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# Mothers' Voices in Early Childhood Education: A Dual Case Study of Resettled Refugee Mothers' Perspectives

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# MOTHERS' VOICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

# A DUAL CASE STUDY OF RESETTLED REFUGEE MOTHERS'

# PERSPECTIVES

by

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A Dissertation Proposal Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 6, 2019

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# ABSTRACT

MOTHERS' VOICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF RESETTLED REFUGEE MOTHERS' PERSPECTIVES

Rebecca John
Old Dominion University, 2019
Chair: Dr. Angela Eckhoff

The U.S. admits approximately 70,000 refugees each year. Many of these are families with young children. Refugee populations differ from broader immigrant populations in their background and experiences, yet they are rarely disaggregated from other immigrant populations within educational studies. Many refugee families meet the eligibility guidelines for early childhood educational programs, such as Head Start or public PreK programs; however, they often have difficulty navigating the enrollment process (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016; Hooper, Zong, Capps, & Fix, 2016). To date, little is known about the specific experiences of resettled refugee mothers and their perspectives of navigating the early childhood education context within the U.S. This descriptive dual case study utilized qualitative data collection methods such as individual interviews, policy and document analysis to develop an in-depth understanding of the refugee mothers' experience of navigating the early childhood education context in the U.S. Results indicate that mothers experience many challenges in both accessing and participating in the public PreK education program in their school district and that they utilize a combination of social and cultural capital to navigate and overcome those challenges. Each mother in the study approached the challenges differently and utilized their unique network of social connections. Implications from the study suggest the need for more targeted resources and support for families in finding, accessing, and participating in early childhood programs.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and their unending support for me over the last five years. To my husband, Gibu Michael, my partner and pastor, who has supported me and encouraged me when I had nothing left. To my children, Nathan and Asher, who have been patient and understanding during this season. They are my inspiration and my constant source of joy!

To the glory of God, my source of all strength and wisdom. The One who has called me for a purpose into this world.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks those who helped me in this journey from student to scholar. I must first thank my committee members, Dr. Angela Eckhoff, Dr. Kristine Sunday, Dr. Helen Crompton, and Dr. Sue Kimmel, for all of their time and rigorous feedback in this process. I particularly want to thank my chair and advisor, Dr. Angela Eckhoff for the countless hours she put in mentoring me through the whole program, reading early drafts of my proposal and dissertation, and giving feedback to help me reach this point. Her positive support and encouragement got me through some difficult and overwhelming times. I also want to thank Kristine Sunday for all of her support in my understanding of the landscape of early childhood research and my growth as a rigorous researcher.

I also want to thank my co-raters and those who helped in the analysis and writing process, Brittany, Jennifer, Bree, Kristen, and Stephanie. I especially want to thank Bree for pushing me to finish and checking in with me regularly.

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**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

As many as one in every four children under the age of eight in the United States (U.S.) have an immigrant parent (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010). Close to one million of these children are children of refugees (Hooper, Zong, Capps, & Fix, 2016). Despite the recent drastic decreases in refugee admissions in the last two years, the U.S. remains the largest formal refugee resettlement country in the world, receiving 38% of the worldwide refugees departing in 2017 for permanent resettlement under the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees [UNHCR] Resettlement programs. However, as of November, 2018, the U.S. percentage of the worldwide share had dropped to 30.8%, only receiving 15,784 individuals referred under the UNHCR Resettlement program (UNHCR, 2019a). In the calendar year 2018, the U.S. received a total of 22,874 refugees from all referring sources, a significant decrease from the longstanding 75,000 average annual admissions (United States Department of State, 2019). due to changes in policy and priorities in funding within the State Department for refugees and asylum processes. Children and families from refugee backgrounds are a protected subgroup of immigrants that have specific rights and protections afforded to them by the international community because of their inability to return to their home country (Cherem, 2016; Feller, 2005). Because resettlement in the U.S. is a permanent solution to the displacement that refugees face, the country takes on the responsibility of ensuring that protection, including equal educational access as natural-born citizens (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Within educational research, refugee populations are often subsumed into studies with broader immigrant populations, however, the context of their migration and resettlement in the U.S. are unique. While it has been found that refugee groups have distinct advantages in the form

of resettlement services and access to "safety nets" and community resources compared to other immigrants (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016), their involvement in early childhood education is still lower than their native-born peers (Van Tuijl & Leseman, 2013; Morland, Ives, McNeely, & Allen, 2016). Families with refugee backgrounds can have difficulty accessing and participating in early childhood programs upon resettlement in the U.S. (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016; Hooper, Zong, Capps, & Fix, 2016). Family participation is a critical component of high quality early childhood education programs and the National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends to involve families from immigrant backgrounds as an important part of developmentally appropriate practice for early childhood programs (NAEYC, 2009). While school-aged refugee children and families receive some services through the help of a school liaison and coordinated volunteer tutors to aid in their educational success, there is no requirement within the resettlement agencies' agreements with the federal or state governments to meet the educational needs of young children under five, or before the start of kindergarten (John, Tilhou, & Eckhoff, 2017).

## Problem Statement

According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement website, refugee resettlement services are intended to provide supports for families to become "integrated members of American society" (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d., para. 1); however, policy and practices are heavily focused on "early self-sufficiency" and helping adults overcome barriers to early employment (Xu, 2007). Because of this focus, there are limited policies directly affecting young children of refugees and connecting them to early childhood education services, except as it serves to remove the barrier of childcare for employable adults in the household. As a result, resettlement agencies utilize community resources and connections to varying degrees, thus there

is inconsistency across the country in what services families are connected to. With the expansion of public PreKindergarten (PreK) programs in many states, utilization of this resource has become common in some places, however, very little is known about the experiences of refugee families in obtaining and participating in these particular early childhood education programs. Therefore, it is important to understand how refugee families experience these programs to better meet their needs and inform policies affecting them.

## Rationale and Purpose of the Study

While there is a rich background of literature on immigrant populations within the U.S., the body of research focusing on the specific experiences of refugee populations is limited. The extant body of literature focuses heavily on older students and adolescents or on earlier waves of refugee populations such as the Karen refugees from Burma (Isik-Ercan, 2012; Quadros & Sarroub, 2016) or refugee populations from Africa (Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2012). Many of these studies focus on refugees from a few particular regions; however, the resettled refugee population in the U.S. is an extremely diverse group, representing over 80 countries making it necessary to study specific contexts (Birman & Moreland, 2016). Considering this, there is a significant lack of research involving Afghani, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees in the U.S., even though these groups make up a over 80% of the refugee arrivals in the last three years resettled in the target state of Virginia (Virginia Office of Newcomer Services, 2019).

Parental involvement in early childhood is key to educational success, however, most research and policy assumes a framework and definition of parental involvement that is rooted in white middle-class ideals (Whitmarsh, 2011). Additionally, studies indicate that parental involvement looks different for diverse communities, and a strong connection between the preschool program and the parents is a strong indicator of parental involvement (Hilado,

Kallemeyn, Leow, Lundy, & Israel, 2011). To understand how better to engage refugee parents in their young child's education, we first need to understand their experiences within the U.S. education system and the forms of cultural and social capital they utilize in navigating early childhood education for their children. This research serves to fill these gaps and look at the issues from a critical perspective, willing to encounter contradictions and examine systemic barriers. In a context where public PreK programs are expanding, it is important to critically examine the specific experiences of refugee families with young children participating in these programs to uncover contradictions within the institutional structures and practices. I used this study to center the experience of the refugee families engaged in these programs. As such, I utilized a critical lens throughout the planning, data collection and analysis processes to look for internal incongruity and conduct a critique, which involves "focusing on the contradiction between the prevailing 'official story' (or ideology) and the way things really are" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 148).

## Research Questions

This study fills a gap in the research by centering the voice of two refugee mothers of young children participating in early childhood education in the U.S. To gain an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of refugee mothers within the context of public early childhood education, the following research questions guided the design, data collection, and analysis of the study.

1. How do refugee mothers describe their experiences with accessing and enrolling their preschool aged children in early childhood programs?

2. What cultural and social capital do mothers identify as valuable in their relationship with the school?

3.  What actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

    a.  What school-based actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

    b.  What parental actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

## Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive multiple case study methodology (Merriam, 1998). Descriptive case studies seek to utilize a bounded case to describe a phenomenon within its context and are particularly important where the boundaries between the case and the context are more fluid (Yin, 2003). This case study looked at the particular context of a small mid-Atlantic city where one resettlement agency offered case management for all resettled refugees. Additionally, the target city provided a particularly interesting setting because of the availability of public PreK services and the response of the local public school system to the influx of resettled refugees in the community by having ESL services for preschool classes in addition to K-12 classes. The context was explored through the experiences of two embedded cases of mothers describing their experiences obtaining and participating in early childhood education for their children. A semi-structured interview with the agency school liaison helped to build context and provide agency perspective of the phenomenon. In multiple case study methodology, several bounded cases are used and first analyzed independently, followed by a cross-case analysis for trends in the phenomenon (Chmiliar, 2010).

For this study, each case was the mother and her experience within the broader context of the resettlement services and early childhood education context. I intentionally chose to focus on

mothers in the present study because in most situations the fathers were working while the mothers were more responsible for the young children (Poureslami, Nimmon, Ng, Cho, Foster, & Hertzman, 2013). Additionally, in many of the cultural traditions that resettled refugees come from, it is most appropriate to have personal interactions, such as interviews conducted by someone of the same gender (Bloch, 1999).

Purposive and snowball sampling were used through utilizing personal connections within the refugee resettlement agency. I spent over 100 hours volunteering within the community building relationships with agency workers as well as the refugee community (Hynes, 2003). Data collection methods included multiple semi-structured individual interviews as well as policy and document analysis. Each case allowed for flexible and iterative data collection, including two semi-structured interviews, as well as an interview with the resettlement agency school liaison within the greater context. Data collection and analysis were completed concurrently, and analysis influenced data collection as themes emerged to elicit further investigation. Each case was analyzed internally as a separate case, and then cross-case analysis was performed to identify trends and differences between the cases.

Translators were made available to participants through contacts with the resettlement agency; however, both mothers refused translators and preferred to conduct the interviews in English in their homes. Mothers were made aware of their freedom to participate or decline participation at any point in the research process. Additionally, at subsequent visits, member checking of transcripts were conducted to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness.

## Delimitations

This study is an in-depth look at two key cases within one particular context at one specific point in time. Generalization of the experiences of these cases to similar populations is

not the aim or purpose of this study, rather an exploration of the experiences of these particular women within this particular context. Families were resettled in the target city in Virginia, U.S., within the past three years under the Refugee Resettlement Program.

Because of the politicization of refugee admissions at the time of the study, the historical context is extremely important to these cases as the constantly changing policies affect the lived experiences of these specific participants. This context contributed to the small sample of only two cases, as other mothers were willing to participate and then changed their mind, indicating that they didn't want to be involved if they had to sign a consent document or be recorded. Additionally, while this study may uncover aspects of refugee mothers' experiences more broadly, this study is focused on mothers' experiences as they relate to their young children's care and education both within the institutional environment and the home.

**Conclusion**

Women and children from refugee backgrounds have a unique immigration experience. Additionally, much of the educational research involving this population has viewed their participation from a deficit perspective and there is a need for more critical research that seeks to give a voice to the refugee's experience. This research study seeks to fill that gap and add to the small but growing body of critical literature on resettled refugee mothers' experiences with early childhood education in the U.S. and the ways mothers use forms of cultural capital to negotiate services and resist or reinforce practices within the education system. The findings of this study are important for policy makers, refugee resettlement agency employees, and early childhood education service providers to understand the experiences of refugee mothers of young children.

The next chapter highlights the key literature guiding the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided the study, along with analyzing the existing literature on refugee

children in early childhood education and mothers' experiences. Chapter three describes the

methodology, research protocols, and data collection and analysis techniques that were used for

the study. Chapter four describes the context, each of the cases, and the results of data analysis.

This is followed by a discussion of the implications and limitations in chapter five.

**CHAPTER II**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Introduction**

The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the global agency

responsible for ensuring the protection of stateless and displaced populations, states that more

than half of the world's 25.4 million refugees are children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2018).

A primary concern for refugee children is education, as only about 61% of refugee children

worldwide were enrolled in primary education in 2016 (UNHCR, 2016). The UNHCR

recommends those refugees who are considered most vulnerable and are not likely to be able to

return to their country of origin for permanent resettlement. This affords them the opportunity to

start over in a new country, with initial protections in place, as full and rightful residents with a

viable path to citizenship (UNHCR, 2019b). Refugee children whose families have been resettled

in the United States (U.S.) are eligible for the same education programs that are available to U.S.

citizens; however, navigating the early childhood education context can be difficult for these

families since they are experiencing multiple barriers.

This chapter first examines the various definitions for "refugee." Defining who is

considered a refugee has been problematic both within the empirical literature and the political

and policy discourses. Within the literature, the wide variety of definitions used becomes

confusing when viewed within the conceptual framework of permanent refugee resettlement in

the U.S. Additionally, the definition is at odds with the goal and aim of the resettlement program

in the first place. Next, the frameworks influencing the dominant discourses of refugee

resettlement and early childhood education within the U.S. are discussed as it relates to family

involvement. Finally, the current literature base on refugee families' participation in early

childhood education within the U.S. is discussed, examining methodological and conceptual gaps within the literature as it relates to the current study.

