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**Narratives of Agency:  
Afghan refugee background students'  
experience of schooling in New Zealand**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Education at Massey University,  
Manawatū, New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

Little is known about the experiences of refugee background students in New Zealand high schools, and more specifically we lack narratives from more recent groups like those from Afghanistan. Research about Afghans in New Zealand does not address the experiences of how young Afghan students engage with schooling and education in the new environment. As schools are often a challenging navigational space during the transition and adaptation for these students, it is imperative to reflect on their experiences for transformative purposes. This study aimed to understand those transitional experiences through the lens of the students' sense of agency.

Data were drawn from a phenomenological research approach that included in-depth interviews with six senior high school students who were former refugees from Afghanistan. The study examined the role and ways in which a sense of agency helped these students to succeed in achieving their educational goals, by identifying the factors that provided impetus for the development of their sense of agency in the educational context. The study's conceptual framework was built on an ecological model. The ecological perspective illuminated the links between the students' agency, their funds of knowledge, and their socio-cultural capital.

The findings highlighted multiple contexts in which the students illustrated their capacities for agency, and how that ultimately helped them to navigate ways in which they believed, decided and acted. The findings also underscored the need to recognize as well as leverage on refugee background students' agency and their agentic resources. These students' narratives can inform and reform underlying premises of current policy, practices and pedagogy for refugee students, which can lead to a more engaged and authentic understanding about their learning and experiences.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Refugee background students in schools .....	1
1.2 Aim of the study .....	2
1.3 Rationale of the study .....	3
1.4 Afghan refugees resettlement in New Zealand .....	5
1.5 Organisation of the thesis .....	6
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	8
2.2 Refugee education experiences .....	8
<i>Pre-migration or pre-resettlement education</i> .....	8
<i>Post-resettlement schooling experience</i> .....	10
2.3 Refugee education – New Zealand experience .....	12
2.4 Locating refugee agency in education .....	14
2.5 Refugees’ fund of knowledge and socio-cultural capital .....	17
2.6 An ecological model .....	18
2.7 Research questions .....	19
2.8 Summary.....	20
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology and Research Design.....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	21
3.2 Qualitative research approach .....	21
3.3 Research design .....	21
3.4 Participant selection .....	22
3.5 Data collection procedure .....	23
3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews .....	23
3.5.2 Photo or object elicitation .....	24

3.6 Data analysis process .....	25
3.7 Role of the researcher .....	26
3.8 Ethical considerations .....	27
3.9 Summary .....	29
<b>Chapter 4 Findings .....</b>	<b>30</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	30
4.2 The journey and experience of students.....	30
<i>Length of residence in New Zealand</i> .....	30
<i>Migration journey</i> .....	30
<i>Prior schooling</i> .....	31
<i>English language proficiency</i> .....	32
<i>Learning programme at New Zealand schools</i> .....	32
4.3 Capacities for agency shown by the students .....	33
<i>Orienting towards existing opportunities</i> .....	33
<i>Active engagement in shaping one's learning</i> .....	34
<i>Acting to overcome structural constraints</i> .....	38
<i>Showing autonomy and self-determination</i> .....	39
<i>Drawing on existing social and cultural capital</i> .....	41
4.4 Summary .....	43
<b>Chapter 5 Discussion .....</b>	<b>44</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	44
5.2 How does agency assist refugee background students in the experience of schooling and education upon resettlement in New Zealand? .....	44
<i>Choosing to succeed – Aspirations</i> .....	45
<i>Shaping learning and engagement – Achievement</i> .....	46
<i>Overcoming structural constraints – Acculturation</i> .....	49
<i>Authoring empowering identity – Assets</i> .....	51
5.3 What supports the development of agency for refugee background students in New Zealand schools? .....	52
<i>Educational opportunities</i> .....	52
<i>Personal beliefs and socio-cultural capital</i> .....	53
<i>Context of reception</i> .....	54

<i>Educational history and identity</i> .....	55
5.4 Reflecting on agency through the lens of an ecological model .....	55
5.5 Summary .....	57
<b>Chapter 6 Conclusions and Implications</b> .....	<b>59</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	59
6.2 Key findings .....	59
6.3 Implications for theory .....	60
6.4 Strengths of methodology/research design approach .....	61
6.5 Limitations of methodology/research design approach .....	62
6.6 Implications for future research .....	63
6.7 Implications for practice .....	64
6.8 Implications for policy .....	66
6.9 Concluding reflection .....	66
<b>References</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>82</b>

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Critical issues related to refugee education .....	12
Figure 2: Ecological framework .....	56

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix A: Information Sheet .....	82
Appendix B: Consent Form - Individual .....	84
Appendix C: Authority for the Release of Transcript .....	85
Appendix D: Interview Schedule .....	86
Appendix E: Ethical Approval .....	88
Appendix F: Consent Form - Organisation .....	89
Appendix G: Bilingual Support Confidentiality Agreement.....	90







## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Of particular interest in this study is the consideration of how, with history of forced migration, students with refugee backgrounds engage with schools in New Zealand. The United Nations Convention 1951 defines the term “refugee” as someone “who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p.5). Refugees leave their homeland because they fear for their loved ones’ lives. It is not uncommon that, in fleeing, they may have lost their properties, their livelihoods and their loved ones. Schools are often a challenging navigational space during the transition and adaptation of these students. Hence, it is useful to reflect on these students’ experiences of successfully seeking and finding refuge during times of forced migration and the impact that has on their determination in adapting to the new environment. Crucial to understanding refugee students’ experiences is the consideration of how educational support practices and measures can sustain and build upon their positive qualities of strength and resilience (Matthews, 2008). One of those qualities of individual strength that encompass determination and action is personal agency, and it is through the lens of personal agency that this study reflects on the students’ educational experience.

This chapter will explain the aim and rationale of the study. Next, a brief background on resettlement of refugees from Afghanistan in New Zealand and refugee students in schools will be presented. Finally, an outline of the organisation of this thesis is provided.

### **1.1. Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to understand how resettled refugee background students from Afghanistan participate in and engage with education at New Zealand high schools through the lens of their sense of agency. In particular, the study sought to discover the ways in which a sense of agency helped those students succeed in achieving their educational goals.

In addition, the study aimed to identify the factors that provide impetus for the development of the refugee background students' sense of agency. These findings will therefore assist schools to recognize and build on their strengths, and provide support mechanisms to facilitate their educational progress. Hence, a key intent of this study is to enable refugee background students' voices and experiences to be shared and heard. It is hoped that these insights will lead to greater understanding of refugee background students' agency and their educational challenges. As a result, teaching and learning practices will be enhanced to address these students' aspirations and needs, as well as by highlighting ways to engage more meaningfully with refugee background students and their families.

## **1.2. Rationale for the study**

For my entire career in New Zealand, spanning about eleven years within the education sector, I have had the privilege of working with refugee background students and their families. I have found these particular encounters to provide the most rewarding and inspiring insights into individual potential and transformation. At the same time, I have found the approach to their education has been predominantly needs' based, particularly due to grief, trauma and educational disruption which tends to label refugee background students as 'at risk' (Hamilton et.al, 2000). Lesser attention has been given to the strengths and capitals that these students may bring and how these characteristics help students' learning and engagement. Hence, I am a strong advocate for recognising positive qualities and strengths within this locus. School success and failure are influenced by complex objective and subjective factors, but among the most fundamental are those that involve motivation to learn and willingness to expend the requisite effort to achieve educational goals (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). That insight continues to drive my curiosity to understand more and discover ways in which refugee background students draw on their personal dispositions, and the resources within or external to themselves, to manage and shape their educational outcomes. In this study I have chosen to explore this process through focusing on refugee students' sense of agency.

Learner agency has now becoming a default expectation in meeting learning needs (21st Century Learning Reference Group [21st CLRG], 2014). Learner agency is about having the power, combined with opportunities and choices, to take meaningful action and see the results of individual decisions. It can be thought of as a catalyst for change or transformation. This is true in the light of refugee background learners who, when they galvanise their inherited resources and seek out opportunities as creative agents, can generate actions that will change the context of their lives in New Zealand. How they construct their agency, through actions, imaginaries and responses, is therefore important to study. When their agency is recognised and addressed, it is hoped that, within the school context, refugee background students, like all students, will be enabled to have understanding, ability, and opportunity through being included in the learning design. In that way they can take actions that positively intervene in the learning process and assist them to become powerful lifelong learners (21st CLRG, 2014).

Another driver for this study is the relative paucity of scholarship on how refugee background students, particularly those from Afghan background, engage in New Zealand schools.

### **1.3. Afghan refugees resettlement in New Zealand**

Afghans have been fleeing their country since 1978 due to wars, ongoing threat of terrorism, poor living conditions and challenging socio-economic environments (UNHCR, 2016). Afghanistan has experienced war with foreign invaders, such as the Soviet Union and the United States, and among internally opposing groups like Mujahedeen and Taliban (Collins, 2013; Gunaratna, 2015; Vogelsang, 2002). These conflicts have resulted in a massive exodus of almost a quarter of the Afghan population. The majority of refugees from Afghanistan flee to neighbouring countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran, or Pakistan, and jointly these nations have hosted 95% of Afghan refugees (UNHCR, 2015). Afghan refugees are the second largest refugee group worldwide, after 5.5 million from Syria. Although their numbers decreased, from 2.7 million at the end of 2015 to 2.5 million at the end of 2016, due to refugees returning home from Pakistan (UNHCR, 2016). Pakistan still hosts 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees while Iran reports close to a million

(UNHCR, 2018). Notably, the people of Afghanistan, particularly the younger generations, have only ever experienced war and the injustices and hardships that have resulted from it.

New Zealand is one of around 26 countries that take part in the international humanitarian resettlement programme of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since the Second World War, New Zealand has resettled over 33,000 refugees (Immigration New Zealand website). However, it was only in the 1990s that New Zealand began to accept refugees from Afghanistan. The 1991 census reported that 117 individuals identified their ethnicity as 'Afghani'. By 2013, that number increased to 3,414. The majority (2424) live in the Auckland region, followed by Canterbury (678), Waikato (144) and Wellington (111) (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

One of the two key periods in which New Zealand accepted a large number of Afghan refugees was 2001. Then, 438 Afghan refugees mostly from the *Hazara* ethnic group, were rescued by the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa* from a sinking fishing boat near Christmas Island. They had paid for passage to take them from Indonesia to Australia. After being refused entry by the Australian government, the refugees were transported to Nauru where most were held in detention camps. Of those refugees, 131 were granted asylum to settle in New Zealand. Since then, the New Zealand government has begun to resettle and reunite these families through the refugee quota programme (Gruner & Searle, 2011). The second key resettlement period was in 2012, when the New Zealand government offered refuge to 44 Afghan interpreters who had been working with the New Zealand Defence Force in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, along with their wives and children.

In the last 10 years, over 1300 Afghans have arrived in New Zealand through the quota system (Immigration New Zealand Refugee Quota Branch Arrival Statistics, 2017). There are three ways that refugees enter New Zealand, namely, through the quota refugee programme, family support or reunification, and asylum. The quota for permanent resettlement currently sits at 1000 refugees annually, but the government has recently announced that it will increase it to 1500, from 2020 (Beehive New Zealand, 2018).

Under the refugee quota programme, refugees who arrive in New Zealand receive a six-week reception programme at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Auckland where they complete physical and mental health assessments that allow for initial treatment and health promotion. In addition, the refugees are provided with a settlement plan that includes orientation to working and living in New Zealand, learning English, and an employment assessment for working age refugees. Refugee children are also prepared for their introduction into the New Zealand classroom and the national curriculum through a funded English language programme. After completing the six-week reception programme, refugees are settled in seven relocation regions throughout New Zealand, namely Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson, Dunedin and Invercargill. As permanent residents, quota refugees are entitled to the same social services and supports for which most New Zealanders are eligible. This includes access to the public school system, healthcare, and welfare benefits. After five years of residence in New Zealand, they are eligible to apply for citizenship.

In 2012, the New Zealand government approved the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy (Immigration New Zealand, 2012). This strategy created a strong emphasis on employment, with strong strategic alliances between ministries and agencies, in order to provide multiple services and supports through four stages of resettlement: pre arrival, reception, initial settlement and progress towards integration. The goal of the strategy is to work towards full integration and self-sufficiency of former refugees in New Zealand. Resettlement aims to achieve the following five outcomes: “self-sufficiency through employment; participation in New Zealand life; healthy, safe and independent lives; sufficient English language skills to participate in education and daily life; and, lastly, safe, secure, and affordable housing” (McBrien, 2014, p.13).

#### **1.4. Refugee background students in schools**

New Zealand’s schools are the primary pathways for refugee background children to gain further social and cultural capital that will in turn increase their opportunities for successful employment and social participation. In the context of resettlement, access

to and participation in education also increases the likelihood of their successful integration within the wider community (King & Owens 2015). In that light, understanding refugee background students' experiences in the education setting is important for their success. This understanding also relates directly to the capacity of educational institutions to identify and respond to their needs and to draw on their strength. That is where the challenge lies. As there can be a range of levels of cultural awareness and responsiveness from staff in schools, refugee background students have often been perceived within a deficit model, emphasizing experiences of trauma, which can diminish the complexity and diversity of their experiences (Uptin, Wright, & Harwood 2016). Such perceptions can add to the challenges of the refugees' migration journey.

Indeed, the histories that resettled refugee students bring to classrooms in New Zealand are varied and complex. Often these histories are hidden from their teachers and other school staff by factors such as language barriers, cultural (mis)understandings and stereotypes. The reality is that refugee background students may have educational gaps resulting from disrupted schooling, but not necessarily a lack of aptitude. Dryden-Peterson (2015) suggests that careful attention is needed to identify educational needs of these students, based on their prior exposure to academic content as opposed to their innate capacities for learning. This needs analysis also includes identifying cultural and social assets, which contribute to their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) that students bring (McCarthy & Vickers, 2012).

### **1.5. Organisation of the thesis**

This chapter has introduced the context for this study and provided a brief summary of the background to resettlement of Afghan refugees in New Zealand. It has also presented the aims and rationale for this study. Following this, in Chapter Two, I provide a review of the salient literature on refugee education, including the resettlement process, the concept of agency in refugee education, and the links between agency and funds of knowledge and sociocultural capital. A description of the over-arching theoretical framework for this study is then explained, followed by identification of the research questions that arise from gaps in the current literature.

