



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Constraints to education or constraining education?  
A case study of Sudanese refugee youth in B.C. schools**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Canada)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of  
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialization:

**Children and Youth Studies  
(CYS)**

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The Hague, The Netherlands

November, 2009

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## Acknowledgments

This research project would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. I would like to specifically thank my supervisor, Dr. Auma Okwany, for her confidence in my project, and for guidance throughout the research process. I would also like to thank Dr. Linda Herrera, my second reader, for the valuable insights she offered during the research seminars, as well as my CYS classmates and ISS peers, whose comments and discussions helped shape this project.

Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to the research participants—for sharing their stories.

### **But a few more thanks are in order...**

To my father, whose undying encouragement started when I was just young, when he would say to me, “Do you know how many people with MAs and PhDs are flipping burgers at McDonalds?”

To my mother, for putting up with me all these years...

To the ‘inverted oreo’... for virtual walks, sanity, and—of course—BS...

To my Gondel girls, for half-tents, hung bikes, roti runs, Friday lunches... and for selling me for a kiss...

To the futbol guys, who have no idea the extent to which those Sunday nights kept me sane...

To one other individual who “bought” his place in the acknowledgments unknowingly—by delivering chocolate while this page was being written...

To my family and friends at home and ISS... for telling me I’m crazy, and tolerating me anyways...

And to the one who made the sea, the beach, the dunes, and the forest...

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## **List of Acronyms**

ASAC: African Sudanese Association of Calgary  
CIAI: Centre for Immigration and African Integration  
CPA: Comprehensive Peace Agreement  
GAR: Government-sponsored refugees  
IRPA: Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act  
ISS: Immigrant Services Society  
LCR: Landed-in-Canada refugees  
PSR: Privately-sponsored refugees  
RD: Refugee dependents  
RTL: Refugee transportation loan  
SWIS: Settlement workers in schools  
UNHCR: United Nations High Commission for Refugees

## **Abstract**

This study situates Sudanese refugee teenagers within the context of multiculturalism, integration, and education debates in Canada. Through an ecological approach that takes into account pre-migration and post-migration factors at the levels of the home, school, and wider society, this research seeks to identify key barriers that prevent the full participation of Sudanese refugee students in B.C. schools. While the mainstreaming of multicultural education presents a powerful mandate for addressing societal inequalities, the experiences of Sudanese refugee youth reveal problematic trends in its implementation. In identifying the discrepancy between multicultural education in as a discourse and as practical reality, this research suggests ways in which education can become a truly transformative process for all students.

## **Keywords**

refugees – youth – multicultural education – integration



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Government of British Columbia is firmly committed to recognising and honouring the diversity of all British Columbians. Diversity among people is one of the most prominent features of British Columbia's society and our schools... The purpose of the British Columbia school system [is] *to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.*

Diversity in BC: A Framework  
(British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008)

### 1.1 Locating Sudanese refugees in the Canadian context

Canada is one of the most diverse societies in the world. The 2006 national census reports that 19.8 percent of the Canadian population was born in another country—a number surpassed only by Australia. Between 1 January 2001 and 16 May 2006, an estimated 1,110,000 individuals settled in Canada—accounting for nearly 70 percent of the national population growth during that period (Statistics Canada, 2007: 8). While immigrants make up the largest group of the foreign-born population, the number of refugees who have resettled in Canada is also rising. In fact, over the past decade, Canada has repeatedly ranked as one of the top three receiving countries for refugees (UNHCR, 2009).

According to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations, 1951), any individual who has experienced persecution because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group is considered a refugee. Among the refugees who have been granted status as permanent residents, there are several main categories. These include government-assisted refugees (GARs), who have been resettled through the Refugee Assistance Programme (RAP) and receive government loans for their first year in Canada; privately-sponsored refugees (PSRs), who receive support from groups or religious organisations for a minimum of one year after arrival; landed-in-Canada refugees (LCRs), who declare refugee status upon landing on Canadian soil and have been granted permanent residency after their case is processed; and refugee dependents (RDs), who apply for permanent residency (while still living in the country of origin) with the pledged financial and social support of a relative with LCR status (Yu *et al.*, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1.1**  
**Refugees granted permanent residence in Canada, by year and category**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>GARs</b>	7,432	7,442	10,669	8,697	7,505	7,506	7,411	7,424	7,326	7,574
<b>PSRs</b>	2,267	2,348	2,933	3,576	3,044	3,252	3,116	2,976	3,337	3,588
<b>RLCs</b>	10,182	11,797	12,993	11,897	10,546	11,267	15,901	19,935	15,892	11,700
<b>RDs</b>	2,962	2,809	3,497	3,749	4,021	3,959	6,259	5,441	5,948	5,094
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>22,843</b>	<b>24,396</b>	<b>30,092</b>	<b>27,919</b>	<b>25,116</b>	<b>25,984</b>	<b>32,687</b>	<b>35,776</b>	<b>32,503</b>	<b>27,956</b>

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2008) *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview – Permanent and Temporary Residents*.

**Table 1.2**  
**Refugee children and youth granted permanent residence, by year and age cohort**

<b>AGE:</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
0-4	1,247	1,298	1,696	1,515	1,257	1,274	1,696	1,728	1,598	1,374
5-9*	1,341	1,390	1,686	1,593	1,465	1,391	1,733	1,816	1,750	1,552
10-14*	3,368	3,526	4,344	4,026	3,515	3,377	4,316	4,471	4,244	3,813
15-24	10,439	10,821	12,421	11,270	10,110	10,887	13,422	15,268	13,058	10,836
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>16,395</b>	<b>17,035</b>	<b>20,147</b>	<b>18,404</b>	<b>16,347</b>	<b>16,929</b>	<b>21,167</b>	<b>23,283</b>	<b>20,650</b>	<b>17,575</b>

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2008) *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview – Permanent and Temporary Residents*.

Until the 1980s, the majority of refugees coming into Canada were of Eastern European descent. Since then, however, visible minority groups—many of whom are from Africa and the Middle East—are being resettled at a much higher rate. In the past decade, one of the largest refugee groups represented in Canada has come from southern Sudan<sup>2</sup> (Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008).

### ***The Sudanese civil war and Sudanese resettlement in Canada***

The Sudanese civil war—which was waged between the largely Arab and Muslim north and the Black Christian and Animist south—began in 1983, and finally ended in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The decades-long war left over 2 million southern Sudanese men, women, and children dead, and displaced another 4.5 million as refugees. While many refugees have returned to the southern part of the country since the signing of the CPA, others are still living in refugee camps or refugee settings in surrounding countries (United Nations News Service, 2009). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has also been

instrumental in facilitating the resettlement of Sudanese refugees to Australia, Canada, and the United States.

In recent years, the number of Sudanese refugees in Canada has risen dramatically. In 2006, Sudanese made up the fifth-largest group of resettled refugees and the largest group from Africa (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). Three areas—Toronto, Calgary, and British Columbia’s Lower Mainland—have become centres for the Sudanese refugee community in Canada, and the majority of Sudanese newcomers migrate to these areas soon after arrival. According to provincial statistics, 4,800 African refugees immigrated to British Columbia between 01 January 2001 and 16 May 2006 (BCStats, 2008). Given the national statistics on refugee source countries, it can be assumed that a significant number of these refugees are from southern Sudan.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Immigrants and refugees in Canadian schools***

The changing demographics in Canada, and particularly the rising immigrant and refugee population, has created new challenges for Canadian structures and institutions—including the education system. While all students who are new to Canadian schools face adjustments, research indicates that refugee populations—and those from visible minorities, in particular—face considerably greater challenges (Kanu, 2008; MacKay and Tavares, 2005; Hamilton *et al*, 2004; Yau, 1995). The different needs of these groups stem from the very different circumstances surrounding their migration, as outlined in Table 1.3:

**Table 1.3**  
**Immigrants and Refugees: a summary of differences**

<b>Immigrants</b>	<b>Refugees</b>
- Granted permanent resident status on the basis of <i>ability</i>	- Granted permanent resident status on the basis of <i>need</i>
- Most personal business is taken care of before leaving home country	- Personal business is unsettled; must leave in a hurry
- Education of children is usually not interrupted	- Interrupted education of children due to waiting time in camps or while leaving home country
- Adjustment to new culture may be easier due to choice in relocating	- Adjustment to new culture could be very difficult due to traumatic experiences and forced relocation
- Sense of loss is not necessarily traumatic	- Sense of loss is profound; may include family members as well

	as personal property
- Repatriation is a matter of personal choice	- Repatriation is not an option unless the crisis situation has stabilised or ended

Source: Adapted from MacKay and Tavares (2005)

For refugee students, these differences may have a profound impact on their ability to navigate the school system. If performance and retention rates are sign of academic success, recent findings suggest that many Sudanese refugee students are failing to achieve positive outcomes in school. Hittel (2007) writes that the drop-out rate among Sudanese youth in Calgary is as high as 80 percent, and cites a more conservative estimate at between 50 and 70 percent. A recent needs assessment by the African Sudanese Association of Calgary (ASAC) also reports that it “has witnessed growth in the number of Sudanese youth failing in the local school system, many of which end up dropping out at an alarming rate” (ASAC, 2009: 11). Unfortunately, these concerns about education are not restricted to the Sudanese community in Calgary. According to Staddon (2009),

School officials and staff, settlement services and community leaders are becoming acutely aware of a growing crisis among older refugee school-age learners who enter secondary schools in B.C. as teenagers and leave before achieving basic literacy and numeracy.

Although specific statistics are not available in British Columbia, the South Sudanese Community of BC (SSABC) has likewise become increasingly concerned about both the “alarming high-school drop-out rate among Sudanese youth in B.C.,” as well as the academic difficulties experienced by Sudanese students who remained in school (Dedi, 2008).

According to Wilkinson, “The school is one of the first sites where Canadian culture is introduced and learned, and it is also the site where much of [refugee students] integration into Canadian society takes place” (2002: 174). Thus, poor school performance and high drop-out rates among immigrant youth present troubling prospects for integration (ASAC, 2009; Kanu, 2008; Hittel, 2007). One of the ways that schools have attempted to address these concerns is through the mainstreaming of multicultural education.

## 1.2 Research objectives and questions

This study situates Sudanese refugee teenagers within debates on multiculturalism and education in Canada. The objective of this research is to examine the role that multicultural education can play in meeting the needs of these refugee students, as well as the ways in which the practice of schooling reflects—or does not reflect—the discourse of multicultural education.

One main research question and two sub-questions were posed to achieve this objective:

1. How do the “lived experiences” of Sudanese refugee youth in B.C. schools reflect the practical implementation of multicultural education?
  - How is the education process for Sudanese refugee students shaped and constrained by individual, home, school, and societal factors?
  - How are some students, despite barriers, managing to achieve successful educational outcomes?

The above were selected to fill a gap in current research. A review of existing literature reveals a tendency for to homogenise of the needs of refugee students at a number of levels. Some studies have thrown immigrant and refugee students together (Ngo and Schleiffer, 2004), while others have failed to distinguish between the experiences of refugee children versus youth (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996). Further, nearly all of the Canadian studies on refugee schooling have included students from a wide range of backgrounds (MacKay and Tavares, 2005; Wilkinson, 2002; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Yau, 1995); only one study has looked at the specific needs surrounding African refugee students. This study chose a narrow focus on Sudanese refugee teenagers in order to prevent further homogenisation or an oversimplified analysis of their distinct position in B.C. secondary schools.