## Defining Refugees

Within a study focused on the population of refugees in the U.S., it was essential to explore this term both from a political and sociological standpoint. A discussion of the global definition of the term refugee is followed by alternative ways of defining the resettled refugee population in the U.S. specifically. Additionally, a case must be made for studying the specific context of resettled refugees as a special subset within the greater immigrant population. Feller (2005) cautions against the dangers of conflating definitions and blurring the lines between refugees and other migrants, as the former is fundamentally entitled to protections from the international community. The UNHCR echoes this caution saying, "refugees are a specifically defined and protected group in international law…Calling them by another name can put their lives and safety in jeopardy" (UNHCR, 2019c, para 9). The refugee resettlement process within the U.S., and Virginia in particular, served as a framework for looking at the experiences of resettled refugee families in the state and their access to services. Additionally, a critique of the discourses about refugees was essential for a study of refugee experiences, as it influences how they are framed in policies and practice. Specifically, I looked at how the discourses of vulnerability and protection stand in opposition to the goals of integration and self-sufficiency, as well as how the neoliberal agenda of economic self-sufficiency has made young children invisible in the policies.

Feller (2005), the former Director of the Department of International Protection of the UNHCR, specifically points out that the line between the definition of refugee and migrant while often blurred in practice, should not be ignored. The primary basis of an individual's

categorization as a "refugee" is that they lack protection from their own nation, giving them special rights and protections from the international community, such as the right to nonrefoulement, or being returned to a country that would endanger them, and the right to a durable solution. Migrants, on the other hand, are individuals who leave their country. However without a credible fear of persecution, they can return or be returned, particularly if the country they attempt to enter denies them entry. Feller points out that it is dangerous to conflate refugees and migrants within research and policies because it shifts the focus from protection of people to management and restriction.

**International Definition of Refugees**

In the wake of World War II, when global migration began to rapidly accelerate, the 1951 Refugee Convention defined refugees as individuals who have fled their country of origin with a well-founded fear for their life or well-being based on race, ethnicity, religion, or another group affiliation. In 1967, the UN established the Refugee Protocol, which identified refugees' individual rights and the procedures for protecting them, setting up the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2011). Both of these agreements are still used globally in identifying refugees and delivering services and ensuring protections to them (UNHCR, 2011). In spite of excluding certain groups that could be considered similarly vulnerable, the present definition provides a broad sociological definition that includes individuals and families with varied histories that cannot be reduced to a common experience.

Some groups use the term *displaced populations* to refer to those fleeing violence, war, persecution, and economic hardships. However, this term and others such as "forced migrants," include groups who would not come under the international protections of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Refugee Protocol such as environmental migrants and others (Black, 2001). The

current study deliberately chose to use the term refugee since it highlights the individual's right to protection rather than the vulnerability and need for humanitarian aid (Cherem, 2016). Additionally, this term is congruent with the United States policy and agencies that oversee their resettlement within the country. The current policy reforms in the country are aimed at keeping this definition narrow and excluding certain displaced populations from being included in services offered for asylum grantees and refugees.

Refugees first cross borders into neighboring countries, referred to as countries of first asylum, which are often developing nations with little infrastructure for supporting mass migrations. According to the UNHCR Figures at a Glance, Turkey, Uganda, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Iran, were the top five hosting countries for refugees in 2018; furthermore, 85% of the world's refugees are being hosted in the developing world (UNHCR, 2018). The primary protection that refugees receive from the country of first asylum is the protection from refoulment, which is returning to their home country under conditions that are a direct threat to them (Cherem, 2016). Because host countries vary in how they respond to refugees and asylum seekers, the experiences of refugees after crossing a border can vary greatly. Sometimes they are settled temporarily in refugee camps where humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR and other non-profit agencies provide food and temporary shelter. Individuals in these refugee camps are usually considered stateless and are not offered citizenship or sometimes even the freedom to leave the boundaries of the refugee camp. Karen refugees resettled in the U.S. from Burma often spent years in refugee camps in Thailand, unable to leave the grounds of the camp (Waters & LeBlanc, 2005). Each refugee's story is deeply contextualized not only in place but in time, making it impossible to universally describe their experiences pre-resettlement. This is because the context from which refugees flee differs substantially case by case. For example, the Karen

refugees from Burma are a Christian minority from the borderlands near Thailand. Many of them fled to Thailand and have spent close to ten years in refugee camps there, with disrupted education and limited occupational opportunities (Isik-Ercan, 2012). Somali Bantu peoples have been oppressed in Somalia for a century. They fled to nearby Kenya and spent nearly 12 years in refugee camps before being resettled to the U.S. (Roy & Roxas, 2011).

According to the UNHCR, only 10% of Syrian refugees worldwide live in organized refugee camp settings, the rest cross the borders into neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, and register with the UNHCR, which provides assistance and aids refugees in accessing local economic and humanitarian resources (Grandi, 2017). For the UNHCR, the most favorable outcome for refugees is repatriation, or returning to their home country once it is considered safe, whenever possible. While the number of repatriations almost doubled in 2017 from 2015, it still accounted for less than 7% of the global refugee population (UNHCR, 2019a). If it is determined that repatriation is not possible due to ongoing conflict and risk, they will recommend families for resettlement to another country through the UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Program. The U.S. has the largest formal resettlement program in the world, offering refuge to 78,761 of the 163,206 individuals recommended for permanent resettlement in 2016 according to the UNHCR's Resettlement Data Finder on their website. Canada received the next largest number of resettlement refugees at just under 20,000. In that year the UNHCR recommended 108,197 refugees for resettlement in the U.S. By 2018, these numbers were drastically reduced with the U.S. receiving 17,112 of the 81,337 recommended for resettlement. In all there were only 29,026 individuals submitted to the U.S. for resettlement in 2018, representing a 73% decrease, due to a significantly lower quota set by the U.S. government (UN, 2019).

Dryden-Peterson (2016) conducted a historical policy analysis of education of refugees from World War II to the present. She conceptualized the experiences of refugees in "neighboring host countries" such as countries of first asylum, as different from those of refugees in "distant resettlement countries" such as the U.S. for several reasons. First, the sheer number being integrated into the national education system is drastically fewer in distant resettlement countries such as the U.S. Second, as there is a viable path to citizenship, translating to an expectation of permanence that is in that situation as opposed to other protracted refugee situations that are seen as temporary.

**Defining the Resettled Refugee Population Within the U.S.**

Within the U.S., attempts to define the refugee population along socio-cultural terms has been problematic, as it ends up conflating the population with other immigrant groups. The U.S. has resettled more than 3 million individuals since the 1980's (Hooper, Zong, Capps, & Fix, 2016). Refugee families in the U.S. are a diverse group. According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), individuals from over 80 nations were resettled in the U.S. in 2016. As illustrated above, resettled refugees have diverse histories in their journey to resettlement in the U.S., making it difficult to define them by common experiences and characteristics. Further complicating the context, certain immigrants are granted asylum in the U.S. years after entering the country, and may have similar experiences, because individuals must meet the international definition of a refugee to be granted asylum status. Once asylum is granted, those families and individuals are granted the same rights and protections as resettled refugees, illustrating that the term "refugee" can be dynamic, shifting and changing to apply to different groups in different contexts.

While there are some differences between the experiences of refugee and immigrant children, none are universal. For example, in an analysis of a large dataset on youth utilizing mental health services, Betancourt, Newnham, Birman, Lee, Ellis, and Layne (2017) found that refugee-origin youth were more likely to suffer from exposure to community violence, along with other disorders than both immigrant-origin youth and U.S. origin youth. Similarly, Almqvist and Brandell-Forsberg (1997) studied Iranian refugee preschoolers in Sweden and found that 84% of the refugee children had witnessed extreme violence, making them susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and other psychological disorders. Additionally, they found that 23% of the children with exposure to extreme violence met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD up to 2.5 years later, indicating that the effects can be long lasting. However, 16% of the children had not witnessed any extreme violence or exhibited symptoms of PTSD.

In an attempt to differentiate between types of refugees, Kunz (1973) separates anticipatory refugee movements from acute refugee movements. An example of anticipatory refugee movement would be the early Vietnamese refugees that were typically higher educated, with the resources to fly to the U.S. as the country struggled in the wake of the war. These refugees helped to create and reinforce the "model minority" stereotype of East Asians as hardworking and high-achieving within the U.S. On the other hand, victims of the acute refugee movements are marked by less education and financial resources, as was characteristic of later refugees from Vietnam. McBrien (2005) points out that most of the recent refugees resettled in the U.S. in the last few decades have been acute refugees, with less specialized training or education. The context of pre-settlement and post-settlement factors plays a pivotal role in refugees' well being and integration (Williams & Berry, 1991).

Within the literature that exists on refugees in the educational context in the U.S., there is great variation in how the "refugee" population is defined, and it is often conflated with other immigrant populations. McBrien (2005), in conducting a literature review of educational challenges for refugee youth determined that "information on refugees is frequently found in articles about immigrants" (p.337). As a result, she included articles on "immigrants" that included populations from nations that typically are origin-countries for resettled refugees, such as Bosnia, Vietnam, and others. Additionally, she found no articles that disaggregated data between refugee and immigrant groups within schools, contributing to a lack of particular knowledge about how refugee youth experience schools. Alternatively, Hooper, et. al. (2016) in a report on refugee children outcomes define "refugee children" as children under 10 residing with at least one "refugee" parent in the U.S. They retrieved their data from the 2009-2013 U.S. Census Data, however it is unclear how they determined parental "refugee" status, since the U.S. Census Bureau states that they do not collect data on legal immigration status (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Some studies attribute "refugee" status to participants, simply by the nation of origin indicated (McBrien, 2005). Others rely on resettlement agency referrals or participation in special services for inclusion status, not addressing that resettlement agencies also serve other humanitarian immigrant populations such as Special Immigrant Visa holders, asylees, and other special immigrant categories. While many of these individuals are receiving resettlement services because they are immigrating under refugee-like conditions, this is not always the case. Gibson-Helm, Boyle, Block, and Teede (2014) discuss the weaknesses of these methods within the context of utilizing health data sets in Australian research and point out that often individuals are misclassified and can be excluded on the basis of type of residence permit or specialized

service utilization when in fact they have a refugee background. Specifically, they point out that there is not enough information to be able to use country of origin as a proxy for refugee status.

Scalettaris (2007) contends that "refugee" is inherently a political term and not a sociological one. Through a discussion of the term and its use in the field of refugee studies, she shows that the term does not describe a sociological group, but rather a political positioning of the individual towards governments and the international community. Therefore it is inherently necessary to study refugees within the political context that they are situated and the direct policies and services that are delivered for their protection. Cherem (2016) lays out the different kinds of forced migrants and makes a case for refugees being a distinct case of immigrants because of a human right not a humanitarian need. It is not a claim based on need, such as economic or environmental migrants fleeing poor conditions, but rather based on their right to claim protection from the international community based on well-founded fear of persecution. For the purposes of this study, I defined refugees by the utilization and participation in specialized services that they are provided upon arrival in the U.S. These specialized services are the U.S.' response to the right of refugees for special international protections and a durable solution and define their position within society. This framework of the resettlement process and services is described below.

<div align="center">**Refugee Resettlement as a Conceptual Framework**</div>

This study defined refugees as individuals who have been resettled by the U.S. government and been identified as eligible for specialized resettlement services from one of the nine voluntary resettlement agency. Because the current study looked at post-resettlement experiences of refugees, it was interested in examining the resources available to individuals that are

officially recognized by the government as being eligible for special services. This section

provides an overview of the resettlement process and the services the U.S. program provides.

After being recommended for resettlement to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, the

Resettlement Support Center, an entity of the U.S. Department of State, conducts security

screening including biometric processing and background checks, followed by face to face

interviews conducted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) with the

Department of Homeland Security. Altogether the process usually takes from 18-24 months

(Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2016). If the Department of Homeland Security

clears the individual or family for resettlement, they are matched with one of nine resettlement

agencies within the U.S. and the agency decides where to settle the refugee based upon "the best

match between a community's resources and the refugee's needs" (U.S. Department of State,

2017, paragraph 1). This can include special physical or mental health concerns as well as family

reunification. Once their destination is decided, their travel is arranged by the International

Organization for Migration. The Department of State provides an interest-free travel loan to the

refugees for their travel to their place of resettlement and a cash allowance to the resettlement

agency that is supposed to assist in the first three months' expenses as well as support the

agency's staff salaries and expenses. The Department of Health's Office of Refugee

Resettlement works through the states for more long-term assistance and to "provide people in

need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society"

(Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2017). It is required that individuals resettled under the

Refugee Admissions Program apply for permanent residency within a year, and after five years,

it's expected that they will apply for citizenship. Often refugees are settled in more urban areas

where schools and public services have more resources to meet the needs of families.

Unfortunately, this sometimes means that families that are traditionally farmers are settled in an urban area that provides fewer familiarities than a rural town would. In the last decades, Karen refugees have started to secondarily migrate and leave the cities and resettle themselves into more rural areas for this very reason (Harper, 2016).

Within Virginia, the Refugee Resettlement Program is operated by the state's Department of Social Services' Office of Newcomer Services, which coordinates with five voluntary agencies that it contracts to work with resettling refugees and ensuring families get the support needed. According to the state's Refugee Resettlement State Plan, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid are available to individuals and families who are deemed eligible by the agency monitoring them (Virginia Office of Newcomer Services, 2017). Virginia Department of Social Services provided services for 1,749 individuals in fiscal year 2018, a significant decrease from the 2017 numbers of 4,257 (Office of Newcomer Services, 2019). While this number includes individuals that received asylum status, and other special cases, 1,589 of these were resettled under the refugee resettlement or Special Immigrant Visa programs, including 185 children under the age of five. Recipients of these programs have case management services from their first day in country, receiving the full benefits and services that the U.S. has allowed for. According to data published by the Refugee Processing Center, refugees are primarily settled in one of seven areas throughout the target state. See table 1 for the last three years' resettlement data for Virginia by resettlement area.

