis due to determinations at the national level are being used to advance issues at the local level. There is some indication that several established organizations and economic institutions such as the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership and the World Trade Center of St. Louis, are partnering with the International Institute and new start-ups like the Mosaic Project to rejuvenate mostly dilapidated neighborhoods through the intentional placement of refugees from the same ethnic background within these areas. Could this be what is happening in Hodiamont with Congolese families? For that, we must first discuss the changing demographics of St. Louis and the city's current economic strategy to spur economic growth.

### **Neighborhood Effects and Community Development in St. Louis**

In 1950, St. Louis was the 8<sup>th</sup> largest city in the US with a population of just over 850,000. It now has 318,069 residents as of 2010, the last time the US conducted its census. The allure of St. Louis and the conditions that brought about great economic prosperity and population boom during the time these neighborhoods were developed are a relic of the past. Yet, it is the mission of several economic development partners in St. Louis to use the skillsets

of immigrant and refugee migrants to revitalize decades long economic stagnation. Therefore, one cannot adequately discuss the impact of race without first situating it within the larger political-economic superstructure that seeks to perpetuate hegemonic, dominance/subordinate relationships between capitalist investors and urban communities.

It may be that refugees relocating to specific economically declining neighborhoods of St. Louis are burdened with the task of stimulating economic activity in their new communities as a part of a municipal strategy to spark life into abandoned areas. In several cities, “community development was used as an instrument of disadvantaged urban communities to gain equity and power in struggles over economic and political life and to gain access to decision making about the distribution of resources and benefits on behalf of disadvantaged and marginalized community constituents” (Gills, p. 125). Though this study’s methodological design was not conducive to address the relationship between refugee placement and neighborhood economic revitalization, there is historical evidence to suggest that this may be a successful economic strategy.

During and after the bloody civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 70,000 Bosnian refugees resettled to a rundown area called Bevo, which is located in the south of St. Louis. Bevo is commonly referred to as *Little Bosnia* among St. Louis residents and on any given weekend one can find no shortage of patrons bustling in and out of the neighborhood's plentiful bakeries, butchers, and coffee shops. According to a New York Times article, “the influx of what was estimated to be the largest population of Bosnians outside Bosnia seemed to work magic. For the first time in generations, the urban narrative of abandoned houses, stagnant business and vanishing people appeared to be changing” (Delkic, 2019). Yet, what

may be advantageous from an economic perspective may also have negative externalities associated with its implementation, specifically when it comes to social integration. It remains unclear how deliberately placing refugees of the same cultural background or ethnicity in a neighborhood would lead to greater social inclusion and integration, especially when those neighborhoods have negative connotations to begin with. Furthermore, the shared narratives by Congolese participants seem to portray a unified and rather downtrodden depiction of Hodiament.

Returning to Bevo, within a few generations the majority of the Bosnian community started to relocate to the suburbs. Social mobility typically implies greater economic success for an individual. Therefore, it's likely that some Bosnians used their recently replenished economic capital not to remain in the city and integrate with the largely Black population, but to escape the city and move to the mostly White county. Although such strategies to revitalize abandoned neighborhoods have potential, there are several assumptions built into this model, namely the preference to remain a part of the host community. Therefore, the degree to which any increase in economic vibrancy is short-lived or more permanent is difficult to predict. Yet, what can be inferred from Congolese participants' narratives is that their neighborhoods also come with personal risks that extend beyond financial insecurity. These risks include individual costs in safety and emotional stability. Therefore, additional research is needed to interrogate the extent to which decisions about refugee resettlement are prioritizing economic goals over personal well-being. Why should refugees, who have been through so much, be responsible for bringing economic rejuvenation to St. Louis? Specifically, of the other participants in the study's sample, why are the Congolese and not other participants expressing similar experiences

regarding their new neighborhoods? More importantly, why is economic vibrance prioritized over other important goals of social harmony and peace?

However, picking up on a point that his brother made earlier our interview, Sam describes the unintended consequences of resettling Congolese refugees to Hodiament. He does this by drawing on his experience in Boise attending school in the suburbs.

(Sam) I do want to touch base on one of the comparisons that I drew between how the refugees here are taken care of and how they are taken care of Idaho. Idaho is smaller than Missouri, but I have to say that after talking to refugees here and what they went through when they came—Idaho probably got the better refugee program. We had a lot of support and things were already set up for you and everything is ready for you.

But I got the impression that the housing programs for refugees in Idaho was way better. Our neighborhood was better and we didn't have to like watch our backs. But again, there's nothing wrong with Hodiament apartments, you know, it could be better. Ian is right though in Boise, we didn't have to worry about anybody coming up and shooting around and stuff.

So that's why it was good for us to see Boise first, and see what life could be like in America. We got to experience the other side of America. I know how to talk to people with a different color. I have no hatred for anybody. I just have love for everybody. Take you, for example [referring to me]. I mean, I know a lot of black people that can't talk to white people like this. They just live in their own world and trapped in their own way of thinking about the world. And then moving to Hodiament, man it's like moving back into a box again.

The phrase, “back into a box,” I do not believe was used by accident. To me it is symbolic, and expresses being shut out or closed off from the rest. It expresses social closure and symbolizes being a part of the outgroup and the exclusion that comes from it. Additionally, Sam recognizes that exposure to others from disparate backgrounds is a proven strategy for combating the formation of biases brought about by social exclusion. It seems Congolese participants' indignation with their neighborhoods and the vicissitudes associated with the

relocation processes in both Boise and St. Louis suggests that neighborhood effects continue to play a factor in their life.

Lastly, it could be that for some participants expectations regarding life in U.S. were congruous with their experience. If so, then shared narratives regarding dissatisfaction with the neighborhoods in which they were resettled were likely not to be a major topic discussed during the interviews. This may be one reason why the Syrian and Asian refugee participants were noticeably silent on the conditions of their neighborhood, which was described as adequate. Alternatively, it could be that because Syrian and Asian participants were resettled to neighborhoods that were perceived as being less dangerous and nicer. Either way, these narratives illustrate the fact that the International Institute remains a peripheral actor whose neighborhood placements impact refugee experiences with identity negotiation and integration.

From participant narratives it was determined that refugee families have little choice when it comes to where they are to be resettled within the city. Therefore, by placing refugees into specific neighborhoods, which are believed (from participant accounts) to be partly selected based on ethnic considerations, the boundaries that demarcate the neighborhood also become ethnicized. This means that the neighborhoods that refugees (re)populate are not only racialized, as they have always been in the context of St. Louis's struggle with segregation and the lingering effects of White flight but may be a part of a larger economic strategy to transform them into cultural embodiments. It is through this transformation that neighborhoods take on distinct identities themselves and, in the case of Bevo, may become subservient to the economic interests of the city and its planners. Of course, critical race theory

requires one to examine the possible racial underpinnings of the successful Bosnian experience, given that several of the participants in this study referred to them White Americans. Although no Bosnian participants were represented in this study and, therefore, comparisons to the Congolese would be unfounded, it does remain an area of further inquiry. What can be theoretically posited from the data analysis, is that if neighborhoods are perceived as “belonging” to one group over another, then it is likely that integration, if that is still a desirable goal for International Institute, will proceed at a glacial rate, if at all.

### **Theme V: Bounded Agency**

Understanding refugee participant’s sense of agency is integral to this study, which sought to denude the institutional arrangements structure that initially curtails school-choice options for refugees attending St. Louis Public Schools. Participants in this study were involuntarily placed within a complex and at times confusing network of school arrangements and feeder-school patterns. If school choice is to remain a part of the larger strategy to deliver education to St. Louis residents, research must strive to better understand the conditions in which refugee students are compelled to act in ways that are consistent with their educational and aspirational pursuits.

As a reminder, this study adopted Evans’ (2007) view of bounded agency which shifts the focus from “structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration” (p. 92). While structuration in this case is the actor-network described in Theme I that mediates and/or circumscribes the perceptions of possible schools to choose from, emphasis still remains on the individual participants. Therefore, this section

provides an overview of how refugee students describe feeling in control of their futures within such a structure and highlights the ways in which they use the school-choice system to their advantage.

### **Boundless Optimism, Bounded Agency**

Of the four participants categorized as Type I, Merriam and Bao's responses suggests that they believe that their choice to attend a specific school was entirely their own. As explained earlier, Merriam was also a part of AVID, a program designed to help students prepare and navigate college selection process. From Merriam's responses in several of the previous themes, one can clearly recognize that she positions agency and decision-making capacities to fall entirely within her locus of control. She draws strength from her life experiences and uses that as inspiration to seek out and discover her magnet school of choice.

(Merriam) I feel like my experience back home shaped me to move forward and have the right mindset for school here in St. Louis. Because once I got into school, I was so eager. I wanted to learn because I didn't have that back in Cote d'Ivoire and here it was free. I have friends back home who are parents now, and they can't afford to send their children to school, and it is just fifty dollars a year. I'm not going to waste that opportunity, because my goal is to turn back and help my people understand. I don't want another 11-year-old African girl like me coming to America thinking it's going to be all crystal clear and magical. I want to be that person that's going to be there to let them know that it's going to be okay—but people are going to pick on you. People are going to call you names, but that's not going to be you because you're here now to make yourself.

You are in control over your life and the only way to keep control is to get some understanding—to learn for yourself. Do your research. Don't just believe what other people tell you. Go find out. Put yourself in an uncomfortable situation so you can learn. Don't go to Sierra because your counselor in middle school tells you to go. I have a stepsister right now. She goes to Independence and I'm trying to get her out of there. Why? Because she just came here and she's African so boom, she's in Independence because that's the community school.

I want her to know that she does have a choice. Even as the African here, once you get your name in the system, after your first year—you can go to Independence for your first year—but after that you have a choice. You have a GPA now so you can apply anywhere you want to. You just got to get in the system first. And I want them to know that they can work hard to get what they want.

Merriam draws upon her experience in Cote d'Ivoire as a source of motivation. Such optimistic dispositions of what education can provide is consistent with the literature regarding the educational aspirations of refugees. Although she identifies her locus of agency to be within herself, she also understands that systems, and those working within them, can operate in ways that she believes will do her a disservice. If you recall Merriam was adamantly against attending a school with many refugees because it would “hurt them in the long run.” This is perhaps why she views true growth to occur within uncomfortable moments. Furthermore, the idea that one must first spend a year within the choice system to potentially derive all of its theoretical benefits was also expressed by Sam and Ian, both of whom exhibited agency through their individual actions.