In Chapter Three, I present the qualitative methodology and phenomenological research design used in this study. That is followed by a description of the participants, procedures for data collection and analysis, and consideration of relevant ethical considerations.

In Chapter Four, I present the key findings from the study. This chapter begins by outlining the context of the participating students' schooling experiences in New Zealand. After that, themes that arose from the analysis of their emerging capacities for agency are presented.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the key findings in the light of relevant literature and in response to each of the research questions. Finally, I reflect on these findings in relation to an ecological framework.

Lastly, in Chapter Six I present a summary of the key findings, implications for theory, and the strengths and limitations of this study. Next, implications for future research and for practice and policy are explained. The chapter then concludes with my reflections on the learning journey undertaken in this thesis.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter begins with a review of the literature on refugee education in the resettlement process internationally and in New Zealand, and factors that may influence former refugees' schooling experiences are identified. Then I will describe the concept of personal agency in relation to the experience of education. Next, I will discuss links between the concept of agency, funds of knowledge and socio-cultural capital. This is followed by an explanation of the over-arching ecological framework that underpins this study. Finally, the research questions arising from the literature review for this study are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

### **2.2. Refugee education experiences**

International literature indicates that refugee background students face particular challenges with regard to education. In addition, appropriately educating this diverse and unique student population presents many challenges for schools and education departments (Hamilton, et al. 2000; Hek, 2005; McBrien, 2005; Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016; Miller, et al, 2017). Thus, understanding refugee children's and young people's education and schooling experience, in the three phases of pre-migration, migration and resettlement (Rashid, Gregory, Kazemipur, & Scruby, 2013) of the refugee journey, is paramount in this study. This section highlights two main areas: pre-migration educational background of refugee children and their schooling experience post-resettlement.

#### ***Pre-migration or pre-resettlement education***

The educational challenges for students with refugee experience are different from those for other migrants because of the particular effects of the experience of forced migration (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The state of education in the flight and post-flight stage of the refugee journey is sporadic, and is often politically affected by host governments or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provide and manage the curriculum at various stages in this journey. The UNHCR data on access to

education for refugees describes over-stretched education systems and often-fragile political and economic institutions in countries of first asylum where 86 percent of world's refugees live (UNHCR, 2014a, p.2). Most refugees from Afghanistan, who are the focus group of this study, flee to Pakistan and Iran, but not all children could access education in these countries. For instance, at the primary school level, more than 80 percent of refugee children access education in Iran while only 43 percent of children do so in Pakistan, where refugees from Afghanistan present the largest protracted refugee population globally (UNHCR, 2015). In many situations, however, secondary school refugees are unable to go to school at all. In Pakistan, only 5 percent of refugees there have access to secondary school education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Variation in education access rates are just one of the multiple ways in which education is disrupted for refugee children. Other disruptions are caused by conflicts, legal restrictions and on-going migration (Dryden-Petersen, 2015). The result is many years of interruption in children's education. A stay of 5 to 10 years in a refugee camp is common, and such time frames have a devastating effect on educational development and attainment (Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008). Additionally, refugee children may have never been to school in their country of origin at all (McBrien, 2005, 2014; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Forced migration also results in large numbers of refugee children experiencing multiple instances of violence and trauma, such as war, abduction, rape, loss of family members and witnessing killings that result in physical and emotional stress (Rousseau et al. 1996; Tayebjee, 2005). Subsequently, these children may exhibit signs of trauma, such as memory impairment, physical disorders and difficulties forming relationships (Esquivel & Keitel 1990). In Sweden, Goldin, Hägglöf, Levin, and Persson (2008) found that nearly half of the Bosnian refugee children were identified with one or more mental health problems that required further attention, including depression, post-traumatic stress, and anxiety.

Rutter (2006), however, cautions against the construction of refugee children as "traumatised" as it is likely to impede a real analysis of their backgrounds and

experiences as well as masking the significance of post-migration experiences such as poverty, isolation, racism and uncertain migration status (p.5). Similarly, in Australia, the over-emphasis on pre-displacement conditions of trauma and the subsequent preoccupation with therapeutic interventions tends to locate issues at an individual level and overlook broader dimensions of inequality and disadvantage (Matthews, 2008). Recently, Ryu and Tuvilla (2018) assert the need to challenge such dominant narratives as these discourses may lead to disempowering narratives of refugee youth as helpless, lacking agency and control (Ludwig, 2016).

### *Post-migration schooling experience*

Post-migration, children and young people from refugee background may face additional barriers to schooling. Starting school in their resettlement country requires significant linguistic and cultural adaptation. Where they have had little or no prior education, these students can often struggle with meeting the demands of schooling in the foreign setting (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Gunton, 2007; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Mickan et. al., 2007 in Miller et. al., 2017). They may have little or no understanding of local expectations around teaching, and learning and may struggle to engage when their ways of being do not match those of teachers and peers. In addition, language barriers can disadvantage refugee background students, not only academically but also socially (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Davies, 2008; McEachron & Bhatti, 2005; Miller, 1997). They may present with low literacy level in the first language upon arrival as well as having to learn a new language. Furthermore, cultural and linguistic adjustments can negatively affect their sense of identity (Bash, 2006; Xu et. al., 2007).

The literature identifies that schools have developed a range of approaches to building literacy and English language proficiency with students from a refugee background. For example, students may attend specialised English language and literacy programmes upon entry to the school system and then transition to mainstream school settings later on. Access to funding for English language support in the resettling countries when available, however, may dictate the ways in which and the level to which schools can support their students. For instance, Haworth (2005) argues how per capita funding fails to meet the needs of schools with just a

few English language learners who often differ in age, as well as linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds.

Reviews of research from a range of western contexts, such as the United States (McBrien, 2005), the United Kingdom (Hek, 2005), Canada (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2016) and Australia (Miller et. al., 2017), suggest many successful strategies and educational approaches to refugee education. These include improved pedagogies for supporting literacy and language development, the importance of a welcoming environment, free of racism, and the need to meet psychosocial and learning needs of refugee background students in a holistic way (Arnot & Pinson, 2005; Rutter, 2006).

Several international studies (e.g. Ludwig, 2016) also highlight positive qualities that refugee students demonstrate, and the relationships that they build in their experience of education. Deficit accounts of refugee background students are being replaced by literature with a focus on resilience (Major et al., 2013; Neumann et al., 2014; Uptin, Wright, & Harwood 2012, 2016; Watters, 2008; Woods, 2009). Dooley (2008) has also discussed how students with a wide range of previous experiences possess a high level of potential to link prior knowledge to new learning material. Furthermore, students from refugee backgrounds often speak two languages or more and the literature highlights there are many cognitive benefits of bilingualism, including attention control and problem solving skills (Adesope et al., 2010). In addition, refugee students often have committed family and community relationships, which are a source of strength and support, and instill a positive sense of responsibility, identity, aspiration and a strong work ethic (Jamal Al-deen & Windle, 2015; Weine, 2008).

This study aims to expand the literature by capturing the voices of refugee background students, and focussing on how they construct their agency while at high school in New Zealand. Capturing student voices reflects the significance of including students as active citizens in their education, who have thoughts that are valued and respected, and is important in bringing about transformative experiences and relevant educational reform (Cook-Sather, 2006).

**2.3. Refugee education – the New Zealand experience**

An evaluation of current practice in New Zealand schools advocates for whole school-based planned interventions as best practice, such as referrals to relevant services, and treatments that promote resilience (Hamilton et. al., 2000). A key feature of the best practice model suggested by Hamilton et. al. is the distinction between pre-and post-migration factors as shown in the table below:

Figure 1: Critical Issues Related to Refugee Education (Hamilton et. al., 2000, p.6)

What they bring	Risk and protective factors	Language (L1 and L2), health, displacement and loss, grief and trauma
The task	To adapt to a new environment	
Factors that are (present at resettlement)	Post-migration and moderating factors	On-going risk/resilience factors including barriers/facilitators to adaptation at school in the individual, the family, the community/school (including policies and services)

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) has utilized it to develop policies to achieve the Resettlement Strategy’s (see Chapter 1, section 1.3) main goal for education. For example, English for Speakers of Other Languages funding, English Language Learning Progression resources and professional development support for teachers are available to help schools provide English language acquisition programme. The Ministry’s Refugee Flexible Funding Pool and Refugee Pathways and Careers Funding provide discretionary support to address schooling adaptation needs through which both refugee background students and schools must pass, and refugee students’ pathway and career guidance respectively. Another MoE resource is the provision of regional senior advisors for refugee and migrant education who are available to provide direction and support to schools’ programmes and approach in addressing the needs of former refugee students at their schools (McBrien, 2014). The Ministry’s website also contains a comprehensive section devoted to explaining the refugee experience and the needs of refugee background students together with a refugee handbook for schools and educators.

However the literature notes that decision-making, including how the curriculum is managed and how funds are allocated, is primarily undertaken at a local level (Sampson et al., 2016) and is internally led by school staff or the teacher allocated to the project. As a result, consistent and formalized responsiveness to refugee background students is not prevalent as any formal policies and procedures at school levels are dependent on expertise, time constraints and school priorities (Sampson et al., 2016). The Hamilton et al. review (see Figure 1) has been criticised for its overly psychological approach (Matthews, 2008; Pinson & Arnot, 2007). The current policy is also said to have overlooked the “complex nuances of resettlement needs and how educational institutions engage with young people” (Sampson et al, 2016 p. 31). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the support provided has not yet been evaluated for its efficacy (Marlowe et al, 2014).

In terms of schooling experiences in New Zealand, there is a relative paucity of literature, which focuses on the complex nuances of resettlement and engagement with education, particularly from the perspective of refugee background students’ voices. In addition, compared to research on Somali students from refugee backgrounds, the academic literature on Afghans in New Zealand is also relatively small. Afghans make up one of the largest refugee groups in New Zealand (Marlowe, 2013) but they remain remarkably understudied. The few works specifically about New Zealand Afghans include masters’ theses on the following subjects: the meaning of home for 1.5 generation of Afghan women in Christchurch (Habte, 2017); the experiences of Afghan women acquiring English as a tool for successful resettlement in Palmerston North (Hermawan, 2015); and the experiences of Afghan entrepreneurs from a refugee background in setting up businesses as a pathway to successful resettlement and integration (Hedayatullah, 2014). However, none of these studies address the experiences of younger Afghan students in the New Zealand school context.

The current study will extend the academic literature on the Afghans through examining Afghan students’ sense of agency, based on stories of their schooling experiences in New Zealand. The next section of this chapter reviews the literature on the concept of agency, which is central to this study.

## 2.4. Locating refugee agency in education

The literature links agency with capabilities to act or to react, as well as with a construct that involves feelings, beliefs, thoughts and cognitive processes (Deters et al., 2014). Social cognitive theory takes the view that learning and actions are more likely to occur when the individual involved believes he or she has the capabilities to succeed. Therefore, actions and feelings are interlinked in agency. Agency can also affect levels of adaptation and change, as confirmed in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 2001; 2006) and is part of the causal structure that affects individual functioning and life circumstances. Since people are viewed as self-organising, proactive, self-regulating and self-reflecting, they are not just onlookers but agents of their behaviours and life circumstances. It is this view that underpins the approach taken in the current study.

Bandura (2006) posits four core properties of human agency, namely *intentionality*, *forethought*, *self-reactiveness* and *self-reflectiveness*. By *intentionality*, it is understood that people form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing these. *Forethought* involves utilising agency to create future directed plans that guide and motivate current behaviours. Forethought therefore “promotes purposeful and foresightful behaviours” (Bandura, 2006, p.164). A forethoughtful perspective provides direction, coherence and meaning to one’s life. The third agentic property, *self-reactiveness*, links to self-regulation. Self-reactiveness links thoughts with action as it involves not only “the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but also the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution” (Bandura, 2006, p. 165). Finally, *self-reflectiveness* in agency involves reflecting on one’s own functioning, on personal efficacy, the soundness of one’s thoughts and actions and the meaning of one’s goals or pursuits. Through reflection, an individual makes corrective adjustments where necessary.

Bandura’s perspective of agency is akin to what Kabeer (1999) calls the ‘*power within*’, which is especially relevant to former refugees. Agency is about more than observable action; “it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose, which

individuals bring to their activity” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). While it can be operationalized as decision-making, agency can take the forms of navigation and negotiation as well as involving the cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. Therefore, for refugee background students, agency refers to their capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of challenges or opposition from others.

In this study, the analysis of agency will be based on both a personal sense of agency (feelings and beliefs) and agentic behaviour (actions and pursuits).

Personal agency does not operate autonomously. Rather, human functioning is a product of the reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioural, and environmental determinants (Bandura, 1986). As most human functioning is socially situated, we need to consider agency as being not just individually constructed but also socially and culturally embedded and mediated (DeJaeghere et. al., 2016). It is through relations with others, or with social structures including cultural norms, systems and practices through school and community surrounding the individual, that agency is shaped, enacted, enabled or suppressed. In the context of a resettled refugee’s experience, agency can be affected by the cognitive belief structure, which the individual has formed through his/her experiences, the perceptions held by the society, as well as the opportunity structures and circumstances of the individual’s environment (Barker, 2005; Mercer 2012). For example, Korac (2009) found that in Italy the lack of legal status for former refugees from Yugoslavia encouraged a type of agency to improve their situations and better their lives as quickly as possible since it was critical to their wellbeing.

Some literature has noted because of issues of language, economic circumstances and legal status, some migrant students including former refugees, had lost their sense of agency or the ability to act on their own behalf (Stewart, 2013). Others in the literature emphasize the continuum of high or low senses of agency directly related to opportunity structure for its occurrence (Brown, 2014). Former refugees are likely to be seeking to reimagine their future in new spaces. As their former social status intersects with new opportunities or constraints in the social structures of resettling country, their view of these realities affects their agency. Gateley (2015)

found that many refugee youths were agentic in pursuing higher education opportunities, despite the professionals in the employment programme discouraging them to do so and encouraging them to pursue work. This was because refugee youth saw higher education as a central aspiration in the new space. Between structures and aspirations, agency emerges as the result of a process of reflection, compromise and negotiation. Matusov, von Duyke & Kayumova (2016) consider such “transcendence of the given” as *authorial agency* (p. 434). In the process of interacting with a given culture and practice, transcendence emerges in the form of new goals, new definitions of quality, new motivations, new skills, new relationships and so forth.