*Table 1: Last three years' resettlement data for Virginia by resettlement area.*

| Area | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 3-Year Total |
|------|------|------|------|--------------|
| Area 1 | 317 | 234 | 173 | 724 |
| Area 2 | 158 | 207 | 125 | 490 |
| Area 3 | 275 | 232 | 91 | 598 |
| Area 4* | 360 | 308 | 92 | 760 |
| Area 5 | 1323 | 1954 | 702 | 3979 |
| Area 6 | 453 | 656 | 297 | 1406 |
| Area 7 | 263 | 216 | 109 | 588 |
| Total | 3149 | 3807 | 1589 | 8545 |

**\* Target area for the present study.**

According to the Department of Social Services Refugee Arrivals Report, the majority of refugees resettled over the last three years are overwhelmingly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Afghanistan and Iraq are the two nations that have been eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa program, which allows individuals who assisted the U.S. during times of conflict to enter the U.S. under the Refugee Resettlement Program. Table 2 shows the last three years of arrivals of these three groups. While there has been a steady decrease in the number of arrivals from 2016 to 2018, there is a significant population that has been resettled in Virginia over the last three years, particularly from Afghanistan.

*Table 2: Last three years' resettlement data for the top three nationalities in Virginia by Refugee or SIV status*

| Country of Origin | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 3-Year Total |
|-------------------|------|------|------|--------------|
| Afghanistan | Refugee- 208<br>SIV-1432 | Refugee- 140<br>SIV-2640 | Refugee- 87<br>SIV-1065 | Refugee- 435<br>SIV-5137 |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | Refugee- 311 | Refugee- 131 | Refugee-226 | Refugee-668 |
| Iraq | Refugee- 347<br>SIV-79 | Refugee- 182<br>SIV-110 | Refugee- 9<br>SIV-26 | Refugee- 538<br>SIV-215 |

Existing contracts between the Department of Social Services and voluntary agencies describe the specific ways that resettlement agencies assist families and individuals in attaining

self-sufficiency, the official goal of the program. Each resettlement agency is required to secure furnished housing for the family and possible employment leads for the employable adults before they arrive. Once the refugees arrive, a Comprehensive Resettlement Plan (CRP) is developed with input from the adults in the family that sets goals to reach economic self-sufficiency as soon as possible. This CRP serves as the blueprint for all the services and programs that case-workers connect refugees with, including language classes, employment and cultural orientations, and removing barriers to employment, including finding suitable childcare. Because early employment is stressed as a key indicator of successful integration, they are encouraged to accept a job as soon as it's offered (Virginia Department of Social Services Office of Newcomer Services, 2016), causing them to need to find childcare arrangements very quickly. As a result, case-workers often help refugees find informal childcare arrangements with a friend or neighbor (International Rescue Committee, 2012). Additionally, case-workers help families gain access to cash assistance programs and medical insurance through DSS if eligible. While refugees are often eligible for these and other public benefits for a longer time than formal case management lasts, they lack the cultural capital and institutional knowledge to be able to navigate the systems on their own, leaving them dependent on aid organizations (Anders & Lester, 2013).

Virginia also provides the Refugee Student Achievement Project (RSAP), which uses federal funds to allocate specific money to resettlement agencies to aid in supporting K-12 students within public school systems (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2018). Contracts between DSS and the voluntary agencies receiving VRSAP funding shows that most agencies use this money to fund a "school liaison" position that works with families in enrolling their K-12 students and coordinates volunteer tutors and access to necessary services through the school system. Within the job descriptions, however, services are focused on children from kindergarten

and older, leaving a gap in services for families with children of preschool age (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2017). While refugee resettlement services are meant to aid in successful integration into U.S. society, as we see below, how policy defines integration and how refugees define integration often are misaligned.

**"Successful Integration:" Driving Refugee Resettlement Services**

Berry (1980) utilized the term integration in a framework that accounts for the varying acculturation outcomes of individual migrants. According to Berry, acculturation is a two-dimensional process with respect to both the home culture and the receiving culture. On the horizontal axis is the home-culture retention and on the vertical axis is receiving-culture acquisition. These dimensions act independent of one another, creating four possible outcomes for immigrants: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilated individuals are high on receiving-culture acquisition and low on home-culture retention, separated individuals remain high on home-culture retention and are limited in receiving-culture acquisition, integrated individuals are high in both domains and marginalized are low on both domains. Criticism of Berry's early work included a lack of consideration for external social factors that influence the outcomes of integration. Most specifically, Weinreich (2009) points out that Berry makes several critical assumptions, among them that both receiving and home cultures are equally benign and not in direct conflict with each other. Salo and Birman (2015) have proposed an ecological acculturation framework, utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (1979), which accounts for the differing domains that individual migrants occupy, such as employment settings, school, residential setting, and the cultural and social expectations within each of those. Salo and Birman's (2015) research looks at Vietnamese refugees and how acculturation of the host culture promotes job satisfaction, however retention

of home culture promotes social support from members of the same cultural background. The ability to function within both cultural contexts remains important for different ecological domains.

**Neoliberal ideals of integration.** "Integration" is a term used in refugee documents and policies, but rarely defined in common terms by different stakeholders (Ager & Strang, 2008). According to the state Department of Social Services website, the main goal of refugee resettlement and support services is integration into the greater society and self-sufficiency. However, the policies outlined in the Refugee Act of 1980, which established the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement and its purpose, primarily emphasize early employment as the key indicator of successful integration (Tyson, 2017). Tyson points out that this emphasis on employment is heavily influenced by neoliberal ideals and often in conflict with refugee-held beliefs of integration as more evidenced by social and cultural outcomes. Through qualitative interviews with two different ethnic refugee-background groups in Chicago, Tyson found that there was little overlap between refugee community ideals of integration and those held within the U.S. policies. For example, while they both emphasized English language acquisition, the U.S. policies promote it as a means of obtaining and maintaining gainful employment, while the refugees valued it for social utility in building social and cultural capital. As a result, the services provided around English language development are largely focused on utilitarian language needed for employment.

The overwhelming focus of all services is driven by neoliberal ideals of economic self-sufficiency and early employment as an indicator of successful integration. Neoliberal policies restrict full social citizenship for refugees on the basis of market citizenship, or employment and independence from social service benefits including agency assistance (Grace, Nawyn, &

Okokwo, 2018). Nawyn (2011) points out that in spite of resettlement services being designed to give social citizenship to refugees as soon as they resettle, the neoliberal policies restrict their full access to citizenship and benefits as long as they are unemployed. As a result, case management focuses on supporting families in the primary goal of early employment and limiting use of public benefits, leaving little room for a focus on children or connecting families to a variety of services and programs for them (Grace, Nawyn, & Okokwo, 2018; Nawyn, 2011; Xu, 2007). Xu envisions policies and practices that are child-driven and focused on child social and psychological well-being and consider "the perspective of children as primary and compelling stakeholders" (p. 55).

**Refugee integration.** Ager and Strang (2008) have developed a framework for refugee integration out of work within a refugee settlement in the United Kingdom, recommending policies to define terms of integration more clearly. They also advocate for a greater understanding of the mechanisms and outcomes of integration that are often mentioned by refugees. Through an inductive process involving European refugee policy analysis and in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders, both from refugee backgrounds and within the community, they developed a framework of the domains of integration and the relationships between them. They see employment, housing, education, and health as not only outside markers of successful integration, but a means to reaching integration. Additionally, integration is facilitated by language and cultural knowledge as well as safety and stability, which are connected to social connections such as social bridges, social bonds and social links that can support integration. Isik-Ercan (2012) studied how schools respond to refugee families in their community and argues that successful integration requires the school to integrate as well,

transforming the process from one in which the refugee takes on all the responsibility to a process of the community as a whole working to integrate.

**Refugee Discourses and Rhetoric in Policy and National Politics**

Scalettaris (2007) affirms the political nature of the term "refugee." Because the term describes the individual's position to the government as vulnerable and in need of special protection, it is important to examine the political discourses being used in policy and the national political environment. According to Feller (2007), a problematic result of subsuming refugees as a subcategory of immigrants is that focus of discourse and policy begins to shift from protection to management and controlling the flow of migration. Feller, as an official with the UNHCR, strongly adheres to the rhetoric of protection and vulnerability and emphasizes the critical need to identify refugees to be able to deliver those protections to individuals who need them. McBrien (2005) points out that refugees' arrival and acceptance has been strongly mediated by political pressures. For example, Cubans fleeing the communist regime were enthusiastically welcomed in a climate of hate for communism during the Cold War. Additionally, Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Doney (2015) found that refugees repeatedly pointed to the socio-political context as a factor in their ability to become part of the greater community.

Current political rhetoric within the U.S. has framed refugees in a negative light. In particular, there is a fear of Muslims and framing of Muslim refugees as potential terrorists (McBrien, 2005). Grove and Zwi (2006) conducted an analysis of the ways refugees are positioned and othered within policies and discourses in developing countries including the U.S. They found that refugees were often framed with verbiage of natural disasters, highlighting the threat that they pose to public health and security. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) ratified by the United Nations states that "we are witnessing, with great concern,

increasingly xenophobic and racist responses to refugees and migrants" and strongly condemns the "demonizing" of refugees within society (p. 3). Furthermore, Scribner (2017) describes the current political environment as being strongly influenced by a "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm in which current administrative decisions are strongly rooted in the belief that Islamic ideologies are at war with traditional Christian values. He speaks of Americans' fear of Islamic attack on American society from the outside in the form of terrorism as well as from within, through changing the values in our society. This belief has influenced not only broader immigration policy, but specific policy pertaining to refugees, such as executive orders 13769 and 13780, which banned refugee entries for a period of 120 days and called for increased vetting of refugees from Muslim majority nations.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (UN General Assembly, 2016) committed to sharing the load of refugee support services across the globe. In response, President Obama raised the cap on refugee admissions from 70,000 to 85,000 for fiscal year 2016 and increased it to 110,000 for fiscal year 2017. Data from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Refugee Processing Center shows that from October 2016 to January 2017, the U.S. admitted 32,448 refugees, almost half the yearly admissions from the previous decade. However, President Trump's "America First" policies such as Executive Orders 13769 and 13780 have reversed these trends, stopping all refugee processing and admissions for 120 days, reducing the quota for annual refugee admissions from 110,000 to 50,000, and indefinitely postponing granting visas and admission to individuals from six Muslim-majority nations (Pierce & Meissner, 2017). The Refugee Plan submitted to congress for FY 2018, lowered the admissions ceiling to 45,000 for the year and limited admissions from certain countries that historically have had high numbers resettled in the U.S., such as Somalia and Iraq (US Department of State, US

Department of Homeland Security, US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Additionally, the administration's budget plan released in April of 2018 cut humanitarian

funding which went to support refugee services in countries of temporary asylum. A troubling

term in recent discussion of refugees is the need for "assimilation," a word that is rarely used, as

it has different implications than the current goal "integration." The Refugee Plan additionally

instructs the Department of State to select candidates for resettlement who are likely to be able to

"assimilate" to the U.S. (US Department of State, US Department of Homeland Security, US

Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Because of all the policy changes in the 2018, there have been disruptions in the

resettlement process for some. For example, when the President halted refugee processing for

120 days, Department of Homeland Security stopped doing security screenings on potential

refugees for resettlement. As a result of that delay, there were not enough families and

individuals in the pipe-line ready to be resettled in the later part of the year. Because most

voluntary agencies depend on the Department of State funds to pay salaries, they have had to cut

back on staffing, leaving them short-staffed for a surge in resettlements once processing resumes

(Harris, 2017).

Refugees have become a highly politicized group, particularly in the years following

President Trump's election and policy changes. As such it is important to understand the political

climate that exists for them. The primary conflicting discourses of vulnerability and protection as

represented by UNHCR, "America First" and cultural assimilation of the current administration,

as well as "integration" and "economic self-sufficiency" as they are represented and enacted

within the current policies and Voluntary Agency documents are important context for

examining the experiences of refugee women resettled in the U.S.

## Social and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1998) theorized that individuals hold cultural capital within the society they are situated. As full members of society, they grow up and gain habitus, or dispositions that are in line with the culture they participate in. Schools are strong institutions within which these norms and expectations are replicated (Bourdieu, 1973). Ogbu (1982) points out that while all children experience some level of acquisition of new cultural knowledge within schools, minorities from immigrant backgrounds experience primary discontinuities between the culture within school and that of their home. With refugees, as with other immigrants, their context has drastically changed and the cultural capital they possess has changed in value. Zhou and Bankston (1994) studied Vietnamese refugee youth and the ways that their traditional cultural values aided achievement within the U.S. school system as their orientation towards school achievement is viewed as valuable. Lamont and Lareau (1988) identified that a critical aspect of cultural capital is that it mediates inclusion and exclusion within certain institutions as well as social circles. Within education, cultural capital that cultural minorities possess has been called funds of knowledge, which educators are encouraged to learn about and engage within the classroom setting (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1995).