Sam convinced his mom to leave SLPS school district by moving out of St. Louis City so that he can attend a school in the county. Ian, who was enjoying his time at Independence, used the public transportation system to commute for hours so that he can keep attending his school despite relocating out-of-district. Although initially an out-of-state transfer, Sam also similarly advised that new students should find a way to make the system of school choice work to their advantage.

(Sam) What I heard when I first came to St. Louis is you can go anywhere you want--any magnet schools you want. Even though we didn't get that choice at first, I think there is a way to be persistent and make the magnet school system work for you. I

would still recommend staying away from Independence. But other than that, I would recommend going to Shaw Classical Studies. I would tell new refugees to definitely get out there and look after that you spend some time in one school. Sometimes all you need to do is just have a foot in the door. Go somewhere for a year and then move once you find out where you want to go.

From Merriam and Sam's responses, it seems that agency appears can be acted upon or activated but only after an initial first year in the school system and, of course, only if one also overcomes structural barriers as highlighted in Theme 1 circumscribed choice. Those barriers include non-human actors such as the lack of transcripts or a GPA. Therefore, participant's agency when choosing the type of school they prefer and thus participate in the educational marketplace is initially suppressed as newly arrived refugee students work towards establishing academic and attendance records. The dilatory nature of school-choice bureaucracy combined with the unfamiliarity with school-choice options work to strip refugees of their agency, at least temporarily.

This notion that agency is initially bounded for refugees due to the lack of proper paperwork and/or credential evaluation is problematic because it fails to provide them with a complete understanding of the options available in the educational marketplace once these temporal restrictions are relaxed. Amara (Type II), who now attends a prestigious private college in Missouri, excelled at Sierra. Yet, she feels that her experience at Sierra did not academically prepare her for college. I even asked her if she would attend Sierra again to which she responded,

(Amara) No, absolutely not. I would not attend Sierra again. And I graduated as valedictorian from there, and I would not attend there. I feel there are schools better equipped and have better--I feel there are better schools that I could have attended if I

had to do it again. Better schools like Shaw Classical Studies or the Biomedical School, or some of the private schools, even if they're in the county or something.”

One could surmise that Type II participant dissatisfaction with their educational experience may be somewhat related to the types of schools they are being asked to choose from. Even if one assumes that experience is independent of choice, the perception of transferring schools as a proxy for agency continues to be influenced by the Welcome School’s initial presentation of school-choice. When pressed on why she decided to remain at Sierra instead of seeking out other options she tells me,

(Amara) I thought about transferring out of Sierra one time. It was after I got bullied. But at that time, all I wanted to do was just get away from the students that were bullying me. I thought about going to Rutherford STEM, but the classes are too big there, and I would be even more confused than I was at Sierra. But my dad talked to the teachers and the administration, and it was basically resolved. But now that you mention it, the weird thing about that is, at the time I was only thinking about getting away from Sierra, and I wasn't thinking about what school that I want to go to other than what I was told at the Welcome School.

Amara’s response suggests that the Welcome School’s influence shaping the perceptions of what schools are available to refugee students continues long after their choice is made. Even Amara, valedictorian and a self-described “diligent and hardworking student” did not believe that she was able to attend some of the other schools, such as Shaw Classical Studies, that are known as being academically rigorous. She believed that the only schools she could attend as a refugee were the three options presented to her at the Welcome School. In this way, Amara’s latent agency was continually bounded by misconceptions and misrepresentations of school-choice based on her experience at the Welcome School.

Therefore, it may be that despite meeting all of the admissions criteria for a desirable school, Type II students have internalized the narratives of Sierra, Rutherford, and Independence as the “foreigners’ schools.” Such internalization will need to be deconstructed if school-choice in St. Louis is to advance its purported goals of equity and diversity.

### **Bounded by Convenience**

Fatima, another type I participant, was a unique case in the sense that her choice was primarily due to her middle school closing. I felt the inclusion of her story added an additional layer of complexity when trying to understand the conditions that activate latent agency.

(Fatima) At first Beaumont Middle was its own school and then because it wasn't doing so well with the students and testing and studies, in my last year—my eighth grade year—we ended up sharing a building with Sierra International. So Beaumont moved into Sierra High School. We had the third floor, like all the way at the top and then the rest of the building was for the high schoolers. And then when we were in eighth grade. It's like, "What? I have to choose another school to go to after you moved me?" So that was strange.

But, I had this really good counselor. She really helped the foreigners, like the immigrant kids. She was very helpful in guiding us to choose our next school and everything. She helped us fill out the forms. She basically filled it out for us. She said, "Fatima why don't you just go here, to Sierra?" and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm already here and I already know it."

Speaking with former colleagues at SLPS, I was able to determine that Beaumont Middle was the affiliated feeder middle school for Sierra International Studies High School prior to its closure. Thus, Fatima’s experience with choice and perceptions of agency can be categorized as bounded, as they are partially shaped by actors working on behalf of the school-choice structure and driven by largely economic and market determinants, in addition to her personal

decisions. Furthermore, schools, and by extension choices, are also susceptible to the whims of market dynamism. It may be that Fatima's experience of selecting a magnet middle school only to have it close may signal that her educational preferences are not in demand and, therefore, not relevant. How does this experience impact her when she tries to decide her next move? The question of whether school closure activates agentic decision-making capacities or suppresses them is of great interest for further researcher.

Regardless, it may be that Fatima did not wish to risk attending another school only to be asked to move again. When it comes to the volatility of market dynamics which position education as a commodity and students as sources of capital, Fatima's decision seems to be more so determined by convenience and not the result of some methodical calculation on the type of educational experience she would receive. Yet, one is left to ponder whether the same decision would have been made had her school remained in operation. Kevin's response to similar questions regarding the choice of school transference also highlights the myriad of ways refugee students justify remaining in the school first "selected," including convenience.

(Kevin) Well at one time I thought about transferring to Rockwood. It is a school in the county. But getting there would be hard. Mostly I wanted to transfer there because of the soccer team. They had a very good soccer team, and their graduation rate was higher than Rutherford. So, I really wanted to go there. But it required us to move out of this city into the county. To live there—and my parents couldn't do that.

Then, I thought about transferring to Soldan at one point when I was a junior. But decided not to because mostly I thought about education first. Going to Soldan—changing schools when I was going to be a senior—transferring from one school to the other is going to make everything difficult. To understand the school and the way they teach over there, to make all new friends. It is all going to be new. So, I just decided to stay at Rutherford STEM and just finish over there.

The first half of Kevin's response illustrates the extent to which being placed in an urban, school-choice district was undesirable, a theme previously discussed. The second paragraph highlights Kevin's reluctance to transfer schools. Although Kevin did not divulge the exact reason why he thought about transferring to Sierra (the other magnet school option provided to him), acting on this impulse was stultified by his apprehension of entering into a new and unfamiliar school environment. According to Kevin, persevering through one more year of education in a school that one can infer he deemed to be inadequate was better than risking the chance on adapting to a new one. From his response, I got the impression that Kevin was in somewhat of a survivorship mode wherein the academic and social conditions of his school just slightly met the minimum threshold for him to remain. Thus, the boundaries between structure and individual when determining the locus of agency becomes increasingly blurred when considering the multitude of factors that influence whether a student is realistically likely to transfer schools within St. Louis.

In sum, several participants coded as Type I exhibited a fuller range of perceptions on choice and the conditions conducive to act on them. In the case of Merriam, who was a part of AVID, and Bao, who attended events explicitly designed to showcase school choice options, such experiences may need to be expanded to all refugee and newcomer populations. To the extent that such programs are reserved exclusively for students deemed academically advanced will exacerbate underlying educational inequalities that inherently exist in school-choice structures. Conversely, the majority of participants (n=9) whose decision to attend a specific high school was facilitated by the Welcome School (Type II), reported feeling unhappy with not only their choices, but also their educational experience at their respective schools. Again,

these are refugee participants that analysis suggested were presented as a narrower, circumscribed range of school options.

### Resistance to school-choice structuration

When it comes to understanding the conditions that galvanize refugee students to act on behalf of their educational interests, the case of Joel is among the most unique of all the participants interviewed. Joel recognized that his agency was being restricted, but he also fully rejected the circumscribed choices presented to him. As a reminder, Joel moved from Kenya after successfully completing his junior year in a school where the medium of instruction was English. After his initial assessment at the Welcome School, he was informed that he was going to return to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to the classes he needed to graduate. Recalling the period of time in which he was making a decision he tells me,


(Joel) The justification they provided for putting me back in the 9th grade from 12th grade was irrelevant. They said your paperwork is not complete and the test [they gave me] did not grade my capability. I was supposed to go to 12th grade, and they gave me a ninth-grade test which I passed, I had an A. I only failed two subjects that I never took—American history since in Africa they teach us about the world's history, and I think government.

So, when they told me that, I just didn't want to waste my time. I was a senior going back to ninth grade and everything they wanted to teach me I knew, somewhat. The only thing that is going to be different is that they want to just teach me the American history. So, when I asked many people what they thought of the schools they said Independence is not a good choice because of drugs and students are disrespectful. So, I thought, well if I am going to waste my time let me go to Independence. At least I will have fun. It's not like Sierra; I heard everyone is serious at Sierra. So, I said "no." I don't want to be serious right now because they're just wasting my time.

Joel would eventually transfer to another comprehensive school, Woodcreek High, after a year at independence. He would go on to take the HiSET test, which “gives out-of-school youth and adults the best opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge and earn a state-issued high school equivalency” (hiset.ets.org). The case of Joel illustrates the ways in which some refugee students not only resist school-choice, but also the deficit perspective that some working in the field of education may unconsciously hold. Upon satisfactory performance, Joel graduated with a high school degree much quicker than if he would have returned to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. He is now working full-time and aspires of getting a college education, but only when he feels it is the right time.