This study also considers the different modes of agency as distinguished by social cognitive theory to understand agency in action. These modes are *individual*, *proxy* and *collective* agency (Bandura, 2006). Bandura notes that an agentic *blend* of these three forms of agency is required in everyday functioning. Where it is possible to bring personal influence to bear on individual’s own functioning and environment, *individual* agency is exercised. However, where people do not have direct control over conditions that affect their lives, they may exercise socially mediated agency or *proxy* agency, by influencing others who have the resources, knowledge and means to act on their behalf to secure the outcomes desired (Bandura, 2006). In the exercise of *collective* agency, individuals pool their knowledge, skills and resources and act in concert to shape their future (Bandura, 2000). Dumenden’s (2011) study of a Chin refugee background student in Australia showed how socially mediated or proxy agency was linked to Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital. It revealed how tutoring and mentoring enabled this refugee student to acquire the necessary capital to effect a positive change in his educational trajectory.

Of particular relevance for this study too is that the cognizance of different cultural determinants of achievement in different societies may influence personal agency. For example, people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures place different emphases on self-representations, their role in the family, community and society, and these perceptions can exert an omnipresent influence on the nature of underlying psychological processes of cognition and self-regulation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the individualistic society that is typical of Western cultures, individuals are motivated to undertake actions that allow for the important expression of their

self-defining, inner attributes (Boekaerts, 1998). Academic success and goals are therefore expressions of individual aspirations and strivings for personal accomplishments. In that respect, personal agency beliefs related to self-efficacy and self-concept may explain academic achievement. On the other hand, students from collective cultures, for example Asian and Afghan culture, may be more motivated to work hard in order to meet parental and social expectations. In these contexts, making one's family proud, saving face and avoiding shame or unhappy consequences may be a stronger incentive for individual success than a personal sense of achievement (Chong, 2007).

## **2.5. Refugees' funds of knowledge and socio-cultural capital**

Another relevant theory in this study is a *funds of knowledge* framework, which is born from sociocultural approaches to teaching and learning (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). This framework theorizes that children's informal experiences and interactions provide a strong foundation for them to draw upon, and that also enables them to develop formal, conceptual learning in later educational encounters. The funds of knowledge framework has been used to document the competence and knowledge embedded in the life experiences of under-represented students and their families, and how such knowledge and skills are used and changed to mediate their economic disadvantage (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Under-represented students are those from low income, ethnic minority backgrounds, or of foreign origin such as migrants. Family knowledge may include their social and labour history, household practices, division of labour, ideas about childrearing and values about education (Moll et. al., 1992). These historically and culturally accumulated bodies of knowledge and skills are essential for household and individual functioning and well-being. In the current study, highlighting and valuing the resources embedded in students, families and communities, through the framework of funds of knowledge, counters deficit perspectives of under-represented students like those from refugee background. It also emphasizes the importance of tapping into understanding of the resources that students bring to their classrooms, including those which may challenge the prevalent schooling practices.

The funds of knowledge approach relates to two distinct forms of capital: *social* and *cultural* noted by Rios-Aguilar et. al., (2011). Similar to Bourdieu's (1986) definition of social capital, funds of knowledge accumulated by belonging to a cluster of households or families can benefit its members. Specifically for this study, this researcher will explore the factors that facilitate or hinder the transformation of refugee background students' socio-cultural capital and their funds of knowledge into personal agency. This exploration may lead to a more nuanced understanding of certain aspects of education for students with a refugee background. These aspects may include factors such as classroom instruction, family-school relations and the design of programmes and policies focussed on improving the educational outcomes of those students.

## **2.6. An Ecological Model**

The current study also draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977,1979), which provides a useful framework to examine the dynamic interplay between personal agency and social structure. Ecological theory implies the individual may influence, as well as be influenced by multiple factors. Bronfenbrenner defined the 'ecology of human development' as:

*The scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21)*

Accordingly, the individual is nested at the centre, within multiple layers and structures in different systems within his or her immediate settings. These settings include: the *Microsystem* (home, peers, school); the *Mesosystem* (interrelationships between microsystems such as between home/parents and school); the *Exosystem* (institutions and practices that affect the individual indirectly such as parent's employment or unemployment conditions or parents' social networks); the *Macrosystem* (the social and cultural norms of society that includes policies and belief systems); and lastly the *Chronosystems* (such as life transitions over time)

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The various settings and systems that influence the individual may extend beyond his or her direct contact. *Reciprocity* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22), in this framework, emphasizes the mutual interaction between the individual and his/her environment as well as the complexity involved in his/her development.

The ecological framework has two main implications for this study. Firstly, foregrounding agency identifies refugee students as active individuals who shape their environment and are also influenced by the microsystems of their face-to-face settings.

Secondly, an ecological model links agency with individuals' funds of knowledge and socio-cultural capital found within and across their ecological systems. As a result, there are various sites where agency development and enhancement may be located, and that may influence positive educational outcomes for refugee background students.

## **2.7. Research questions**

The research questions for this study arise from gaps identified in the literature in relation to understanding the influences on educational resettlement of former refugees in New Zealand schools. In particular, a positive capability view underlies this study, and supports the aim and rationale for the study (see Chapter One). The two key research questions that were explored are:

1. How does agency assist refugee background students in the experience of schooling and education upon resettlement in New Zealand?
2. What supports the development of agency for refugee background students in New Zealand schools?

Answering these questions will provide useful insights into how students enact their sense of agency to support schooling and their education, which will in turn enrich

understanding of ways to reinforce agency in order to enhance the attainment of educational success for refugee background learners in schools.

## **2.8. Summary**

The literature reviewed in this chapter illustrates how forced migration can disrupt the education of refugee background students and that the experience of violence and trauma may put them at risk of having mental health problems. Literature suggests that these may affect their education post-resettlement, in addition to the linguistic and cultural challenges facing them with schooling in the new environment. Much of this literature have tended to emphasize a deficit view of former refugee students, and have not provided a broader picture of the complex nuances of resettlement, particularly in relation to their educational experiences. Research and literature internationally and in New Zealand discuss various pedagogical approaches and resources in response to learning needs but are limited in addressing strengths.

Counter deficit literature supports a positive-capability view of refugee background students' experiences that highlight bi/multilingualism and literacy skills; and strength of character. Therefore an opportunity exists for foregrounding sense of agency in understanding their educational experience. Literature on agency defines what is agency, how it is demonstrated in both thoughts and actions and how agency emerges in different contexts. The identification of the interplay between agency and environment from literature supports this study's intent to examine sense of agency in former refugee students' schooling experience within an ecological framework. The next chapter will explain the methodology and design of the research.

## **CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Introduction**

In this chapter I will first explain the qualitative research approach taken. Next, the phenomenology research design is described, including the use of personal narratives to understand the sense of agency that Afghan students with refugee background had in their experience of high schools in New Zealand. Then, the methods of data collection and data analysis are explained, and finally relevant ethical considerations are outlined.

### **3.2. Qualitative research approach**

Since this study is concerned with understanding and interpreting how participants' sense of agency assisted them in their current education and schooling, a qualitative research approach has been taken. As explained by Creswell (1998), qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' perspectives through using their own words or meaning. This approach therefore offers a close-up, detailed view of how individual students with refugee backgrounds engaged in high school education in their resettled country. At the same time, the approach also allows the researcher to zoom out with a wide-angle lens to take into account the context of those individual experiences.

### **3.3. Research design**

In line with the qualitative research approach, a phenomenological design was selected for this study. Phenomenological research has its roots in philosophy and psychology, allowing the researcher to describe the lived experiences of individuals in relation to a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2014; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological research design was seen as an appropriate choice for this study as the study's intent was to get to the essence of what the participant experienced and personal agency at the heart of that. This approach enabled the study to focus on learning what the participants revealed about their sense of agency as

they engaged in New Zealand high school education. As advised by Moustakas' (1994) "from the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experience" (p.13). In this study, insights into students' sense of agency in relation to their educational experience are gained through the perspectives and personal stories told by six refugee background students from Afghanistan who were studying at New Zealand high schools.

A phenomenological research design utilizes interviews (Giorgi, 2009), which was the main method of collecting data for this study. The inclusion of several participants allowed for similarities and differences to be emphasized, which could allow for the study findings, to some degree, to be generalized to a broader population with similar characteristics or backgrounds (Cohen et al., 2011; Glesne, 2006; Johnson & Christenson, 2008).

### **3.4. Participant selection**

Six Afghan refugee background students were involved in this study. This number is considered to be sufficient for a qualitative study. As stated by Gay et al. (2011), "qualitative sampling is the process of selecting a small number of individuals for a study in such a way that individuals chosen will be good informants who will contribute to the researcher's understanding of a given phenomenon" (p.142).

The participant selection followed a purposive approach, utilizing criterion sampling, whereby participants invited for the study fitted the descriptions and characteristics set in the selection criteria by the researcher (Gay et.al, 2011). The selection criteria for the current study were based on four factors: culture, gender, age and English language proficiency. Participants needed to be of refugee background and either come from Afghanistan or have Afghan heritage; be sixteen years of age or older. They also needed to have conversational or basic interpersonal communicative skills in English language, as interviews were conducted in English. However, a bilingual support person was offered should the participant prefer to speak in Farsi, the first language. The aim was also to achieve a mix of gender among participants, to ensure that views and insights from both male and female students were captured. Lastly,

potential participants that fitted the selection criteria had to be willing and able to provide informed consent to participate.

All of the students who fitted the selection criteria (see Section 3.8) and indicated that they were interested in and willing to participate, became participants in the study. The six Afghan students who participated in this study consisted of four female and two male senior high school students. They had differing backgrounds in terms of their length of residence in New Zealand; their level of English competency; their varied journeys and entry into New Zealand under the Refugee Resettlement Scheme; and their prior New Zealand schooling experience. One participant requested and was provided with a bilingual support person to enable him to extend his voice in English when conversations went deeper.

### **3.5. Data collection procedure**

As emphasized by Gay, et.al (2011), the qualitative researcher acts as the primary data collection instrument, when undertaking qualitative research “in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p.14). The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews for this study. To uphold the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time and place. Four interviews were conducted at the participants’ schools, in an empty classroom, just after school hours and during the quieter days leading up to the end of the school year. One interview was conducted in a public library, while another was held in a quiet room at the researcher’s workplace, when schools were closed for holidays. The data collection phase took three months, with the first interview conducted in late November 2017 and the last one in January 2018.

All one-on-one interviews were audio recorded and the data was later transcribed, reviewed and analysed. The participants were asked to sign consent forms, including both audio recording of the interviews and for the release of transcripts (see Appendices A, B and C) to be used in this research.

#### **3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews**

The main method of data collection in this study was semi-structured interviews (see

Appendix D). As recommended by Mutch (2005), these semi-structured interviews employed open-ended questions, allowing each participant to be flexible in answering and the extent to which they chose to share their stories or perspectives. The process also allowed the researcher to clarify and check answers or to discuss points further with participants without being confined to a rigid question order, as described in O'Hara, Carter, Dewis, Kay and Wainwright (2011).

Two separate interviews, lasting up to one hour each, were conducted with each of the six participants. Depending on the discussion that was generated, and with the agreement of the participants, some interviews ran longer or shorter in time. The first interview focused on gathering information on students' background, previous schooling experience prior to New Zealand, current New Zealand schooling and learning experiences, socialization process, and future aspirations. As the students shared their narratives, opportunities arose for re-imagining thoughts on what they would do to ensure future refugee background students would have a positive schooling experience, as well as self-retrospection on their learning journey. This effectively led to another meeting for the second interview with the students, which is explained in the following section.

### **3.5.2 Photo or object elicitation**

The second interview involved a photo or object elicitation method, which provided an additional opportunity for the students to distance the focus from themselves onto an image or object, about which they could share their thoughts and generate self-reflections. Participants were asked to bring a photo or any material, which contained some meaning to them that may relate to educational/life goals, motivations and their experience of schooling and life in New Zealand for the interview.

Similar to other descriptions of photovoice method (e.g. Wang & Burris, 1994; 1997), the process of having individuals tell the story or describe the meaning behind the photos or other material they brought provided a glimpse into their social realities as well as insights into related broader community and cultural narratives that were meaningful to them. It has been argued that all important information, including what we know about who we are, who we were, and who we can become is stored and retrieved in storied form (Rappaport, 1998; Schank & Abelson, 1995).

Three students brought personal photographs to share. One student brought a printed news article, while one shared a collection of photo slides. The sixth student recounted a family event to share his perspective since he had not brought anything from Afghanistan in his journey to New Zealand.

### **3.6. Data analysis process**

This section describes the procedure for analyzing the data collected in this study.

Phenomenological research analysis focuses on significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an “essence of description” (Creswell, 2014, p.196). To that end, after the audio recordings of each interview had been transcribed, and edited based on participants’ feedback, the next challenge was to review all of the information gathered to obtain a sense of the overall data set and to reflect on emerging meanings. This process involved detailed reiterative reading of the transcriptions, making margin notes and allocating initial codes to descriptions/statements within and across individual experiences that emerge from the data. This “horizontalization of the data” was then developed into a description of “textures” of the experience as statements were clustered into “meaning units”, to indicate themes and patterns as recommended by Creswell (1998, pp.147-150). Specific textures related to agency (feelings, thoughts and actions) were grouped under the contexts where the students demonstrated a sense of agency as they encountered learning and schooling in New Zealand. The research questions also provided a guide to focusing this analysis.

As the analysis process continued, all coded data were meticulously sorted and reflected upon under specific themes that emerged. These themes were also linked back to theoretical concepts related to this study (see Chapter 2), to help understand the essence of agency in the schooling experience for the students. The key findings were then written up using “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2014, p.202), that described the meanings and essence of the experience in detail, in line with individual students’ perspectives.