Ager and Strang (2008) view cultural knowledge as well as social connections as important domains in the integration process for refugees. They utilize Putnam's (1993) distinction between social bonds between ethnically similar groups, and social bridges, which serve to connect the family to other groups within society. Ager and Strang (2008) found that refugees distinguished between these different forms of social resources that aided them in integration and quality of life.

Pourtes (1998) points out that social capital and cultural capital are related in multiple ways. For example, the formation of social bonds sometimes requires the use of extensive cultural resources. Families that don't gain cultural capital and integrate into the dominant culture can risk becoming linguistically and socially isolated, which becomes a significant risk factor for children's school success (Van Tuijl & Leseman, 2013). Hauck, Lo, Maxwell, and Reynolds (2014) found that language barriers were significant factors in preventing Burmese, Bhutanese, and Iraqi refugees from gaining employment. However, Burmese and Bhutanese reported high social ties such as sharing childcare and feeling connected to their community which helped to insulate them from other challenges. Iraqi refugees expressed weaker social ties, however they reported having more American friends. In a study with resettled refugees in Australia, Pittaway, Bartolomei and Doney (2015) identified several enablers of social capital that refugees described. This emphasized a complex, cyclical nature of outcomes and enablers for social capital, as many of them reinforced each other. This included connection to community resources such as resettlement services, community leaders, cultural capital, as well as inclusive norms within the greater society.

Schools can play an important role in developing family's cultural and social capital. Smyth, MacBride, Paton, and Sheridan (2010) conducted qualitative work within primary schools in Scotland and found that teachers made efforts to help children build social connections with peers of like (bonding) and unlike (bridging) backgrounds. Dachyshyn and Kirova (2008) found that refugee children attending a preschool in Canada were able to mediate cultural knowledge for their parents in play. Children had knowledge of playing with building blocks from their classroom environment, however the African refugee parents had little experience with the dominant cultural norm of developmentally appropriate practice and

teaching your children in this way. This space of play allowed for children and parents to play with the culture and practice the discourses that are thought appropriate to the school.

Both social and cultural capital play important roles in refugees' integration into society and schools can operate as a critical space of development of these for children and families. Additionally, lack of cultural capital can serve as a barrier for accessing early childhood education services. Gross and Ntagengwa (2016) found that within the state of Massachusetts, many refugees lacked the knowledge or language and cultural ability to navigate the public resources available for their children without the help of voluntary agency case workers.

## Refugee Families in Early Childhood Education

Recent studies using data from 2005 National Household Education Survey (NHES) and 2007 RAND California Preschool Study have shown that while enrollment of children of immigrants in center-based preschool programs is still lower than native-born peers, the gap has narrowed with the expansion of public PreK programs (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011). Additionally, findings suggest that maternal education level and income level are stronger indicators of center-based enrollment of three and four year olds than immigrant status of mothers (Greenberg & Kahn, 2011). Still, many immigrant families tend to prefer family-based care over center-based. For example, one qualitative study found that African immigrant mothers preferred family care for their children under five, but enrolled in center-based programs because it was the only option as they were not living near family or other African community members (Obeng, 2007).

Refugee families, through resettlement services, are often at an advantage compared to other immigrant populations in gaining access to early childhood programs (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016), but the priority in these arrangements is employability of the parents, and not the wellbeing and development of the children (Xu, 2007). Early childhood education enrollment

among refugee children is slightly lower than native-born peers, but slightly higher than other immigrant populations (Van Tuijl & Leseman, 2013; Morland, Ives, McNeely, & Allen, 2016). Isik-Ercan (2012), in qualitative interviews with parents of primary children found that many Burmese refugees are not aware of the opportunities and programs that are available, and there needs to be more communication to those families. The Migration Policy Institute has suggested that Head Start and Early Head Start programs partner with the Refugee Resettlement Agencies to increase access to early childhood programming for refugees and integrate services (Morland, Ives, McNeely, & Allen, 2016). Head Start is a federally funded program to provide early childhood education services to families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Other recommendations are for refugee agencies to utilize key relationships with early childhood centers and state child care vouchers programs to streamline enrollment in childcare for refugee families as soon as employment is obtained (BYCRS, 2011).

Gross and Ntagengwa (2016) explored the challenges refugee families experience in accessing early childhood care and education services within the state of Massachusetts. Through interviews with different stakeholders at the various refugee-serving agencies and the Childcare Resource and Referral (CCR&R) services, they found that the process of connecting refugee families with appropriate childcare providers was complex and required help from multiple agencies. Families were unable to navigate this process on their own in spite of being eligible for child-care vouchers and access to programs for other low-income families. This meant that communication lines between refugee-serving agencies and government agencies serving low-income families had to be open and collaborative since refugee resettlement case-workers lacked formal training in navigating this process. Additionally, it was challenging to find programs that met the cultural preferences of the families, with many of them opting to utilize informal

childcare arrangements with people in their social network that shared childcare values over larger center-based care. Additionally, the lack of centralized data about utilization and satisfaction in early childhood care and education services was found to be a barrier to improving access and availability of appropriate programs.

In Virginia, agencies employ a school liaison, funded by the State Refugee School Achievement Program, to assist in enrolling children ages five to eighteen in K-12 public schools. However, the contracted position does not formally require the agency to assist with preschool enrolment, in spite of the fact that most districts that refugee families are resettled in have widely available public pre-kindergarten programming (Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Social Services, 2014).

**Barriers to Educational Success and Parental Involvement in Primary Grades**

One of the key guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice for preschool and early childhood programs is involving families in reciprocal relationships through open, two-way communication and sensitivity to parents' goals for their child's education (NAEYC, 2009). Identifying barriers to parents' involvement in the early years is critical for increasing parent engagement of these populations. There are limited studies focused on refugee parental involvement in early childhood, however, as a subset of immigrant parents, refugee parents share many of the same challenges and barriers experienced by the broader immigrant population.

A quantitative study found that Asian and Hispanic immigrant parents were more likely to experience barriers to being involved in their kindergarten child's school because of language barriers and feeling unwelcomed in the school than their native born peers of the same ethnicity (Turney & Kao, 2009). The researchers used the ECELS dataset and controlled for factors such as socio-economic status, comparing mothers who were foreign-born to mothers who were

native-born. They found that some differences in actual involvement were explained by SES, however, immigrant parents still lagged. A literature review of research with refugee students (McBrien, 2005) found that barriers for students' achievement included parents' limited English acquisition as well as discrimination and past trauma exposures.

**Discrimination and unwelcome environment**. Discrimination of refugee and immigrant students affects their academic achievement (McBrien, 2005). Examples of discrimination experienced by students from teachers and the educational institution include low expectations and marginalization and isolation in English Language Learner programs. Adair (2015) summarized the effects of discrimination on young immigrant children in kindergarten and found both personal and structural discrimination within schools. Personal discrimination included negative personal interactions with adults in the school, low expectations and assumptions about literacy abilities based on English skills, tracking students into ESL programs which limit creative learning experiences, and devaluing home culture. Structural and institutional discrimination included school segregation, limited resources, over diagnosing of special education, and lack of engaging parents.

Teachers' discursive practices can serve to silence refugee parents as they position themselves as both the expert, using research and technical terms, and the host, holding meetings in the school and controlling the focus of the discussion. The teachers in Denmark used physical arrangement of chairs and seats as well as linguistic signaling to silence refugee parents (Christine & Matthiesen, 2015).

Lack of knowledge about students can cause discriminatory and marginalizing behaviors in teachers towards students, for example South East Asian refugees are often all considered Vietnamese when they actually come from a variety of different ethnic groups (McBrien, 2005).

Additionally, African refugees are often mistaken as African American, when they have distinct cultural and historical backgrounds (McBrien, 2005; Li, 2013). On the other hand, African refugee parents of children in a Head Start program expressed that by teachers respecting parents and taking the initiative to welcome them into the school environment, they were able to be more involved in their child's education and partner with teachers (Tadesse, 2014). One study involved refugee mothers in one geographic location in focus group interviews on their perspectives of their child's schooling in the U.S. and how a cultural liaison from the non-profit agency benefited them (McBrien, 2011). The study found that some parents, particularly from Iran, expressed discrimination and lack of cultural sensitivity as a challenge for their children in school. However, the mothers felt that the cultural liaison assisted greatly in gaining access to parent-teacher conferences and other school-related information.

Since preschools and early education environments are some of the first institutions that young refugee families interact with, they can play a role in helping alleviate some of the negative consequences of young refugees' early experiences, if they remain welcoming and affirming places.

**Language**. A primary barrier for refugee parents' involvement in their child's schooling is language. Tadesse (2014) found that African refugee parents felt that teachers made assumptions about their language abilities even when they could converse in English. One study (Hurley, Medici, Stewart, & Cohen, 2011) found that early childhood educators listed language barrier as one of the key challenges in working with refugee families in the early childhood context. The authors found that teachers in the study could not find translators for the languages they needed to be able to communicate effectively with parents, and had to rely on sign language and inexperienced interpreters. In addition to spoken language, there are linguistic patterns that

differ between home and school and can cause a barrier for students if they are not made explicit to them (Lovelace & Wheeler, 2006).

   **Cultural liaisons and training.** Paris (2012) advocates for a framework of culturally sustaining practice that extends the funds of knowledge work to actively engage students with their native culture. Culture is conceptualized not as a static frame but as a dynamic, socially mediated, and ever shifting collection of cultural practices that children and families engage in. Paris' framework asks teachers and schools to look at power relations and how our practices are sustaining or unsettling them. Children should be supported in their maintenance of language and cultural knowledge, and democratic societies should move not towards assimilation, but the maintenance and respect of multiple cultures simultaneously.

   A promising practice that research has shown to improve refugee parents' access and participation in programming is a cultural liaison program (Morland & Birman, 2016). McBrien & Ford (2012) studied the effects of a culturally appropriate liaison program with refugee families in elementary schools. In the study, the cultural liaison was a member of the refugee community who worked with families and schools to increase communication by representing families' concerns to the school and vice versa. Parents and teachers were surveyed and participated in focus groups to identify ways in which the liaison program affected their participation in their child's schooling. They found that parents were more aware of what was going on in the school and more comfortable with asking for help when they needed it. Additionally, they found that their attitudes and behaviors changed with respect to school and teachers' perceptions of the refugee parents changed as a result of more communication and partnership. Teachers who work closely with Hmong refugees have also stated that cultural liaisons can be a powerful tool for building partnerships with refugee parents (Rah, Choi,

Nguyen, 2009), and teachers report that refugee parents themselves sometimes make effective cultural liaisons for their community and building partnerships with the schools (Hurley, et. al., 2011).

Within the early childhood context in particular, the cultural and linguistic liaison has been studied in Canada as a part of the early childhood classroom. Massing, Kirova, & Hennig (2013) studied an intercultural preschool program that was started as a partnership between several nonprofits, the refugee community, and the public school system. The publicly funded preschool class was designed for children from Sudan, Somalia, and Kurdistan (Iraq), but has welcomed students from many other cultural backgrounds. There is one white Canadian trained early childhood teacher, and then one cultural and linguistic liaison for each majority group. Their role was not only to help the teacher to design curriculum around cultural artifacts and literacies, such as a unit on making and serving tea. Additionally, they served as a bridge between the home and school, making home visits, helping families to access public services and attend appointments, as well as representing the culture and community within the school. Massing, Kirova, & Hennig (2013) point out that these cultural liaisons, as members of the specific cultural community, served as a way for the families to be involved in schooling when parents couldn't attend because of work and time constraints. Researchers often make use of these liaisons within the research context to serve as interpreters for families and mediators of culture (Christine & Matthiesen, 2015).

Having teachers involved with the families can have the benefit of teaching the teachers about the community their students are coming from (Morland & Birman, 2016). Patton, Silva, and Myers (1999) involved student teachers in a family literacy program with refugee families. The student teachers expressed gaining more intercultural awareness in addition to the

experience of teaching in an intergenerational literacy program. Refugee parents of preschoolers in Canada expressed a desire for teachers to have more culturally inclusive attitudes and warmth for the parents coming from diverse backgrounds (Poureslami, et. al., 2013).

Teacher participants in a study on the challenges in working with refugee families expressed a need for more cultural training and professional development for themselves (Hurley, et. al., 2011). Lim, Maxwell, Able-Boone, and Zimmer (2009) found that early childhood teacher training only included diversity training if it was located in an area with a significant minority population. They advocate for aligned training in linguistic and cultural diversity for early childhood teachers and pre-service teachers in order to meet the needs of the diverse population.

Without the use of a cultural liaison, having culturally sustaining practices within a school can assist with the transition and integration of refugee students. When Sudanese refugees were resettled in borderland areas of South Texas, they found schools that were already bilingual in Spanish and English, creating a space where multiple literacies and cultures were respected and expected (Roy, 2015). In her work, she noted the use of Spanish in Sudanese homes since they expressed it was a necessary tool in their community for communication and work. In the schools, there were bilingual books and posters that signaled a respect for home cultures to be used in school and created space for them. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) created an ESL class for Iraqi refugees that was culturally relevant and encouraged the use of Kurdish and Arabic amongst students and found that the students demonstrated much faster language development than other ESL peers in other classes. The use of culturally sustaining pedagogies that encourage children to maintain their cultural knowledge and extend it to English was affirming and successful.

**Prior Research with Preschool Mothers from Refugee Backgrounds**

Because many refugee families come from cultures that emphasize community orientation rather than individual orientation, strategies that focus on involving the whole family have been recommended as culturally relevant (Birman & Morland, 2014). Particularly in the early childhood education context, it is important to consider family context from an ecological development model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Gross and Ntagengwa (2016) stress the importance of multiple sectors and stakeholders working together to meet the needs of the refugee family with young children by integrating services. Refugee resource agencies need to work with early childhood education institutions and families to ensure success. Family literacy programs are one example of this.