As you can see, the conditions in which bring about agentic actions is dependent on several factors such as time spent within the system and exposure to specific forms of information. Table 9 below contains selected participant responses when describing perceptions of educational choice and their sense of control over their educational futures. They were selected in such a way as to represent all schools in the sample. Furthermore, each response was placed on a spectrum of locus of agency starting from residing within the individual (agentic) to within the structure of school choice (deterministic).

TABLE 9: CODED THEME AND SUPPORTING STATEMENTS FOR LOCUS OF AGENCY

Coded Theme: <b>Locus of Agency</b>		
<u>Participant</u>	<u>Supporting Statements</u>	<u>Individual/ Agentic</u>
<b>Merriam, Northwest Career Academy</b>	"I would say my choice was completely a hundred percent my own because I wasn't going to go where all the Africans wanted to go. But at one point I thought it would be nice to go to high school with my friends, but nope."	
<b>Bao, Edgewater ROTC</b>	"I was just enjoying school and I was listening to the student ambassadors from the high schools talk about their school. I saw one student who was dressed up in ROTC and told me I could be a cadet. I thought it was pretty cool, you know, and I had couple of friends from middle school and they had the same choice. I think I picked it cause my friends picked it."	
<b>Joel, Woodcreek (Independence Transfer)</b>	I didn't like the choices that they gave me. They only give me four options though. There are many other schools available, but I didn't feel that way because they gave me four options. I felt like I didn't have a say about my life here. So, I decided to transfer to Woodcreek, take the HiSET and be done."	
<b>Kevin, Rutherford STEM</b>	"I thought about transferring to Soldan at one point when I was a junior. But decided not to because mostly I thought about education first. Going to Soldan—changing schools when I was going to be a senior—transferring from one school to the other is going to make everything difficult. To understand the school and the way they teach over there. It is all going to be new. So, I just decided to stay at Rutherford STEM and just finish over there."	
<b>Yonas, Rutherford STEM</b>	"I would not say that was my own decision and I would not say somebody forced me. I cannot say that. It's just that I didn't know anything. If my friend did not tell me, I was just do rock, paper, scissor with the three, and then choose any thing that comes to my head during the choice time or filling the paper."	
<b>Dang, Sierra International Studies</b>	"I thought maybe I can switch because I feel I do not get the education I deserve at Sierra. I thought that maybe I'll attend Rutherford once because they focus on STEM. But then didn't. I think my family, I think they want me to stay at Sierra. Switching school is not easy, I think. For some people it is. But I did not try."	
<b>Amir, Sierra International Studies High School</b>	"They [Welcome School] didn't give me any option. They're like, 'Okay, you have to go to schools near the area. Rutherford, Sierra, you have to apply.' They said, 'you have to apply to school near these areas.' If I had known I had more options I would have probably applied to more rigorous schools."	

Finally, several participants expressed satisfaction with their school choice and the education they received. Emmanuel and Mona (Type II) are the only participants who would choose Sierra again if presented with the option. They both expressed a sense of belonging and feeling attached to the school. For Emmanuel, he derived strength from a soccer team who he described as having entirely “foreigner” players. Mona stated that classes were fun and that she was able to easily make friends with both foreigner students and American students. To the extent that each of their cases can serve as evidence for ways in which schools are able provide a positive educational experience to refugee students would be a whole study in itself.

### Summary

This section described refugee participants’ perceptions of feeling in control of their educational futures within a rigid school-choice structure that is designed to circumscribe their options of where to attend high school. Although agency, to a certain extent, is likely bounded for all students enrolled in school-choice districts, it is particularly so for Type II refugee participants considering the requirements to attend schools with ESOL programs. Additionally, because of the increase in refugee families to the St. Louis area and the stigma often associated with them, those magnet schools that are absorbing an influx of students from refugee backgrounds in their school population may also be more susceptible to decisions derived in part from prejudice consumer preferences in the educational marketplace. Taken altogether, evidence presented in this theme and previous ones suggests that school-level decisions, such as curricular requirements or pathway options, may either mislead or exclude entirely some refugee students from accessing the thematic educational opportunities marketed to the general public. Those participants who did feel as if they were able to make choices that aligned

with their educational aspirations did so by their circumventing the ESOL requirements or by seeking ways in which to escape the structuration of school-choice altogether through strategic out-of-district relocation or by early graduation programs.

## **Chapter VIII: Research Contributions, Implications, and Conclusions**

Five major themes were identified and explored in this study, Circumscribed-Choice, Magnet-in-Name-Only, Identity and Discrimination, Racialized Schools and Neighborhoods, and Bounded Agency. These themes were the result of applying actor-network theory, critical race theory, funds of knowledge and human agency theory to narrative data gathered from participants. Additionally, cross case analysis revealed that there is much variation between participants' experiences based on the Welcome Schools involvement in refugee student's school-choice decision. Yet, despite this variation in school-choice experience, the findings highlight the extent to which choice remains somewhat of an illusion for many refugee newcomers. Therefore, the focus then shifts to how this research can be used to create transformative agents of change that can then impact the educational structures that they find themselves within. Unfortunately, the global coronavirus pandemic interrupted plans to host a focus group with participants to collectively unpack their experiences with school-choice—an approach designed to articulate small but meaningful ways in which they can act to alter network relations. It is my contention, that human agency cannot be fully understood without examining the social implications of network (mis)configuration, which—if historicized sufficiently—is partially attributable to shifts and patterns in cultural and political discourses. A focus group might have provided the space to push back on those dominant cultural and political discourses regarding school-choice in St. Louis, MO. Regardless, this research has several important findings. Therefore, this chapter examines the usefulness of the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study and the study's findings to pull a part the sinews of

actor-network relations within school choice districts in the interest of equal educational opportunity for refugees.

## **Contributions and Implications for Theory and Applied Research**

### **Actor Network Theory & Critical Race Theory: Complementing Frameworks for Social Justice.**

This section discusses the usefulness of Actor-Network Theory as a conceptual framework for analyzing the assemblage of actants in shaping educational experiences and its implications for expanding the literature in the field of international and comparative education policy. ANT is a relatively recent newcomer in educational research circles but is establishing a foothold as a means of tracking policies across horizontal and vertical boundaries (Barlett and Vavrus, 2016). In this study, I applied ANT by identifying vested actants and constructing a network map of how they come together to produce certain outcomes. ANT requires an object of inquiry. School-choice was that object, but it was only considered from the perspective of refugee users. Therefore, the actor-network, as presented in this paper, is incomplete. To be fully captured this research would have also needed to consider the relationships between several other categories of human and non-human actors. Although ANT discourages imposing boundaries on the social phenomena under question, such restrictions may be warranted in seeking to contextualize the conditions in which a phenomenon manifests itself, or to understand it from a specific perspective, in this case refugee students.

When I proposed his study, I sought to understand prospective participants' perspectives of school-choice possibilities. Refugees engaging with the Actor Network confirm

that market dynamics on the basis of consumer preferences do not always govern school-choice options; rather, the institutional arrangements between networked actors *circumscribe choice* for Type II participants. This is perhaps the greatest contribution that ANT has had in this study. It is because of participants willingness to recount their experience that we were able to lay bare a portion of the SLPS structure that discriminately concentrates refugee students in specific schools. In this way ANT, as a framework, is useful for identifying processes that result in discrimination and restriction of choice for students from refugee backgrounds. ANT confirms the institutional arrangements that discriminately deliver unequal educational opportunities to refugee families with school-aged children. In the context of this study, those users were refugee students and, therefore, the degree of choice provided is also ethnicized. Thus, reinforcing the familiar notion that school choice systems, by their very design, almost never function as equitably as proponents claim.

In terms of social justice-oriented frameworks, it must be mentioned that although ANT is not intentionally designed to position social justice as a primary objective of the research process, it doesn't disallow it either. Thus, in order to understand St. Louis's continuing struggle with delivering quality educational opportunities to all, ANT must be combined with critical theory to expose the ways in which networks can and do fail to include certain, often marginalized, users. Therefore, ANT and CRT together, are useful in educational research as means to move beyond simply the naming of systems that reproduce inequalities, in this case school-choice, to systematically uncover and investigate how key opportunistic actors emerge and may in fact, as I have demonstrated, undermine the theoretical presuppositions of market-led education reform. It is by the careful construction of the actor-network by means of

assembling and arranging identified actors by their concomitant overlapping interests, that researchers can also render network vulnerabilities. Only then, can the network be made to change by either introducing a new actor in the interest of equity, altering the relational dynamics of the actors involved or dismantling the perverse incentives that naturally occur when money (as with the case of per pupil funding of schools) and power become the embedded byproducts of the actor-network feedback loops.

Differences in student narratives regarding access or educational attainment within schools or school systems can be useful in providing information on which processes warrant greater scrutiny. Such inconsistencies in school-choice experience can be viewed as a failure of the network (although some critical theorist would argue that the network is in fact working exactly how it was designed). Network failure is fundamentally different from market failure when discussing assumptions of market theory, as the latter would not view school choice as a barrier to the distribution of educational services. Tweaking Schrank and Whiteford's (2011, p. 155) definition, *network failure* defined here as "the failure of a more or less idealized set of relational-network institutions to sustain 'desirable outcomes' or to impede 'undesirable outcomes,'" may perpetuate misunderstandings of educational possibilities. A caveat to this modified permutation of Schrank and Whiteford's (2011) definition is that it is only useful if and when those idealized set of relational-network institutions include viewing refugee families as stakeholders themselves and not merely as passive bystanders experiencing network operations. If not viewed as part-in-parcel in the relational-network dynamics, it's likely that central actors are not aware that the network is failing them. Therefore, ANT and CRT as it

relates to the institutional arrangements have implications for local level policy and practices, which I will discuss below (see Implications for Policy: Local Level).