### **3.7. Role of the researcher**

As a researcher, I need to acknowledge my own perceived power in the research relationship, as noted by Cohen et al. (2011). My current role at the Ministry of Education is in the advisory section on the delivery of refugee and migrant education support; hence I am actively and continuously working alongside schools and teachers. In addition, I have considerable previous experience and knowledge working with refugee background students in schools. While these insights informed my understanding throughout the study, my visible connections may have positively and/or negatively affected the ability of the participants to be open and forthright about their particular experiences. In acknowledgement of this, continuous assurance was given to the participants about maintaining confidentiality regarding their identities, and care was taken to maintain professional conduct throughout all processes of the study.

I also endeavoured to be supportive and respectful of the honest voice of the participants, in line with my role to present the findings from the participants' view, rather than as an expert who passes judgments on participants. The use of bracketing, which is important in phenomenological research design (Creswell, 1998), supports this action. Bracketing occurred when the researcher bracketed or suspended her preconceived ideas about agency and schooling and kept the focus on learning the meaning that the individual participants held, thus enabling the researcher to understand these meanings through the voices of the informants.

In addition, reflexivity also involved my accountability in data interpretation and representation. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) hold that writing is a central method in qualitative research and the author's subjectivity can influence the production and final product of the text. In that light, I was compelled to reflect on what this study meant for the participants' and their stories. In essence, these narratives depicted contexts – past, present and future – and I endeavoured to privilege the students' voices within each of these contexts.

### **3.8. Ethical considerations**

In this study, sound ethical principles were applied to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of research. This was particularly important because qualitative researchers are visitors who are privileged with insight into the personal world of their participants (Stake, 1994). For the safety and protection of both the researcher and the participants, addressing issues of confidentiality, responsibility and accountability in research with minority groups like former refugees, before the start of this study was an important part of the ethical process. To that end, the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (2015) was followed in the conduct of this study. Prior to the study, the procedures for this study were also granted ethical approval by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (see Appendix E).

This study was conducted in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Permission to access and approach participants was initially sought through a secondary school that had a homework and study centre attached which was attended by students from several schools. After gaining approval at the institutional level (see Appendix F), a lead staff member of the school was consulted in the first instance to identify potential participants based on the specific selection criteria (see Section 3.4). Once this information had been provided, a meeting with potential student participants was held for the researcher to introduce herself and the study. The researcher also answered any questions. At the end of the meeting, the students were formally invited to participate and they received the detailed information sheet and consent forms. It was stressed to all students that participation was voluntary. Although potential participants were given a week to consider their participation in the study, the majority returned the consent forms immediately after the initial meeting.

Once each of the participants had given written consent for his/her participation in the study, interviews were negotiated at a time that was mutually convenient for both the individual participant and the researcher. All of the participants were asked, and agreed, for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions were made available for each participant to read, check and change, if they desired, before the data analysis process began. The participants' identities remained

confidential and the information they provided was stored safely with all real names and identifying information removed. The bilingual support person who assisted with the interview of one student also completed a confidentiality form (see Appendix G).

As this study focused on the experience of participants from refugee backgrounds, the values and attitudes stipulated in the Guidelines for Research with Refugees in New Zealand (Change Makers Refugee Forum, 2010) were upheld, in particular with regard to respect, reciprocity and beneficence when conducting research with people from refugee backgrounds. Throughout the study, care was taken to communicate information about the study procedures and participants' rights, and to ensure that the research posed no physical, social or emotional harm to participants. The researcher was aware that the participants' refugee experience and/or memories might be reignited during the interview process, which could cause distress or discomfort and embarrassment. Hence, every measure was taken to ensure the participants' feelings were respected with allowance to pause and skip any question(s) that caused distress during the interviews. Further referral to appropriate counseling was also offered if it was felt to be required.

Reciprocity and beneficence was critical in this study as the intent was to enable refugee background students' voice and experience to be heard and shared. By participating in this study, the Afghan students benefited directly and indirectly. Direct benefits included giving the participants who were experiencing resettlement an opportunity to be heard. They shared what was on their mind, and talked about their challenges and experiences to someone who was interested in their journey. Through the resulting insights, it was anticipated that greater understanding of refugee background students' agency and challenges would lead to enhancement in teaching and learning practices that meet the needs of these students. It was hoped that these insights might also facilitate positive engagement with students and their families by other professionals involved in their settlement and integration into the school system.

### **3.9. Summary**

In this chapter, I explained and justified the qualitative research approach used in this study. The phenomenological research design was also described, in addition to the semi-structured interviews and photo/material elicitation as the key research tools for data collection. After that, the strategy for analyzing the data was presented. This was followed by an explanation of the researcher's role and reflexivity. Finally, the ethical considerations considered when conducting this research and, in particular, with refugee background participants, were explained.

The next chapter will present the background information of the participants and the emerging areas of agency demonstrated by the students that frame the key findings of this study.

## CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings from this study, based on data from the qualitative interviews with six Afghan high school students from refugee backgrounds who had resettled in New Zealand. The chapter will firstly present a brief background on each of the participating students, to provide background context for their schooling experiences in New Zealand. Then, themes that emerged from the analysis of findings from across the students' narratives, regarding their emerging capacities for agency, will be presented.

### 4.2 The journey and experience of students

To protect the identity and privacy of the students involved in this study, individual case studies are not presented. However, a general description of the key features of the students' background and experiences is provided below, to offer insights into their prior experiences. These features include: length of residence in New Zealand; migration journey; prior schooling; English language proficiency; and learning programme at New Zealand schools.

#### *Length of residence in New Zealand*

The students involved in this study comprised of four female and two male senior high school students whose length of residence in New Zealand at the time of study ranged from six months to twelve years. Except for one, all of the students began their education in New Zealand at high school level, based on their age at the time of arrival. As for the one exception, that student started primary school here in New Zealand as a five year old.

#### *Migration journey*

All six students experienced fleeing and moving across cities within Afghanistan such as Ghazni and Kabul, and across international borders like Iran and Pakistan, before making the journey to New Zealand. These students and their families had fled from oppression, violence, conflict and general lawlessness, which increasingly

threatened life and safety. However, the resettlement journey of the students in New Zealand differed. Two students came through the family reunification quota and were received at Mangere Refugee Reception Centre for the initial six weeks upon arrival. These two students came with immediate family members to be reunited with a parent who had arrived in New Zealand several years earlier. At Mangere, they were given a taste of schooling in New Zealand as part of the orientation programme. When they arrived in their current location, they were assisted to enrol at local schools by resettlement support volunteers. The other four students came to New Zealand through the family sponsorship category. As one of their family members – an aunty, an uncle, a brother and a sister – had already resettled in New Zealand so they were successful in sponsoring their wider family to resettle here. These four students were received directly by the sponsoring family members and were enrolled at local high schools with the help of family members.

### ***Prior schooling***

The participant students' journeys, before coming to New Zealand, revealed varied prior schooling experiences. Two students had no prior formal schooling experience in Afghanistan. This was because, during that time, one was under the school entry age of seven years old in Afghanistan; and the other, due to the priority placed on the schooling of a son over that of a daughter by the family, did not go to school prior to coming to New Zealand. Another student completed primary school in Iran and was still doing high school studies there when the move to New Zealand came.

Two other students had experienced formal schooling in the capital city, Kabul. One of these had returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan, while the other had moved from a village to Kabul. Both of these two students had completed primary and secondary education, with one of them having a three-month stint at a local university before moving to New Zealand. They enrolled in a high school in New Zealand so as to gain the requirements for entry to New Zealand universities. The last of the six students received a relatively less formal primary and secondary education at a village school in Afghanistan before moving to New Zealand.

### ***English language proficiency***

The four students who had schooling in Afghanistan had a taste of learning the English language before arriving in New Zealand. However, the students noted that those classes were rudimentary and were held for just an hour a week. The curriculum and instruction in these classes was predominantly in Farsi language. Their level of fluency in English therefore varied, depending on how long they had been learning English in New Zealand. One of these students, who requested for bilingual support for the interviews, had only been in New Zealand for less than a year.

The two students without prior formal schooling before resettling in New Zealand showed different levels of English proficiency. The one who arrived as a five year old and had since started formal schooling in New Zealand showed the highest level of English fluency and literacy, while the other student showed only basic functional proficiency having arrived as a pre-literate teenager eight years ago.

### ***Learning programme at New Zealand schools***

Based on their English proficiency levels and age at the time of arrival in New Zealand, all six students' learning programmes were individualized. Their learning programmes were developed to factor in the additional English language learning support needed for them to access the New Zealand curriculum.

The five students who arrived in New Zealand in their teens started with an intensive programme of 20 hours per week in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) alongside subjects like Mathematics and Science for at least one to two years. As the students progressed, the ESOL programme, with reduced hours, became a support for the mainstream high school curriculum. All five students were able to work and earn credits for New Zealand's National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA). As for the only student who started formal schooling in New Zealand at primary level, as a five year old, his learning programme at high school was similar to that of all mainstream high school students in New Zealand without the need of ESOL support.

### **4.3 Capacities for Agency Shown by the Students**

This section outlines the ways in which the students demonstrated agency as they experienced learning in New Zealand school contexts. Despite the variation in their schooling experiences prior to coming to New Zealand, as discussed in the section above, they all showed a similar sense of agency. The findings revealed that their emerging capacities for agency included: orienting agency towards existing opportunities; active engagement in shaping learning; acting to overcome structural constraints; showing autonomy and self-determination; and drawing on existing social and cultural capital.

#### ***Orienting agency towards existing opportunities***

Being in school and getting an education were considered to be the best and most important opportunity that the new context presented for the students. For example, coming from a small city outside Kabul, Student 4 shared: “in Afghanistan I finished high school but we don't have something to do... We are happy in New Zealand because there is something to do... I can go to university... [an] opportunity for me to go and study further”. Keen on pursuing a nursing programme after high school, Student 4 was optimistic that New Zealand would give her “the best life”. Student 1 also expressed this feeling when he first enrolled at the school in New Zealand. He said, “I thought I can do anything that I want here... I love studying and I am keen to use the opportunity I have at the moment to go ahead”. He explained, “I want to go to university to get a degree in engineering... my family hasn't reached this stage [university] because of the situation in Afghanistan”. With conflict and constant threat of violence from the Taliban, these students explained that disruptions to normal life, like going to school and pursuing education, were widespread. Understandably, seeking safety and refuge was paramount for these students’ families. Hence, they all arrived in New Zealand with a sense of optimism and a great belief in the potential advantage of New Zealand schooling.

The existing opportunities also extended to include the staff and facilities that supported the students’ education in New Zealand. Student 5 noted, “here [in New Zealand] is like if you try your best, you will not get any problem... because we have a lot of opportunities... It’s not like in my country... they don't have internet or

library...so [I] make good use of the opportunity here”. In Afghanistan, the journey to a high school for her was an hour and a half walk across mountainous terrain every day. The school was not equipped with modern facilities and technology such as a writing/teaching board, digital devices, or appropriate furniture for sitting and writing. It was not unusual to have a class of 35-45 students to a teacher. In the capital city of Kabul, the school seemed to have better facilities. Student 3 related that “but in New Zealand, we have 15 or 20 students [in a class] which is good; you can exchange ideas with teacher and other students”. Hence, teacher support and encouragement was highly valued by all the participating students.

The female student participants predominantly felt foreign and vulnerable. However, assurances given by teachers helped to mitigate that and encouraged their agency. Student 3 shared one of the reasons for the feeling: “I felt nervous because I saw different students from different countries; I didn't understand when they spoke; I didn't understand the [English] language”. However, the assurances from her teacher developed her confidence and reduced her fear of trying and feeling embarrassed. Being in the same class with male students was also a new environment, different from schools in Afghanistan but that had encouraged agency in student 3 to “just talk to them since they came to me and talked to me”.

The homework and study centre was also mentioned as a resource enabling students to capitalize on opportunities, with all students utilizing their agency by going to the centre for additional support in a variety of learning areas when they were able to.

### ***Active engagement in shaping one's learning and schooling experience***

With opportunities to access education and get a qualification in New Zealand, all of the students showed active involvement in shaping their learning for a positive schooling experience. Both academic and social aspects such as learning English, connecting with teachers, making friends, participating in extra-curricular activities, joining into sports, ignoring negative reactions, supporting others and utilizing learning support and facilities, including digital technology are experiences the students recounted, and which revealed their agency. This finding suggested that

agency in both academic and social areas provided support in facilitating the students' learning, participation and engagement at school.

All participating students recognised the importance of learning the English language to access education and get a New Zealand qualification. Since English was not their first language, they all showed agency in the various ways they made an effort to learn English and receive learning support within and beyond the classroom. As Student 2 noted,

“It was so hard the first time [learning English] but now is better, I can understand English. I practised at home ...reading books, copying [and] writing. I seek help from teachers [especially] the bilingual teacher aide. I use the [bilingual] dictionary. To remember things, I have to write down a lot [not just read] many times”.

Acknowledging the minimal academic support in English they received from home, Student 1 recounted, “I don't get help at home as my mother has no English [so] I go to the homework centre two times a week”. Going to the homework and study centre to proactively seek help was a common act of agency for all the students, ensuring that they got support and progressed in their English language acquisition. In addition, they also knew the kind of help that was needed to address their specific learning difficulties. For example, Student 5 shared,

“I really need help for my writing...it's really hard to put the words correctly and also the grammar. I asked them [teachers at homework centre] how I can do my essay and show them some paragraphs for feedback... and then [I] will be more confident about my writing”.

Besides the homework centre, on their own accord, Students 1, 5 and 6 sought further learning support and practice from the Internet through websites such as Khan Academy for academic subjects and the YouTube on specific topics like writing an essay. Sitting with non-Afghani students in the ESOL class was another way that students 1 and 3 used their agency in order to practise conversational English.

It appeared that these students' agentic behaviours were influenced by their academic and learning needs, which in turn shaped the way they learned. Knowing how he learned best, Student 6 shared a strategy he used to manage procrastination and prepare for the NCEA examinations the year before:

“I've got this [board] set up, [with] three categories of what needs to be done, time and the done pile...you put post-it notes if you have done it on the other side as reward, if not [completed] I keep going, that will be give you a sense of accomplishment [when done] and motivation to carry on...that helped me, [and it] has worked”.