### 1.3 Research strategy

In order to answer the research questions and achieve the stated objectives, this research engaged with qualitative data from several different sources. Because of the explicit focus on Sudanese youth and their experiences in the education system, the in-depth interview was chosen as the main research technique. Key informant groups were identified according to their ability to offer insights on the research subject. In-depth interviews took place with:

- Seven Sudanese refugee teenagers (six female, one male);
- Two Sudanese parents, both mothers of teenagers in the B.C. school system
- Three Sudanese social workers employed as Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)<sup>4</sup>;
- Two B.C. teachers
- One Sudanese male (24 years old) who came to Canada as a refugee in 2004 and has spent several years working as a translator for Sudanese youth in juvenile court;
- One former Congolese refugee and founder of the Centre for Immigration and African Integration (CIAI);
- One Kenyan youth worker and employee with the Immigrant Youth and Young Adult programme (IYAA), a government initiative that seeks offer ESL, computer, and employment skills to immigrant and refugee youth who have dropped out of school

This project relied on the ‘snowball sampling’ technique to identify potential interviewees from the tight-knit and often closed Sudanese refugee population in Canada. Although sometimes criticised as an unbalanced approach that leaves key informants out of the research sample, this technique was chosen because of its ability to reach difficult-to-access populations (Schiphorst, 2009). Research informants were selected on the basis of whether or not they fit a certain criteria. For Sudanese refugee youth, this included their immigration status (GARs or PSRs), current or placement grade in the school system (secondary-school level), and willingness to participate in the study. Selection for other key informants was based on experience working with Sudanese refugee youth in schools, or knowledge of refugee issues in the Canadian context. In addition, this study sought a geographical balance in order to reflect the distribution of the Sudanese community in B.C. Youth and settlement workers were chosen from each of the five municipalities with the largest Sudanese populations in the province: Abbotsford, Burnaby, New Westminster, Surrey, and Vancouver.<sup>5</sup>

While in-depth interviews were used as the main research technique, this study also engaged other data. Three important government documents were used to understand multiculturalism and integration in the Canadian context: the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada (1988); the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2003); and the Ministry of Education’s handbook for the implementation of multicultural education, entitled *Diversity in B.C. Schools – A Framework for Action* (2008).<sup>6</sup>

Existing studies on refugees in Canada were also used as secondary data sources. Two existing studies on the Sudanese population in Canada—one a youth needs assessment from the ASAC, and the other a Master’s thesis from a researcher at the University of Calgary (Hittel, 2007)—were used to compare the findings generated through qualitative interviews. These studies also supplemented gaps in the research sample (particularly those caused by gender imbalance). Other important sources of secondary data included previous research on refugee children and youth in Canadian schools (Kanu, 2008; MacKay and Tavares, 2005; Hamilton *et al.*, 2004; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Yau, 1995).

In the data analysis process, information and insights from the recorded and transcribed interviews were sorted thematically. Their experiences, supplemented by secondary literature, were then compared and contrasted with the goals and objectives of multiculturalism as theorised in government legislation and policy. This enabled a critical examination of the discourse and practice of multicultural education.

### ***Position as a researcher***

As a white, middle-class researcher approaching a Black minority group occupying a low economic and socio-political location in Canadian society, it was important to consider positionality in the research process. According to Sheridan and Storch (2009), reflexivity “involves examining power relations and the politics in the research process.” One of my primary concerns was to avoid ‘Othering’ in my approach to and portrayal of Sudanese refugee youth.

In current literature, refugee populations have frequently been stigmatised as a problematic population in what Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) call the “business of placing Canadian children and youth at risk” (321). This portrayal has also been fed by media representations of Black youth subculture as a threat to social order.<sup>7</sup> Thus, I was faced with the task of mitigating my own biases, as well as gaining the trust of the research subjects to assure them that this was not simply another project that would portray these youth as a burden to the B.C. education system.

In positioning myself as a researcher, I began with extensive readings on the Sudanese civil war and Diaspora, as well as more general literature on refugee resettlement in Canada. Conversations with a Sudanese community advocate during the initial design phases also provided direction for the project. Once in the field, I first made contact with Sudanese settlement workers in order to hear their stories and insights, and these settlement workers then provided the link to the teenagers who participated in this study. Although all of the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of this research before giving their consent, these key informants played an important role in the evolution of the study into a critical appraisal of the practice of multicultural education.

### ***Scope and Limitations***

Although this research began as an investigation into the poor performance and high drop-out rates of Sudanese refugee students in B.C. secondary schools, the lack of data on performance and retention rates required changing the scope of the project. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the “lived experiences” of Sudanese youth. This shift allows space for investigating trends of poor performance and early school leaving, while broadening the discussion to also allow the analysis of positive outcomes from several of the research participants.

One of the key limitations of this research involved finding willing participants. Although male Sudanese youth were located and consulted, only one participated in the study; the others either refused consent or failed to turn up for interviews. Because many of these youth were unemployed, their participation was not inhibited by work. One possible reason for their self-exclusion may be due to societal pressures that see African-Canadian youth, and particularly unemployed Black youth, as delinquent (Brake, 2003). If these youth have been repeatedly told by society that they are failures, the prospect of another researcher doing the same could have prevented their participation. While the unbalanced gender dynamics of the research sample provide a limitation to the study, the insights provided by other key informants (particularly settlement workers), as well as the findings presented in the two case studies on Sudanese refugees, supplemented this research gap.

### ***Organisation of research***

This chapter has located Sudanese refugee students in B.C. secondary schools and outlined the methodology employed in this research. The

following chapter will present the analytical framework by engaging with key theories. The third chapter will present the various factors that stand in the way of Sudanese refugee students' full participation in B.C. schools, and the ways in which multicultural education presents a means for positive intervention. The fourth chapter will highlight the agency of Sudanese refugee youth, and the ways in which their interactions with the education system reveal a discrepancy between multicultural education as a discourse and as a practical reality. The final chapter will bring together the research findings in a concluding analysis and provide insights into how multicultural education can be made more responsive to the needs of refugee students.



## Chapter 2

# Conceptual and Analytical Framework

In studying the educational experiences of Sudanese refugee youth, several important concepts—and the theories behind them—proved important for the analysis. This research seeks to identify the constraints facing Sudanese refugee youth in B.C. schools, as well as the ways in which multicultural education as a discourse and as a practice address these barriers. Given these objectives, multiculturalism and multicultural education provide the core analytical framework for this research. This framework is enhanced by a brief discussion on integration, in recognition of the important role that the education system plays in the acculturation process—and the impact of in-school experiences on the out-of-school economic, political, and social mobility of students. Yet before engaging with theories of multiculturalism, integration, and multicultural education, it is necessary to first locate the research subjects as *youth*—individuals who are embedded within a broader environment that includes the home, school, and larger society.

### 2.1 Conceptualising youth: an ecological approach

Like their Canadian-born peers, Sudanese refugee students in B.C. schools are in a formative stage of their lives that has been labelled “youth,” “adolescence,” or “young adulthood” (Ansell, 2005). Despite the United Nations’ definition of youth as any individual between the ages of 15 and 24, “youth” as a category is a social construct that varies according to context. As a result, the definition and meanings attached to youth extend beyond age to include gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005).

Honwana and De Boeck understand youth as “makers and breakers of society, while they are simultaneously being made and broken by that society” (2005: 2). This definition reveals an important aspect of youth: their situated agency and ability to not only be shaped by, but also to shape, the environment. In this research, an ecological approach is used to understand how youth are embedded within a system that extends from the individual to include the home, school, and larger society.

In the West, the increasing independence, political awareness, and agency of youth have led to their conceptualisation as social problems and a threat to the existing social and economic order (Roberts, 2009; Ansell, 2005). This conceptualisation is rooted in the ideas of Stanley Hall, who in the early twentieth century wrote about adolescence as a period of *sturm und drang*, or ‘storm and stress.’ For Hall, this phase in life is characterised by “antisocial behaviours and attitudes that invariably ‘spring up’ with a rush of hormonal activity and changes resulting from physical development” (Nichols *et al*, 2004: 3). Society’s conceptualisation of youth as rebellious and problematic has led to approaches that have focused on containment and control—and the school has also played a key role in this process. Youth, however, are “undeniably self-willed political beings [who are] undeniably engaged in (or disengaged

from) economic life” (Ansell, 2005: 31). While they may threaten societal values and norms, their actions must be understood as a response to their environment rather than a biological tendency towards delinquency.

### ***Black youth subculture and Sudanese refugee youth***

Youth subculture theories have emerged from a study of youth movements among individuals sharing similar spatial, temporal, and class locations in society (Brake, 2003). For African-Canadians, Black youth subculture offers a means for finding and expressing their identity in a society where they are frequently seen as the ‘other.’ According to Kelly (2008), these “discourses of blackness” are dominated by African-American youth culture (90). While all youth struggle to find a sense of identity, these challenges are heightened for Sudanese refugee youth, who constitute a racial minority within B.C. schools. For these teenagers, Black youth subculture offers an alternative to “white” and “Western” identity through media, music, and dress. Yet there is also a grimmer side to this subculture—one that embraces violence and the adoption of the African-American ‘gangster’ image (ASAC, 2009).

Although violent trends do exist among some African-Canadians, the stereotyping of all Black youth according to this ‘gangster’ image has been reproduced through media portrayals. As a result, “white” society often sees Black youth subculture as “accompanied by behaviour often classified as delinquent, certainly deviant” (Brake, 2003: 151). The higher-than-average school drop-out rates among the African-Canadian population has also fuelled these perceptions. Many are assumed to be engaged in alcohol abuse, gang violence, and other criminal activities. This stigma has led to the “social labelling of Black Canadians as troublemakers” (Dei, 1997).

The Sudanese youth in this study occupy a distinct position—both in society at large, and schools in specific. A review of youth and youth subculture theories thus provides an important framework for contextualising their experiences. These theories also assist in understanding the situated agency of Sudanese refugee youth and the ways that this influences their response to educational barriers.

## **2.2 Multiculturalism in the Canadian context**

Sudanese refugee students are also situated within part of a growing visible minority population in Canada. In a country where nearly 19.8 percent of the population is foreign-born (BC Stats, 2008), multiculturalism has been upheld and embraced as a pillar of national identity. If culture is understood as “the meanings, values, and ways of life of a particular group” (Schech and Haggis, 2000: 21), Canadian society is a dynamic space where various peoples and cultures converge.

Canada has—in principle—formulated an “excellent” approach to multiculturalism and diversity that has been upheld as an example across the world (Fleras and Kunz, 2007). In fact, Canada was the first country to officially recognise multiculturalism, acting in response to equality concerns among French and English minority groups in different parts of the country. In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau officially recognised the bilingual and bicultural history of Canada, and thus effectively set the stage for other minority groups to pursue recognition and equality (Connelly *et al*, 2003). The following decade, the federal government passed the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada, or Multicultural Act. Multiculturalism, as enshrined in this Act, can be defined as the recognition of diversity, preservation of heritage, promotion of understanding, promise of equality, and assurance of participation for all individuals, regardless of their background (Canada. Parliament. House of Commons, 1988).