There are very few studies that focus on preschool mothers from refugee backgrounds in the U.S., and many of these studies focus on parents' participation and perspectives within a specific programming, such as a family literacy outreach program or a single preschool program. For example, Singh, Sylvia, and Ridzi (2015) investigated Burmese families' home literacy practices in a family literacy program in the U.S. and found that Burmese families often relied on oral storytelling practices for teaching their children more than reading books at home, but were responsive to learning about reading at home and the use of manipulatives because of their priority for educational success for their children. Teachers in the program were sensitive to the fact that some parents were illiterate in their first language and modeled target reading practices with them. However, they found that teachers weren't always responsive and aware of the linguistic and cultural needs of the families, overgeneralizing certain experiences. Some parents within the program became cultural brokers for the instructor in the absence of the translator.

In another study, Tadesse, Hoot, and Watson-Thomas (2012) interviewed four African refugee mothers about their expectations of early childhood and found significant and fundamental differences between their expectations and the Head Start program their children attended. Mothers expressed a desire to see programs be more academic and serious rather than play-based, so that children would learn the importance of school. They also explained that often their children's behavior gets misinterpreted because of key cultural differences, and expectations are lowered based on inappropriate assessments.

Additionally, there have been studies of the impact of school and teacher practices on Burmese refugees in the early grades (Isik-Ercan, 2012), finding that while parents wanted to be involved and more active in the school and their child's education, there were barriers preventing them. Because primary schools in her study often held goals related to cultural assimilation, there was a significant lack of advocacy for diversity within the school and community (Isik-Ercan, 2012).

**Global Research with Refugee Preschool Parents**

Studies with parents of preschoolers in New Zealand have found that African refugee parents have different goals in childrearing and early education than teachers. Mitchell and Ouko (2012) conducted focus groups and qualitative interviews with storytelling to explore the views of refugee parents from the Congo and found that they felt there were barriers to access of Early Childhood and expressed a desire to have staff in the school that could understand their child's communication and behavior from a cultural perspective to help mediate for them. Additionally, a study conducted by the Families Commission in New Zealand utilized participatory focus groups with recent immigrants and former refugees and found that they expressed many barriers to enrolling and participating in early childhood education. The study also revealed a need for

more options for childcare and education that fit the families' preferences and scheduling needs, such as proximity to other children's school and hours that aligned with non-traditional work hours (Broome & Kindon, 2008). Poureslami, Nimmon, Ng, Cho, Foster, and Hertzman, (2013) conducted focus groups with immigrant and refugee parents of preschoolers from three different language groups in Canada found that while their views on early childhood development were limited, there were differences between the groups, such as the emphasis placed on spiritual development by Farsi speaking parents. The parents also expressed a desire for a less standardized approach to early childhood since children are coming from different backgrounds. Furthermore, all groups indicated that more involvement from the cultural community in the school would benefit them and their child.

Whitmarsh (2011) identified a gap in the research on work with refugee families from Iraqi and Afghani backgrounds. She utilized qualitative focus group interviews to investigate asylum-seeking mothers' choice in early childhood programming in the U.K. and their perceptions of these programs. She found that women chose to enroll their children so that they would learn language, school readiness and social skills. In further exploring their choice in preschool programs, the mothers shared that they were not given options of programs to enroll their children in. Additionally, the mothers expressed challenges being involved because of language and cultural barriers, such as differing values in autonomy versus family respect.

These studies, while conducted outside of the U.S., can offer insights into the experiences of refugee parents in English-speaking western nations. However, it is clear that more research is needed to gain a more robust understanding of the particular experiences of families in the U.S.

**Conducting Research with Refugee Women-Utilizing Critical Social Theory**

Turner and Fozdar (2010) point out that much research conducted with refugee

populations is highly political, designed and carried out with a particular agenda in mind.

Instead, they argue for "social research methods...to be selected to ensure both high levels of

ethical and academic standards" (p. 185). They maintain that rigorous research is important for

drawing policy implications, however there are important ethical considerations that must be

made to protect participants from the imbalance of power. Particular, they advocate for carefully

chosen research questions that are relevant to the needs of the community being studied,

qualitative methods that allow for refugees to have their voices heard, and use of reflexivity and

"constant review of ethics issues" (p. 194). Tomkinson (2015) echoes this need for ethical

decision-making in the field with refugees. She separates procedural ethics, monitored by

Internal Review Boards (IRB), from everyday ethics, decisions being made in the field. While

IRBs are concerned with informed consent, there are more nuanced ethical concerns in the

everyday research, such as managing relationships with gatekeepers and understanding when to

intervene. In one hearing that she observed, she was aware that the translator was interpreting

poorly and worried that it would affect the outcome of the asylum hearing for the refugee. She

had been strongly cautioned not to intervene in the hearings and sat in troubled silence until the

lawyer spoke up and corrected the translator. Kindon and Broome (2009) used a similar

framework in their work with immigrant parents from refugee backgrounds in New Zealand in

engaging them in focus groups about early childhood care and education services. In their focus

groups they maintained a "flexible and inclusive approach…and did not seek to rigidly apply the

same process with each group" (p. 146.) They took care to hold focus groups in spaces that made

the researchers the outsiders and adapted the process in response to cultural practices, such as

storytelling, meal-sharing, and even prayer. The authors point out that "such an orientation to research fieldwork does not fit comfortably within institutional practice associated with requirements for accountability," (p. 149) because it cannot be predetermined what adaptations will need to be made to accommodate intended participants.

A critical perspective in research can help us "attempt to understand, analyze, criticize, and alter social, economic, cultural, technological, and psychological structures and phenomena that have features of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, and misery" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 146). Critical social research must have the aim of attempting to minimize and eliminate these barriers and promote more equitable treatment in society. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) characterize critical social research as looking for internal contradiction and conducting immanent critique, which involves "focusing on the contradiction between the prevailing 'official story' (or ideology) and the way things really are" (p. 148). For the current study, a critical lens is appropriate to investigate a context in which the primary discourse is that the refugee resettlement services assist refugees in gaining access to necessary resources and integrating into the society, and early childhood education is viewed as both a critical contact between families and integrating culturally as well as

For the critical social researcher, context is important and contributes to the need for rich data collection methods (Coleman, 2016). The interpretive turn has allowed for the use of more qualitative research methods as ways of uncovering and interpreting what exists in the context, however, the post- discourses have argued that this can still perpetuate Eurocentric and patriarchal perspectives and that there is an underlying truth to uncover (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2013). Briggs and Sharp (2004) caution against persistent colonizing attitudes in development research with indigenous and non-Western groups, when "experts look for

experiences to analyse, but not for the voice of the indigenous peoples which might offer different-and challenging-interpretations" (p.666). However, they argue that this cannot restrain us from engaging with this knowledge and trying to represent their voice in the literature because the insider-outside binary is an oversimplification of the issue. The need to avoid viewing "other voices" as an "artifact" is critical in research within context where colonial powers and relationships are at play. Critical researchers must grapple with ethical questions of power within the space of research, how the research benefits the researcher and the researched, and how knowledge is produced within the space of research (Swartz, 2011). These questions require a commitment to what Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2013) have called, the bricolage, which involves a blurring of genres, disciplines, and borders in research, and an emancipatory framework, "employing these methodological processes as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation… pushing to a new conceptual terrain" (p. 350).

Ethical issues that arise from research with refugees can be complex and stem from "a range of intersecting issues including those of power, consent and community representation; confidentiality; trust and mistrust; harms, risks, and benefits; autonomy and agency; cultural difference; ender; human rights and social justice; and in the worst cases, oppression and exploitation" (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway; 2007, p. 300). Besides the obvious need for ensuring translation and cultural relevance of survey questions (Bloch, 1999), Hynes (2003) discusses the various issues of mistrust that can occur within the research process with refugees. Hynes states that "central to any study on refugees is the issue of trust" (p. 1), and through historical analysis and qualitative interviews, she outlines the sources of mistrust for refugees through their past experiences pre and post-resettlement within the U.K. She further recommends that researchers build trust by separating themselves from government, volunteer within the

community, be willing to be an advocate and examine issues *with* refugees rather than *on* them, providing opportunities for member checking and feedback throughout the dissemination process. In addition to building trust with participants, building trust with and between interpreters/cultural informants and participants is also paramount. In interviewing, thought should be given to physical layout, dress, the kinds of humor, and how to build rapport with participants. Most importantly, she contends that researchers need to be considerate of the "boundless universe of mistrust...that is a product of the refugee experience" (p. 14) when doing research in this context.

**Reflexivity in Critical Social Research**

Ezzel (2013) contends that we must practice reflexivity in order to disclose to ourselves and the consumers of research where our political alliances and sensitivities lie. This is particularly important when researching in spaces with contradictory discourses and beliefs. Additionally, reflexivity "scrutinizes issues such as the dynamics of the research encounter, the values and assumptions framing the research, and the social embeddedness of the research process for their impact on knowledge generation and to inform readers or research users about the consumption of products of research" (Henwood, 2008, p. 45). Cabot (2016) had to practice reflexivity in his study with refugee advocates in Canada, which required him to struggle with representing the participants' voices in a space where the voice of the refugee was silenced.

Reflexivity also requires a constant evaluation of the researcher's emotions and actions in the research space, and how they are shaped by and shape the research (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2015). Ezzel (2013) recommends freewriting before entering a research site on what you may expect, as well as what you hope to gain from the research. These make explicit, the inner emotions and affects that become entangled in the research. By returning to reflexivity

throughout the research process, the researcher is able to gain an understanding of him or herself within the research setting and how expectations and emotions are being changed and mediated by behavior and vise versa. Bergman Blix & Wettergren (2015) contend that emotions are not byproducts of actions, but data in and of themselves, with reflexivity allowing us to access them and how the inform and are entangled with behaviors.

In cross-cultural research, reflexivity is necessary in reflecting on the research process and the power differences between researcher and participant. Reflexivity allows the researcher to place themselves in the research and make adjustments when the see areas where they are perpetuating hierarchies and hegemonies. Reflexivity also allows for reflection on ethical representation of participants and marginalized groups. Because "history and context position both the researcher and the participant" (Olesen, 2013, p. 279) research with refugees will position the researcher as the "native" and the refugee as the "foreigner." Additionally, reflexivity allows for recognition of my own culture, resources, education, and all other aspects of my past and how they affect the social interactions with participants (Gorelick, 1991).

**Presenting Competency and Approachability**

Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) discuss the emotional labor involved in gaining access in marginalized communities. This involves building trust in participants as well as self-confidence in your abilities. Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016) operationalize vulnerability such as emphasizing being a language and cultural learner as being "acceptably incompetent", which contributes to the researcher's approachability. By approaching marginalized groups as acceptably incompetent researchers reverse the power in the relationship, because "the interactions between the acceptable incompetent and participant include

explanations and identifications of otherwise unspoken or taken-for-granted practices and attitudes" (p. 9).

Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016) argue that access to participants in the field also requires representation of competence, which can be institutional or cultural. For their participants, institutional competence of a researcher with a university gained them access more easily with white residents, while cultural competence of communicating in Spanish and having common history of migration and being "easy to talk to" gained more access with Hispanic residents.

Narag and Maxwell (2014) conducting research in the slums of the Philippines, had to reevaluate their presentation in their dress and language use to be culturally appropriate. Additionally, they made use of a key informant to introduce him to participants, which proved to have advantages and disadvantages. As their key informant was a notable member of the community, the researchers had a social status, however, they were also taken in and accepted more readily, giving access to behaviors that they expected him not to divulge as an "insider" in their community. Access in the field is constantly negotiated and renegotiated (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016). Reflexivity must be ongoing to ensure that a regular presence in the field contributes to trust and that ongoing consent is articulated.

## Critical Need in Research

The research base on refugee children and families in early childhood in the U.S. is deficient, particularly with regard to refugee mothers' voices. Additionally, with the expansion of public PreK programing through the K-12 public school system, there is a gap in looking at specific contexts where many refugee children are being enrolled in these programs as opposed

to Head Start, where they have often been served in other resettlement areas. This is the gap in the literature that I addressed through my study. Through a descriptive embedded dual case study of mothers with children aged four to five, I add to the literature that describes specific and contextualized stories of particular minority groups of refugees in the U.S. that are often underrepresented in the literature. The particular context of the target city makes this study unique among the literature, particularly the access of refugee students to public PreK programming through the Virginia Preschool Initiative. The following chapter describes the rationale and methodology for this study in detail.

## CHAPTER III

## METHODOLOGY

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and develop a deep understanding of the experience of two refugee mothers' selection, participation, and engagement with early childhood education in a small city in the Mid-Atlantic states. This project, centering the experience and perspectives of the refugee mothers, utilized a critical lens to conduct a critique and look for internal contradiction (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Through multiple data collection methods, this descriptive multiple case study sought to be multi-voiced but to center the perspective of the mothers. Understanding the experience of early childhood education services from the perspective of mothers from refugee backgrounds is an important step in identifying practices that serve to empower or disempower a group who has limited agency over their lives.