All of the students also recognized that the smaller class size and different teaching style had enabled their greater participation in class. It was an opportunity to be more intentional in their actions in order to make learning easier, finish a task or improve understanding of a topic by supporting one another. Student 2 explained, “when I'm writing [an essay], my ideas are small [so] I talk to someone or be in a group to bounce ideas and brainstorm”. She added, “I make friends to get support”. Social support given by peers helped the students to feel that they were not alone. They encouraged each other. As Student 6 recounted when he struggled with the topic Organic Chemistry, he and a friend studied together, “...we will go over [our] notes and discuss...we teach each other.” These two students showed another act of agency by utilizing peer support upon identifying learning areas that they needed support in.

Unlike the teacher-centred teaching in Afghanistan, the collaborative style of teaching boosted the confidence of three students, which further assisted their agency. For example, Student 4 recounted her experience, in a Science class, of working together with teachers and classmates on an experiment. “[Teacher] let me try everything”. These connections with teachers then allowed for students to engage with them both within and outside the classroom. Student 4 also stated, “I am able to talk to my teachers if I have problems”. In addition, Student 6 related how he knew support was available from teachers and was able to identify when and where he needed this, “especially in Science, I talk to myself about doing well and they [teachers] help me when I need help, I tell them what I need help with”.

Equally important as utilizing agency in academic areas, the students also used their agency in shaping their social and school integration. In initiating the first move to make friends, for instance, Student 3 shared, “I made friends through [making] a conversation first”. All of the students stated that they usually made the first approach by introducing themselves and being friendly. Although there were times when it was difficult to be friendly and the students received unwelcoming comments, they were undeterred. For example, Student 6 recounted “I try to think on the positive side all the time. Even if there is something [unpleasant] I will forget about it”. He believed that he could be and was successful in establishing friendships through joining sports: “There was connection [through] play...I played basketball, football and rugby, in school teams”. The significance of being in a team that represented school assisted in creating bonds of friendship and a sense of belonging for him. Being part of the team as part of school activity created a sense of pride for the students, as Student 1 proudly mentioned: “I like football...I am in the school team”.

In another instance, opportunities for sports and games, through the school physical education programme, allowed Student 4 to take up tennis and play with other Kiwi students one afternoon a week. Although she had never played tennis before, she took up the game in order to learn something new and make new friends. Student 4 embraced the new sport, while dressed in appropriately modest gear befitting her Muslim faith. This also revealed her agency in negotiating her cultural identity in the new space. Likewise, Student 5 related how wearing a *hijab* (headscarf) and being a Muslim posed unwelcoming attention. However, her response showed agency to ensure a positive environment: “I explained to them and I gave them a website about Islam and told them to search about Islam”. She also reminded herself and other female Muslim friends to “just be yourself, don't listen to them because they don't have the information about Muslims to know who we are”. In this instance, Student 5 had not only shown her own agency but also proceeded to enhance the agency of others, like her friends, in order to mitigate some of the unpleasant encounters they faced by being and looking different.

### *Acting to overcome structural constraints*

Apart from showing active engagement in shaping their learning and schooling experience, the findings also revealed students' agency in addressing and overcoming some constraints, namely: English curriculum and instruction; teacher prejudices and practices; and limited family resources.

Expressing the challenge presented by the curriculum and instruction in English, Student 3 shared that she “liked Science and Mathematics because I studied them in Farsi and [now that] it is in English...it is so different for me”. To address the language difference, she used a bilingual dictionary or Google translate to understand English words and phrases. She admitted that, “if I get English, it is not difficult [to study] Maths and Science”. Student 5 agreed with the fact that the English medium here was also a challenge: “The English here is very high[er] than the one [level] I studied in my country [which] was so basic and easy”. Despite the challenge, Student 5 advised, “don't get disappointed with your English or your studies because the first time when I experienced it [was] really, really hard to catch up, to speak or to do writing...just study hard and focus on your studies”. She revealed unrelenting motivation to acquire additional language requirements of specialist subjects in her senior years of schooling. Through utilizing her agency, she also developed several learning strategies to enable her to understand and learn, for example, the terms and phrases in Biology by highlighting all the difficult ones first and translating them into Farsi before she studied.

Some students also pointed out that mainstream teachers were not always understanding and helpful, unlike the ESOL specialist teachers. Student 5 recounted, “they just don't care, like where you are from” and “when I asked for help, they ignored me”. Consequently, that drove her agency to seek out ESOL teachers and teachers at the Homework centre for support and help instead. Student 3 also wished that teachers made more effort to get to know them, including “their country, how they were taught, how they had learned...so that it [can be] linked to their studies here [in New Zealand]”. The lack of recognition for their prior learning was frustrating for the students. Student 3 further explained that this was because “we may know the [subject] content, it is easy, content the same, only the language is

different”. There was a sense that these students’ cultural capital, in terms of prior knowledge and ways of learning, were neither understood nor recognized to enable teachers to tap into them effectively. In addition, teachers seemed to place low expectations on them, which prompted Student 6 to suggest better ways for teachers to view them and support their learning:

“I would like teachers to have high expectation of us because if you want to succeed, you got to have a high expectation. Also, see where [we] are struggling, see if [we] need help for a specific topic and provide that help to get us on the same level as everyone or even higher. Also, [it is good] for teachers to know what we are capable of doing”.

Such teacher perceptions and practices became drivers for the students to double their efforts to prove their academic levels of competence. Student 1 recounted: “A success for me is I reached Level 1 for Mathematics [in less than a year]”. Student 6 also took the challenge of sitting for the United Kingdom, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination in English at Year 11 and was proud to achieve an ‘A’ grade for the subject.

Students also showed agency in supporting themselves financially to reduce the pressure on limited family resources. Most of them held part-time employment, either on the weekends or during the school holiday breaks. Student 5 admitted, “It is not good that you ask your parents for money. I want to be able to have my own money”. This was despite the fact that her father told her not to worry about money and to just focus on her study. Engaging a home or private tutor in New Zealand to support and accelerate learning was also not an option for any of the students because of the potential cost involved. All of the students utilized the homework and study centre instead.

### ***Showing autonomy and self-determination***

All of the students revealed a strong sense of agency in taking the opportunity to choose and make decisions, which propelled them to develop plans for action. Being the first generation to be educated at school in New Zealand, they were clear about

what they wanted to pursue and the steps towards achieving it. One key example of this was Student 5 who shared:

“They [my parents] say do what you want, do what interest you. I explain to them what I want to be and what I want to do; that’s why they [do] not pressure me to get married. I really want to finish university to get my degree and masters as well”.

It can be seen that both this student and her parents had made some life adjustments to the New Zealand context by focusing on options and pathways available in education. In this case, the parents seemed to agree that the preferred pathway was to carve out a future through getting a qualification and pursuing a career rather than coercing their daughter into early marriage, which traditionally was a norm in the Afghani community. Student 5 had been accepted into a university foundation programme commencing that summer. Due to that she exclaimed, “My future is bright!” She drew on her success to motivate her further. She added:

“I believe in myself to get what I want. I see that [and decide] yes, and I know I can do it. I think every pupil should have [his/her] own aim and then the motivation comes easy if you believe in yourself. It is possible, everything is possible”.

There was a real sense of optimism in the sense of agency shown here and much of that may be attributed to not only the positivity felt in contrast with her previous background but also to a sense of competence achieved as a result of her actions.

Having goals was integral to developing autonomy to have some control over the course of one’s life. A majority of the students revealed this agency to pursue their own interests and values when outlining their goals. For example, Student 1 maintained, “This is my goal that I be a role model for my family and for others in the community. I will be the first [in my family] to go to university if I get there”. Student 6 set a higher goal for himself, as he believed that education “is the fundamental of everything. If you have the right tool like education, you make your whole life a lot easier, helps you function and live life. I may [like to] get a PhD”. Expressing a different goal, Student 2’s aim was to find employment for job experience while continuing to improve her proficiency in the English language

when she finished high school. She was realistic in her goal of getting employment because she felt that having arrived in New Zealand as a preliterate student, mastery in academic English was a big hurdle. Her agency was directed at achieving sufficient English for employment. On the contrary, Student 4 acknowledged the longer pathway she had to undertake in order to pursue her choice of studying nursing due to her English. She was in an intensive ESOL programme for two years, and planned: “I will go to an NCEA [National Certificate of Educational Achievement] class next year but will keep learning English because I want to go to university”.

### ***Drawing on existing social and cultural capital***

The students were all proud of their identity. They drew on their traditions, language, family and wider relational connections that encouraged them into action and sustained their motivation. Student 3 shared that “when studying English is difficult, I think of the dance [and say] I can do this”. She was referring to a traditional dance that involved dancing with a knife, which the younger sister of the bride had to learn and perform with precision on the wedding day.

In another example, Student 5 taught the Farsi language to young Afghan children in the community on weekends. She pointed out, “We have a programme to teach Afghan children Farsi – speaking, reading, writing – exactly like English”. The awareness of and commitment to learning her first language was not lost on her. Student 2 reflected on memories of the Afghan New Year (Nawruz) celebrations in Afghanistan, captured in a photo when she was younger. “When I feel sad, it [the photo] brings nice memories and cheers me up.” The photo also urged her to work and study harder because she was reminded of her hometown, “I didn't go to school in my hometown and I want to study more...I want to learn English well”.

Family was an important resource and source of support for the students. Student 6 stated:

“They [parents] give me all the tools I need to achieve or what I intend to do. So, like financial wise...they bought me my laptop, books, stationery,

textbooks and educational things. My dad says anything you need to become a better person, he's down to help me".

This student's dad held a grammar session at home where he would teach English grammar "as much as he knew" to the children. Because of the support from his dad, Student 6 proclaimed, "I'm able to read a lot of books". Student 5 also described her appreciation for the love and support her parents have given: "I love my family because my dad and mom always support me. My dad says 'Don't think about money, just study', while mom always like says 'Go eat your dinner, then go and pray and then focus on your study'". Relieved of housework and financial worries, she stated, "They [my parents] give me motivation to study".

The findings also showed that students' connections with the wider community activated and maintained their agency. Student 5 expressed her desire to go back to Afghanistan after being educated and successful with high income earning potential in New Zealand. She said, "I want to help them with their education; for example, because in my country there is no library in schools". She shared, "My dad had built a school before and it is still running and my aim is to build a big library for that school". Feeling connected to the local New Zealand community through the work of a family member was also a source of agency for Student 4 who felt inspired to volunteer her time to teach children Farsi in the weekends. A close family member of Student 4 was a teacher in Afghanistan, who had made a significant contribution to a school in New Zealand as a volunteer teacher aide and family liaison person. Sadly, he tragically passed away, but the memory of him encouraged Student 4. She added, "I want to be like him, a helpful and kind person...even the Kiwi people remember him and talk about him very nicely. We [my family] feel that he is not dead because the memory of him doing good is still alive".

For Student 6, his membership in a regional youth group enabled him to network with youth in other New Zealand regions and bring greater awareness to schools and the public about refugee background youth's issues around identity and wellbeing. He reflected on his Pecha Kucha presentation experience: "It made me think about being wedged in two worlds...between school and home [having to behave] different ways in different contexts". Among all the students, Student 6 expressed the

strongest sense of bicultural efficacy, fluidly navigating the demands of his ethnic culture or former refugee identity and the dominant culture of New Zealand with success. He was one of the school's student leaders and, through his wider New Zealand community engagement, he presented at youth workshops and forums.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The findings of this study revealed multiple areas of agency demonstrated by the students as they engaged with high school education in New Zealand. The students' sense of agency was particularly focused on acquiring English language skills to ensure educational success; on choosing to succeed and making use of the opportunities presented to do so; and on maintaining support and dedication to succeed despite challenges. Their agency provided insights into ways in which they believed, decided and acted in order to learn, integrate and work towards their goals. The students also disclosed specific practices within and outside the learning environment that facilitated and enhanced their agency for educational success.

Furthermore, the findings revealed the nature of agency demonstrated. Their agency was strongly embedded in the socio-cultural context of the refugee resettlement experience as the students adjusted and integrated into the school system. In particular, agency was about more than observable actions. The following chapter deepens the examination of these findings, with discussion that informs understanding of the role that agency played in the students' experience of schooling in the light of existing literature related to refugee education and ecosystems.

## CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Introduction

*Migration drove  
me down this  
bumpy road,  
where I fell and  
smelt the soil,  
where I arose  
and sensed the  
cloud.*

*“The Glass of Tea” by Shukria Rezaei*

This line from a poem by a former refugee Afghan student in the United Kingdom is poignant here as many former refugee students may experience similar sentiments when journeying through migration and resettling in a new country. However, while former refugee students face the challenging task of adjusting to the new society, the findings from this study show that they can also raise to the challenge, seize opportunities and negotiate success.

This chapter will discuss the key findings in the light of relevant literature to better understand the role agency played in the students’ educational experience. This discussion is arranged in response to each of the current study’s research questions, which firstly address how agency assists refugee background students to engage and participate in schools, and secondly, what facilitates the development of their sense of agency.

### **5.2. How does agency assist refugee background students in the experience of schooling and education upon resettlement in New Zealand?**

Based on the findings to the first research question that focuses on how agency helped refugee background, agency assisted the students in several ways. Firstly, students chose to succeed by making use of the educational opportunities presented. Secondly, they shaped their own learning by acquiring new skills and activating their personal capital. Thirdly, they worked to overcome structural constraints; and finally

they were actively agentive in authoring their identities in more empowering ways. In this section, these insights into the students' sense of agency will be discussed in the light of relevant literature. In particular, this section of the discussion will highlight the themes of aspirations, achievements, acculturation processes, and assets.

### ***Choosing to succeed - Achieving aspirations***

The participating students' stories indicated they envisioned a bright future in which they could be emancipated from limited possibilities and uncertain future to undertake either education or employment leading to a career. They all made comparisons between the educational opportunities they had pre-migration and their current opportunities. The students related that, in New Zealand, they were able to access English education, modern classroom facilities, a good library, information technology, encouraging teachers, learning support through the homework centre, higher education, and opportunities for future employment. Therefore, the students believed that a bright future was possible, and regulated their behaviours towards galvanizing and actively engaging in those opportunities. Indeed, the students' drive to make "active use of opportunities" supports Tomanovic's (2012) description of how agency can be used in a setting to create considerable economic and social change (p.610). In this sense, agency helped the students in this study to choose, take appropriate actions and invest to achieve their imagined future (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2011) building on the opportunities available to them in the new setting. This idea is reflected in Student 4's optimism that New Zealand would give her "the best life".