### ***Multiculturalism and integration theory***

Although it has evolved through various stages, with different focuses and goals, Canadian multiculturalism in the twentieth-century carries the objective of fostering citizenship and identity through integration (Fleras and Kunz, 2007).<sup>8</sup> In fact, multiculturalism has played an influential role in shaping national discourse on integration. Rather than a one-way movement towards assimilation, the integration of newcomers in Canada is seen as a reciprocal process involving adjustments from Canadian structures, institutions, and peoples, as well as from immigrants. This discourse is embedded in the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA); one of the core objectives of this document is “to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognising that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society” (Canada. Parliament. House of Commons, 2001).

In addition to its two-way nature, integration is also an economic, political, and social process, carrying implications for employability, citizenship and equality, and feelings of belonging (Atfield *et al*, 2007). These dimensions of the integration process can lead to varied outcomes, and current literature has identified three main paths of integration for newcomers. These include upward mobility, mainstream absorption, and downward spiral into underclass absorption (Stewart, 2008). Alba and Nee (2003) have argued that the opportunities for successful social and economic mobility of newcomers are on the rise, thus facilitating upward mobility in terms of class and status. Yet this process of adaptation and adjustment can take time, and the researchers have noted that many immigrants—especially in the first and second generations—will experience little change in their socioeconomic status; as a result, they experience straight-line integration, or mainstream absorption.<sup>9</sup> Others, however, have noted the large numbers of newcomers caught in a downward spiral of poverty and inequality. Portes and Rumbaut (1990) have found that immigrants who are part of ethnic minority groups are even more likely to be caught in this downward spiral of underclass absorption.

## ***Multicultural education***

Because schools are one of the first spheres where newcomer youth interact with Canadian society and culture (Wilkinson, 2002), they play a key role in the integration process. As “powerful ideological institutions” (Stromquist, 1996: 397), schools have become a main focus for instilling multicultural values. They also play an important role in the economic and socio-political mobility of immigrants and refugees.

However, because education is administered at the provincial level—while multiculturalism is embedded in national legislation—the ways in which provincial education ministries incorporate multiculturalism differ across the country. Some scholars have argued that in British Columbia, conservative government leadership throughout the 1970s saw multiculturalism as a “threat to Canadian national unity and social cohesion” (Carrington and Bonnett, 1997: 414); in recent years, however, multiculturalism has become an integral part of the education planning and policy-making. Given the fact that over 27.5 percent of the population of British Columbians is foreign-born (BC Stats, 2008), diversity is a reality in schools—and multicultural education has been implemented to address the needs of changing school populations.

This research conceptualises multicultural education as a process that aims to address “institutional barriers, material inequalities, and power discrepancies between minorities and the majority” (Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994: 427). Given this definition, multicultural education has transformative goals. According to Banks (1993), multicultural education necessitates adjustments to ensure that curriculum, teaching styles and attitudes, and the overall objectives, values, and practices of the school are inclusive for all students. It has also been seen as an important means to address discrimination and inequality in Canadian society. According to the Royal Commission on Education, schools are “expected... to serve as agencies for civic and democratic development and as places where our culture and values can be sustained and transmitted to the young” (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008: 3).

Despite the attention that has been directed towards multiculturalism in Canada, there have been significant challenges to the practical application of corresponding policies—including multicultural education. In a nation-wide study that involved roundtable discussions with members of municipal, provincial, and federal government, businesses, the media, and community organisations, Fleras and Kunz (2007) found the following:

“While Canada is good at developing sound policies, it is less successful in translating policy goals into reality due to overly subtle and uncoordinated practices in communicating principles, as well as disconnects between policy goals and implementation on the ground” (8).

Multicultural education has come under fire for exactly these reasons. One of the primary critiques is that the mainstreaming of multicultural education has led to an empty process which creates space for the celebration of diversity, but does little to address the structural inequalities that exist. This has led to critiques of multicultural education as the “sari, steel drum and

samosa approach” (Ghosh, 2004: 554); the ”food, clothing, song, and dance” approach (Kehoe and Mansfield, 1993: 3); and the trivial celebration of the ‘other’ (Schick and St. Denis, 2005: 307). Another critique has been that multicultural education, with its emphasis on unity in diversity, sees Canada as a “raceless” country. By doing so, however, multiculturalism has overlooked the existence and persistence of racism (Kirova, 2008).

### ***Anti-racist education***

The failure of multiculturalism to address these problems has led to the emergence of an alternative approach: anti-racist education. This approach has epistemological roots in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, who maintain that education is a highly political process. This perspective views schools as a space where inequalities—whether social or cultural—are reproduced, and thus have the effect of segmenting society according to class (Rezai-Rashti, 1995: 4). According to anti-racist educator Dei, “Critical education must challenge the propensity of the Western academy to celebrate diversity and yet not respond concretely to difference. This is where anti-racist education and critical practice come in” (2008: 220).

Anti-racist educators argue that racism—and “the construction of racial dominance” (Schick and St. Denis, 2005: 298)—is embedded in all of the structures of society, including the educational system. Under multicultural education, there is an emphasis on protecting and promoting the culture of visible minorities. By applying Freire’s critical pedagogical approach, however, anti-racist educators argue that the labelling of some groups as “visible minorities” means that their identity is formed according to what they are not—the ‘majority’, or the ‘White’ (Schick and St. Denis, 2005). Further, this de facto association with a certain ethno-cultural group fails to recognise the dynamism within non-Western cultures, instead assigning minority groups a static, homogenous identity (Kirova, 2008). Because theories of multiculturalism fail to deconstruct the majority and the ‘other’, or the symbolic ‘White’ and ‘Black’, multicultural education can never address the advantaged white identity, which is inherent to the system (Schick and St. Denis, 2005: 309).

Because the school plays a key role in shaping—or reproducing—identity (Torres, 1998: 445), the education process has important implications for society. Anti-racist educators argue, in the spirit of Giroux, that recognition of the political dimension of education brings the opportunity to “create new knowledge, to emphasise classroom social practices, and to generate a new curriculum aimed at cultivating a deeper respect for a more democratic, egalitarian, and just society” (Rezai-Rashti, 1995: 6). Thus, change is directed at the structure of the educational system, and race equality and equity initiatives have become a key focus.

Anti-racist approaches to education provide added value to the multicultural education. However, the emphasis on institutional racism as the leading cause of disparities between “Black” and “White” (Rezai-Rashti, 1995; Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994) brings with it the potential to overlook other contextual factors that also affect students’ academic experiences. These may

include family or intergenerational conflict, cultural differences, or other external circumstances. By labelling the system as responsible for persistent inequalities in society, the approach ignores other factors that also play a potentially important role.

### ***Towards a comprehensive framework***

Some scholars have argued that multicultural and anti-racist educational interventions are contradictory due to their different roots and underlying assumptions (Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Yet according to Mansfield and Kehoe (1994),

“One unfortunate consequence of the multicultural versus anti-racist conflict is that it has confused or antagonized many educators, who seek direction in modifying their curricula or instructional practices to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the ethnic communities they serve. Clearly, it is time for an accord.” (426)

British Columbia’s Ministry of Education has sought to achieve this balance through a blended approach. In 2001, the Ministry of Education produced a handbook entitled *Diversity in B.C. Schools – A Framework*, which contains both multicultural and anti-racist content.<sup>10</sup> The explicit goals of the document involve:

- developing cross-cultural understanding to create sensitivity to and respect for difference;
- eliminating racism;
- eliminating systemic and attitudinal barriers that prevent full and equitable participation in community services, employment and education; and
- developing culturally responsive services to meet the changing needs of the communities they are intended to serve, rather than expecting clients and consumers to adapt to prescribed services as they exist.

Because multicultural and anti-racist education form an integral part of the education process in Canada, they provide an important framework for analysing the experiences of Sudanese refugee youth. The following chapter will use this framework to identify the constraints to full participation in B.C. schools and to evaluate the role that multicultural education can play in addressing these constraints.

## Chapter 3

### Individuals embedded: identifying and contextualising the barriers facing Sudanese refugee teens in B.C. schools

For African students, this place is a mirage. It exists, but not everyone gets to experience it. And it'll swallow you up.

--Youth worker, Abbotsford

Sudanese teenagers are more than just students, and the challenges that they face within the school system are embedded in various layers of support, including the home, school, and wider society. Their agency, both in pre- and post-migration, is therefore situated in and constrained by these often overlapping and intertwining spheres.

As outlined in the previous chapter, multicultural education, at least in theory, provides equal and equitable opportunity for all learners in the school system. Yet the experiences of Sudanese refugee youth in B.C. schools reveal that numerous constraints stand in the way of positive economic, political, and social outcomes of schooling. In this chapter, an ecological approach will be used to identify and contextualise these barriers. By building on the conceptual framework outlined in the previous chapter, I will examine the interface between the needs of Sudanese refugee students and the role that multiculturalism—and, more specifically, multicultural education—can play in addressing their distinct position in society.

**Table 3.1**  
**Sudanese refugee youth participant profiles<sup>11</sup>**

Name	Age	Sex	Age on arrival	Parents		Siblings	Immigration status	English on arrival	Interrupted schooling
				Mother	Father				
Tabitha	19	F	14	Yes	Deceased	5	PSR	Limited	Minimal
Lual	17	F	15	Yes	Yes	6	GAR	None	Yes
Achol	17	F	11	Yes	Deceased	4	GAR	None	Yes
Daniel	17	M	12	Yes	Deceased	5	PSR	None	Minimal
Irene	16	F	11	Yes	Missing	5	GAR	Limited	Yes
Jemilla	15	F	9	Yes	Deceased	4	GAR	None	Yes
Mona	15	F	13	Yes	Yes	6	GAR	None	Yes

### 3.1 Carrying their past: pre-migration experiences and the post-migration home-school linkage

As outlined in the first chapter, one of the distinguishing factors between newcomers stems from their pre- and trans-migratory experiences. For refugees, these experiences are shaped by threats or outright violence, often as a result of ethnic conflict and/or civil war. For the Sudanese refugee students in this study, traumatic experiences and forced relocation have resulted in emotional scars and disrupted family units; further, they have challenged traditional gender roles and responsibilities within the home. Each of these factors has contributed to the vulnerable position of Sudanese refugee students in B.C. schools.

#### *Physical and emotional scars*

While mental and physical health of refugee youth can affect their functioning in all spheres of their lives, they are particularly important to their the school experience. All of the students who were interviewed for this research told stories about trauma and loss in their past, but were hesitant to express how these experiences affected their every-day lives in Canada. When their stories were linked with the insights provided by settlement workers, however, mental health was identified as a significant source of risk. According to one settlement worker,

These kids come from an environment that was so hostile, where they have witnessed some sort of violence—losing their family members in the war, things like that. So that affects them mentally, and it affects them physically, because when you're mind is not stable...

Previous studies on refugee students have identified mental and health challenges as one of the most significant barriers to performance and retention (Kanu, 2008; MacKay and Tavares, 2005; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996). These psychological challenges can affect trust in authority figures such as teachers and educators, hinder the development of relationships with other students, and potentially cause stress or even panic attacks as a result of every-day occurrences at school (Kanu, 2008; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996).<sup>12</sup>

Although all of the students who were interviewed for this research fled from the same war in southern Sudan, they experienced varying types and degrees of trauma. Despite their hesitation to speak about these experiences, they all recounted a range of stories and emotions about horror endured in Sudan and, in some cases, during the trans-migration period in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> These included physical violence or threats against themselves, family members, or friends, food shortages, separation from family members, and geographical insecurity.