As Yosso (2005) reminds us, it is reasonable to assume that refugees experience some degree of depletion in their stockpiles of social, cultural, financial and navigational capital upon fleeing their home countries. Such forms of capital provide an advantage to individuals when engaging with the novelties of a robust school-choice actor-network. Thus, refugees experience network failure when they report feeling trapped, unhappy with their options, or not in control of their educational destinies. Network failures are not universally experienced by all users of a system, nor are they comprehensive in their breakdowns. In this case, the network failed a portion of the refugee participants by circumscribing their access to schools they deemed to be more desirable upon reflection. For refugees categorized as Type II, this reveals a misalignment of interests between the primary network drivers (Welcome School and IISTL) and their purported beneficiaries (i.e., refugee students). Although this research did not interview how native St. Louis residents experience school-choice, comparisons can be made from the case of Bao and Merriam as to their sense of agency and empowerment. Both are categorized as Type I, attended magnet schools true to their form, and reported feeling accepted and loved by their teachers and peers. For them, the network expanded their academic and out-of-school opportunities.

Network failure, as opposed to market failure which generally invites reform or intervention to correct for violations of basic market assumptions, is often difficult to detect. ANT can be a powerful analytical tool useful in describing the formation, reproduction and, theoretically, the transformation of actor-network relations to correct for network failure. In

the context of the educational marketplace of St. Louis, this requires that those maintaining the network can distinguish between several categories of student, including refugee. As Amir told me, “I identify as African because I’m not like a United States citizen yet. But on my student transcript I am African American—like—you get that title African-American when you enroll here even though I’m not.” It is possible that data gathering decisions that categorize students based on race conceals and essentializes the unique experiences of refugees within school-choice districts. Therefore, this research can be instructive for reforming the daily operations of the International Institute and its partnership with the Welcome School, in the interest of transparency, empowerment and social justice. In order to do this, more granular data are needed on refugee experiences and a more expansive understanding of how local, information communication channels are shaped along ethnic lines and geographical locales commonly referred to in school choice districts as “catchment areas”.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory coupled with Actor Network Theory allowed attention to be drawn to how certain structures that influence school-choice are shaped partly by racialized dynamics and socio-economic considerations that produce a distinct divide between St. Louis City and St. Louis County. Though actors certainly are involved in the production and diffusion of racialized dialogical narratives regarding the kind of education one would receive at a particular school, CRT—when applied to the analysis of narratives—was also useful in rendering a cogent explanation as to why integration for refugees within predominantly minority school districts remains a complicated process. This study, as well as other studies that focus on refugees in urban educational contexts, indicates the need to go beyond what is normally the focus of

critical race theory—which tends to examine structures that reproduce interracial inequalities. In that regard, traditional critical race studies might have overlooked the ways in which neoracism operates to privilege or perpetuate the status of the context-specific dominant group (i.e., Black American students). Discrimination, then, is not simply the result of dynamics between races (i.e., between Whites and Blacks), but between individual responses to performances of ethno-cultural and national identity. In many urban schools, the tensions and antagonisms experienced between self-referential groups—a function of identity—first involves the manufacturing of more complex categories of refugee/foreigner (e.g., Syrian-refugee, African-refugee, English-speaking-refugee, White-refugee, the light-skinned refugee, etc.). Within educational settings, such categories may lead to subtle and/or overt forms of discrimination that signal to others who is a part of the dominant group and who isn't. Thus, critical race theory must move beyond its current White-Black, dominant-subordinate framework—while also not exonerating White people from their historical (and contemporary) complicity in generating the inequitable structures of power in which both Black Americans and refugees find themselves in.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

This research also provides insight into the ways in which funds of knowledge for refugees are susceptible to influences from the actor network. Informal communication channels emerge naturally within refugee communities, especially when refugees from certain backgrounds are concentrated in specific neighborhoods or housing complexes. As stated previously, this neighborhood-facilitated nexus of communication also represents an indirect connection to the actor-network itself. This becomes problematic when specific information

regarding the full range of educational options is intentionally restricted or conveniently overlooked in the interests of placing refugee students at certain schools.

Additionally, refugees draw upon their funds of knowledge to overcome obstacles adapting to their new environments. The social support that they derive from first encounters with other refugees suggests that information exchange inextricably links them with the International Institute of St. Louis. Although this is generally not a problem, an issue that remains unresolved is the role of the school district in communicating with refugee students and their families. By consolidating information exchange in one centralized hub, such as the International Institute and by extension the Welcome School, direct communication with district headquarters or school administration is diminished. This move may effectively absolve schools of their responsibility to directly engage refugee families as a part of a concerted strategy to understand the educational needs of this diverse population.

### **Bounded Agency**

This study found several institutional arrangements that constrict or bind the agency of refugee students. In many respects, bounded agency is somewhat of a given in a structure that relies upon various forms of metrics to stratify students and reduce the options available to them through cutthroat criteria for admission. Therefore, it was of little surprise that several participants reported feeling like they did not have a choice in where to attend high school.

The question of when agency matters when it comes to school choice and how it can help one understand the conditions that promote agentive action becomes difficult to determine given all the factors that are designed to constrain it. Yet, this research confirms Bartlett et al. (2017) study which found student optimism to be an invaluable resource and acts

as a form of “refugee resilience” when presented with negative educational experiences (p. 116). From the limited cases in this study, wherein participants claimed that their choice to attend a specific school was fully their own, certain individual characteristics can be identified that may have played a crucial role in establishing a sense of agency. This study also found that self-reliance, tenacity and optimism are necessary preconditions that can assist in overcoming structural and/or institutional barriers to school-choice access. Yet those attributes are only able to be drawn upon once an individual acquires the implicit knowledge of the innerworkings of school-choice in St. Louis typically held by many native residents. As Merriam indicated, her latent agency was only activated when she learned that she didn’t have to attend Independence. This suggests that agency matters in school choice when refugee students are provided a complete understanding of how choice is operationalized and what is required to be able to effectuate a transfer of agency from the structure to the individual. For Merriam, the AVID program she was in elucidated admissions requirements and helped her gain insight that is typically more common among her native peers.

Additionally, if agentic behavior is learned, it can therefore be conditioned or enhanced with practice. For Bao, the only other Type I participant who described his choice to attend Edgewater ROTC to be his own, the decision was made alongside co-nationals and, therefore, required him to exert agency. To be agentic one must be asked to make individual decisions regularly. For those participants who felt as if they did not have a voice in where to attend high school, agency is not an attribute that one has or doesn’t, rather, agency is bounded by structural constraints that limit the extent to which they are able to practice agentic behavior. Thus, the actor-network that delimits perceptions of school-choice options,

also works to shape the agentic capabilities of refugee students as actors within the network to deleterious ends. Yet, where this research may further be of use is in exposing the myth of equal educational opportunity in the U.S. Although remaining the ultimate end goal, policy and programs advanced throughout the years still is far from achieving equality of educational opportunity and it seems that market-driven solutions only serve to perpetuate existing inequalities.

### **Contributions and Implications for Policy**

Although the previous section examined how school-choice literature may benefit from the use of the theoretical frameworks that guided the analysis of data, this section makes connections between cross-case analysis of participant experiences and the implications for policy across multiple levels. As stated before, ANT discourages the imposition of boundaries on a network, instead opting to view systems as the result of continuous and often self-serving processes. Thus, policies at the international and national level indubitably influence local practices. The regions, states and localities in which refugees are placed upon approval of resettlement provide the opportunities to start to rebuild their lives anew. Education within their new communities affords refugee students a means to advance their own life and career pathways. For the sake of organization, I have decided to partition them into ascending levels, what Barlett and Vavrus (2016) refer to as the micro, meso and macro spheres. Yet, before turning to specific policy recommendations, revisiting what the resettlement process looks like is crucial when considering placement and policy changes across governmental levels.

Initial applications for asylum are typically started in countries of first asylum by UNHRC or one of their affiliates. Moving from the International to the national level, there are several federal agencies that are typically involved in the process of refugee resettlement in the U.S., such as the State department, Department of Homeland Security and Department of Health and Human services. However, Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) is ultimately responsible for determining whether an application is approved. If approved, refugee families are then transferred to one of nine<sup>38</sup> federally recognized voluntary agencies (VOLAG) privately contracted by the federal government and receive funds through the federal Reception and Placement (R&P) grant. R&P animates the resettlement practices of VOLAGs who work with local, subcontracted NGOs to provide resettlement services. Those local NGOs are a sub-recipient of the funding VOLAGs receive from the R&P grant.

The International Institute of St. Louis (IISTL) is a nonprofit resettlement services program recognized by the Department of Justice and is subcontracted by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), a VOLAG. The IISTL, like all local subsidiaries of VOLAGs, send representatives to select certain refugee cases that have been approved or are awarded refugee cases based upon several factors outlined in the contract between the VOLAG and the U.S government. Factors that determine where a refugee will be placed in the U.S. include whether they have a living relative already in the U.S. (family member priority) or access to

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<sup>38</sup> Those nine recognized VOLAGs include: Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, The Global Jewish Nonprofit, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, World Relief

specific needs such as medical specialist (medical priority) or linguistic services available to the resettlement agency.

Apropos of the resettlement process, I find the *awarding* of refugee cases to VOLAGs to be analogous to a pre-season football draft. Individuals agents (refugee cases) arrive to be evaluated wherein teams (VOLAGs) send their technical directors (representatives) to draft (select) agents based of their organizations needs and, in part, the needs of the agent. If an individual refugee or their families do not fit neatly into a priority category, then they are considered to be free agents (free cases) and are awarded based on space, ethnic composition of the city from prior migratory patterns, or on the agreed upon case percentage between the State Department and the VOLAGs, which is outlined in their cooperative agreement. In my research, little attention, if any, is given to the educational contexts in which refugees are placed within their host communities. It is just assumed that any issues with educational access and attainment is a concern to be addressed after relocation. This is problematic in the context of school-choice in St. Louis for all of the reasons previously identified in the themes that emerged from this research.

VOLAGs can be religious or secular and delegate relocation responsibilities to their one of several NGO subsidiaries across the United States. For their services, VOLAGs provide resettlement funding that pays for both direct costs (housing, transportation, document fees) and indirect costs (staff salaries, building costs, etc.). Similar to other resettlement programs, IISTL must therefore operate within its financial and budgetary means. Inadequate funding structures then impose implications for refugee neighborhood placement. Funding is typically derived from federal monetary contributions (R&P grant) on a per refugee basis, which back in

2017, added up to providing \$1,125.00 of direct support per refugee (Bruno, 2017). To operate sufficiently, VOLAGs and non-profit resettlement programs rely heavily on donations and charity from other sources. With this background knowledge, I now turn to level-specific policy recommendations.