The agency exercised in orienting choice and actions towards existing opportunities reflected the uniqueness of these students' experience coming from a refugee background. The students were clearly attuned to what education meant for them, what the opportunities were and how they could maximize them. Optimism for the future, especially through education and the potential advantage of schooling in New Zealand, was a common theme among all six students in this study. Gladden (2012) has noted that having hope and aspiration are part of the cognitive reframing that takes place for some refugees. Similarly, in my study, the students' agency revealed

that they were able to reframe their current situations in a manner that would benefit them. Many spoke extensively about their motivation to learn and achieve in school making use of the opportunities available.

The findings corroborate Bandura's (2006) analysis of *forethought* as one of the core properties of human agency, where the individual's visualised future guides and motivates current behaviours. This ability to "bring anticipated outcomes to bear on current activities promotes purposeful and foresightful behaviours" (Bandura, 2006, p.164). Ryu and Tuvilla (2018), who studied the stories of former Burmese refugees in the United States, also found that these students made sense of their experiences and agentively authored their future in empowering ways within the new context. It was suggested that, in relation to their refugee experience, emancipation was not only from various kinds of oppression such as war and persecution, but also from conditions that did not foster opportunities. A similar view was held by the students in the current study when they reflected on the opportunities available in schools and in New Zealand.

Education was one of the sites identified by Aaltonen (2013) where agency often requires "action and choice" (p.376). Education provided an opportunity that the former refugee students in this study identified as a choice they wanted to pursue. Hence their agentic actions followed. The next section will discuss how these actions helped the students confront the new learning environment.

### ***Shaping learning and engagement – Achievement and Acceptance***

As the students entered a New Zealand school and classroom, they were confronted with the reality of their task as new students in a new environment, a task that required adjustment and adaptation. Academically, these students were aware of the difficulties of learning English, of how to study and how to participate in the new school setting. However, socially, individuals were challenged in making friends, not only because of their limited proficiency in English but also due to looking different from other students. They also had to build relationships with their teachers in order to facilitate learning.

The findings showed that students' agency in shaping learning and engagement aided them to navigate and negotiate both academic demands and social connections, which otherwise could be barriers to education. Students 1, 2, 3 and 5 employed varied strategies to learn and hone their English language skills, either through individual efforts and peer support or by getting extra tutoring from the homework and study centre. Additionally, they also sought further help from academic websites on the Internet. These students were aware of the areas where they needed help, such as writing, generating ideas, speaking, subject content and also in preparing for assessments such as NCEA. Subsequently, they also knew where and who to seek help from. Student 6 also shared his examination revision strategy that kept him on track and reduced procrastination. Chong (2007) suggests that such self-regulatory learning strategies in negotiating schoolwork, and academic efficacy in judgments of capability help organise or exercise control over performance in schoolwork, and can result in more effortful and purposeful engagement and actions, that is agency, to maintain success expectations. That effect was certainly reflected in the continued agency shown by the students in the current study, for example when seeking and gaining assistance.

The dual process of navigation and negotiation were important for the participants in addressing the challenges of learning and engagement. As suggested by Ungar (2008), employing navigation and negotiation skills enhances a young person's capacity to access support for particular needs. Navigation implies that there is a destination and that young people intentionally seek out available support. Negotiation ensures that support services will be provided in ways that are meaningful to those who seek it. That was also the case for the students in this study, as they intentionally sought help from a wide range of sources, including teachers, their friends and peers, the Internet, and tutors at the afterschool homework and study centre, in order to engage with academic content in specific contexts.

*Intentionality* is another core property of human agency posited by Bandura (2006) and, as shown by the findings, students formed intentions that included action plans and strategies to achieve success and meet their aspirations. Additionally, in the course of navigation and negotiation, the students engaged in reflexivity, a core feature of agency (Archer 2012), by self-monitoring and evaluating their learning in

a way that allowed for a myriad of different innovative responses. Although they reflected on their limits, however, the students did not give up on their efforts to pursue their aspirations.

Academic engagement is enhanced by the support of social relationships and connections. The findings show that the students were thoughtful in employing agency to make friends, join sports, participate in the school physical education programme and to connect with teachers in order to support their social and school integration. While having friends as social support was important to their personal wellbeing, participating in school sports team assisted in giving students (like Students 1, 4 and 6) a sense of belonging and being part of the life of the school. Effectively, this helped to move them from feeling invisible, as newcomers, to having an identity within the school. For example, Student 6's leadership skills and self-confidence arose from his youth work in the wider community and being a school leader. Additionally such afterschool and extracurricular activities provided meaningful opportunities for former refugee youth, potentially contributing to building their self-confidence as well as their interpersonal and leadership skills. These agentic actions went beyond just facilitating students' adjustment to the academic environment, as also found by Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018).

Negotiating cultural identity in the new social space was another area of agency, which helped the students navigate the new environment for achievement and acceptance. Continuing to express the Muslim faith through appropriate dressing while embracing a new sport, and showing confidence in befriending, supporting and ultimately allaying the fears of those who lacked knowledge of Islamic culture, also enabled female Afghan students to be understood and accepted. When, at times, it was difficult to be friendly, and the students received unwelcoming comments, they were undeterred and adopted a positive stance, such as by thinking positive and adopting a "forget about it" attitude as shown by Student 6. Bandura (2006) has suggested that cultural and identity navigation shows how bicultural efficacy can become part of agency. Students in this study revealed how they used their sense of bicultural agency to navigate the demands of their ethnic subculture alongside the culture of the larger and dominant community, in order to function effectively and position themselves positively in the new context. It was evident that being cognizant

of navigating across cultural spaces was equally as important as academic adjustment in order for these students to have a positive schooling experience.

### ***Overcoming structural constraints – Acculturation***

Apart from showing active engagement in shaping their learning and schooling experience, the findings also revealed how the students' sense of agency assisted with addressing and overcoming some key structural constraints, namely the English curriculum and instruction, teacher prejudices and practices and limited family resources. In addressing the challenge of English curriculum and new instructional styles, the students in this study displayed unyielding efforts to work hard and not give up when confronted with the language difference. Both agentic actions and strong personal motivation helped students (like Students 3, 5 and 6) in the structural context of the school. For example, Student 3 felt frustration when she knew the subject content in Farsi but was not able to express that knowledge in English. However, she still persevered.

A second structural constraint was that of teachers' practices and prejudices. The students shared how their agency had helped to mitigate this. In particular, it was evident that the teachers of Students 3, 5 and 6 had not encouraged them to draw across both of their languages in their conceptual development, nor had they provided the students with an opportunity to participate in learning activities in which the students could translate from their home language into English. Nonetheless, these students engaged independently in translanguaging practices, in order to support their subject-related conceptual development. According to Garcia (2009), bilinguals perform translanguaging to access different linguistic features or various languages, in order to maximize their communicative potential. While the agency shown by the students here was to be lauded, an important opportunity to ensure understanding of key terms was negotiated interactively was missed by the teachers.

As with language, connecting to students' prior experiences and building on their strengths is essential (Roxas, 2011). However, as highlighted by Students 3 and 6, when teachers had low expectations, the students actually doubled their efforts to

prove their competence and experience through their participation and achievement in national assessments such as the NCEA and GCSE. Nonetheless, Stokes-Dupass' (2014) study on citizenship and identity highlighted how low expectations of immigrant youth can place them in a perpetual state of self-clarification in the eyes of others and deprive them of opportunities to express their more complex selves. Student 3 alluded to this constraint when she related her wish for teachers to make an effort to get to know them better, including their experiences, prior knowledge and interests. It is known that biographical glimpses that teachers might glean about students' lives help teachers tailor their instruction, build empathy for the student and, when sustained over time, build stronger social capital among teachers and students, which may lead to a greater sense of identification and belonging among students (Amthor & Roxas, 2016). In the current study, it was mentioned by students that mainstream teachers did not always understand and some were unhelpful; unlike the ESOL specialist teachers they knew. In fact, student 5 related how a particular teacher ignored her on several occasions when she sought help. However, the student's sense of agency then drove her to seek alternative support from the ESOL specialist teachers and tutors at the homework and study centre.

Students in the current study also used their agency to reduce the pressure on limited family financial resources. They did this by holding part-time employment either on the weekends or during the school holiday breaks. These students not only achieved financial independence but also the ability to contribute and build the family financial capital. Where possible, they also used the free services offered, such as the additional tutoring and learning at the afterschool homework and study centre. Other studies have showed that refugee background students in senior high school years often have added responsibility in looking after their families, and therefore encountered schooling difficulties (Cassity & Gow, 2005). However, the students in my study showed focus and balance in a situation of possible competing demands. Many of them (4/6) also received encouragement and support for their achieving aspirations from their families.

By employing their sense of agency the students were better able to deal with the process of acculturation. According to Berry (2001), former refugees adapt to a new environment using several strategies. As opposed to assimilation, integration is seen

as a more successful process of adjustment as it implies accommodating the individuals' home cultures within that of the receiving society. The integration process for former refugees emphasizes language acquisition and cultural awareness, as well as developing social capital (Ager & Strang, 2008; Berry, 2001). The agency shown by the students in this study, along with their motivation to integrate, successfully enhanced their acculturation process. In so doing, they were able to author their own identities in more empowering ways. The section below discusses this process further.

### ***Authoring empowering identity – Assets***

The findings revealed how students' agency, personal beliefs and motivation supported and sustained their sense of autonomy and self-determination, particularly with regard to their goal setting and decision-making in education. Most of the students were able to identify the educational goals and the pathways they wanted to pursue. For example, Student 5 exercised control of her future by informing her parents of the goal she wanted to achieve at university. With that understanding, her parents had not pressured her to go into an early marriage. Thus, Student 5's autonomy shaped and maintained her motivation to succeed. This insight is supported by Ryan and Deci's (2000) finding that recognition of autonomy creates motivation, through which individuals integrate perceptions of the inherent value of a specific activity or behaviour into their sense of self. They also suggest that when people are autonomously motivated, they gain self-support and self-advocacy through their actions. At the time of this research, Student 5 was planning to start a foundation course at university. Likewise, Student 6 saw the critical link between functionality in life and in education, which then informed his actions to work towards getting into university and pursuing the long-term goal of attaining a PhD.

Despite the positive examples above, an additional challenge can occur for students who have migrated to New Zealand as adolescents, which in this study were all students except for Student 6. This is because unlike younger immigrants, they are asked to function in environments where previously acquired cultural scripts might no longer offer a sense of predictability which may cause adaptation difficult (Eccles & Roeser, 2003). However, the findings from the current study show that students'

agency in drawing on their cultural scripts provided them with stability in their adaptation process, and flexibility in the wider sense of self they were building, ultimately resulting in a positive experience. For example, Student 3 motivated herself by drawing on her previous accomplishment in learning a traditional dance to sustain her when she felt that learning English was an uphill battle. Student 6 was also able to draw on within his family when his father purposefully supported his acquisition of English language at home. Collectively, all of the students experienced added value due to the resources and support from their families. They then invested in themselves by making individualized choices and developing their aspirations through both opportunities and constraints, hence further enhancing their capital assets.

### **5.3. What supports the development of agency for refugee background students in New Zealand schools?**

As part of understanding refugee background students' experience of schooling and education through the lens of agency, research question two in this study sought to identify the factors that provided impetus for the development of the students' agency and that further enhanced their existing agency. The main drivers were: educational opportunities, personal beliefs and resources, context of reception, and educational history and identity. These factors are discussed below.

#### ***Educational opportunities***

The opportunities provided through education and schooling in New Zealand developed and supported both the participating students' sense of agency and their agentic behaviours.

Several research studies have shown that educational opportunities can develop and shape former refugee students' agency with regards to the quest to reimagine their futures in new spaces (Gateley, 2015; Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Many former refugees, especially younger generations, place a high value on education that is tied strongly to their future orientation and their hope for a better future (Gladden 2012).

Therefore, opportunities in the new context, particularly in education, provide an important site to further enhance the existing agency of former refugee students.

Ungar (2008) also suggests that a sense of agency is enhanced by the provision of education in ways that are meaningful and that enable former refugee students to achieve their potential.

### ***Personal beliefs and socio-cultural capitals***

Educational opportunities remain as just another opportunity if they are not taken advantage of. However, it requires agency to take advantage of such opportunities. In the findings of this study, the students' personal beliefs and socio-cultural capital provided another impetus for agency. Most of the students had strong beliefs about their ability to take control of their lives, make decisions, set goals and take actions to achieve them. As a result, they organized their work, monitored and evaluated their progress and behavior, and demonstrated an awareness of their own agentic thinking. Moreover, the consequences they imposed on themselves for their successes and failures constituted aspects of self-regulation in their personal agency. As confirmed by Mercer (2012), such self-regulatory processes can play a central role in students' decisions to allocate agentic resources such as their time, effort, and strategies and in finding support to pursue a chosen activity or goal.

The support and resources from their family, culture and community links also developed the students' sense of agency. As noted in Varghese (2012), agency can be seen not only in students' actions, but also their discursive choices when they talked about themselves, their families and their communities. This sense of agency can be seen in how Student 5 drew parallels between the effort and persistence in her community work in teaching Farsi to Afghani children who grew up in New Zealand and her learning of English as an additional language. Whilst Student 4 was reminded of the joy that Nawruz celebrations in Afghanistan brought her, it was equally tinged with an important reminder that she did not go to school there; but the memory drove her efforts and motivation to study hard, especially at learning English.

A further poignant insight was how Student 5's family was a source of strength and motivation for her agency to defer marriage and continue her studies to pursue a potentially successful career. Her experience was very different to the resettlement

experiences of Afghan female adolescents in Australia (Iqbal, Joyce, Russo & Earnest, 2011). In that study, it was found that many girls within their community were not allowed to have an education. According to the cultural practices of their country, they were not allowed to go to school and places in the community, but instead had to stay at home to learn household skills in preparation for marriage and child rearing. On the contrary, however, all four female students in my study were supported by their families to pursue their educational and career goals.