Mona, a 15-year-old refugee who spent more than half her life in Egypt, is still recovering from a trans-migration experience that has left her physically and emotionally scarred. When asked about a four-centimetre-long mark just



above her left eye, she explained that it happened on the street in Cairo when she was only nine years old:

*Mona:* “Someone shot me in the head.”

*Researcher:* “And that was just because you’re Sudanese?”

*Mona:* “Yes.”

After being shot by young Egyptian male, for no apparent reason other than the fact that she is Sudanese, Mona’s parents were afraid to let her outside. During the interview, Mona recounted the emotional difficulties she experienced for the duration of her time in Alexandria, when she stayed in the family’s flat almost all the time due to her parents’ fear for her safety. Instead of going to school and visiting friends, Mona spent the next four years cooking, cleaning, and caring for her younger siblings. In the interview, she expressed how even today, she still suffers sometimes from the fear of strangers.

### ***Broken family units and inverted roles within the home***

Not all of the students who were interviewed had physically experienced the effects of war. Yet for nearly all of these students, the pre-migration experience fractured the family unit—causing emotional stress on the individual and family, challenging traditional gender roles, and inverting responsibilities within the home. Out of the seven Sudanese refugee students who were interviewed for this research, only two arrived in Canada with both parents. The other five youth fled Sudan and travelled to Canada with a single mother as their only guardian. While none knew the whereabouts of their father upon arrival, four have since learned of their fathers’ deaths.

For Tabitha, one of the most traumatic experiences in her past was fleeing Sudan without her father.

It was a huge, shocking thing. It was because of the war, and my dad... if someone from the family gets in trouble, the whole family is in trouble... He had been working with organisations taking medicine to the war zones. I think it was something that got him in trouble, because he left and he never came back from one of his trips... I remember my mom saying, “We have to go.” Where are we going? “We just have to go.”

In fact, Tabitha’s father had been arrested and placed in prison, where he suffered from malnutrition and eventually died of an unknown disease. However, she—along with her four siblings and their mother—spent several years in Cairo, Egypt and a year in Canada before they finally found out what had happened. While she did not detail the emotional trauma that resulted from this uncertainty and concerns over his safety, the experience undoubtedly affected her ability to adjust to life both in Egypt and in Canada.

Almost all of the settlement workers also pointed to broken family units as a major barrier of refugee students. A New Westminster settlement worker described the situation facing many refugee families upon arrival in Canada:

When they arrive here, they'll be a single mother with five, six kids, and she will be the one acting as the husband and wife at the same time, and that most of the time reflects on the kids, the disadvantage of not having the head of the family, as well as the disadvantage of being in a different country, a different culture...

This statement reveals an important aspect of Sudanese culture: traditional family values. These values—and particularly traditional gender roles, with the male as the “head” of the household—complicate the acculturation and integration process for single mothers. Upon arrival in Canada—and often already during the trans-migratory period—these single mothers are required to fill the typically male-dominated role of primary wage-earner, as well as carry out reproductive roles within the home. Several youth in this study told about how their mother's inability to achieve this balance meant that they were required to assume the role of primary care-giver for younger siblings.

These youth also took on “adult” roles in other ways. Refugee children and youth often pick up language skills faster than their parent(s) because of their immersion in Canadian schools. As a result, parents and younger siblings become dependent on these youth, and there is a blurring of roles. Tabitha remembers the new responsibilities fell on her because of her English skills:

I picked up the language quickly. So I had to deal with all the bills, helping everybody with their homework, then doing all the processes with government talking, the phone calls... so I had to be home. So it was kind of challenging, until my younger siblings grew up a little bit.

While role reversals in the home may be more common in single-parent families, even the two students who lived with both parents were often forced to take on adult roles. For these students, juggling responsibilities at home decreases the time they have available for schoolwork—an important problem, considering Kaprielian-Churchill (1996)'s finding that in order to achieve successful outcomes in school, refugee students must typically spend substantially more time on homework than their Canadian-born peers.

### ***Settlement Workers in Schools as a multicultural-driven initiative to fill the gap between the home and school***

Although the school can never be expected to fill the gap caused by a missing parent, or to ensure that students do not take on adult roles in the home, multicultural education *does* promise “to create and maintain conditions that foster success for all students and promote fair and equitable treatment for all” (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008: 4). One of the ways that the needs of refugee students have been addressed is through the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) programme. Modelled after an initiative in the province of Ontario, SWIS workers entered B.C. schools in 2007. The programme mandate includes outreach to all newcomers, settlement orientation and counselling, promoting awareness of settlement issues, acting as a liaison between students and schools, connecting students to other service providers, and monitoring and evaluating students' progress (British Columbia. Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, 2009).

The introduction of SWIS workers in B.C. schools symbolises an important step in the implementation of multicultural education. However, even settlement workers themselves argue that this is not enough. Financial constraints have limited the resources available. Further, schools do not keep background information on the status of newcomers. While this is a sensitive issue due to privacy laws and, at times, students' desires to shed the "refugee" label (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996), lack of information on the student population means that SWIS workers must rely on personal contacts with students and referrals by teachers in order to identify at-risk students.

In order to treat refugee students equally and equitably, multicultural education must address their distinct needs. Yet if schools and teachers do not understand the psychological challenges of their pupils, there is a significant danger of misdiagnosing the needs of these students. According to Yau (1995), students from ESL backgrounds who are socially distant or non-participatory in class are often assumed to simply require remedial language instruction. However, the failure of refugee teenagers to engage in classes or with other students may be symptoms of other problems, including trauma from their pre- and trans-migratory experiences. Likewise, students who display aggression within schools may have diverse reasons for their behaviour:

If young people have survived the chaos in the old land by their wits, their cunning, their shrewdness, and their aggressiveness, do we have the right to place them in our society and expect them to shed those qualities and characteristics which helped them survive in the first place? (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996: 360).

If left unaddressed, the symptoms of mental health problems—including withdrawal or aggressive behaviour in school—may lead refugee youth to find different outlets for their emotions. One result may be through identification with some of the more negative aspects of Black youth sub-culture, including alcohol and drug abuse, or gang activity. While multicultural education claims to offer a solution to ethnic divisions in society, failure to identify and prioritise the needs of refugee students—including mental health challenges—can leave them at greater risk for underclass absorption in a stratified society. When this occurs, blame cannot be exclusively placed on the students.

### 3.2 Counting pennies, weighing futures: the costs of education

As outlined in the previous section, the home-school linkage is often affected by pre-migration experiences that cause trauma, disrupted family units, and inverted roles within the home. However, this link is also affected by a family's economic and social positioning in society. In this context, the education process can present important financial and social costs for refugee families.

#### *Financial concerns of refugee families*

While Sudanese refugees often come to Canada with emotional scars and broken family units, they are further disadvantaged by their positioning, upon arrival, in a society where inequality is growing—and the African-Canadian population is over-represented in an impoverished underclass. According to national statistics, 39 percent of the African community lived below the national poverty line in 2001, in contrast with 16 percent of the remaining Canadian population. The same report revealed that nearly half of all African-Canadian children live in poverty, as compared to 19 percent of their peers (Canada. Statistics Canada, 2007).

One of the significant challenges facing refugee families is the financial burden they face upon arrival—and one of the root causes of financial stress stems from national-level policies. The findings in this study confirm what existing research has already suggested—that while virtually all refugees face financial hardship, GARs face even more challenges (Yu *et al*, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002). The difference between private and government sponsorship can have significant effects on the economic integration of a refugee family in Canada, and one immediate and obvious example is the struggle that GARs face in repaying the refugee transportation loan (RTL).

While the Canadian government pays for GAR flights to the country, they do so through a loan; as a result, all GARs are in debt upon arrival. While debts vary depending on the size of the family and the location of origin, they can range from \$1,200 to \$15,000 and above (Friesen, 2009). A recent letter authored by Chris Friesen, the director of Immigrant Services Society (ISS) in British Columbia, and signed by 36 refugee assistance service providers across the country, outlines the potentially disastrous effects of the refugee transportation loan on families:

For over 10 years we have tracked alarming trends among GARs as a distinct result of the transportation loan program. Higher at-risk homelessness, increased use of food banks, family breakdown due to income instability and youth forced to drop out of high school to help their parents augment their household income have been observed across Canada. These trends are now accelerating as a result of the recent economic downturn in the economy (Friesen, 2009).

Study findings reveal that constraints at the family level can also have dire impacts on the experiences of refugee youth in B.C. schools. All seven of the

students interviewed for this research described the long hours that their parent or parents spent at work—ten or more hours per day, and often six or even seven days per week. One father earned around \$16 per hour—a wage that Mona described as good. The remainder of the youth said that their parent’s earnings fell in the minimum wage range (currently eight dollars in B.C., the lowest in the country). For adults—many of whom have no English language skills upon arrival, and have either low education levels or accreditation that is not recognised in Canada—the job market is extremely limited. Financial difficulties are accentuated for GARs, who have immediate debt due to the refugee transportation loan. GARs also have limited support systems upon arrival, and must rely on their own job search skills or the Sudanese community for assistance. This disadvantaged position has had an effect on the economic integration of refugee families. According to existing research in Canada, PSRs have almost double the average earnings of GARs, with the latter earning an average of only \$10,000 per year (Yu *et al*, 2002: 20).

These financial concerns intersect with the students’ educational experiences in numerous ways. For some students, limited resources mean that they are unable to participate in school fieldtrips or to purchase a hot lunch. But an even greater concern is the fact that many students are pressured to find work during the school year and summer. As mentioned in the previous section, refugee students often experience inverted roles in the home, where they find themselves saddled with responsibilities including contacting government and community service providers, paying bills, and caring for younger siblings. The financial burdens surrounding Sudanese refugee families can further complicate the role that these youth play in their family.

For the Sudanese refugees interviewed in this study, economic concerns were an important push factor behind decisions to find part-time employment. Four of the youth who were interviewed admitted that they had found part-time employment at fast-food restaurants or—during the summer—in the berry fields. Tabitha expressed the burden caused by the family’s financial concerns:

I would go to school, and the money that I would get [from working], it was just helping us around. So I was like, how can I go to university? I would go home and cry about it all night long, then pray about it, then come back...

Tabitha’s situation is not unique. According one Abbotsford worker, many Sudanese youth begin leaving school early in the afternoon so that they can go to work—and still others are balancing full-time employment with full-time schooling. A New Westminster worker has seen similar problems.

Income assistance that these families receive from the government is not always enough for anything... [and now] you have a kid who is 16 or 17, and instead of focusing on how to graduate, he will also be trying to assist the family.... His focus has become on actually making money to help the family.

The pressure to provide financial assistance to families weighs heavily on some refugee students, and can put them at greater risk of poor academic performance or even dropping out of school. Several existing studies have expressed concerns over the impact of work and school on the performance of refugee students (Kanu, 2008; Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996).

For many refugee families, and refugee youth, the opportunity costs of education are too high, and families must forego future benefits of education because of immediate needs. A Vancouver SWIS worker told the story of one family, where a single mother of three teenagers had no choice but to have her children work.