Refugees are often included in studies on immigrant populations in general, but rarely as a distinct group themselves. As a result, there is a lack of particular knowledge about the experiences of refugee families and children in the United States (U.S.) education system (McBrien & Ford, 2012). Refugees, while not a homogenous social group, have access to specialized services such as case management and liaisons that are intended to provide support in the transition to the U.S. and encourage early self-sufficiency. How these networks serve as gatekeepers and social capital for accessing early childhood care and education is largely unstudied. Because these services are offered to meet the distinct human rights that refugees have to a durable and protected situation outside of their home country (Cherem, 2016), it is essential to evaluate these services to ensure they are meeting the needs of those they are designed to serve. Additionally, there has been more focus in research on the experiences of

older refugee students in the education system (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2016) than the experiences of families with young children in the early childhood education context. The studies that do focus on preschool experience are most often within the context of federally-funded Head Start programs (Tadesse, Hoot, and Watson-Thomas, 2012; Tadesse, 2014) rather than public PreKindergarten (PreK) experiences. This study serves to address these critical gaps in the literature.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do refugee mothers describe their experiences with accessing and enrolling their preschool aged children in early childhood programs?

2. What cultural and social capital do mothers identify as valuable in their relationship with the school?

3. What actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early educational experiences?

    a) What school-based actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

    b) What parental actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

### Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The experiences of refugee mothers with children in early childhood education has been largely unstudied in the U.S. context with the exception of a few studies (Tadesse, Hoot, and Watson-Thomas, 2012; Singh, Sylvia, and Ridzi, 2015). Most of these studies utilized qualitative research methods in order to gain a deep and contextual knowledge of the experiences. In the present study, qualitative methods provided the opportunity to center the experience of the

mothers and represent their voice in the literature. Ethical research with vulnerable groups such as refugee women must allow for "collection of information from often vulnerable populations in a way that is empowering, not harmful or exploitative, and which has the potential for bringing about social change" (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2013). This requires research methods that allow for more participation by the women and flexibility of the researcher. Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway (2007) argue that research with refugees should seek to move beyond 'do no harm' and that qualitative methodologies allow researchers to build trusting relationships that can recognize their capacity for autonomy while ensuring protection. Qualitative research also answers the need for deeply contextualized research with refugees to combat the essentialization of their voices into one singular experience focused on vulnerability (Gifford, 2013).

## Research Design

Using a qualitative descriptive multiple case study design and a critical theory framework, this study endeavored to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of refugee mothers resettled in southeastern Virginia with children enrolled in early childhood education programs. In a multiple case study design, the researcher looks across the cases for similarities and differences. Merriam (2009) describes case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). Because case study allows for an in-depth and close look at a particular case in the real-life context (Yin, 2016), it lends itself to delving deeply into a few participants' experiences. Additionally, because refugee mothers' experiences with early childhood education in the U.S. has been largely unstudied, case study research design was an appropriate design for use in the exploratory phases in a field (Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 2008). Each of the mothers in this study made up a bounded embedded case within

the larger context of the resettlement system and programs available within a small city in Virginia.

According to Merriam (2009), case studies are used when studying a bounded system. They are particularly useful in contexts where "the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time" (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). For the present study, several of these variables that consisted of the context were the particular agency providing refugee resettlement services, the particular local public school system with its policies and procedures, as well as the community and national dialogue taking place in the historical context of the study. Additional participant-level variables were nationality, family context, as well as age and personal history of the women. Case study provided the opportunity to describe those variables as part of the case and contextualize the stories of the women.

Yin (2008) suggests that "how" and "why" questions are particularly well-suited for case study research. However, it is important to identify both the boundaries of the case that is being investigated and the unit of analysis. Because each refugee's story is deeply contextualized within their own history and the particular geographical and historical area that they are resettled in, case study is an appropriate methodology to use. Birman and Moreland (2016), in a review of the literature, point out that the diversity of this group is extensive and therefore there is a need to study specific contexts to develop deeper understanding. Because of the relatively recent expansion of public PreK in the Virginia, the resettlement area served as an instrumental case that provided the opportunity to shed light on the experiences of resettled refugee families within this unique context and the ways they draw on community resources for early childhood education attainment. An embedded case study design allowed me to explore the context through the specific experiences of two women recently resettled in the target area. The unit of analysis

in the study was each embedded case of mothers and their narrated and observed experience in enrolling and participating in preschool education for their child. All cases focused on mothers with children currently in early childhood education programming and their experience and perceptions of the U.S. early childhood education system.

## Recruitment of Cases

Each case in the study was a resettled refugee mother reporting that they have a child in a preschool program. This study defined refugee families as those receiving resettlement services upon arrival in the U.S., therefore the study restricted participation to families still in contact with the resettlement agency. Selection criteria used in advertising the study was 1) mothers having a child between the ages of four and five enrolled in PreK, 2) willingness to participate, 3) ability to communicate in English or Arabic, Dari, or Swahili through available interpreters, 4) length of residence in the U.S. greater than three months and less than 3 years.

As part of the case, I chose to interview the school liaison, a staff member of the resettlement agency tasked with supporting families with children in school. I initially contacted this person to describe the study and ask if she were willing to be interviewed as part of it. The resettlement agency restricted recruiting participants who were receiving case management services and still within the initial resettlement period of 3 months. Additionally, I wanted to focus on the experiences of families who are eligible for school liaison's services, which was formerly a three-year period. During the study, the policy affecting the school liaison's services changed from three years to five; however, participants had already been recruited using the criteria above. While I had hoped to gain participants from a range of length of resettlement to gain diverse comparative perspectives, both mothers were resettled within 2 years of the interviews.

Mothers were recruited through snowball sampling and utilizing personal connections at the resettlement agency. I designed a flyer that invited participation in the study based on the above criteria and had it translated into the three major languages represented in the local resettled refugee population: Arabic, Dari, and Swahili (see Appendix A). The flyers were sent through mail to a mailing list of eligible families provided by the agency; however these elicited no response. Additional flyers were distributed at relevant local events, such as an adult ESL class for the refugees, which resulted in one participant. The flyer was also made available to several other volunteers that I knew through the agency to help elicit participation. This resulted in one more participant recruited. Snowball sampling was attempted to elicit further participants, however both women stated they didn't know anyone. Table 3 shows a brief description of the demographics of the two cases.

*Table 3: Case descriptions*

| *Case Number* | *Nationality* | *Time in U.S.* | *Living arrangement* |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Case 1-Rayna | Syrian | 1.5 years | Husband, Mother-in-law, son, Muhammad (5) and daughter (3), (Sister-in-law and her two daughters were visiting and staying with them in their apartment during the time of the study) |
| Case 2-Lisa | Syrian | 2 years | Husband and three sons, Omar (4), Haya (7), and Alan (8) |

*Pseudonyms

Recruitment was a significant challenge in this study. I spent over 100 hours volunteering in the community both as an official volunteer with the resettlement agency and as a volunteer in a community-based ESL class for refugees. Through my work as a volunteer in the community, I had built trusting relationships with several women, however the women were

reluctant to participate. Common reasons were that they didn't understand the purpose of the study, didn't want to use a translator, or didn't want to participate. For example, I had shared about my study informally during some early interactions with one woman. She had indicated that she was willing to talk to me; however, when her child was getting ready to start PreK, I asked for more confirmation on when I can speak with her more formally and asked her to sign the informed consent form. In spite of the relationship we had built, she indicated that she wanted some time to think about it, and when I attempted to follow up twice, she didn't respond.

While the challenge of building trust with this population was somewhat anticipated. It became a major hurdle and barrier to gaining participants. Gillam (2013) points out the ethical and practical challenges in obtaining informed consent with refugees, stating that the power differences are between researcher and participant make it difficult to guarantee participants' autonomy, and that it is essential to have full research project information translated into their native language to ensure full understanding of purpose, risks and benefits. However, Gillam also points out that informed consent does not have to be written, particularly because the purpose is to respect autonomy of the participant. In the present study, I found women were willing to talk to me about their experiences, however, the formality of signing a form became a barrier for them. The challenges in communicating the purpose, risks and benefits of the study to individuals with limited English, even with translated information, broke down much of the trusting relationship I had built with some women prior. In spite of multiple attempts to gain more participants, I was met with reluctance and mistrust in the research process, with women fearing putting their name down and nervous to be audio recorded.

**Protection of Subjects**

All recruitment information, such as letters of invitation and informed consent were translated into Arabic, Dari, and Swahili, the major language groups from the population of resettled refugees in the target area. Translators were available through connections with Commonwealth Catholic Charities and their resources; however, none of the participants asked for a translator in spite of being offered one. I met with the mothers willing to participate to describe the study and gather preliminary information to use for selecting appropriate cases. All possible benefits and risks were explained to ensure the mothers understood that participation is voluntary. Data was kept protected behind the university firewall and password protected computer. Recordings of interviews were deleted after transcription. Names were not used on transcripts to ensure protection of identity.

**Risks**

Because the participants in this study are formally acknowledged by the U.S. government as legal residents and entered through official channels, there is no risk to individuals' immigration status within the U.S. Additionally, since the study focuses on post-resettlement experiences, there is little risk that individuals will have to talk about experiences prior to their migration, which reduces the risk that traumatic experiences will be retold. While I was able to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for participants choosing to be interviewed in English, it is impossible to guarantee confidentiality with the presence of an interpreter, although every effort would have been made to ensure interpreters maintained confidentiality.

**Benefits**

While the aim of the study was to identify areas where programs and policy could be improved, as well as practices that could be replicated in other resettlement areas of the U.S.,

there is little to no chance that the individuals participating would be personally benefitted by participating in the study. Additionally, when researching with refugees, it is important to be transparent about the expectations for possible impact that the research will or will not have on policy and practice (Gillam, 2013). As a doctoral student working on my dissertation, my influence is limited, and thus I was clear with participants that this study is part of my coursework and that I would be presenting it. Information such as date of resettlement, age of child(ren), school attendance, country of origin, family structure, and child's education history were gathered to help describe cases. An important part of this research, as with any research with refugees, is building trust (Hynes, 2003), which can involve navigating the borders of establishing credentials (Hynes, 2003) and being "acceptably incompetent" (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016) as a learner of their experiences and perspectives.

At all points in the research process, it was reiterated to participants that they could decline to participate at any time. Additionally, they could decline to participate in part or the entirety of the study at any point in time. All interviews were semi-structured to allow for participants to guide the discussion. I made it clear to participants that the interviews can take place at a location of the mother's choosing, such as in their home, a public library or community center, or the school, although they all chose to have the interviews in their homes. The school liaison chose to be interviewed at her office to save time. Transcripts were reviewed with participants to allow for member checking and further input, to ensure representation of their voice (Hynes, 2003). All data was de-identified and pseudonyms were used. Data was stored on a secure network and password protected computer.

**Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection occurred in late 2018 and took place in multiple contexts and over several months. Data collection methods were rich and contextual in order to avoid oversimplifying or overgeneralizing the experiences explored within one particular geographical and historical context. Merriam (2009) primarily emphasizes three types of data collection in case studies: interviews, observation, and document analysis. Data collection methods employed for this study were flexible and iterative, guided by participants. Data collection for each case include artifact and policy analysis, semi-structured individual interviews with mothers, agency personnel such as the school liaisons, and the researcher's detailed field notes and reflexive journals. Data collection was flexible and recursive, occurring concurrently with analysis to allow for emerging themes to be further explored as well as each case to be guided by the mothers and their preferences.

Table 4 describes the data collection and timeline. Data collection for each case was as follows. Mothers were interviewed through informal, semi-structured interviews. The foci of the first interview were the admissions process for their child into the early childhood program, and if appropriate, early experiences with the program such as preferences and modes of communication utilized. See Appendix B for the full interview protocol. Interpreters were offered to participants, however, both resettled refugee mothers recruited indicated they were comfortable proceeding in English. Artifacts such as letters from the school and school papers that the student brings home were sampled and used for elicitation during the interview. Some of the artifacts were voluntarily offered by mothers during interviews, such as Rayna's son's assessment results that confused her. Other artifacts were elicited through the interview question

4c: "Do you have any flyers or papers the school has sent?" and 1a: "Do you have any of his/her work you want to show me?"

*Table 4: Data collection for each case.*

|  | **Data Collected** | **Timeline** |
|---|---|---|
| Case 1-Rayna Initial interview | Questions focused on enrollment, first impressions of school, resources utilized | July |
| Follow-up Interview | Questions focused on challenges and helpful practices in school, mother-provided artifacts discussed | August |
| Case 2-Lisa Initial interview | Questions focused on enrollment, first impressions of school, resources utilized | August |
| Follow-up Interview | Questions focused on challenges and helpful practices in school, mother-provided artifacts discussed | September |
| Follow-up Visit | Researcher field notes on visiting the school with the participant | October |
| School Liaison Interview | Questions focused on connecting families with early childhood education services | September |
| Artifact Analysis | School, Agency, State, and National policies and handbooks | Ongoing |
| Reflexive Journal | Record reflections on decision making in the research process, the ways I am impacting the research and the research is impacting me | Ongoing |
| Debriefing with Cultural Informants | Debriefing after interviews and during analysis phase, recorded on memos | Ongoing |

Between first and second interviews, the schools' mission and vision statements, school handbook, program description and brochure, and other policy documents were collected from the website and analyzed. Policy analysis of global and national policies affecting refugee

families was also ongoing as those policies greatly impacted the experiences of refugee families, for example, during the study, Medicaid expanded to cover certain eligible adults. This particularly impacted Rayna, whose mother-in-law was without insurance for many months in spite of being diagnosed with cancer. The resettlement agency school liaison was also contacted and interviewed about the process of enrolling families in early childhood education and mothers' participation in that process as well as her perceptions of challenging and supportive practices within the program (see Appendix D).