### ***Context of reception***

Agency can emerge in response to both opportunities and constraints and in the presence or absence of support, and McCleary (2013) suggests that such situations often set the stage for youth to be agentic. Indeed, educational opportunities provided impetus for agency amongst the students in this study. Despite perceptions about an unwelcoming reception and some prejudiced classroom practices, the students developed agency to help navigate the differences and constraints they encountered. For example, Student 5 rationalized the lack of understanding about Muslims and Islam and agentively referred the person concerned to a website that could help with more knowledge and intercultural understanding. In another instance, when a teacher ignored her, she sought help and support from other more approachable teachers and tutors.

Portes and Rumbaut, (2006) posited that the *context of reception* could be represented in the form of a three-faceted model, with policy, economic and social elements having a neutral, positive or negative impact on an immigrant population and its long-term prospects. Looking beyond the immigrant groups' characteristics, this model highlighted the difference made by positive opportunities for education and work, as well as participating in the wider society. In contrast, groups encountering a negative context of reception were said to have fewer possibilities, even when their own motivational levels and desire to transition well into the new society might be high (Amthor & Roxas, 2016). This brings our attention to how school policies, pedagogical practices, as well as their cultural and community dynamics, form contexts of reception that have varied consequences for newcomer

youth. This will be discussed in more detail as part of implications of study in the final chapter.

### ***Educational history and identity***

All aspects of the participating students' educational history (which for many was limited, informal, non-English, preliterate, or single-sex) influenced the development of their agency. In particular, they were found to advocate for themselves in learning English, in developing subject-related conceptual knowledge and generally in formal learning in New Zealand context, through adopting agentic ways to accelerate learning and achievements. This finding is similar to a study by Sleijpen et al. (2016) that showed, whether students came from a refugee experience or belonged to a social minority and a low socioeconomic group, these students had to struggle to succeed. As a result, they were challenged to work harder, to study more and to do better than their peers. Subsequently, in the absence of a relevant teaching approach, most of the students in this study developed and galvanized agency to prove their competence, and in so doing, strengthened and redefined their identity.

### **5.4 Reflecting on agency through the lens of an ecological model**

While agency is central to this study, it sits within a wider ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977,1979). As mentioned in Chapter 2, an ecological model provides a useful framework from which to examine the dynamic interplay between personal agency and social structure, with the individual influencing, as well as being influenced by multiple factors. Bronfenbrenner defined the 'ecology of human development' as:

*The progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21)*

Accordingly, in an ecological framework, the developing individual is positioned at the centre of multiple layers and structures in the different systems within his/her immediate settings. Figure 2 below shows the intersections and interplay between students' agency and the structures surrounding them within their ecological

framework. The findings of the current study show the student is an active person within the immediate microsystem of school, peers, family, and engages in interactions between the mesosystem and the different parts of the microsystem. In this system, school, peers, family and the students are interconnected and assert influence upon on one another. Although the students may not have had direct participation in the decision-making processes in the exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, they were affected through the interactions across these three systems, as they engaged in schooling and education in New Zealand schools. This can be seen in how the refugee background students' experiences of education and schooling were affected by the interplay between power dynamics within the schools' social, cultural and institutional structures and the students' sense of their own agency or power within these systems.

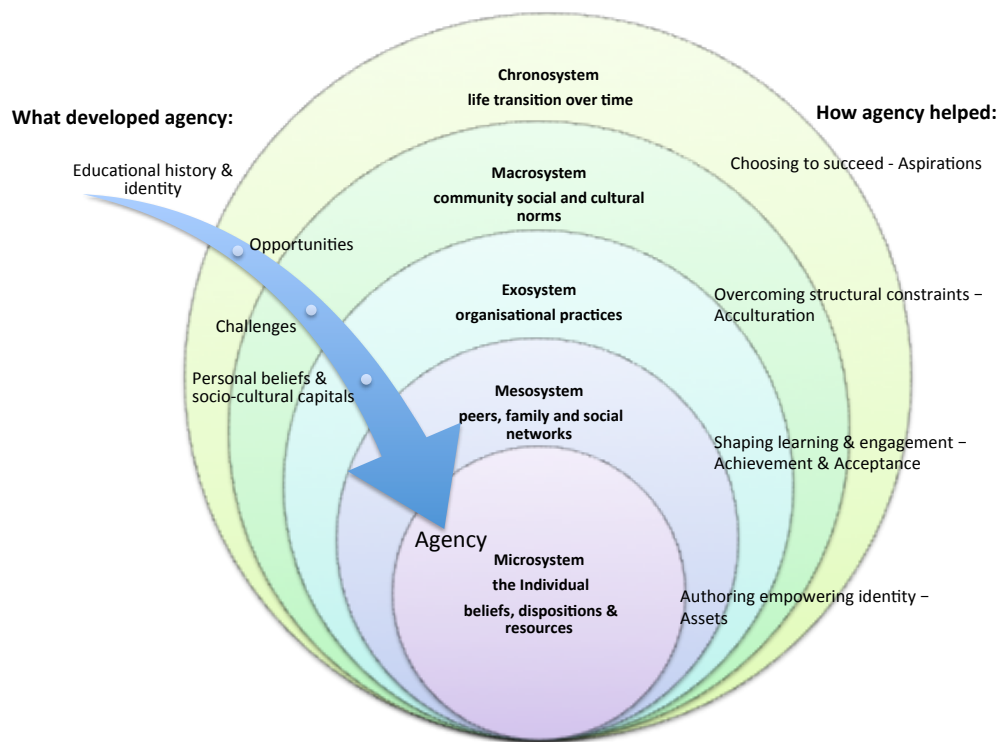


Figure 2: Ecological framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979.

As shown in Figure 2, the students' sense of agency and agentic behaviours emerged and developed in response to both opportunities and challenges found in the structures, and as a result of a process of reflection, compromise and negotiation with

their surrounding environment. The students were not victims of circumstances, but instead they were strategic actors who reflected on their aspirations and opportunities as well as their challenges and constraints. Hence, the students' agency was the power that enabled them to negotiate the systems.

Findings from my study showed how the students' agency was operationalized in decision-making, undertook navigation and negotiation, involved cognitive processes of reflection and analysis and how an asset-based identity was developed. This insight adds to the existing literature by recognizing the former refugee students' agency in learning, participating and engaging at school, as well as in defining who they are as learners. As shown in Figure 2, the interplay across the various systems within the ecological framework had a mainly positive but also a cumulative effect on school engagement and educational achievement for refugee background students in this study.

Comparable to the complexity theory of learner's agency (Mercer 2012), reflecting on agency through the lens of an ecological model reveals how the students' sense of agency emerged from complex dynamic interactions with a range of components in multiple levels of context – contextually, interpersonally, temporally and intrapersonally.

## **5.5 Summary**

The findings of this study show students' agency took two forms: firstly in their sense of agency, and secondly in their agentic behaviours as they experienced schooling and education in New Zealand. The first sense of agency relates to the students' sense of feeling in control and the belief in their ability to influence individual learning and goals. Secondly, their agentic behaviours took an active role in guiding and directing the students' participation, achievement and growing sense of belonging in schools.

In answering research question one of this study, the discussion in this chapter identified how a sense of agency helped refugee background students in this study to engage with schooling and to build a positive experience in education at New

Zealand schools. It was evident that their sense of agency and agentic behaviours had an important role to play in making the choice to pursue their aspirations, in implementing actions to support learning and engagement, in overcoming structural constraints and challenges, and in authoring a more empowering identity for themselves. Ultimately, their agency both personified and shaped their learning and schooling experience, suggesting that it was a defining characteristic and an asset, and created a valuable tool to further the acquisition of new forms of capital.

In addressing research question two, this chapter discussed factors supporting the development of these students' sense of agency and agentic behaviours. Findings to this question indicated that educational opportunities, personal beliefs, socio-cultural capital, challenges in the context of reception, and educational history and identity were all influential in the ways that the students in this study cultivated, constructed and enacted their sense of agency. Understanding the factors that provided impetus for a sense of agency offers an opportunity to critically reflect on practices in order to transform challenges and to utilise agency to the best advantage for students. In reflecting agency within the ecological model, it demonstrates how the participating students' sense of agency can only be fully understood by taking a holistic perspective.

## **CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this research, a phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences of refugee background students in learning upon resettling in New Zealand. The study centred on insights gained into the sense of agency of six refugee background Afghan students as they experienced education in New Zealand high schools. In particular, through attending to the students' voices, as captured in the interviews, the research had two key aims: firstly, to understand the meaning and role agency played in participants' schooling experience; and secondly, to identify factors that facilitated the development of their sense of agency and agentic capabilities as they engaged with schools.

This chapter will begin with a brief summary of key findings on each of the two research questions, followed by reflections on theoretical implications. Next, there will be a review on the strengths and limitations of the research design/methodology used. Then, an exploration into implications of this study for future research will be presented. Following that, I will identify implications for practice and policy, in regards to supporting the education of former refugee students. Finally, I will present my reflections on this thesis journey.

### **6.2 Key findings**

This study arose from the need to balance the focus of literature around refugee background students' education post-resettlement experiences. Past literature has predominantly centred on the negative impacts of previous educational gaps on learning in the new context, as well as on the effects of prior trauma on schooling and educational engagement. In contrast, this study takes a capability and asset-based view of refugee background learners. This goal was achieved by adopting a sense of agency lens in investigating how these students engaged and succeeded in schools. Key findings from this study highlight the multiple areas in which participants illustrated their capacities for agency as they navigated their learning and responded to the new educational demands and systems. The students' agency assisted them in navigating the ways in which they believed, decided and acted in order to learn,

integrate and work towards successful educational outcomes. As discussed in the previous chapter, a sense of agency was a defining characteristic and an asset, and created a valuable tool to further the acquisition of the students' future capitals. As the study is for and about refugee background students, it takes an empowering perspective to reflect on both their skill-sets and their identity.

Another key finding that emerged from this study was the understanding of how educational opportunities; personal beliefs; socio-cultural capital; challenges in the context of reception; and educational history and identity; encouraged the development of students' agency. These findings highlighted ways in which the students' sense of agency influenced, interacted with and was shaped by their surrounding environment/structures, particularly in the school and wider educational context.

### **6.3 Implications for theory**

This study foregrounds how the concept of agency is activated within the ecological systems of a group of refugee background students as they engaged and experienced schools in New Zealand. It identifies the students as active individuals who, within the microsystems of face-to-face settings and the relationships within their mesosystems, shaped the environment, evoked responses and reacted to the influences on them. The students continued to be active and agentic within their interactions with the wider systems, although they had minimal participation in the decision-making processes that shaped their environments, such as on their resettlement journey from forced migration, the context of reception from schools and community, and acculturation factors that included learning English and accessing the New Zealand curriculum.

The ecological model (see Figure 2) I have created, adapting ideas from Bronfenbrenner's work, gives a useful understanding of how the participating students' experiences of education were affected by the interplay between the power dynamics within schools' social, cultural and institutional structures and the students' sense of their own agency or power within these systems. These interactions mainly had a positive and cumulative effect on the students' school

engagement and educational achievements. The final theoretical model adds to the field of knowledge on refugee education and suggests future interventions that recognize agency as an enabling asset/capital that former refugee students may bring to learning, participating and engaging at schools, as well as in defining who they are as learners. If we are to consider a successful educational outcome for our refugee background students, I believe it is imperative to adopt theoretical approaches to refugee education with a ‘developmental’ space that allows for an evolving, growing and progressive view of individual students from refugee backgrounds. Such an approach should support developing their sense of identity within a more responsive and equitable educational climate. One suggestion is for teachers to draw on students’ home languages as part of their teaching practice, like giving them the opportunities to translate from home language into English in their work or encouraging students to translate key concepts from English into their home language (Mendenhall & Bartlett, 2018).

#### **6.4 Strengths of study methodology/research design approach**

The qualitative phenomenological research approach in this study allowed for a data gathering process that utilized in-depth, up-close and personal, individual interviews with the participants. Through a focus on their sense of agency, the insights gathered helped the researcher to recognise individual students’ efforts to find voice and meaning, and to apply themselves in the new educational demands and expectations. Ultimately, their agency aimed to improve their situations for the future. Comparing and contrasting the data from six different stories, allowed for analysis of commonalities, differences and the role of individual contexts to be explored.

In line with phenomenological approaches, another strength of the research design was gaining understanding of agency and its role and meaning in education contexts, through the voices of refugee background students themselves. The students’ voices offered insights into how the participants viewed themselves, their communities and the social institutions in which they were situated (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Warriner, 2013). More importantly, they helped to illuminate the interplay between the individual student’s lived experience and the socio-cultural and political contexts in which that experience was situated. In this way, the research approach counter-

balanced insights from the existing literature on refugee educational research, which tended to render forms of agency invisible through the emphasis on deficit discourses. In researching refugee background students, an *asset discourse* (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017), that emphasizes the resources and strategies that they bring and employ toward achieving their goals both within and outside of educational settings, creates space for empowering narratives.

Capturing individual voices also reflects the significance of including refugee background students, like all students, as active citizens in their education. The inclusion of these insights is important to bring about transformative experiences. I was fortunate that the participating students in this study found the climate at interview sessions to be safe and comfortable, enabling them to open up and share their experiences without fear and judgement. Many (5/6) thanked me for the opportunity to participate in this study and, more importantly, they recorded their appreciation for allowing them to reflect on their schooling experiences, and to articulate their thoughts on the interactions they experienced at various levels of the ecosystem. They indicated that they had never received such an opportunity before.

### **6.5 Limitations of methodology/research design approach**

One limitation that must be acknowledged is that this study relied on a small number of participants' representation of their experiences, rather than seeking external triangulation of agentic accounts through observations and/or from teachers, friends, family members, or others interacting with the students. While Cohen et.al. (2011) states that "observation methods are powerful tools for gaining insights into situations" (p.474), choosing not to observe and to focus only on capturing the voices of participants did limit the extent to which the wider reality could be presented. It is possible that in some instances, the students may have reported ideals rather than actual experience or practice. However, on the other hand, the potential for evaluating students' schooling experience and performance through observations would have been likely to impede them from openly sharing their stories. In addition, including teachers' accounts would also be likely to include *assumed needs* based on a third party determination (Noddings, 2012), rather than the actual needs as understood by the students themselves.