These kids go to work at 10:00 pm and work in cleaning for three, four hours. They come home at 1:00 or 2:00, go to sleep, then wake up and go to school... I try to convince her, you know, their future—if they study, they will still have enough. But she says, “What about now? I can’t even work; I’m not healthy. So if they go to school, who is going to feed them? The welfare money is not enough. So what am I supposed to do?” And sometimes it’s hard for me to convince her about what she’s supposed to do. She will tell me, “You have your income—but you’re telling me to do this for them.” And that breaks my heart. And what future do they have? Probably just to live a life of poverty.

These findings reveal the high financial and opportunity costs that face some refugee families. Settlement workers are employed for the purpose of helping minority students navigate the B.C. school system. Yet the fact that the above worker does not know how—or even if—he should convince these students to study rather than work is a testament to their vulnerable position. If students choose to work, they have less time to focus on their studies; yet if they study, they will not be able to pay the bills.

When analysing the ways in which financial difficulties place students at risk within the schools, the need for multiculturalism and multicultural education becomes apparent. Current theories, and the corresponding policies, claim to offer the solution to “institutional barriers, material inequalities, and power discrepancies between minorities and the majority” (Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994: 427). However, multicultural education, with its emphasis on inclusion, equality and equity, and culturally-responsive services (BC Diversity Framework, 2008), must also be supported by macro-level, systemic changes to problematic policies such as the RTL. If not, the risks associated with economic difficulties have the potential to push students from low-income families into a life of poverty—or, according to the rhetoric of integration theory, absorption into an underclass. The end result, then, is the systemic creation and perpetuation of a cycle of poverty and inequality.

### ***Social costs of Canadian education***

In addition to the financial and opportunity costs of education, some Sudanese families also see Canadian education as a threat to their culture and identity. For Sudanese parents, in particular, the values that are transferred in

Canadian schools are a challenge to traditional conceptions of gender roles, appropriate behaviour among and between sexes, and respect for authority—practices that are highly valued by the Sudanese community. This has led to decisions to withdraw young people from school as well as inter-generational conflict between parents and youth.

One Sudanese mother from Abbotsford gave a parent’s perspective on the cultural costs of education:

We come from a different culture. When we’re here with kids, we need our kid to be like us—traditionally, whatever. Our culture... Parents need the children to go to school—but don’t do ‘whatever’ like the other students. But at school, the kids want to have freedom like here in Canada....

This quote reveals what Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) have identified as the generally “different pace of acculturation and adjustment between [refugee] parents and their children” (30). While parents may see their teenagers as losing their Sudanese roots, refugee youth often see their parents as traditional and backwards. Gender roles and relationships can be a major source of tension within the home, and one settlement worker described an incident where the problem escalated to the point that the police were called in to address the matter.

Although none of the youth who were interviewed recounted extreme problems with their parent or parents, several admitted to fights over ‘inappropriate’ clothes. While Tabitha described her mom as open-minded and understanding, she admitted that their relationship is unusual:

The way she raises us, it’s quite different than the way people get raised in Sudanese culture. My boyfriend used to say, ‘I wish I could trade my mom for yours. My mom is crazy!’ Some families are very traditional...

According to a Vancouver settlement worker, intergenerational conflict between Sudanese parents and youth is a common problem, and the impact extends beyond the confines of the home:

A lot of times, some of them become rebellious. Some will continue to live the same lives—you know, this is me at home, and this is me at school. So they have two characters, which to them creates this identity crisis—like, who are they really?

But even at school, navigating identity issues proves to be a challenge. Because they are part of an African-Canadian minority, there are both external stigmas and internal pressure to identify with Black youth subculture. Students who do not adopt the music, dress, and behaviour of their African-Canadian peers face ostracism from their own community. One Abbotsford settlement worker gave an example of a common taunt directed at these youth: “Just leave him alone; he’s whitewashed.”

The impact of cultural differences and intergenerational conflict can place Sudanese youth at risk within the B.C. school system in various ways. The most extreme examples, as mentioned by one Abbotsford settlement worker,

involve parents withdrawing their teenagers from school. A study by the ASAC (2009) revealed that a large number of the Sudanese girls who are taken out of Canadian secondary schools have marriages arranged by their parents soon after. Others end up searching for unskilled labour jobs for low wages. In less extreme cases, students may not be forced to drop out; however, the challenges of navigating cultural differences between the home and school can have an impact on a student's ability or desire to focus on their studies.

In the Canadian context, integration is conceptualised as a reciprocal relationship between newcomers and larger society. As a result, all Canadian residents are—in theory—granted the space to retain their distinct identities. Yet perceived the social costs of education among some Sudanese families—as evidenced by intergenerational conflict and, at times, the resulting decisions to withdraw students from school—reveal the challenges of negotiating cultural space. While there is a need for tolerance in education, multiculturalism is also faced with making moral judgments about which cultural practices are incompatible with the individual freedoms embedded in Canadian institutions. However, these judgments can, and have, contributed to the perception of education as a threat to Sudanese culture and identity—leaving youth in a vulnerable position in B.C. schools.

### **3.3 The functional challenges of starting school as a refugee in Canada**

While perceived costs of education—whether financial or social—may influence decisions to choose work over school, the majority of Sudanese youth do attend school—at least for a time—after arriving in Canada. For these students, immersion into the B.C. school system is complicated by a number of functional challenges, including English language deficits and interrupted schooling. Although these factors originate in the pre-migration experience, they can have a profound impact on the ability of Sudanese youth to transition into B.C. secondary schools.

#### ***ESL deficits***

In addition to cultural barriers and identity concerns, refugee students also face functional challenges when they arrive in B.C. schools. One of the biggest struggles for refugees who are resettled in Canada is the language barrier. While the language barrier affects interactions in various places, it becomes a particular problem when refugee students enter the school system. Despite limited or no knowledge in the English language, refugee students are placed in B.C. secondary schools according to their age and, with the assistance of ESL classes, expected to manage both the curriculum and the language.

Multicultural education calls for an equitable approach to the needs of a diverse, changing student population, and for immigrant students, this has ensured the commitment, within schools, to language instruction for all students who are from ESL backgrounds. This response addresses a clear need; of the seven Sudanese youth who were interviewed for this study, only two had any previous experience with English—and both of these teens still



identified their English abilities upon arrival as very limited. Yet despite the commitment to assisting second-language learners, the current practice of placing all ESL students in the same class reflects a homogenisation of their needs. In fact, the needs of African refugee students are often very different from those of immigrants. One settlement worker from Vancouver detailed this problem:

When the newcomers come, they register and go to ESL class, and then in ESL class [they find] a bunch of kids from different countries—from all over the world... But [schools] forget that these kids came to Canada for different reasons. The ones from Asian countries have come specifically to learn. The ones that come from other countries like Sudan... they did not have a choice to come here. They weren't coming here to school prepared, [while for the other students] their parents are behind them, they support them... it's a completely different situation.

This statement was supported by the study findings. All of the students who took ESL classes said they were either the only African student in the class, or one of just a few Black students among a majority from South Korea, China, and India.

For most immigrant students, ESL classes are simply remedial language instruction. For Sudanese refugee youth, however, the challenges more complicated. None of the Sudanese refugee youth in this study knew how to read or write in their mother tongue, and only two of the students could do so in Arabic. Thus, while English is the third or fourth language for these students, it was the first language where they were learning to read and write—making the task of gaining literacy even more difficult.

### ***Interrupted schooling***

In addition to ESL challenges, Sudanese refugee youth almost always come to Canada with interrupted schooling or deficient education stemming from their trans-migratory experiences. However, these students are, as mentioned above, always placed in classes according to their age (MacKay and Tavares, 2005: 33). A settlement worker from Vancouver explains the problem:

Many refugee youth spent so much time in a refugee camp, or a refugee setting. In Egypt, there's no camp, but they're living in a refugee setting. There's a lack of resources for them, and they haven't been given school for a long time. They lack a basic educational background. So when they come here with less education and enrol in school, [schools] are putting them into a grade with you and me who might have been here for a long time... it just doesn't make sense.

When Mona arrived in Canada in 2007 at the age of 13, she was placed in Grade 8 at an Abbotsford public school. In the seven years she spent in Egypt before migrating, she never attended school. Instead, she worked at home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for her younger siblings while her parents

worked. Her older sister, Lual, was 15 when she came to Canada, and also spent seven years in Egypt without any access to education. Instead, she spent between eight and ten hours each day working as a maid for Egyptian households to help sustain her own family's livelihood. When placed in Grade 9 upon arrival, she found the experience overwhelming:

I'm so bad at math. I just only finished math at Grade 3 in Sudan, so I didn't do it anymore. And when I came here, I [was placed in] Math 9."

Lual's experience reflects a critique that has been highlighted by several existing studies—the age-based placement of refugee students (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Kanu, 2008). According to several settlement workers, this age-based placement strategy is employed almost without exception. Yet using age as the sole criteria for grade placement overlooks other factors that can have an impact on learning—such as language and educational deficits. Thus, current practice reflects a convenience-based approach rather a student-centred strategy formulated according to the distinct needs of individual students.

According to a New Westminster SWIS worker, these problems have been raised before. In fact, a settlement conference was held in June 2008, with the participation of Ministry of Education representatives, teachers, settlement workers, and students. The goal of the conference was to address the challenges of increasing diversity in B.C. schools. Yet when settlement workers called for additional programming and a more diversified approach to accommodate the wide range of needs among immigrant and refugee students, they were met with resistance from the Ministry of Education representatives:

They came with the attitude that this is the way the system is, and there's nothing we can do about it.

The above quotation is particularly concerning in the context of multicultural education as a remedy for systemic injustice and inequality. By its very nature, multicultural education seeks to transform the system. Yet the very institution that is promoting multicultural education as a discourse also perpetuating inequality in practice. If the schools continue to homogenise the needs of all ESL and immigrant students, "constraining education" will continue to place refugee students at risk in the B.C. school system.

In fact, one of the ways that schools could encourage positive outcomes for students with ESL and remedial education needs is through pursuing school-community partnerships. In 2005, the SSABC formed a homework club for children youth in Burnaby and New Westminster. One of the most encouraging aspects of the programme is the fact that the SSABC has hired Sudanese young people to assist with teaching refugee youth. In 2008, nine Sudanese students on scholarship at UBC participated in the programme, providing educational assistance as well as serving as role models and providing emotional support for their younger peers (Dedi, 2008: 3).

Although the SSABC homework club is a positive, community-driven initiative, resource constraints have prevented the implementation of similar initiatives in cities such as Abbotsford and Surrey, where there are also substantial Sudanese populations. Further, the programme cannot meet the

needs of students that have to care for younger siblings or work outside the home. While community-school linkages could be enhanced through similar programmes, current practice reveals an apparent lack of desire to find innovative ways to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

### **3.4 A student—but an equal? Individual and institutional racism**

ESL and educational deficits can have a profound impact on the ability of refugee students to manage the B.C. curriculum and keep up with their Canadian-born peers. However, Stromquist *et al* (1998) argue that the impact of the school experience transcends economic concerns of employability to affect human dignity, social legitimacy, and empowerment (401). For the Sudanese youth who were interviewed in this study, structural and individual manifestations of racism presented clear obstacles to full and meaningful participation.