### **Local Level**

Given the less than laudable outcomes of St. Louis's 35-year experiment with school choice, technical failures in policy and programming must be understood as also a function of community and cultural dynamics that influence those processes. Local Level policy considerations are the most explicit as they can immediately alter the experience of future refugee students relocated to St. Louis. These considerations are informed by the narratives retold in this dissertation in addition to contemporary research regarding the educational needs of refugee students in the context of the U.S. Specifically, the policy suggestions in this section do not include a dismantling of the entire school-choice apparatus upon which SLPS is built—even though such reform, I believe, is necessary. Suggestions provided are immediately actionable, as they are meant to work within the structure of school choice until the political will of St. Louis residents pressure state and local governments to abandon market-driven educational experimentation on this urban district.

### ***Integrate ESOL content across content subjects***

This research identified that in order to be eligible to apply for all choice schools, parents of refugee students must decline ESOL services, or their child must score a certain level on an English proficiency exam, in addition to meeting school-specific admission requirements.

Though it remains debatable as to whether declining ESOL services is viewed as desirable, I mention it here because the financial and budgetary decisions to fund and operate only three ESOL programs leads to a restriction of school choice options. As a point of departure, these policy recommendations consider the lack of financial resources necessary to expand ESOL programs to all high schools apart of SLPS. Furthermore, even if such monetary restrictions were overcome, this research demonstrates that labeling students as ESOL also restricts their access to more advanced curricula and perpetuates intra-school inequalities through isolationism and avoidance. Therefore, the first policy recommendation is that SLPS should not only revisit the district policy that necessarily places all newly arrived refugees in schools with ESOL programs, but also restructure ESOL services in ways that intentionally integrates them into school and classroom culture. For this strategy to take a foothold, however, must be coupled with professional development on how to identify and mitigate discriminatory classroom practices and student-to-student interactions and requires the full buy-in of both administration and staff.

Integrating ESOL content within mainstream classroom environments and providing ample professional development and time for ESOL professionals to work alongside teachers of core subjects has been shown to lead to higher academic achievement for refugee and immigrant students (Bartlett, 2017). Having a centralized hub wherein targeted groups labeled as ESOL are “pulled-out” of often leads to students underperforming in their core subjects. This is not a new policy recommendation given the preponderance of educational research that discourages learning English in sheltered instructional ESOL programs (Callahan, 2005; Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Gandara & Orfield, 2012; Hakuta, 2011; Harklau, 1994; Thompson, 2013).

Yet, given SLPS's financial constraints, one particularly cost-effective way of ensuring integration of ESOL content within mainstream classrooms is to prioritize the hiring of educators with dual certifications in both subject content and an area related to teaching students of varying language proficiencies, such as foreign language, ESOL, or literacy coaching. The rationale for hiring such candidates is that the training they receive in their teacher education programs enhances the instructional strategies of their core content. Furthermore, given the need to hire teachers with certification in subjects typically assessed via State benchmarking, such hiring practices may provide little to no additional strain on already stretched budgets. Combined with intentional professional development and a culture of ESOL support within mainstream classrooms, the use of ESOL programs that remove refugee students from their American peers become unnecessary.

Additionally, this research presented evidence of intra-school inequalities and barriers to certain educational pathways. Removal of the ESOL label and sheltered ESOL programs provide more room in the schedule for refugee students to participate in the thematic curricular options afforded to their American counterparts. Therefore, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that all students are able to access curricular opportunities associated with each magnet school's theme. An internal reexamination of the school policies that effectively deprive students of access is crucial if magnet schools are to operate in ways that are consistent with their advertising.

### ***Equitable credential evaluation***

The second policy recommendation is a more holistic and less rigid criterion of deciding refugee student's readiness levels for admittance into selective enrollment magnet schools. Several refugees stated that they were given language tests which aimed to assess their level in English instead of assessing their educational level, psychological and mental health, preferred learning modalities, or prior knowledge. Although English proficiency is crucial for success in monolingual schools in the U.S., coupled with the need to evaluate academic and school records, prioritizing English proficiency serves to document what refugee students don't know, instead of establishing a baseline and building upon what they do. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) minimum standards states that, "documentation requirements should be flexible. Certificates of citizenship, birth or age, identity papers or school reports should not be required for entry because emergency-affected populations may not have these documents" (INEE, 2010, p. 57). Yet, in a hypercompetitive educational marketplace with specific admissions criteria that only consider certain types of metrics as legitimate, such as GPA, transcripts, attendance, and discipline records and so on, lacking such documentation acts as a barrier that only works to further disadvantage refugee students.

Furthermore, participants reported a panoply of educational experiences ranging from out-of-school entirely (non-formal education) to religious private school formal education, and every permutation in between. From this study, students relocating to St. Louis were treated as having similar educational histories upon arrival at the Welcome School. Yet, participants described having diverse and at times even more rigorous educational backgrounds than what they received at their school in St. Louis. Therefore, the role of transcript and credential evaluation should be revisited and questioned in the assessing of refugee student readiness.

For better or for worse, credential evaluation is already a crucial component of higher education's approach to assessing international students seeking to enroll in universities and is taken on a case-by-case basis. By taking a somewhat deficit view of cultural wealth and knowledge that refugee populations bring into their new communities, the Welcome School—with their hyper-emphasis on English proficiency—may have underestimated the extent to which refugee students are able to succeed in the variety of educational contexts offered in a robust school-choice district. Therefore, admission policies specifically for refugees should be created in the interest of educational and school choice equity.

***Embracing alternative and informal networks of communication for information exchange***

At the local level, barriers to access that are often associated with choice schema, such as time, transportation and uniform and book costs, were not reported to be much of a factor for refugee students. What is more of a factor is the lack of understanding about how school-choice works, where to find pertinent information and the proper protocols or avenues one must take when attempting to enroll in a magnet school. Thus, the final policy recommendation is to create refugee- and immigrant-specific informational recruitment programs. No participants reported learning about any schools or having any informational material that was directed specifically to them.

It is common in public middle schools for counselors to provide guidance to students and their families on where to attend high school in St. Louis. Yet, as Crul and colleagues (2019) note, parents of refugee children often lack the confidence to approach administrators, teachers, and other personnel within their new settings. Therefore, such a responsibility should

fall squarely on the shoulders of school officials to restructure the actor-network for information delivery in a more transparent and equitable manner. Although centralizing information about school-choice options in one place, such as the International Institute or the Welcome School, makes sense, issues arise when choices are being made on behalf of refugee families instead of alongside them. One scalable intervention is through a targeted school exploration program such as the one Merriam went through with her AVID teacher. Such a program could strengthen the ties of refugees to the actor-network stakeholders and the larger community. Information given, gathered, and discussed alongside trusted school personnel can overcome impersonal, bureaucratic modes of informational exchange. Therefore, in order to understand their unique needs and gain their trust, school officials should meet refugee families where they are by embracing the role of the informal counter-networks and how they can be a source of information. This can be accomplished through stronger outreach programs and refugee parental involvement at the schools or during community events.

### ***Abandoning Temporary Refugee Education in Parallel Schools***

The final policy recommendation I wish to advance is one that I struggled with including for both personal and professional reasons. There is a growing trend in several cities accepting refugees to place their children in 2-year transitional schools—especially if they are of high school age upon arrival. Despite the good intentions of these “Welcome Schools,” such an approach must be rejected if public schools are to be viewed as spaces of inclusion. Without reiterating the issues identified in this dissertation when such a transitional school operates in the context of a school choice district, Welcome Schools are in effect a parallel educational structure and can be considered a form of segregation. Their presence and the refugee student

time spent within them, however temporary, legitimizes segregation along national, ethno-cultural and linguistic lines.

Abandonment of such a policy is even promoted by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) which states, “Infrastructure and services already exist in urban environments; humanitarian actors should capitalize upon local resources, advocate against discrimination in public services, and avoid the creation of parallel, refugee-specific structures” (PRM, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, despite the wonderful people who work at ‘Welcome Schools’—many of whom give their time, love, and patience unconditionally—direct access to safe, supportive, quality education alongside foreigners, co-nationals and natives alike remains the ultimate goal. As evidenced by Nabil’s story, he elected to return to Independence from Sierra precisely because he knew that he had the love and support of the Welcome School teachers who he felt more comfortable approaching for help as he progressed through his high school education. Therefore, the expertise that teachers of refugee students have, particularly those at the Welcome School, is an untapped reservoir of experience that other SLPS teachers can draw from when looking to make their classrooms spaces of inclusivity and/or incorporate refugee students’ funds of knowledge—both crucial to processes of two-way integration. I do not want to understate the urgency of abandoning parallel schooling for refugees. Integration of refugees into mainstream classrooms is a precondition of integrating ESOL instruction across subjects. If adopted, this policy should allow for the sharing of pedagogical practices from Welcome School educators to their colleagues working in mainstream classrooms.

### **National Level**

A critical analysis of the types of refugee first impressions of their new environments and neighborhoods revealed several insights into the ways in which certain areas act as reservoirs of strength or strife. For refugees, not only are their in-school experiences shaped by their social standing within the hosting community, but also their out-of-school experiences within the neighborhoods in which they are placed—which also tend to resemble their social standing. Therefore, there are overlapping policy implications between the local level and the national level decisions that can further be elucidated by this study. Thus, this section makes connections between the perceived quality of city and neighborhood placement, and the impact of socio-emotional and psychological wellbeing on the educational experience. In this way, this study supplements the literature on refugee education and calls for an equitable framework to complement processes of refugee placement in the United States.

***Increased Funding and Ensured Accountability in the National Minimum Standards Framework for U.S. Resettlement***

The standards and guidelines outlined in the cooperative agreement between the VOLAGs and the State Department uses the Sphere Humanitarian Minimum Standards framework, which include process, progress, and target indicators to evaluate services rendered by resettlement agencies. Although mechanisms of accountability and mandatory reporting are embedded essential components of the PRM cooperative agreement, they are between the VOLAG and the State Department. Less is known about how VOLAGs, once they delegate cases to local affiliates, go about ensuring that their non-profit subsidiaries are being held to measure up to these key indicators. With that understanding, the first policy recommendation at the national level is to increase financial support for resettlement programs

at the federal level to strengthen accountability mechanisms that are meant to evaluate progress towards the minimum standards key indicators.