Another caveat of this study is that, as is true with any study on a particular population group, the findings from this analysis may not be generalizable to other former refugee groups. Conflating one former refugee groups with another may prevent understanding of differences in ethnic identity and the lived individual experiences that contribute to different educational and resettlement outcomes. Such homogenization may become its own form of deficit discourse about education in refugee resettlement.

### **6.6. Implications for further research**

This study has foregrounded several capacities for agency by participating refugee background students as they engaged schools and experienced education in New Zealand schools. Future research involving a focus on one particular capacity of agency could help identify ways to strengthen its enactment, and to study its impact more fully. This might include possible longitudinal and/or ethnographic methods that could also involve observations across a wider sample. The results of such a study may also further deepen our understanding of the everyday navigation and negotiation decisions made by refugee background students in various contexts, and make these more visible.

As this study focused on capturing the students' stories of their New Zealand schooling experience, further research could be conducted in the future to gain insights into the voice and perspective of teachers on their experiences in the education of refugee background students, through the lens of agency. Adding data on teachers' and/or schools' perspectives would also help to bring awareness of educators' work with former refugee students and ways to support their agency that would be beneficial for effective teaching and learning. Such future research would also add some critical new insights to this study's findings, on how refugee background students are represented by teachers. That insight into teachers' interactions could also impact on understanding more about the interplay between students' sense of agency and their immediate microsystem and mesosystem structures.

This research has opened up discussion on what resistance to deficit-oriented discourse looks like in action, when former refugee students enter and engage within New Zealand schools. This discussion can help create a space for new stories by and about refugee background students that may highlight other capitals, such as the linguistic resources and literary practices that they brought with them, or even the positive strategies that they developed for resisting the systemic prejudices encountered. Through an asset-based study, those areas could be more deeply explored in the future.

### **6.7 Implications for practice**

A number of implications for practice can be identified with regard to teachers' role and the context of reception provided by schools. The findings showed that students' agency assisted them to navigate and negotiate rather successfully, although not completely. The students potentially had different educational trajectories and were also differentiated by aspects related to identity and belonging in the new context. These aspects also depended on whether their sense of agency was recognized, supported and/or further developed by teachers and the schools. As Keddie (2012) noted, refugee background students' capabilities might not be recognized by teachers, so their behaviours may be misunderstood, and the ability of these students to fit into their new environment might ultimately determine their ongoing engagement with school. Goals, tasks and accomplishments are boosted when students can identify their own strengths. Having found how their sense of agency had assisted refugee background learners in various aspects of learning and participating, their capacities for agency must be acknowledged within the school and the class, so that it can be built on. In addition, this study suggests a need for more effective pedagogical practices that allow students to recognize their own agency and resourcefulness, and enable them to reflect critically on their schooling and other life experiences.

As *agents of reception* (Dabach, 2011), teachers and schools also have to consider ways in which their practices, school policies and culture, exclude or encourage participation and engagement, and ultimately impact on the students' sense of agency. While the findings promote an asset-based orientation, they also make

visible the challenges faced by refugee background students in schools. As a result, it is recommended that better focus could be placed on supporting refugee background students to negotiate language, reception and ability in schools. For instance, when teachers scaffold, support, and guide students through their use of various learning strategies, such as digital technologies, refugee background students can be empowered to drive their own learning. Furthermore, teachers could more effectively capitalize on the language and literacy resources of these students.

Teachers and schools also should not place low expectations on former refugee students – a concern that is raised often in the literature on English language learners (Shapiro & Macdonald, 2017). Students in this study showed their critical awareness of this issue, and advocated for improvement in teachers' awareness of their backgrounds, strengths and interests, so that they could draw on and link them to teaching and learning practices in New Zealand. More inclusive teaching approaches also have an important impact on refugee background students' developing identity. Indeed, there is a strong connection between the notion of identity building and a 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) pedagogical approach, where the particular and unique things that a student brings to the teaching/learning setting are valued and recognized as significant contributions. That approach can open a pathway for all students to make stronger connections with others.

How schools position refugee background students within the mainstream school culture, including ideas of what they are allowed to be and do, may also impact on their identity and academic performance. Goals and aspirations could become stifled by practices and discourses that signal 'a lack of' knowledge, or intellectual inferiority (Thorstenson, 2013) attitudes, which represent a systemic deficit perspective. As this study has shown, schools should engage with the experiences of refugee background students to visualise the complexities of their experiences as they navigate schools and education. Students in my study were not passive and engaged in complementary ways of learning and participating, albeit quietly. Knowing those capacities could enable schools to be receptive and fruitful spaces for providing contexts for enhancing students' positive self-beliefs and agency.

## **6.8 Implications for policy**

The findings from this study highlight two key contexts in which refugee education policies and support could be more fully realized, if they are not currently. Firstly, additional support and resources for refugee background students, in addition to addressing any other learning needs, could also focus on helping the students to be aware of their assets and on extending those strengths and capacities. Support can be provided through mentoring programmes that connect students with specialist skills and key interests, and learner self-awareness workshops to better understand how they learn and what learning skills are best for them. Secondly, policies that promote multicultural education could give greater attention to the complexities of experience and identity. This policy needs to go beyond supporting intercultural dialogue and culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to promote academic success, cultural competence and socio-political consciousness. It should also involve supporting *cultural agency* (Amthor & Roxas, 2016). That calls for the development of critical consciousness in relation to issues such as injustice, both socially and ethnically, that confronts students like former refugees, and can enhance a positive view of their background/culture in educational settings.

## **6.9 Concluding reflection**

Through the focus of this study, I have been privileged to hear, from their own voices, the stories of how refugee background students agentively navigated and negotiated educational settings to shape their learning and engagement, and about their sense of possibility beyond school. In essence, these narratives depicted contexts of past, present and future while privileging individual voices within these contexts. These students shared with me personal insights and experiences that compelled me to reflect throughout my research on how best to make a fair representation of them in my writing and to make their voices count. To that regard, I drew on points of intersection between my study participants and my own experiences as a newcomer to the country and as a member of an ethnic minority in New Zealand, to understand its importance. Appropriately, I was committed to honour the voices of participants and to represent them in a way that seeks to discuss transformative ecosystems.

The students' sense of agency or the power within their microsystem that emerged from the current study, has created the potential for developmental space and growth in each individual. This opens up an area for prospecting where asset-based intervention and support could be provided for refugee background students. I now more firmly believe that an asset-based orientation offers a more inclusive vocabulary for talking to students about their educational goals, opportunities, and challenges and, equally importantly, for foregrounding student voices in my future educational decision-making.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Information sheet



MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

### ***Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand***

#### INFORMATION SHEET

##### **Researcher Introduction**

*My name is Mastura Abd Rahman. I am a Master's thesis student and I am planning to conduct my research as part of my Master of Education degree at Massey University. I have a teaching background and am currently working as a senior advisor for refugee and migrant education at the Ministry of Education.*

##### **Project Description and Invitation**

*My research focuses on Afghani high school students, who have come to New Zealand through the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement scheme. The study will look at factors that contribute to, help or hinder the students' sense of agency in achieving educational goals and success.*

*I would like to invite you to participate in this research.*

##### **Participant Identification and Recruitment**

*I am inviting 4 to 6 Afghani senior high students from refugee background to participate in the study. You were selected as one of the students to receive this invitation based on recommendations made by the teacher at the Homework and Study Centre you are attending.*

*The information that you provide will be kept secure and you will not be identified in any reports or presentations that arise from the research. If you wish, I will provide you with a summary of the findings when the research is finished.*

##### **Project Procedures**

*If you agree to participate in this study, you will be involved in two individual interviews.*

*In Interview 1, the researcher will ask questions about your schooling experience. An audio recorder will be used to record the interview. This interview will take a maximum of 60 minutes.*

*In interview 2, you are asked to share an item that gives meaning to your schooling experience with the researcher. With your permission, an image recorder will be used to capture the item with all identity markers removed. This interview will take a maximum of 30 minutes.*

*If, at any time during the study, you experience any discomfort or distress, you may ask to stop the interview. You will also be provided with information on the free multicultural counseling service provided by Christchurch Resettlement Services.*

*You will also be given an opportunity to review the transcript of your interview within a month after the interviews. This review will take a maximum of 30 minutes.*

### Data Management

The information from the interview will be transcribed and all identity of participants removed in the thematic analysis. The data will be kept in a secure personal computer with a password for 3 years before it will be disposed. The data will only be used for the purpose of this research.

Due to the relatively small educational context in New Zealand, it may be possible that someone could work out where the study was conducted, but every effort will be made to protect the identity of the school and individuals concerned.

### Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study at any time during the research data collection stage;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher; however, if at any time the researcher has reason to believe that your safety, or that of others, may be at risk she will need to inform an appropriate support service
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- ask for the voice recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

### Project Contacts

If you have any questions about this project, my contact details and those of my supervisors can be found below.

#### Researcher:

Mastura Abd Rahman

Mobile: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

#### Supervisors:

Dr Spencer Lilley

Te Putahi-a-Toi, School of Maori Art, Knowledge and Education

Phone: 06-356 9099 ext. 83281

Email: [S.C.Lilley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.C.Lilley@massey.ac.nz)

Associate Professor Penny Haworth

Institute of Education

Phone: 06-356 9099 ext.84446

Email: [P.A.Haworth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:P.A.Haworth@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 17/29. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix B: Consent – Individual



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TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

### *Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand*

#### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to the interview being sound recorded. **Yes/No**

I agree to the image I share being recorded. **Yes/No**

I wish to have my recordings returned to me. **Yes/No**

I wish to have a research summary to be sent to me. **Yes/No**

Please send the research summary to:

Physical address \_\_\_\_\_ or

Email \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name - printed** \_\_\_\_\_

You can contact me to arrange a time for the interviews at:

Cell phone: [REDACTED] OR Email: [REDACTED]

Te Kunenga  
ki Pūrehuroa

Institute of Education  
Cnr Albany Drive & Collinson Road, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand T 06 356 9099 www.massey.ac.nz

## Appendix C: Authority to release transcript



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### *Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand*

#### AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name - printed \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Interview Schedule

### Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand

#### Interview Schedule 1

Duration: Maximum 60 minutes per interview

Participants: 4-6 Afghani students

Equipment: digital audio recorder

Introduction: greetings and welcome; note of thanks and acknowledgement of participation; brief on research and the process of interview; and reiteration of participants' rights and consent. Brief introduction of this researcher and her migration journey to set participants at ease and encourage trust and active participation. Give opportunity for participants to ask questions about the study and their participation.

**1. Section 1: Demographic/Background**

Tell me a bit about yourself – something that you are happy for me to know for instance, where were you born; your family; and when did you come to New Zealand; what do you do in your free time?

**2. Section 2: General previous school experience**

Can you share with me what school was like in your country or before you came to New Zealand? What did or did you not enjoy about school? What is/are your favourite (least preferred) subjects? What are the similarities and differences with schools in New Zealand?

**3. Section 3: Socialization**

When did you start school in New Zealand? Can you share with me how the experience of starting school in New Zealand was for you?

4. How do you make friends at school? How easy it is to make friends? Tell me about your experiences. Can you share with me times when you enjoyed a good company with friends? Are you able to talk to your friends? Are you able to talk to your teachers? What about talking to others in the homework centre? Who do you work with for school projects? At the homework centre, do you only work with Afghani students or with other students?

5. Tell me about any school activities that you are involved in.

**6. Section 4: Learning success and challenges**

Can you give me an example of what you have been working on learning recently? How did you go about/work on this? What strategies or resources, if any, did you use? Do you think these strategies were effective? Why? Why not?

7. Tell me about any particular successes you have experienced or are experiencing at school?

8. Can you share with me any particular challenges you have experienced or are experiencing at school? What do you do when you face difficulties in your studies or challenges at school?

**9. Section 5: Future aspirations**

What do you want to achieve or work towards with your education? What is important to you? Why? How do you want to achieve that goal?

**10. Section 6: Re-imagining thoughts**

If you were to give advice to new refugee background students who like you are going to be studying in New Zealand schools, what advice would you give?

11. If you were a teacher or a school staff member, what would you do for refugee background students to have the best school experience and successful educational outcomes?

**12. Prelude to Interview 2: Self-reflections**

I would like to share this photo with you. It means a lot to me especially for my learning journey. In the next meeting, I would like you to bring and share with me a thing (or two) you own, keep or given that meant something to you in your academic journey.

**Interview Schedule 2**

Duration: Maximum 30 minutes

Participants: Same 4-6 Afghani students who participated in Interview 1

Equipment: digital audio recorder and digital image recorder

Introduction: greetings and welcome; note of thanks and acknowledgement of participation; brief on research and the process of interview; and reiteration of participants' rights and consent; opportunity for participants to ask questions about the study and their participation and a brief recap of my sharing on the item of reflection.

**Question:**

You have brought an item(s) that is important to you because it means something to you in your learning journey. What is it? Talk me through it.

## Appendix E: Ethical approval



Date: 03 October 2017

Dear Mastura Abd Rahman

Re: Ethics Notification - **SOB 17/29 - Education and Schooling in New Zealand: Narratives of Agency among refugee background students from Afghanistan in senior high schools**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Southern B Committee at their meeting held on Tuesday, 3 October.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "B Finch".

Dr Brian Finch  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

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## Appendix F: Consent – Institutional



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

### *Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand*

#### ORGANISATION CONSENT FORM

We have read the Information Sheet. The details of the study have been explained to us, and our questions have been answered satisfactorily.

We agree to allow access to the school for Mastura Abd Rahman to conduct interviews with four to six Afghani students who attend the Homework and Study Centre.

**YES/NO**

We agree to assist by recommending potential students who can be invited to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**YES/NO**

Signature of Principal: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full name – printed: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Board of Trustees Chair: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Full-name- printed: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G: Confidentiality form



MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
TE KURA O TE MĀTAURANGA

### *Afghani refugee background students' experience of schooling in New Zealand*

#### **BILINGUAL SUPPORT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

I agree to provide bilingual support to the participant and to interpret the interview(s).

I agree to keep confidential and private all the information heard and provided to me.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name - printed** \_\_\_\_\_