#### ***The limited power base of African populations in Canada***

For ethnic minorities—whether immigrants or refugees—the transition to a predominantly white Western society presents numerous challenges. For African refugees, however, these challenges are complicated by the “lack of power base in Western countries” (Kanu, 2008: 917). Despite the diversity that exists within Canada, the Sudanese population—and even the African community—in the Greater Vancouver area is still relatively small. No official statistics are available, but the settlement workers interviewed in this research all estimated that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 Sudanese refugees living in southwest British Columbia. These individuals make up part of the 25,000 B.C. residents from African backgrounds—eight percent of the national total (Canada. Statistics Canada, 2007). The small number of residents from African backgrounds lies in contrast to the large, established Chinese and south Asian populations—groups that mainly migrated to Canada as economic immigrants. Thus, the African community is “located at the intersection of at least three categorical descriptors that have become synonymous with disadvantage in Canada: ‘Refugee,’ ‘Visible Minority, and ‘Black’” (Francis, 2009: 14).

#### ***Attitudes and actions: peers and teachers as perpetrators of racism***

Because Sudanese refugees are part of a small visible minority community, they are particularly vulnerable to racism, and their experiences at school are no exception. All of the youth who were interviewed told stories about racism at school. Their experiences originated from both teachers and peers, and included experiences of both verbal and physical attacks:

It’s mostly in the way they act. Like, you can be sitting on something, and they’ll just come up and start picking on you. Laughing and calling you names.

Interestingly, almost all of the participants in the study identified “the brown kids” as the main perpetrators of racism. The “brown kids” they are referring to are second- or third- generation students from Indian (mainly Punjabi) backgrounds, and are also considered visible minorities. However, in some school districts—particularly Abbotsford and Surrey, where most of the interviewees lived—Indian students equal or outnumber their white counterparts within schools.

While verbal abuse can have significant detrimental effects on students’ self-esteem and ability to function in the school setting, even more concerning is when racism turns to attacks on personal property and individuals.

One day, I put my stuff in my locker and someone, I don’t know, just come and put juice or water in. And I have to change my clothes and it’s all wet and stuff. And I don’t go to class because I have to wait to dry. [And I told] the teacher that I was changing my clothes, but she didn’t listen. (Mona, Sudanese student in Abbotsford)

For Daniel, one experience that has been imprinted on his memory took place during his first year of school in Canada. During a morning break, he was sitting outside when a group of white students approached and, unprovoked, began to hurl rocks at him. While he was the only student who recounted details of a violent attack, it would be naive to assume that his experience was a rare exception. These findings may be due to the unbalanced gender sample in this study.

While students were often the source of racism, teachers were also identified as perpetrators. Irene recalled an occasion where a friend sitting beside her began talking to her in class:

The teacher looked at me and thought I was the one who was talking. And [my friend] is white and I’m black, so of course she picks on the black person. So she tells me, why don’t you just get up and play basketball in the gym, something you’re good at.

The above quotation reveals a common societal perception about African-Canadian youth. Dei *et al* have argued that the negative publicity around Black youth subculture affects students who do remain in school. Because of the “social labelling of Blacks as troublemakers” (1997: 29), even students such as the Sudanese teenager in the above statement are assumed to be academically incompetent. In fact, this Sudanese teenager has earned very high grades, and has aspirations of securing a scholarship to study medicine in the future.

In the interview process, it became clear that Sudanese teenagers feel a strong sense of disillusionment with the school system’s ability to deal with the problem. According to one student, reporting racist incidents to the school principal was pointless because “nothing really happens.” Another settlement worker echoed these concerns:

Sometimes when things happen, they want to go to the teacher. But then the teacher says it’s just okay. So you want to tell the teacher every time, but [because of their failure to respond], some students

just keep it to themselves and don't tell. But if you want to revenge back, then you'll be the victim. Then you'll be the problem-causer.

Yet because schools do not adequately confront issues of racism, their non-response reaffirms these students' feelings of being part of a social underclass. As a result, African-Canadian teens may find other ways to address the problem—including violence, as was the case for one student in this study.

The racism that these youth have experienced in schools clearly highlights the need for multicultural education. In fact, the BC Diversity Framework states that “eliminating racism” and “eliminating systemic and attitudinal barriers that prevent full and equitable participation” are two of the primary goals of multicultural education (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008: 9). In this context, the students' and settlement workers' claims that racism goes unpunished reflects a clear discord between the rhetoric and the practical realities of multicultural education.

### ***Non-academic streaming of refugee students***

This study revealed concerns over schools enabling racism by failing to respond to acts of discrimination by both teachers and students. Yet this research also revealed that schools are perpetuating inequality through structural racism, which is manifest in the non-academic streaming of refugee students. In the British Columbia school system, students are supposed to have the choice between several course paths. These include choosing academic courses that will earn them the Dogwood diploma and fulfil the requirements for university admission, enrolling in an apprenticeship programme as preparation for trades work, or taking non-academic courses that will give students a B.C. School Leaving Certificate (Dedi, 2008: 2).

The students who were part of this research shared dreams of becoming doctors, counsellors, teachers, and ESL instructors. Despite their goals, however, nearly all of these students expressed anxiety over their streaming into non-academic courses. One Sudanese mother shared her frustration with the school system, and the fact that her daughter is entering Grade 12, but is not enrolled in any academic courses:

It's difficult in every subject. [She only takes] sports... I mention it because she does not like to talk about these things... sports, singing, music, drama, tailoring—these are the only subjects she's having. But English? No good English. No social studies. No maths, no science. This is what happens...

Conversations with students and settlement workers revealed important insights about why Sudanese teenagers are enrolled in low-level academic streams. When asked whether they had ever experienced problems with teachers at school, Lual expressed high levels of frustration with her ESL instructor:

I don't know if this is bad or not, maybe because my English is [not so good]... but if I want to take some classes, she's always saying no, you can't take it, it's not important... it's only for people

that are born here in Canada. So take the others because it's hard for people who come from different countries—so you can't take it. So I feel so bad.”

This teenager's statement troubling, as it reveals her uncertainty of the rights she possesses as a student and permanent resident in Canada. Since she arrived in the country two years ago, her ESL teacher has continually pushed her into non-academic courses. Despite her desire to enrol in classes that will open opportunities for post-secondary education, she does not know if she has the authority to make her own course decisions. This uncertainty has been fed by her ESL teacher's failure to treat her with equality—which has had a noticeable effect on her self-esteem.

The fact that Lual's teacher believes certain classes are only suitable for students born in Canada presents a clear example of the streaming of refugee—and other immigrant—students into non-academic courses. Given situations such as this, claims that multicultural education provides opportunity for equal outcomes among all students prove to be empty. Without knowledge of their rights as students—as Lual's experience demonstrates—refugee youth will continue to be at risk of over-representation in non-academic streams. As a SWIS worker, Charles is frequently involved in advocacy issues for refugee students, and expressed extreme frustration with the attitudes of teachers and administrators in Vancouver's public schools:

You find ESL or teachers who will tell [the students], okay, you're gonna enrol to do this, and this, and this, but this one you can't do it, and this one you can't do it. Now, where did they bring that from, that they can't do it?

The teachers and ESL instructors who carry these attitudes are a reflection of systemic racism within schools. Codjoe (2001) argues that the persistence of racism in Canadian schools has been masked by the mainstreaming of multiculturalism. This discourse has led to the perception of Canada as an inclusive society, and one in which multicultural education ensures equal and equitable opportunities for all students. As a result, underachievement among the African-Canadian population is assumed to be the fault of “Black culture” (Codjoe, 2001: 344).

The presence of refugee students in non-academic streams has been well-documented by previous studies (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996; Wilkinson, 2002). Yet whether the school systems are or are not directly pushing refugee students into non-academic streams, there are clear and concerning consequences. For the students interviewed in this research, poor self esteem and a lack of belief in the utility of school were particularly apparent in the discussions. One settlement worker from Vancouver acknowledged that this is a frequent problem:

*SWIS worker:* I find kids who fight very hard, who say, “No I need to do this, I need to do this,” but sometimes the counsellors, they say, “You're not able to do that.”

*Researcher:* And that must have an impact on their self esteem, as well.

*SWIS worker*: Absolutely. They have been put down: You can't do it." And now I have this girl who thinks that there's nothing she can do for schooling—because someone has already planted that in her mind."

The disproportionate representation of African refugee students in lower-level academic streams is particularly concerning in light of school-to-work transition literature. Ainsworth and Roscigno (2005) have documented the "class, race, and gender disparities" within non-academic secondary school streams, and argue that traditional neo-classical views of the education system see meritocracy as the determining factor for educational paths. In this context, "Black culture is seen to be mainly responsible for Black underachievement" (Codjoe, 2001:344). Yet Ainsworth and Roscigno call this assumption "questionable at best" (277). By analysing the results of a National Longitudinal Education Survey, these researchers found that the demographics within vocational education streams mirror—and reproduce—societal inequalities. Equally troubling is the fact that many refugee students who are represented in low-level streams still have aspirations of pursuing post-secondary education (Yau, 1995).

If "class, sex, and racial inequalities are clearly rooted in educational processes played out well before initial labour market entry... [and] set the stage for the proliferation of inequality in the world of work" (Ainsworth and Roscigno, 2005: 277), there is a key need for transformational, multicultural education. The findings in this study reveal that schools are, indeed, a place where inequalities are reproduced, with the effect of segmenting society according to class (Rezai-Rashti, 1995: 4). Yet even in this small research sample, the experiences of Sudanese refugee teenagers reflect clear discrepancies in the discourse of multicultural education and the realities within B.C. schools.

The educational experience of Sudanese refugee youth is embedded in a stratified system where inequality is growing, and newcomers and minority groups are over-represented in an economic, political, and social underclass. This chapter has analysed the broader context in which Sudanese youth are embedded, building on factors in the home, school, and larger society which have an impact on their educational experience. In doing so, the research reveals the important role that multicultural education can play in addressing inequality. Yet indications are that despite some positive initiatives, the education system is in many ways allowing and even perpetuating divisions that leave refugee students with very clear view of their position in society. As the above chapter revealed, the rhetoric of multicultural education has been undermined by the failure to implement truly equal and equitable education initiatives that meet the needs of all students.

Yet these youth, however, are not passive members of society; in fact, their stories reveal active engagement with and against the structures in which they are embedded. The following chapter will look at the ways that Sudanese youth have engaged with the system, and the impact this has on the integration process.

## Chapter 4

### Against the system – constraining education and alternative responses: stories of student agency

In the previous chapter, the barriers facing Sudanese refugee students were contextualised within debates on multicultural education. By analysing the factors that place Sudanese refugees at risk in B.C. school, this research indicates that despite the need for multicultural education, there are significant gaps between discourse and practical reality (Fleras and Kunz, 2007). Thus, in addition to assessing constraints to education, there is a need to also discuss the constraining education experienced by Sudanese refugee youth.

Yet youth are not passive recipients of adult socialisation. As Honwana and De Boeck (2005) argue, young people are, in addition to being moulded by society, also active participants in the making of society. While youth and youth subcultures that challenge existing structures and norms are often “considered either to be at risk or a risk to society” (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005: 3), the lived experiences of Sudanese refugee youth in this research also reflect positive engagement with unjust institutions. In fact, only one of the seven students in this study explicitly showed a lack of desire to finish school; the other six teenagers demonstrated substantial resilience and were, in fact, overcoming multifaceted barriers to their participation.