The second interview with mothers took place two to four weeks later and focused on school practices that the mothers felt were supportive and those that they felt were unsupportive or disempowering (see Appendix C). Using artifacts provided by the mothers as cues, I asked questions to gain their perspective and responses to school practices. At the beginning of the interview, I conducted member checking by clarifying preliminary themes and descriptions of experiences. Field notes were taken after each interview and during a follow-up visit with Lisa, during which I took her to the school to attempt to reenroll her son. Field notes and transcribed voice memos from interviews along with preliminary analysis of initial interviews informed subsequent data collection.

After each data collection process, a key informant was consulted to check for cultural understanding and correct description of mother's words and actions. Along with member checking and triangulation with school liaison's interview, this served to increase trustworthiness in the study. For example, a key informant from the same region stated that often mothers do not like for their children to cry. This came up in both Lisa and Rayna's interviews, however, they responded to it differently.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

An important part of this research was ongoing data analysis concurrent with data collection (Yin, 2016). As themes emerged, more data was collected to delve deeper into the phenomenon. For example, during the first interview, Rayna focused on several salient negative experiences. Initial analysis showed that these challenges were met with a variety of conflicting responses, such as valuing school and wanting him to study, but not sending him to school. To further understand Rayna's response to challenges, clarifying questions were asked during the second interview. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim after the interview was completed.

Each case was analyzed as a unit, looking for themes and their relationships. All narrative data within each case was analyzed through Domain Analysis (Spradley, 1979), looking for themes across data sources in the mother's utilization of resources and perceptions of supportive practices within early childhood education services. Domain analysis, according to Spradley (1979), involves searching for larger units or cover terms for related concepts that emerge from the research. It involves several steps of exploring the terms that are repeated, grouping related terms and naming the domain with a cover term. Semantic relationships aid in the development of domains, for example in Lisa's case, I established that learning English was a way of problem solving. Problem Solving was the name of a domain and learning English was an included term within that domain that Lisa identified as a supportive practice in interacting with the school. Primary analysis was then followed by secondary analysis to further develop an understanding of each domain through taxonomic analysis to identify hierarchical structure within domains and specific contrasts between terms, componential analysis to more accurately describe the

domains, and theme analysis exploring the relationships between domains and the larger experience.

Keeping in mind that participants were utilizing a second language in interviews, terms and vocabulary being used were explored for relationship to other topics and descriptions, however specific contrasts were not made between terms. For example, in Lisa's case, she used the terms "overcome challenges," "solve problems," "improving" and "not stay in the same place" at various points in the interviews to describe the concept of encountering a challenge and overcoming it. I chose to name the domain "problem solving" because the participant used this term the most often. Additionally, vocabulary limitations made it necessary to not draw many inferences about the accuracy of the words being used. For example, the word "good" was used by both women often to describe the school, teachers, the class, and their children. Aware that vocabulary limitations are the most likely cause for the use of this word, and because it was used to describe multiple experiences and people, it was not possible to distinguish the exact meaning that it held for each mother. I decided to interpret that the mothers were communicating a general positive feeling towards what they were describing, using context and narratives to inform my understanding of the domains.

To increase rigor and trustworthiness of the study, a research team of two other researchers supported the analysis in the initial round of coding. The research team consisted of an expert in the field of social work with experience working with resettled refugees and an early childhood educational expert with experience with diverse families. The research team independently coded 20% of the data and reached agreement on the emerging domains. The rest of the data was coded by the principal investigator; then, during secondary rounds of coding and

analysis, the research team was again consulted for verification and reached agreement on relationships between domains and subdomains.

After analysis of each case separately, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify differences and commonalities. Yin (2016) states that some of the most interesting analysis comes from multiple cross-case analysis. Since cases were selected from within a particular context, all mothers had the common experience of refugee resettlement in the U.S. and negotiating early childhood education services for their child. Additionally, as a result of recruitment, both mothers were from the same country, indicating that cross-case differences were due to individual history and characteristics.

Cross-case analysis was conducted by looking for similarities across both cases as well as key differences as they addressed the research questions. Inductive analysis was used to identify similarities and name the shared domains, such as challenges, responses to tension, and supportive practices. These domains were shared by both mothers and they identified similar terms and practices within the domains of challenges and supportive practices. However, specific contrasts emerged during analysis of responses to tension. These differences helped to describe a more robust and multifaceted description of mothers' responses to challenges, addressing both social and cultural capital that mothers draw on in interacting with the school to resolve challenges.

<center>**Researcher's Role and Identity**</center>

**Reflexivity**

As a critical part of the research, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the study to record the ways in which I affected the research through participation and interaction with the families. Additionally, I reflected on my own cultural understanding and the ways that the research was

changing me, particularly after interactions with members of the community and conversations with key informants and research team members. At all points in the research, I used the reflexive journal to make sure an ongoing assessment of the relationship between the researcher and the families and how power and privilege influence the research as well.

As a white female researcher within the context, there is an inevitable power difference (Marmo, 2013) that must be acknowledged. This became apparent through my journals mostly in my own fear and disappointment. Many entries of my journal centered around my own fear of being misunderstood or declined by the women in the community. Particularly, after my experience with a woman who initially said yes, and then later said no, the fear of having wasted time came up in my journal. Several entries after spending time volunteering at the ESL class and making connections, yet having no positive recruitment reflected this same fear. Additionally, the fear made me hesitate and second guess when to follow-up with potential participants. For example, entries reflect a fear to follow up with women so that I wasn't putting undue pressure on them as well as a fear that I should have asked more directly; however, the priority was to ensure that I wasn't putting pressure on her to participate.

**Insider-Outsider Dichotomy in Cross-Cultural Research**

Postmodern discourses of blurred boundaries and fluid dichotomies, along with indigenous ontologies, argue for a reconceptualizing of the traditional view of insiders and outsiders in research (Enguix, 2014; Parker Webster & John, 2010). In their research with Alaskan Natives, Parker Webster and John problematize John's participation as an insider in the traditional dance community because of the difficulty in repositioning herself as a researcher. She had to draw on different identities in presenting herself to younger dancers as opposed to the Elders in the community. They argue that it is precisely in exploring those connective spaces

between the cultures, the hyphens and Third Spaces, that our identities as insiders or outsiders is negotiated. Similarly, Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016) found they had to negotiate their insider and outsider status in a research space in low-income populations in Brazil. Mayorga-Gallo had expected, as she had been advised, that because she was Mexican and spoke Spanish, she would be able to gain access to the Hispanic community members; however, she found that this was not so. She had to negotiate her identity with different participants: as a doctoral student from a prestigious university with the White and middle-class community residents, and as a first generation immigrant from Mexico with the Hispanic residents. The status as an insider or an outsider was ever changing and in flux depending on the context and the social interactions.

In gaining access to different stakeholders in the current research project, it was important to acknowledge my identity as an outsider within the research. I also found that it was important to navigate and negotiate my identity as an educational researcher, an agency volunteer in the community, and an American mother of young bicultural children. In my research, I expected my identity as an American and former teacher to put me at a disadvantage as an outsider with the refugee women. I was aware that this might affect my level of understanding the discourses and cultural performances of refugee families and children. It also could make it difficult to gain trust in trying to gather their honest opinions and experiences (Hynes, 2003). However, my expertise as a former teacher helped gain access in some cases, as mothers were willing to talk to me since I understood the school system. This became apparent in Rayna's case, in particular, when she asked for my assistance in understanding the assessment results that were sent home that she had questions about. To ensure validity and representation of

participant voices it was important to gain access through presenting myself appropriately and utilize member checking in the research process.

As an official volunteer with the resettlement agency, I had already gained an emerging level of access into the community before starting the research. I had taken my own children and visited a family at two different apartment facilities that the resettlement agency regularly utilizes in resettling refugees. It turned out that each of the two women recruited lived in those two apartment complexes. While I planned on conducting at least two interviews with the mothers in the study, I wanted to allow the participants as much choice in directing the context of the interview as possible. I used informal interview methods as a way of decentering the research process, and not to mirror the process of formal interviews, perhaps reminding them of their refugee admission process (Sinha & Back, 2014). Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman (2016) found that when participants met her family, they felt she was more authentic and trustworthy. Likewise, I found that my identity as a mother, and particularly as a cross-cultural mother increased trust between the families and me. For example, my field notes state that several times my own children were mistaken for Arabic children in the community. When mothers found out that they were mine and that my husband had grown up in the Middle East, their demeanors eased and they became more friendly and relaxed around me. In one such case, after the ESL class, Rayna invited me to come to her home for the interview. She had also invited another student and we shared lunch in her home. When they saw my younger son eating the *kubboos* (bread) and hummus with his hand, they commented that he was just like an Arabic child. Some families in the community had already seen me at the apartment complex with my own children visiting families as a volunteer. During interviews, I reference my identity as a mother regularly through comments such as, "He [my younger son] came home from daycare talking about

ghosts!" and, "Sometimes he does [listen to me]!" Additionally, several interviews showed regular interruptions from the children surrounding us as both participant and I engaged our own children by directing and correcting them. This took some of the formality out of the interview process and replaced it with a more naturalistic approach.

Building trust with the mothers required me to sometimes be willing to talk about my own questions as a mother and be willing to accept advice and cultural instruction. Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman (2016) operationalize this vulnerability as being acceptably incompetent, which contributes to the researcher's approachability. By approaching marginalized groups as acceptably incompetent researchers reverse the power in the relationship, because "the interactions between the acceptable incompetent and participant include explanations and identifications of otherwise unspoken or taken-for-granted practices and attitudes" (p. 9). This was reflected in my own journals as I discussed my hesitation over a cultural practice that was recommended to me for breaking my son's habit of sucking on his fingers. By trusting the mothers' traditional knowledge and decentering my own parenting practices, I was able to build trust with families.

## Summary

This study utilized a descriptive multiple case study design to investigate the perspectives and experiences of mothers with children in public preschool education in the U.S. Recruitment was attempted through multiple avenues, including flyers sent to a mailing list provided by the resettlement agency as snowballing through contacts with both volunteers and refugee families in the community. This resulted in two separate cases. Data collection took place over multiple weeks in order to collect rich and varied data on each individual case embedded within the larger phenomenon. While data was collected from multiple perspectives including policy and

document analysis and a school liaison interview, the research intended to focus on the mothers' experiences of the context and their perceptions and decisions within that context. Data analysis and collection was an iterative and concurrent process to allow for adjustments in the study in response to emergent themes and aspects of the case for further investigation. Qualitative data was coded using domain analysis, looking for emerging themes to come from the data from within each case. Relationships between themes and domains were explored to develop taxonomic relationships. A research team strengthened the research and increased the validity and trustworthiness of the study. After each case was described and interpreted from a critical theory stance, cross-case analysis was conducted to look for overarching themes and differences between the cases.

This research is valuable for policy makers, refugee resettlement service providers, and schools serving refugee families. It adds to the limited but growing literature on specific experiences of families in the early childhood context within the U.S., and offers a critical look at the experiences of families utilizing public preschool services. In the next chapter, I describe in detail the results of the study and analysis. The context is first described including the results of analysis of the agency school liaison's interview. Next, each case is presented independently, followed by cross-case analysis. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the implications and limitations of the study.

**CHAPTER IV**

**RESULTS**

I begin this chapter by describing the context for the present study. To achieve this, I used artifact analysis of state policy on refugee resettlement and domain analysis of an interview with the school liaison to describe the agency perspective. Documents used in describing the context were the state government website documents including grant proposals written by agencies, state contracts with resettlement agencies, and descriptions of the program. Additionally, the public school system website was used to access all public information about the Primary Blocks[1] preschool program offered through the public school system. The Parent Handbook for the 2018-2019 school year, Title I information, Parent Brochure, and powerpoint slides from Parent Information Night were used to analyze and describe the program and its major components as they related to parental involvement. This information was triangulated with the school liaison's interview to describe the process for screening and enrolling students in the program.

After describing the context, including the school liaison's perspective, I present each of the two cases as a separate embedded case within the context. Each case is presented separately first, as each mother's experience was treated as deeply contextualized within the early childhood program as well as the family and neighborhood they lived in. Finally, I present a cross-case analysis at the end of the chapter to discuss overarching themes across both cases as well as contrasting themes between the cases and between the described context and the mothers' experiences.

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[1] Pseudonym to ensure adherence to IRB guidelines.

**The Context**

The context of this study is a mid-sized city in Virginia. Refugee families are resettled under the United States Refugee Resettlement Program out of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The ORR contracts with resettlement agencies to provide services such as housing, English classes and job training. These contractual case management services last for only three months, but the agency and other community organizations continue to assist families for up to several years. At the time of the study, the agency employed a full-time (37.5 hour per week) school liaison who assists families for up to five years after their arrival. This position was funded through a combination of state and federal Refugee School Impact funds.

The city has a comprehensive full-day public prekindergarten program for 4- and 5-year olds called Primary Blocks. This program is funded by a combination of federal Title I funding, state grants for expanding preschool, and local funds. The district allocates approximately 50% of its Title I funds to the Primary Blocks program as a focus on early intervention. This is unusual because, according to the Department of Education website, only 2% of Title I funds across the nation are used to serve preschool students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Due to the confidentiality demands from the IRB granting approval for the research, specific figures cannot be given; however, the Primary Blocks program grew from serving a few hundred students to over a thousand from 2014 to 2017, about a 300% increase in just a few years.