One of the core standards that inform resettlement services is an obligation to place refugee families in cities, neighborhoods and localities that are supportive of their wellbeing, which includes physical, emotional, social, developmental, and psychological domains. Funding is crucial to the monitoring process of this standard as the quality of data gathered is related to the amount of time and resources one must commit to the data gathering process. Regarding physical wellbeing, refugees, many of whom come from conflict-affected regions, should not be placed into known environments where physical safety is an oft-cited concern for access to education, such as the case with the Congolese in St. Louis. The U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) defines protection as,

Measures to safeguard the rights of PRM populations of concern by seeking to prevent or end patterns of violence or abuse; alleviate the trauma and related effects of violence or abuse; identify and promote durable solutions; foster respect for refugee, humanitarian, and human rights law; and ensure that humanitarian actions uphold human dignity, benefit the most vulnerable, and do not harm affected populations (U.S. Department of State, 2017).

Protection is a core standard of U.S. immigration policy, which takes much of its directive and policy language from the principles enshrined in the 1951 Refugee convention (PRM, 2012).

When discussing refugee protection in urban areas, much of the language of the nine core tenets revolves around *access to basic infrastructure and public services* that exist within these contexts which include housing, healthcare, and education. Therefore, once refugees are transferred to local resettlement NGOs, access becomes the threshold that must be met for a refugee to be placed in a specific neighborhood or area of an urban city.

There are several other factors that a resettlement agency considers when agreeing to take place refugees in certain neighborhoods. Informal conversations with caseworkers reveal financial and proximity to jobs as well as cultural composition of the neighborhood. Ultimately, space and relationships with apartment complex owners drive many of the decisions on where to place refugee families due to their lack of proper documentation when initially resettled. Yet, the case of the Congolese in St. Louis was particularly alarming given the threat of immediate physical violence and the absence of dissatisfactory comments compared to other participants. Although critical race theory might posit prejudice in the local decision-making process of the IISTL, there is not enough evidence to warrant such a claim and more research into their placement policies would be necessary.

What I am willing to recommend as a starting point is the use of a minimum standards framework for selecting suitable cities and neighborhoods for refugee newcomers which can also be used as a point of leverage to advocate for increases in funding that are contextualized to the economic conditions of the cities in which refugees are placed. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) minimum standards, which strives for safe access to education, provides insights that should be considered at the national level so that refugee families do not feel, as former presidential candidate John Kerry once described, “abandoned upon arrival” (Kerry et. al, 2010). The framework states that students, “are too often subjected to physical or psychosocial risks on their way to and from education facilities and within the learning environment” and that “no individual should be denied access to education and learning opportunities” (p. 54). For refugees unfamiliar with the culture and American lifestyle, learning occurs both within and outside of educational facilities. If placed in unsafe or violent

neighborhoods, like those reported by Congolese participants in this study, risks associated with everyday life will inevitably enter the formal learning environments of the classroom and negatively impact their performance in all aspects from academic to social.

Therefore, more coordination between national actors during the refugee resettlement process and local resettlement programs within an agreed upon framework of equity can ensure both proper funding and provide explicit procedures for placing refugees in urban areas. These guidelines should be intentionally designed to identify and remove certain neighborhoods experiencing direct violence and unrest from potential sites of refugee resettlement. Such a framework, of course, will need to be continuously evaluated in terms of its efficacy for achieving desirable goals, ensure mechanisms of accountability, and establish grievance protocols so that refugees are able to exert agency when they are dissatisfied with their placement. Yet, in the absence of accountability measures, the variation in refugee perceptions regarding the safety of their new communities and satisfaction with their education will likely continue.

### ***International Level***

Local and national goals must coordinate with international partners to understand how education in countries of first asylum can better prepare students for education in their host country. Therefore, this section provides international level policy recommendations driven by insights gleaned from refugee participant pre-arrival experiences.

### ***Expedited Processing and Distribution of Proper Documentation for Refugees in Countries of First Asylum***

Protracted conflict disrupts all aspects of social life and engenders population displacement. Often individuals fleeing from violence do not have appropriate forms of documentation (such as passports, birth certificates, and health records) often required to begin UNHCR application processes. This could be due to the urgent need to leave and therefore such documents were not prioritized, they were lost in transition, or individuals flee from areas where such documents were never provided. In any event, lack of these documents tends to extend what is already a lengthy process of applying for asylum.

The time lapse between when refugees apply to seek asylum in the U.S. to when they arrive is simply unacceptable and has led to generations of people being “warehoused” in large camps in the interim. Although prolonged encampment is considered by most to be untenable, several of the refugee participants in this study spent their entire lives in a camp before arriving to the U.S, during their high school years. During these years, refugees “experience unconscionable amounts of restriction to their rights, exposure to violence, resource scarcity and disempowerment” (USCRI, 2019, p. 3). Restriction of rights has been linked to lack of proper national identity documentation (USCRI, 2019). Therefore, the first policy recommendation at the international level calls for the swift processing and distribution of proper documentation so that refugees may secure rights, however temporary, within their countries of first asylum. This is the first hurdle for them when seeking gainful employment, entering and exiting the camp, and theoretically, enjoying protection under the national law of their hosting nation. Yet, such a recommendation is only viable if adequate recompense is provided by the international community for refugee services rendered by the hosting nation as they wait for conflict to subside or for alternative, scalable solutions to emerge.

## ***Education for a Transnational Class of Citizens***

This next policy recommendations have direct implications at the local school level yet needs to be understood as an international strategy for peacebuilding through education. When I asked participants in this study where home was or where they ultimately saw themselves residing, nearly half indicated a desire to return to their home country to work and live. Current U.S. immigration policy and public education systems operate under the assumption that refugee students desire to remain in the U.S. upon adulthood or after graduation. Yet in this globally interconnected society, movement of people is made possible even for those from impoverished backgrounds. The reality is that refugees are not bound to the regions that they are initially resettled. Therefore, education for a transnational class of citizens may be instrumental in shifting North-South dynamics, especially for refugees looking to return to their home countries to rebuild their nations post-conflict.

Bajaj and Bartlett's (2017) work in newcomer and international schools partly informs this recommendation. They identify four core tenets of a critical transnational curriculum which include 1) using diversity as a learning opportunity; 2) engaging in translanguaging<sup>39</sup>; 3) promoting civic engagement as curriculum; and 4) cultivating multidirectional aspirations. Although education for a transnational class might look different across contexts, from their research one can identify practices that are responsive to the unique needs of the populations they serve *and* transferrable to the common public school. Such practices are relational by

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<sup>39</sup> Refers to leveraging bi- and multi-lingual students' abilities to make sense of complex educational content in more than one language thereby expanding opportunities for speakers of the dominant language to engage with them (Garcia, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016).

design and meant to end the anomie and social exclusion experienced by refugees through a two-way view of integration. Regardless of where students educated by a transnational orientation end up, they are likely to be better prepared for cross-cultural communication and more accepting of others from disparate backgrounds.

### **Addressing Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study involved SLPS refugee participants from various backgrounds and its possible that several of the findings are generalizable to refugee student experiences in other districts that implement some degree of school choice policies. As stated before, the need to conduct multi-sited case study research regarding the educational experiences of refugees in school-choice districts should encourage a renewed and sustained interest for those of us in the field of international and urban educational research. This is not a limitation of this case study, which sought to understand the processes that influence the school choice decision making from a structural and personal perspective, but more so a call to action.

This study also relied on convenience or snowball sampling rather than more robust participant selection methods. This limitation is due largely to the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges of working with vulnerable populations compounded by research complications introduced by the Covid-19 global pandemic. In my proposal, participant eligibility was based on both general and specific criteria of which some were met while others were not. I was not able to reach my goal of gender balance as there is an over-representation of participants who identify as male. Although I do not believe this impacts the validity of the

findings, it may be problematic when using the dataset for further inquiry into the lived experiences of refugee students in SLPS.

This case study, although intended to be on refugee students across all school-choice options including those participants who attended charter schools, mutated into a case study of SLPS given the structure of their experiences upon arrival. I was not able to recruit participants from charter schools as many participants were not aware that any opportunity to attend them was available. Recall, that when asked about charters or other magnet schools Yonas told me,

I've never heard about other schools like Shaw or Career Academy or any of the other schools until I went to Rutherford. I didn't know any other schools except those three schools they [Welcome School] gave me. So I know about them now, but only after I went to Rutherford.

I reached out to several charter schools in the St. Louis area and was informally told that they either didn't have students that fit my eligibility criterion, or they were not allowed to provide any personal information. Additionally, more cases outside of the traditional 3 schools (Type I) might have shed light on the diversity of experience depending on when they arrived in STL. Yet, with an N of only 4, wherein only 2 participants attended a school categorized as "Other," it remains unclear the extent to which those experiences can be generalizable to the rest of the population that also fit that category.

One suggestion I wish to advance in this section implores researchers and practitioners in the fields of international education policy, migration studies, and the sociology of education for a commitment to sustained scholarly attention to refugees and their host communities, post-relocation. The interaction between neighborhood effects and educational performance is

also one area identified by this study that warrants further exploration. A comparative study of how and in what ways the placement of refugees in specific educational contexts expand or restrict their educational opportunity is necessary for evaluating domestic educational policy.

Another area of research I deem to be of relevance to this study and of personal interest is understanding the differences between states that opt-out of traditional state-administered refugee resettlement programs and those that opt-in. Idaho is a Wilson-Fish (WF) state, which was a senate bill passed in the 1990's aimed at providing more flexibility to VOLAGs and local resettlement agencies when it comes to providing services or implementing program. The Ngoy brothers went through Boise's WF refugee resettlement program and had several praiseworthy remarks about their experience. Missouri is not a WF state and therefore abides by the guidelines outlined in the PRM cooperative agreement. Therefore, additional research on WF state's alternative programs could generate empirical data that could inform certain management practices and or community engagement strategies that may be useful in non-WF states. Of course, such decentralization and deregulation of alternative resettlement programs can also reproduce inequalities present within a local context. Therefore, I remain ambivalent on whether a move to towards a WF state model is desirable until further research is conducted.