Thus, this chapter will look at Sudanese teenagers as active agents who can provide valuable lessons about the impact of the schooling process, and the role that multicultural education plays in the outcomes for refugee youth.

#### *Tabitha*

Tabitha is an example of a well-integrated Sudanese youth. Nicknamed “Sudanese gold” by members of her community, she has managed to overcome financial barriers, the language deficit, racism, and other obstacles. Though Tabitha came to Canada six years ago and was placed in a B.C. secondary school, she is now entering her third year of university on a full scholarship. According to Tabitha, the opportunity to attend a private secondary school—thanks to the financial support of her sponsoring church—made a significant difference in her schooling. Yet in recounting her experiences, the sources of resilience were rooted in the exceptional actions of a few individuals within the school, rather than an emancipating curriculum or inclusive multicultural education policies.

For this youth, close relationships with her teachers—something which was enabled by the relatively small student population at her private Christian school—ensured that she remained in an academic stream that would prepare her for post-secondary education.



I remember I wanted to take Communications 12 instead of English 12, and the teacher was like, “Your brain is way too smart for that.” And finally I was like, fine, I’ll register for English 12.

Without the intervention of her teacher, this student would have also been enrolled in an academic programme that did not meet the requirements for university entrance. This provides a stark contrast to the experiences of most of the other students who were interviewed who, despite strong desires to try pre-university courses, were streamed into non-academic courses.

For Tabitha, support and encouragement also came in other ways. She remembers spending hours after school working on design projects for her art and textiles classes. Both of her teachers in these courses also frequently gave their to offer advice and encouragement. She remembers one teacher ripping out advertisements for universities, and another helping her put together a portfolio of her artwork. Her school counsellor also researched scholarships for immigrant and minority students and assisted with the application process. Yet the biggest encouragement she received came one Christmas:

With my sewing, I would stay after school. And I’d stay late—I’d stay until like 21:00. And at Christmas time, I got called into the office. And the principal was like, ‘The teachers put some money for you together for you to get a sewing machine.’ I was like, oh my... Because my mom was working so hard, and she was trying to get enough money to buy a sewing machine, but it’s so hard. The money is just tight for us, and my mom couldn’t afford it. So that was a really, really good surprise that I’ll never forget. And until now, I have my sewing machine... I think that’s what really got me going.

The sewing machine that Tabitha received allowed her to pursue her gifts in fashion design, and with the help of her counsellor and supporting teachers, she received five different scholarships at her high school graduation—where her counsellor told her she was the richest student at the school. Through merit and performance-based scholarships, she has successfully paid for the first two years of her post-secondary education, and has recently started her third year on a full scholarship. She has continued to pursue her goal of entering the world of fashion design, and in the spring of 2009, Tabitha was one of 25 finalists from across Canada who submitted winning sketches for the national fashion design contest. As a reward, she was given an all-expenses-paid trip to Montréal for the prestigious Montréal Fashion Week.

Tabitha’s experience in a Canadian secondary school prepared her for university and played an important role in the positive integration process—one where she is overcoming obstacles and heading on a path towards upward mobility. Yet when asked whether she thought her experiences would have been the same had she attended a B.C. public school, Tabitha strongly disagreed:

A lot of people drop out [of public school] because I think that there, teachers are not as helpful... people just say, ‘I give up,’ and then go and try to join the workforce. That’s what pretty much everyone does.

Despite the mainstreaming of multicultural and anti-racist education in all B.C. schools, Tabitha attributes her success to the exceptional interventions of a few teachers, as well as individual determination, rather than systemic changes that have brought about more inclusive and equitable education practices. Without the support of teachers who went beyond their job description to ensure she stayed in school and developed her talents, Tabitha would likely not be where she is today.

### ***Irene***

The story of another refugee student attending a public school in Burnaby offers a contrast to Tabitha's story. Irene is an active member of her school community. She plays on numerous sports teams, and also participates in extra-curricular activities such as the Leo club, which promotes volunteer work outside the school. She has aspirations of becoming a doctor, and hopes to secure academic and athletic scholarships in order to achieve these goals. Yet rather than being empowered by the educational process, Irene argues that her success has come in spite of the system. During a discussion on streaming and refugee students in B.C. schools, this youth related her own experience:

They said only kids who were born here could take some classes. So they put me in a class, and I said it was too easy for me; I'm not coming to class. So finally they put me in the regular class, and I got an A in it."

Irene's response reveals that youth are actively engaging with a system that reflects and perpetuates structural inequality in society. Rather than acting as a passive recipient in a one-way educational process, Irene explicitly challenged the system. For her, the determining factor for positive educational outcomes stems from individual dedication and commitment:

At the schools, it depends who you are. If you just go and listen to the teacher's bullshit, you won't do as good. But if you only focus on yourself and want to do it, then you could do it.

The above quotation reflects Irene's disillusionment with the system and its ability to provide for the needs of students such as herself and her peers from the African and Sudanese refugee communities. Her statement further validates the claim that despite multiculturalism's transformative goals, the practical implementation of multicultural education has not been accompanied by systemic reform; thus, equal and equitable educational opportunities are not yet a reality for newcomer and minority youth.

### ***Mona***

Like Irene, Mona has also experienced pressure from teachers to enrol in non-academic streams. Although she has dreams of attending college or arts school to become a teacher or a singer, she has experienced continual pressure over the past two years to enrol in lower-level classes. Despite this fact, during

the interview Mona expressed fierce determination to pursue course options that will prepare her for post-secondary education:

We know it's hard, but let us try it. If it's too hard, we can change it... but we have to take it, because we [are] going to college...

Mona's statement reflects a clear commitment to not only finishing high school, but also pursuing post-secondary education. While recognising the challenges that she faces—including overcoming language deficits and several years of interrupted schooling while she was in Egypt—Mona sees school as a vital link to successful integration. During the interview, she expressed how having an education would allow her to pursue her own goals, instead of depending on someone or something else. Yet if multicultural education carries a mandate of empowering students such as Mona, the fact that refugee teens are over-represented in lower-level streams presents another example of the discord between multiculturalism and rhetoric and reality.

In addition to exercising her agency against structural discrimination, Mona's experiences in school also reflect a non-violent response to racism. Despite encountering verbal abuse and damage to her personal property—and pressure from some of her peers to fight back—she refuses to retaliate:

My counsellor, he's so happy with me and my sister, because we don't fight. And he says, 'You're kind of really strange. We have lots of students that come from Africa, and they aren't like that; they'll just fight back.'

This student made the conscious decision not to retaliate in a physical way. However, her statement still reflects systemic racism and stereotyping. Her counsellor, though “proud” of Mona and her sister, sees them as an exception. His attitude reflects broader systemic attitudes towards Black youth subculture as violent and problematic—and African-Canadian youth as a threat to the system.

### ***Lual***

Lual's experiences within an Abbotsford public school are similar to those of Mona; she, too, has been barred from taking the classes she wants to take because her ESL teacher and guidance counsellor does not believe she will be able to succeed. During the interview, the Abbotsford teenager described how, when she has tried to enrol in more challenging courses, her counsellor changes them—without her consent. The negative pressures from the school have become so discouraging that, at the time of the interview, Lual had resolved to switch schools.

Lual's goal is to become an ESL teacher because she knows first-hand the challenges of learning English, and she wants to assist other students from similar backgrounds in the future. While many of her peers have succumb to the barriers they face in school and dropped out to pursue work, Lual reflected obvious maturity when she said, “I want to learn. I want to study now, and make money later.” Yet the fact that this student feels she must change

schools in order to learn, and to pursue her dreams, reflects a clear discord in the rhetoric versus the reality of multicultural education in B.C. schools.

Refugee youth, as politically-aware and engaged individuals, are faced with the dilemma of how to respond to the constraints affecting their educational participation. Yet while Tabitha, Irene, Mona, and Lual provided examples of engagements that produced positive outcomes, the current trends among Sudanese refugee youth reflect that many of these students are exercising their agency with problematic consequences (Hittel, 2007; ASAC, 2009).

### ***Achol***

Achol is entering her final year in a Surrey public school—yet if she completes the year, she will finish with only a Leaving Certificate. She has failed to complete the required number of credit hours or specific courses for the Dogwood diploma, and therefore does not have the opportunity to advance into university.

According to Achol, there is little point in engaging with the education system. When asked in the interview about the benefits of earning a secondary school diploma, she expressed strong feelings of disillusionment:

The whole school is useless. At this point, I don't think it will make a difference [whether I graduate or not]... they say you go to school to be something you want to be. But at the same time, school right now is actually making you dumb. It doesn't make sense.

While Achol claims that the school system may be relevant for white, Canadian-born students, it does little to expand the opportunities available to herself and her African peers. Achol admitted that she often thought about dropping out, as many of her friends have done. While a few of these friends are now working in manual labour, many of them, she says, are unemployed.

Achol's attitude towards school is particularly concerning considering the fact that the provincial Ministry of Education is committed to "equality, fair treatment, non-discrimination, inclusion, and access" as foundational concepts (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008: 8). If students do not feel that the education system is meeting their needs, then there is little chance that they will see the value in attending. Yet for students—particularly those from low-income households and ethnic minority backgrounds—who do not complete school, the risks of integrating into a societal underclass are extremely high.

Although only Achol showed warning signs for dropping out, all of these teenagers knew of peers who had left school. This early school leaving is important because of the consequences that it has on the integration experience. While integration is undoubtedly a process that can be accelerated or reversed at any time (Atfield *et al*, 2007), the decision to withdraw from the Canadian school system is a significant step towards a downward spiral of what Portes and Rumbaut (1990) call "underclass absorption."

These underclass absorption models look at the distribution of power and resources in society, and the stratified position of newcomers and ethnic minority groups. One of the main characteristics of underclass absorption trends in integration is the “frequent downward occupation and economic mobility of new immigrants” (Wilkinson, 2008: ??). For Sudanese refugee youth who have dropped out of school, concerns over a downward spiral of integration are already becoming a reality. The causes of poor performance and high drop-out rates among Sudanese refugee youth, as outlined in the previous chapter, may be invisible—at least to schools. Yet the consequences are often very visible, and serve to perpetuate societal conceptions of Black youth sub-culture as a threat to Canadian norms and values. When asked about early school leaving among the Sudanese community, one Surrey youth gave the following comment:

I've got a lot of friends who have dropped out. Most of them are chilling out, smoking weed... but some of them are really rappers actually. They're good at other stuff...

This statement reveals the complex nature of Black youth subculture in Canada. As with many youth subcultures, music is a key connection for young African-Canadians. It is also a means for filling a gap that has not been resolved by multicultural values and education—the invisibility and ‘othering’ of minority groups. Blair (2005) writes that “historically, much sub-cultural music has come from oppressed groups defined by socio-economic class... For many minority youngsters, rap has become a voice reflecting not only rebellion against adults but alienation from the majority culture.” For these teenagers, music becomes both an outlet for their experiences and emotions, as well as a source of identity. Yet this aspect of their identity is considered to be ‘other stuff’—something that, despite the mainstreaming of multicultural values and education, is seen as less valuable to society.

Unfortunately, trends among Sudanese youth are also revealing their involvement with some of the more negative aspects of this subculture. The rates of teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drug use and abuse, and gang violence among Sudanese drop-outs are growing—a problem recognised by both students and settlement workers. One Abbotsford student, when asked about teenage pregnancy in the Sudanese community, remarked:

Oh yeah... it's like all my friends now. And a lot of people, when they talk to me, are like, ‘Oh, where's your baby?’

The assumption in the above quotation provides an indication of the extent to which pregnancy among teenage girls in the Sudanese community has become an issue. For Sudanese males, however, problematic behaviour often takes a more violent form. A Sudanese community advocate, who spent several years working in the juvenile courts, relayed the following:

We just buried a friend three weeks ago, and his older brother was killed in May 07. Both of them, my childhood friends, wasted and gone through gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>14</sup>

This vicious cycle only perpetuates the conception of the Black youth subculture as deviant, but also push these youth further towards a downward spiral of integration. The downward spiral does not always end in death, as it did for the two individuals in the above quotation. However, high pregnancy rates, substance abuse, and criminal activity among Sudanese refugee youth (ASAC, 2009)—who are already vulnerable due to their history and status in Canada—increase the likelihood that these youth will become trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Multicultural education, though not a comprehensive solution, can—and indeed claims to—play an important role in fostering resilience among minority groups such as the Sudanese refugee population. Yet the experiences of youth in this study reveal that instead of facilitating integration into mainstream society, the current educational practices are actually pushing students into non-academic streams and reinforcing ideas of inferiority. Thus, education in practice has played the problematic role of maintaining social divisions and perpetuating inequality.

Nearly all of the students who were interviewed exercised their agency in ways that enabled positive participation in school; yet rather than being aided by the education system, these outcomes appear to have occurred despite of it. For Achol and many other Sudanese youth known by both students and settlement workers, pressures at school have led to a sense of disillusionment. Their ‘problematic’ behaviour—including teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminal activity—must be understood as another means of expressing agency against systemic injustice, and not simply as innately delinquent Black youth subculture.

## Chapter 5

### Multicultural education revisited

Schools are one of the prime acculturating agents within societies. It is here that the values, norms and tools of a particular culture are transmitted to its young. This includes the multicultural ideology of the dominant group as well as attitudes and beliefs about specific migrant groups. Furthermore, the values, norms and goals of the dominant society will be reflected in the practices of institutions such as schools.

-- Hamilton et al, 2004: 78

Sudanese refugee youth occupy a distinct position in Canadian society. As refugees, their needs are different than those of other immigrant populations. As part of a small and relatively recent Black minority in British Columbia, their challenges are different than other more established minority groups. As youth, they are not only aware of their position in society, but also respond to it through demonstrating increasing independence, political awareness, and agency (Roberts, 2009).

In this study, Sudanese refugee teenagers have been located within the context of multiculturalism, integration, and education debates in Canada. Through an ecological approach that takes into account pre-migration and post-migration factors at the levels of the home, school, and wider society, this research has identified key barriers that prevent full participation of Sudanese refugee students in B.C. schools. By contextualising these constraints within the multicultural mandate of the B.C. education system, this research reveals a gap in the discourse of multicultural education versus the practical realities within schools.

Because the impact of the school experience transcends economic concerns of employability to affect human dignity, social legitimacy, and empowerment (Stromquist *et al*, 1998), the education process provides an important link in the integration process for refugee youth. These newcomers enter a society where immigrant groups are over-represented in low-paying jobs, and where African minorities are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty as other Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2007). As a result, the mainstreaming of multicultural education provides a powerful mandate to address “institutional barriers, material inequalities, and power discrepancies between minorities and the majority” (Mansfield and Kehoe, 1994: 427).

Yet if the “values, norms, and goals of the dominant society [are] reflected in the practices of institutions such as schools” (Hamilton *et al*, 2004: 78), the experiences of Sudanese refugee youth reinforce the failures of multicultural education. Among the most frustrating aspects of the school experience, for these youth, was their placement in non-academic streams and their treatment by both peers and staff. These experiences indicate that rather than being a transformational process with the goal of “eliminating systemic and attitudinal

barriers that prevent full and equitable participation” (British Columbia. Ministry of Education, 2008), the school can reflect and perpetuate existing economic, political, and social stratification.

### ***Turning rhetoric into reality: recommendations for the implementation of multicultural education***

In order to achieve successful school outcomes, there is a need for interventions at a variety of levels—including changes to government policy, mobilisation of community resources and supports, and reform to the practice of education. Based on the problems identified in this study, the following recommendations can be made to promote true multicultural education in practice, whereby all students are given equal and equitable opportunity to succeed in school:

- Enable programming that is sensitive to the needs of refugee students by expanding the SWIS worker programme and fostering the links between the home and school. This will ensure that refugee students—and the distinct challenges that they face within the schools—will not remain invisible.
- Ensure that proper mechanisms are in place within schools to deal with racism from peers and teachers, and foster school-wide awareness of these interventions among the entire student community. This will ensure that refugee—and other minority students—are given opportunities for full participation and are treated as equals within the school.
- Provide after-school assistance and facilitate community-school linkages by encouraging initiatives such as the SSABC’s Homework Club, rather than streaming students with language and educational deficits into non-academic classes.
- Encourage advocacy against the RTL, which attaches substantial debt to GARs upon arrival and can contribute to students’ or families’ decisions to forego school for work. Since the beginning of 2009, 36 immigration and settlement organisations across the country have signed a petition to the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and Multiculturalism protesting against the loan. The municipality of Surrey has also formally expressed its opposition to the RTL (Friesen, 2009).

The recommendations outlined above do not provide a comprehensive plan for addressing the failures of multicultural education. However, they represent important steps in the implementation of what is, according to the experience of Sudanese refugee youth, a discourse without the accompanying practical reality. Youth, as both “makers and breakers of society... are simultaneously being made and broken by that society” (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005: 2). While Sudanese refugee students possess the ability to exercise agency for positive educational outcomes, they may also express their resistance to the system through problematic behaviour such as substance abuse and criminal activity. Without reforming current practices, schools will



continue to be sites where societal stratification is maintained and reproduced. Only by identifying current failures can multicultural education truly become the transformative process that it claims to be.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In addition to GARs, PSRs, LCRs, and RDs—all of whom are permanent residents and are formally counted in government statistics—there are also significant numbers of refugee claimants (RCs), who declare refugee status upon arrival in Canada and are currently waiting for the Immigration and Refugee Board to process their applications. However, there are no available statistics for the number of refugee claimants that arrive in Canada each year (Yau, 2002: 18). Further, other individuals and families from refugee backgrounds have been granted permanent residence in Canada through the Family Class category of immigrants, whereby they are sponsored by relatives. As a result, the numbers of individuals from refugee backgrounds are higher than might be suggested by existing facts and figures (Kaprielian-Churchill, 1996: 351).

<sup>2</sup> This research focuses on the experiences of southern Sudanese refugee youth in Canadian schools; from this point on, the term “Sudanese” will imply reference to southern Sudanese youth.

<sup>3</sup> According to Immigrant Services Society of B.C. (ISS), the top sources of GARs in B.C. are Afghanistan and Africa, with the African refugee population coming mainly from Sudan, Somali, and the Congo.

<sup>4</sup> This SWIS initiative is discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> For a map of the Lower Mainland, B.C., see Appendix I.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendices II and III for excerpts from the Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism and the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act.

<sup>7</sup> Black youth subculture will be addressed at greater length in Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> For a more complete outline of the history of Canadian multiculturalism, see Appendix II.

<sup>9</sup> While Alba and Nee (2003) apply these theories to immigrant assimilation, they are also helpful for understanding integration in the Canadian context.

<sup>10</sup> An updated version of this document was released in 2008.

<sup>11</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

<sup>12</sup> In a report by Kaprielian-Churchill (1996), one teacher told about a refugee student who had a panic attack during a nature hike; a study by Kanu (2008) included the story of a student who was hospitalised after a fire drill at the school.

<sup>13</sup> All but one of the students who were interviewed spent their trans-migration years in Egypt; the student who lived in Kenya remembered the experience as mostly positive.

<sup>14</sup> M. Aruei, personal communication, 31 October 2009.

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# Appendix I

Political maps of Canada and the Lower Mainland, British Columbia

Map of Canada



Map of the Lower Mainland, British Columbia



Source: Garrish, C.J. (2009)

## Appendix II

**Excerpts from the  
Act for the Preservation and Enhancement  
of Multiculturalism in Canada  
- passed 21 July 1988 -**

### **Preamble –**

WHEREAS the Constitution of Canada provides that every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination and that everyone has the freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and association and guarantees those rights and freedoms equally to male and female persons;

... AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada ...;

### **MULTICULTURALISM POLICY OF CANADA**

1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada to

(a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage;

(b) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future;

(c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation;

(d) recognize the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development;



- (e) ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity;
- (f) encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character;
- (g) promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins;
- (h) foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures;
- (i) preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official languages of Canada; and
- (j) advance multiculturalism throughout Canada in harmony with the national commitment to the official languages of Canada.

*Source:* Canada. Parliament. House of Commons. (1988)

## Appendix III

### Excerpt from the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act - passed 01 November 1988 -

#### OBJECTIVES AND APPLICATION

3. (1) The objectives of this Act with respect to immigration are

(a) to permit Canada to pursue the maximum social, cultural and economic benefits of immigration;

(b) to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society, while respecting the federal, bilingual and multicultural character of Canada;

(b.1) to support and assist the development of minority official languages communities in Canada;

(c) to support the development of a strong and prosperous Canadian economy, in which the benefits of immigration are shared across all regions of Canada;

(d) to see that families are reunited in Canada;

(e) to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society;

(f) to support, by means of consistent standards and prompt processing, the attainment of immigration goals established by the Government of Canada in consultation with the provinces;

(g) to facilitate the entry of visitors, students and temporary workers for purposes such as trade, commerce, tourism, international understanding and cultural, educational and scientific activities;

(h) to protect the health and safety of Canadians and to maintain the security of Canadian society;

(i) to promote international justice and security by fostering respect for human rights and by denying access to Canadian territory to persons who are criminals or security risks; and

(j) to work in cooperation with the provinces to secure better recognition of the foreign credentials of permanent residents and their more rapid integration into society.

## Appendix IV

### The Evolution of Multiculturalism in Canada

	<i><b>Ethnicity Multiculturalism (1970s)</b></i>	<i><b>Equity Multiculturalism (1980s)</b></i>	<i><b>Civic Multiculturalism (1990s)</b></i>	<i><b>Integrative Multiculturalism (2000s)</b></i>
<b>Focus</b>	Celebrating differences	Managing diversity	Constructive engagement	Inclusive citizenship
<b>Reference Point</b>	Culture	Structure	Society building	Canadian identity
<b>Mandate</b>	Ethnicity	Race relations	Citizenship	Integration
<b>Magnitude</b>	Individual adjustment	Accommodation	Participation	Rights and responsibilities
<b>Problem Source</b>	Prejudice	Systemic discrimination	Exclusion	Unequal access, 'clash' of cultures
<b>Solution</b>	Cultural sensitivity	Employment equity	Inclusiveness	???
<b>Key Metaphor</b>	"Mosaic"	"Level playing field"	"Belonging"	???

Source: Fleras, A. And Kunz, J (2001)