### **Final Remarks**

I started this doctoral research hoping to provide another lens in which to address the fundamental question of "choice for whom?" when it comes to market-based reforms in education. School choice in the context of the United States has remained a part of the

national educational policy debate throughout the centuries. Arguments over who should control the provision of education are derived in part from ideological beliefs over the competing and perhaps incompatible goals of education (Labaree, 1997). Dichotomizing the debate between public and private provision of education can, and often does, overlook the ways in which market systems act in ways that reproduce inequalities. Quasi-market school choice systems attempt to adjudicate these distinctions by theoretically positing the many ways choice can lead to the equitable distribution of quality education for all. Yet, theory is of little value if it is not coupled with critical inquiry into how these educational reforms play out in practice. This study does not claim to resolve that debate, but to only demonstrate that more sophisticated arguments are to be made regarding how school-choice systems differentially or unevenly distribute choice.

Research confirming that the theoretical benefits of school choice policies are often undermined by discriminatory school-level practices, does not explain exactly how those responses are understood by those who they are purported to help, nor provide actionable knowledge to address disparities in access. This research, which has focused on refugee experience in a large, urban school-choice district, has attempted to demonstrate yet another way schools, embedded in hyper-competitive markets, innovate to preserve their own interests (or the interests of certain groups) at the expense of the most vulnerable among us. If school-choice is to be a part of the educational experiment in the U.S., additional focus should be given to understanding how vested actors assemble to respond to the dynamism of the market and to what end. Actors that emerge can become nested within networks and not only have material implications but also ideological ones. The participants in this study were not without

critique regarding their school-choice experience. Yet, when I asked them to offer suggestions on how education in the U.S, and in St. Louis, specifically, can address some of the concerns that they mentioned, none of the participants suggested scrapping school choice as a strategy to deliver equitable quality education. Although more research will be needed to fully understand the relationship between rhetoric, policy, social structure and agency, my view is that they are all contributing to the crafting of a local culture with favorable dispositions towards neoliberal solutions to social issues. Despite the risks of getting their application rejected, the impracticalities of attendance and the structural determinants that condition their admittance, the prospect of 'choosing' where to attend school for residents of St. Louis is as alluring to the consumer as the prospect of autonomy is to the education provider.

Finally, I have come to understand the role of ideology differently since I began my doctoral studies. Ideology is not simply the socio-political and/or philosophical beliefs and lenses that one chooses, but also includes the beliefs and lenses that one doesn't choose. A culture of school choice imposes and reifies an ideological worldview which, upon being conferred legitimacy by the actor-network, results in the internalization and uncritical adoption of the marketplace as the only fathomable distribution mechanism to ensure the provision of quality education. In the case of school-choice in St. Louis, a predisposition to neoliberal ideological beliefs regarding how best to deliver educational services is both a precondition and a necessary output of the actor-network. What's more, newly arrived refugees to St. Louis are then asked to participate within this culture of school-choice (i.e., make a choice of where to attend school) often without having chosen a school choice district to begin with nor having the option (read economic and social capital) to choose to escape it. Furthermore, the methods of

instruction, evaluation, monitoring, and tracking (mobilized non-human actors) a part of the public education system in the U.S.—which can often be novel to refugees—are not viewed as the mechanisms of control that they are, but rather as the normative processes of a school-choice machine—whose casing is but a thin veneer of agency and whose internal components are both well-oiled and maintained by a culture of choice.

Since the writing of this dissertation, I have remained in contact with my participants throughout the coronavirus pandemic. I would ask them how they are doing while also using that time to clarify topics or responses that came up during our interview as a part of my member-checks. During those moments of informal communication, several students reported feeling grateful to share their stories and wondered why it took so long for someone to ask them about their education in SLPS. This sentiment is best exemplified by one of the final exchanges I had with Amir during one of my member checks,

When you asked me to interview, I took it seriously. You're the first person who asked me about my experience at Sierra and choosing schools, and this is the first time that I am speaking about it. Like—nobody asked me. They should! They can do a lot more better job than just forcing students to go to some school to graduate and assume we all had the same experiences. People don't talk about it unless you sit [them] down and talk to students.

Perhaps this is the most important finding for me as a researcher. Their willingness to be honest with their experiences can be a source of strength for researchers looking to dismantle systems that have been assumed—or at least purported—to have homogenous users or believed to be homogeneously experienced. I believe this process starts by listening contextually and ends with the reconstruction of the network as co-actors.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Refugee Arrivals to St. Louis by Country-of-Origin 2002-Current

Table 3: Refugee Arrivals to St. Louis by Country of Origin from 2002-Current.

Nationality	CY 2002	CY 2003	CY 2004	CY 2005	CY 2006	CY 2007	CY 2008	CY 2009	CY 2010	CY 2011	CY 2012	CY 2013	CY 2014	CY 2015	CY 2016	CY 2017	CY 2018	CY 2019	Total
Afghanistan	139	63	48	67	46	13	13	2	9	2	0	6	12	7	54	13	12	18	524
Azerbaijan	0	2	3	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Belarus	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Bhutan	0	0	0	0	0	115	165	170	156	237	197	69	91	74	24	2	0	0	1,300
Bosnia and Herzegovina	367	16	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	390
Burma	0	0	0	0	0	85	155	147	103	52	72	60	70	43	27	3	3	15	835
Burundi	0	0	0	0	4	77	26	12	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	131
Cameroon	0	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Central African Republic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Columbia	0	41	12	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	11	0	0	0	81
Congo	4	1	0	0	0	4	0	9	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
Croatia	0	0	10	4	0	0	0	0	0	69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
Cuba	0	0	9	21	1	0	3	47	30	27	11	17	59	19	0	0	0	0	244
Dem. Rep. Congo	1	0	6	4	0	11	7	2	11	1	19	2	83	154	191	88	40	27	647
Eritrea	0	0	2	13	1	54	30	39	15	16	42	15	15	14	34	8	9	3	310
Ethiopia	1	10	14	16	0	6	0	0	18	11	21	17	12	11	19	2	2	4	164
Iran	18	51	26	14	6	7	0	6	0	1	1	13	2	9	8	2	0	0	162
Iraq	7	0	0	0	0	16	129	210	121	48	113	98	183	64	95	18	1	0	1,101
Ivory Coast	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Kyrgyzstan	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Liberia	0	19	147	41	8	25	6	9	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	280
Nepal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Nigeria	0	6	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	12
Pakistan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Palestine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Republic of South Sudan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9
Russia	3	6	0	187	151	18	3	0	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	373
Rwanda	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Serbia	14	9	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24
Sierra Leone	5	1	14	13	0	3	0	0	7	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	46
Somalia	0	61	260	115	99	112	20	49	71	77	124	188	108	120	216	76	1	0	1,697
Sudan	0	0	6	13	0	0	0	7	12	15	20	24	5	3	12	27	0	0	144
Syria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	280	46	0	5	359
Togo	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
Uganda	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	3
Ukraine	11	0	8	5	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	30
Uzbekistan	6	0	3	10	12	6	0	9	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	61
Vietnam	20	4	4	37	17	6	6	11	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	114
Yemen	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>598</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>580</b>	<b>565</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>1,139</b>	<b>708</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>661</b>	<b>647</b>	<b>629</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>1,030</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>9,098</b>

Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. 2019

## **APPENDIX B: Invitation to participate in research study**

You are invited to be in a research study regarding your experience with choosing a high school to attend upon relocating to St. Louis. If you are receiving this letter, it is because your contact information was provided by a friend, a family member, or a former teacher. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Timothy Reedy of the University of Maryland-College Park.

### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of refugee students within school choice environments, their aspirations and their educational pathways. Specifically, this study seeks to learn about your unique history with school choice in St. Louis. I am interested in asking you questions regarding your experience as a student who had to navigate all the options available to St. Louis residents.

Your participation in this study is voluntary- you can decide the extent to which you are willing to participate fully, partially, or not at all. If you do decide to be a part of the study but change your mind, you may stop at any time. If you decline the invitation, your decision will not negatively impact your relationship with your former school, the researcher, or the University of Maryland.

### **Procedures**

If you agree to be a part of the study, you will be invited to sit down and be interviewed by the researcher, Timothy Reedy, at two different times. In the interviews, you will be asked questions about the school choice process, what type of information was available, how you decided on their current school and whether that school sufficiently served your needs. Additionally, we will discuss your educational, occupational, and life aspirations as well as any obstacles and support systems that you identify. Each interview will take approximately one hour. If you agree, I will schedule an interview time at a time and place that is convenient for you.

### **Risks and Benefits**

The risks involved in this study are the same as those people encounter in everyday life. This research is intended to understand the experiences of refugee students in school choice systems. You will not be asked about illegal or sensitive behaviors. If you think any of the questions are too personal, you do not need to answer them, and you have the option to stop the interview at any time. This study is not intended to benefit individual participants, but instead to help inform policy and practice for refugee families upon arrival to St. Louis.

### **Confidentiality**

Your privacy is of paramount importance. You will not be asked to show any form of identification to be in the study or be asked to provide any specific information that could identify your involvement. All information you provide will be kept private (confidential). I will not share individual responses with anyone who is not a part of the research team/committee. If any publications come from the study, you will be provided with a pseudonym and your legal name will not be used. All data in the form of

interview transcripts will be stored on a private and secured computer during the entire duration of the study. After the completion of the study all data will be destroyed/permanently deleted.

**Contacts and Questions**

The researcher conducting this study is Timothy Reedy. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact him at:

Phone no. (240) 314-9676

Email: [tdreedy@terpmail.umd.edu](mailto:tdreedy@terpmail.umd.edu)

Do you agree to participate in a minimum of 2 interviews? (check one) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you agree to have interviews audio recorded? Check one) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Which St. Louis high school did you attend/graduate? \_\_\_\_\_

Which St. Louis middle school did you attend/graduate? \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide your contact information so that the researcher can get in touch with you regarding next steps.

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please email the completed form to [tdreedy@terpmail.umd.edu](mailto:tdreedy@terpmail.umd.edu) or to [tdreedy@gmail.com](mailto:tdreedy@gmail.com)

Or you can return the form by mail to:

Timothy Reedy

12803 Talley Ln.

Gaithersburg, MD. 20878

## APPENDIX C: Interview Guide for Participants

### Opening Script:

*My name is Timothy Reedy, and I am a doctoral student in the International Education Policy program at The University of Maryland. I am interested in learning about your experience selecting a high school to attend in St. Louis City. I would like to thank you in advance for taking your time to be a part of this interview and assist me in my research.*

*With your consent, I would like to tape/record this interview. I will also be taking notes to monitor my own thoughts and reflections during the interview. As a reminder, your identity will remain anonymous and all data collected will be stored on a secure hard drive. At the conclusion of this study, all data including the interview conducted here today will be destroyed.*

*Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that your participation in this interview is voluntary and that you may pause or discontinue the interview at any time you wish. As I said before, your participation will benefit other refugee students who have relocated to St. Louis and may assist in helping them navigate the complexities of school-choice in the future.*

*Would you like to proceed with the taping/recording of the interview?*

*[yes] – In that case, please take a few minutes to read over the informed consent form and sign at the bottom.*

*[no] – Reiterate to the participant the importance of the research and the protocols to keep them anonymous. If unwilling to be recording, interview will proceed verbally, and data will be collected in the form of researcher notes.*

### Research Questions

- 1) How do refugee students describe their secondary educational experiences (navigating, accessing, and attaining desired programmatic and thematic curricular opportunities) in school-choice schema?
- 2) How do refugee students describe their own sense of agency when it comes to deciding their educational future in marketized systems amidst obstacles and opportunities?

## *Interview I: Part I | Historical Questions*

- 1) Can you tell me about yourself?
  - a. Where were you born
  - b. How do you identify in terms of race or ethnicity?
  - c. How old are you
  - d. What is your current job/occupational status?

- e. What is your family background?
  - f. Do you have any family members who are also attending or have attended a school in STL?
- 2) You indicated that you were born in **[Insert Country Name]**. Can you describe what it was like to live and go to school there?
- [Probes]
- What subjects did you study?
  - Can you describe a typical day?
  - Can you describe what your interaction with teachers/principals was like?
- 3) Can you tell a little bit about why you had to leave your home country?
- 4) When you left your home country, did you have to spend some time in another one before coming to the United States?
- a. If yes, which one?
    - i. Continue to question 5 in the context of **[insert country of first asylum]**
  - b. If no, continue to question 6
- 5) Can you tell me about your time spent in the schools prior to arriving in the United States?
- a. What country were you in?
  - b. Were you located in a refugee camp? If so, which one?
  - c. Did you attend school?
  - d. What was that school like?
    - i. Did you feel safe?
    - ii. What types of classes did you take while in school?
    - iii. What kinds of materials did you have in the class?
    - iv. How often did you attend class?
    - v. Can you recall a time when you were out of school for an extended period of time?
      - 1. How long? What was the reason?
  - e. Who was in your class?
  - f. Were you with national students as well?
  - g. How were you treated schools by others?
- 6) Please share your experiences relocating to the United States.
- a. What were you most excited about?
  - b. What were you most worried about?
  - c. What city did you move to first?
  - d. When did you arrive in St. Louis?
  - e. What was your first impression?
- 7) When did you first enroll in school in St. Louis?

- a. What grade were you in when you first started going to school in St. Louis?
  - b. Did you experience language barriers?
  - c. Did you feel prepared/ready to enter school in the U.S.? Please elaborate.
- 8) What middle school did you go to? **(if not gathered during the call for participants)**
- 9) What High school did you graduate from? **(if not gathered during the call for participants)**

## *Interview II: Part I | School-Choice Experience Questions*

- 1) What are the most important things you want out of school?  
 [Probes]  
 What do you hope to get from attending school?
- 2) Think back to when you were in high school, what did you want to do after you graduated?
- 3) Describe the process of selecting a high school
- a. When did you have to decide on where to attend high school?
  - b. What informational events were held to inform you of your options?
  - c. What resources were provided to assist you in making your decision?
    - i. Who provided them?
    - ii. What language were they written in?
    - iii. What information, if any, was provided that was specifically directed towards education for refugee students?
    - iv. What do you feel was missing from these resources?
  - d. How were you able to get answers regarding questions you had about attending a particular high school?
- 4) What high school did you attend?
- a. Was this high school your primary preference or first choice? If no, continue to 4.b, if yes, continue to question 5.
  - b. Explain to me why you were not able to attend your first-choice school.  
 Probe:  
 What were the reason/s that the school said you were unable to attend?  
 What actions, if any, did you take to try to attend this school anyway?
- 5) What factors influenced your decision to attend **[School Name]**

[Probes]

Proximity?  
Theme/Course offerings?  
Student Services such as ESOL?  
Sports/Extracurriculars?  
Admission Requirements?  
Your own preparedness or readiness?  
Financial?

- 6) Can you recall who may have influenced your decision to attend [**School Name**]  
a. Can you describe their role?

[Probes]

Friends  
Family  
Teachers  
Community Members  
Others

- 7) Think back to when you were making your decision on where to attend school, what were others saying about the school you were thinking of attending?

[Probes]

What was the school known for by your peers?  
What types of descriptions or perceived stereotypes about your school at the time of your decision?  
What types of students were known to attend that school?

- 8) Think back to when you were making your decision on where to attend school, what were school officials saying about the school you were thinking of attending?

[Probes]

Did a teacher or counselor ever suggest to you where you should attend high school? If so, what did they say?

- 9) Can you tell me a little bit about what was going on in your life around the time you had to make a choice on where to attend high school?

- 10) Having gone through the process of selecting, attending, and graduating from [**Insert School Name**], what information would you have liked to know prior to choosing [**School Name**]?

[Probes]

Is there anything about the school that you wish you would have known before making the decision to go there?

- 11) Would you attend **[Insert School Name]** again if you had to choose all over again, why or why not?

### *Interview II: Part II High School Experience Questions*

- 1) Can you please describe the theme of the school in which you attended?  
[Probes]  
Did your school have an emphasis such as: STEM, Law, Foreign Language, Theatre and Visual Arts, Leadership and so on?  
If not, was it just a general college prep high school?
- 2) Take a second to think about the school's mission [show student the mission statement of school] please describe how your experience attending **[insert schools name]** is similar and dissimilar to this mission statement.  
[Probes]  
Do you feel that this statement captures what you experienced at **[insert school name]**?  
Do you feel that you are **[insert portion of mission statement]**?  
Elaborate.
- 3) Please describe your overall academic experience in **[Insert School Name]**  
[Probes]  
What did you enjoy most about school?  
What did you enjoy least about school?  
Were there any courses that you found interesting?  
Were you able to take the classes you wanted?
- 4) Were you able to obtain a copy of your high school transcript?
  - a. If yes, are you willing to voluntarily review it with me now?
    - i. If yes, continue to question 5
    - ii. If no, continue to question 6.
- 5) Let's take a look at your transcript together. You indicated that you chose the school because **[insert reason from Interview pt. II question 5]**
- 6) me about the coursework you completed at **[insert school name]**.

- 7) Can you describe your relationships with teachers?
  
- 8) Can you describe your relationship with the counselors?
  - a. How often did you meet?
  - b. How did you choose which classes you were going to take?
  
- 9) Were there any classes that you wanted to take but couldn't? if so, which ones and why?
  
- 10) Did you graduate from the high school that you first chose?
  - a. If yes, have you ever thought about attending a different high school than the one first chose?
    - i. If yes, what was the reason you were thinking about switching?
      1. Probe: can you describe what was happening at the time you were considering changing
  - b. If no, what made you change schools?
  
- 11) Can you describe some of the difficulties of enrolling in a different school?

**APPENDIX D: Vision and Mission Statements by Participant School**

School	Mission Statement	Vision Statement
<b>Edgewater ROTC</b>	...to develop responsible citizens prepared for leadership in their schools, communities, and careers through a comprehensive education within a military environment	...graduates will demonstrate the highest levels of self-discipline, self-esteem, and academic achievement necessary to succeed in college, careers, and military service.
<b>Independence High School</b>	<p>Our Daily Mission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspire, nurture, encourage and empower those within our reach</li> <li>• Recognize and celebrate our potential, talents and gifts</li> <li>• Facilitate holistic instruction and provide resources to fulfill the needs of those who need support</li> <li>• Cherish and celebrate our diversity</li> <li>• Create and maintain clear and high expectations for ourselves and others</li> <li>• Build trusting relationships</li> </ul>	Independence High School has a culture of care, support and high expectations that builds achievement from potential.
<b>Northview Career Academy</b>	Committed to inspiring every student to be career and college ready.	To ensure that all students engage in high-quality learning experience to prepare them to succeed in their aspirations as they become productive and responsible citizens in a global society
<b>Rutherford STEM</b>	Rutherford STEM Embraces diversity and inspires critical thinking through innovative career and college pathways.	Rutherford STEM empowers diverse career and college ready innovators to evolve with the world.
<b>Sierra International Studies High School</b>	The mission of Sierra International Studies High School is to create productive world citizens and to promote unity in diversity. Students graduating from Sierra International Studies High School will be life-long learners who are prepared for further study, employment, and leadership in a global society.	Sierra International Studies High School will provide a world-class education and be recognized as a leader in student achievement and teacher quality.

<p><b>Shaw Classical Studies High School</b></p>	<p>Our mission is to provide a challenging and quality education that will focus on high standards and expectations, in an atmosphere of unity, enthusiasm, caring, and respect for self, others and the community</p>	<p>We believe that learning is a life-long process of growth and development. This process involves physical and mental activities and affects all facets of a person's character and personality. We believe that one's formal education is a series of planned experiences, designed to cause specific learning to take place. Therefore, we believe that Shaw should provide experiences to develop responsible, intelligent, self-directed human beings who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• function as effective citizens</li> <li>• possess sound values</li> <li>• possess good physical and mental health</li> <li>• live and work harmoniously with others</li> <li>• are economically competent</li> <li>• are career-oriented</li> <li>• habitually respond to personal and group issues with sound reasoning, emotional force and control, creativity, and human sensitivity.</li> </ul>
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