To register their child for the Primary Blocks program, parents need to make a screening appointment through the website and attend the appointment at one of the four Early Childhood Centers in the district. This screening appointment lasts for approximately 30 minutes, during which the child must complete prescreening assessments related to language and social development. Parents must also fill out application paperwork and a survey on child behaviors.

Moreover, parents are required to provide valid income and address documentation as proof of eligibility. After receiving an acceptance letter, parents must visit their zoned preschool center during limited business hours with additional documentation in order to register their child. During the interview with Susan, the resettlement agency school liaison, she estimated that 50-75% of the students she helps go through the screening process get admitted to the program (School Liaison Interview).

The district has websites for each Primary Blocks Early Childhood Center that have parallel information. Additionally, there is a google translate feature available on the websites in multiple languages, including Arabic and Swahili. However, documents and attachments are only available in English and occasionally Spanish. According to the Primary Blocks Parent Handbook, parental involvement is a requirement of the program. The handbook lists several requirements of parents for participating in the program, including two parent-teacher conferences and meeting the bus daily to walk their child home. Additionally, each early childhood center in the program requires parents to sign a school-parent compact at the beginning of the year. This outlines more specifically the expectations that the school holds for the parents. See Figure 1 for the parent responsibilities listed in the compact.

**Parent Responsibilities**

**As a parent, I will:**

♦ Communicate on a regular basis through notes, phone conversations, e-mails, daily review of the Agenda Book entries. I also will attend scheduled conferences.

♦ Listen to and read with my child daily while talking about the story to encourage understanding.

♦ Assist my child by being available for help and encouragement.

♦ Encourage and model positive respect for the school, teachers, staff, and my peers.

♦ Ensure my child attends school daily and provide a note explaining the reason for an absence upon returning to school.

♦ Utilize district and community resources to enhance my child's learning.

♦ I will peruse volunteer opportunities at my child's school throughout the year.

I agree to participate in this compact.

_____
Signature/Date

**Figure 1. Parent responsibilities in school-parent compact**

As indicated above, in addition to attending parent-teacher conferences and maintaining

daily contact with the school, the program requires parents to support their child's education at

home through reading and utilizing community resources and ensuring their child maintains a

good attendance record. The Primary Blocks Parent Handbook for 2018-2019 states that,

"Although our program participants have not yet reached the state mandated age for school

attendance, the 'Title I Primary Blocks Parent Agreement' clearly states parents will ensure their

child will attend school each day on time and participate in the program according to the district

attendance policy" (p. 8). In fact, the Parent Orientation PowerPoint presentation available on

both Center A and B's websites state that the child's attendance record from the Primary Blocks program becomes part of their permanent school record.

As part of their family engagement core values, the district states that, "the responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with the school staff, especially school leaders" (School-Parent Compact, 2016, p.2). The compact also states that the school will ensure that they communicate regularly with families using "language interpreters when necessary"(p.2). It also states that the school will provide families with ideas and supplies for supporting their child's education at home and will be available to listen to parent concerns. It is of note that while compacts under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] should be developed together with parents (Department of Education, 2004, p22), the list of contributors to the document consists of three school district personnel. In the sections that follow, I detail the findings uncovered during domain analysis. I present the school liaison's perspective first to build context, followed by each case. Cross-case analysis at the end of the chapter involves comparing and contrasting the perspectives of each case.

## School Liaison Perspective

The resettlement agency employs a full-time school liaison to assist families with children in school. As the principal investigator, I interviewed Susan[2], the current liaison, during the summer of 2018. She had been in the position for a year, but previously worked as a Swahili interpreter for the agency. She holds a master's degree in women's studies and indicated to me that she is interested in pursuing her Ph.D. in public policy. At Susan's request, the interview was held at the agency office in the target city on a weekday morning. At the outset of the interview, she stated that it was a busy time of year for them, with the recent arrival of several large refugee families, which required much of her time.

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[2] All participants have been given pseudonyms in this writing to ensure anonymity.

According to the state contract with the voluntary agency, available on the state government website, the school liaison has several responsibilities and goals focused on enrollment and school achievement of "school-aged" children. Specific examples of responsibilities include coordination and participation in community events and partnerships with schools for awareness of "issues and challenges, including absenteeism, lack of parental involvement, etc." (FY 2016 VSRAP Performance Goals, p6). They are additionally tasked with coordinating parent workshops to "educate parents on their rights and responsibilities and to promote parental involvement" (same, p.6).

Our interview took place at the agency office and lasted approximately 39 minutes. During the interview, Susan described her role as the school liaison and the procedures and policies related to assisting families with preschool-aged children. She also relayed her perspective on the experiences refugee families have in registering and maintaining relationships with the preschool (see Appendix D for a list of questions used in the interview). Initial domain analysis of Susan's interview revealed four key domains: Misunderstandings, Challenges and Family Initiative, Priorities, and Roles and Responsibilities. Through taxonomic analysis, subcategories that emerged from the school liaison's interview helped to describe the domains through semantic relationships. Misunderstandings were a kind of challenge that families most often dealt with, in the school liaison's perspective. Additionally, challenges were sometimes characterized as the result of a lack of family initiative or a lack of prioritizing of early childhood education. The school liaison described the three primary stakeholders of families, school personnel, and the school liaison (SL) and their roles and relationships with each other using these terms and domains.

While Susan described several key challenges experienced by families, she often described them in relation to their indirect effects which included necessitating her involvement as the liaison. As described further below, her goal was to equip and empower parents to be self-sufficient in their involvement with the school. However, she expressed some frustration that either the school or the family would contact her at various times to mediate their conflicts, which often resulted from a misunderstanding and subsequently a lack of family initiative and self-advocating. In her experience, misunderstandings resulted from school personnel not utilizing translation services to communicate effectively. The only situation Susan described herself as proactively getting involved and pushing parent involvement was in enrolling children in the PreK program when families don't take the initiative to call her about it. Each domain is described in detail below.

**Domain 1: Misunderstandings**

Misunderstandings were discussed by the school liaison at length. There were many kinds of misunderstandings, including cultural misunderstandings on the part of families, school personnel misunderstanding of her own role and job description, and misunderstandings involving language and communication. In fact, when asked what the most common challenges are for families, her response was, "when the kids start PreK, some things are not understood at the beginning" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). Misunderstandings as a challenge for families is discussed more in the next section.

In addition, she stated that there were misunderstandings on her own part when interacting with families to assist with PreK enrollment. Her responses indicated that she didn't understand why some families changed their minds after asking for help. The following quote

illustrates this: "So there's really lack of training or understanding or knowledge why parents are not excited about PreK" (Susan, School Liaison).

Another misunderstanding she related was nurses misunderstanding the school liaison role and responsibilities within the relationship between school and home. She expressed some frustration at the nurses calling her for situations that she indicated she didn't need to be involved with, such as the child being sick or not having turned in a shot record.

"One I think they believe I'm a taxi service. I'm not a taxi company really! <laughs> so I told them if the child is in danger call 911! The ambulance will take them to the hospital because I'm not in the office right now to pick them." (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

These misunderstandings of her role were frustrating to her because it impacted her ability to do her job in the other areas. She didn't see picking up the sick child and giving her a ride home as part of her job, but instead as the parents' responsibility. This misunderstanding of the responsibilities of the stakeholders within the context was a key frustration for her because it led to her getting involved in situations that she didn't view as part of her job.

**Domain 2: Challenges and Family Initiative**

**Challenges as a reason for lack of initiative.** "I would like them to know these services are available to them, but most of the time they don't want to do it, they want someone else to help them with that. Yeah, I don't know if it's because they don't feel confident enough to be part of the education system or just because since they don't speak English somebody else can just explain that better." (Susan, School Liaison Interview)

When speaking about early childhood education and PreK enrollment, the school liaison frequently articulated a need for parents to take initiative. While she recognized that parents have "limited agency" in choice of early childhood programs, at the same time, she described that

some families lacked initiative in many cases and needed to be equipped with greater

understanding of the system and the tools available to them to participate with schools

effectively. As the quote above illustrates, she speculated that the lack of initiative is in part a

result of not being confident in their understanding due to lack of experience in the system and

limited English skills.

A key challenge she identified for families is understanding the procedures and "the do's

and don'ts" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). For example, from her perspective one of the

biggest challenges is the yellow card system for the PreK students on the school buses. PreK

students ride public school buses as all other public school students, however, they must have a

yellow bus tag around their neck every day. Parents and guardians must have an identical yellow

card when they pick students up from the bus stop daily. This is a procedure that is unique to

PreK and is outlined on the website and in the parent handbook for the Primary Blocks program

as well as reinforced at the school orientations. The school liaison described this as problematic

because often parents didn't understand the importance of this procedure. This misunderstanding

would result in children being returned to the school and needing to be picked up. In many cases,

this meant that Susan would have to leave work to pick the child up from school before 6pm and

deliver them home, since many parents don't have their own transportation.

Particularly with respect to PreK admission procedures, she described a

misunderstanding on the behalf of parents on the procedures and purpose of assessment in the

screening appointment. Susan indicated that there have been several instances that she has

observed parents coaching children through the screening assessment despite her objections

which resulted in the child not being admitted to the program. According to Susan, the school

personnel must mark that the child answered correctly, even if the parent tells the child the

correct answer. In the interview, Susan pointed out that they did too well on their screening assessment because parents "insist on telling the answer to the children" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). She then had to explain to the parents why their child cannot attend the PreK program. "Someone has been denied and I explained to them, 'because you were interrupting the whole session but that's not the right way'" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

Because the enrollment procedure is multi-step and her own responsibilities prioritized school-aged children over PreK enrollment, Susan stated that she would often ask families to take the first step in taking their child to the screening appointment on their own. This sometimes required them to find a ride from a friend or to use public transportation to find their way to the early childhood center.

**Initiative and contacting the school liaison.** Susan frequently referred to families as contacting her or calling her. Her reactions to this contact, however, were contradictory. She described parents who contact her on time for their children to be enrolled in PreK as "taking responsibility," compared to others who either waited too long to call or didn't call at all. On the other hand, Susan's interview demonstrated that when families contacted her, she viewed it as an indication that they have encountered problems.

> "Based on how many times they call me about things I can tell if it's easier or hard. Cause sometimes they have questions, like 'the child cries a lot in the morning,' 'the school is not good,' they ask me 'is it fair for other kids'? Yeah, but if they don't call me, I assume everything is good." (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

Susan used the number of phone calls from either school or families as an explicit measure of how well the family was transitioning to the school. She stated that a lack of contact was an indication of a lack of problems and that the family were able to navigate the system on their

own, showing initiative. For example, with regard to the transition to kindergarten, she stated that families that participated in PreK have few complaints and there are "barely few phone calls" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). She viewed families who called her, or instructed the school to call her, as not taking adequate responsibility for their child's education.

> The involvement is still not a lot… from the start they've taken a back seat, which is very problematic for me, because my main goal was to have them advocate for them and make them as responsible as possible. But the school calls and they say, 'call Susan, if you have any question, call Susan.' That is very sad, because I want them to be able to make a decision without asking me. I want them to have the paperwork because I don't know what is said at home, they have the child at home. (Susan, School Liaison Interview)

Families would contact her when they encountered challenges such as difficulties in communicating with the school, particularly with front desk personnel, who according to the school liaison often aren't trained or willing to use language-line, the phone service with trained translators available. "I've had people call me and say 'I went to the school. They say they don't know my child.' Did you talk to somebody?" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). She explained instances like this, where the family involved the school liaison in matters that she they should be able to handle, as illustrative of families' lack of initiative and school personnel's lack of training.

**Domain 3: Roles and Responsibilities**

**School liaison's role.** In the interview, Susan described her role as increasing awareness of the families on the resources and programs available to them and encouraging them to take initiative and be responsible. While both school personnel and refugee families continued to

contact her when they faced challenges, she took actions to give parents more responsibility and teach them to advocate for themselves.

She described some of the ways she tried to equip parents to advocate for themselves, particularly as to their rights to a translator. "I give them a piece of card that has their name, their kid's name, and the language they speak. So I tell them just go to the school and just show them this paper. They'll call the language on this phone, then they can talk to the person and translate." (Susan, School Liaison Interview). She also tries to connect new families to others living in the same apartment complex who speak the same language to assist each other with finding the bus stop for school. Additionally, she coordinates with a member of the public school district to provide "parent education" meetings on K-12 topics for parents to increase their cultural capital such as understanding report cards, communicating during parent-teacher conferences, and extracurricular activities that support education. She pointed out several times, however, that these meetings are strictly focused on K-12 parents and topics, leaving a gap in training for parents of PreK children. This is expanded in another section below.

An additional responsibility of her position that she articulated was advocating for families to non-teaching staff, such as the school nurses. She described several cases where she needed to negotiate with nurses on behalf of the parents.

> "So there's a problem there because I've seen them kick out kids out of school for not getting shots, but I'm like, 'How did you communicate to them? The parents don't know English, did you use language line?' They're like 'I don't know what that is.' So it's surprising in the same school with teachers they don't know what language line is!" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

As, this quote illustrates, Susan was perplexed that a school in which the teachers make regular use of Language Line to communicate with refugee parents, other personnel such as the nurses, claim to be unaware of it. She also expressed frustration that the nurses didn't seem to take time to understand common cultural differences with some families. She has had to contact the nurse in response to requests for proof that Muslim children can't eat pork.

> "So for instance when I have families say for religious reasons they can't eat pork, the nurse wants a doctor's note. There's not a doctor's note for not eating pork as a Muslim, so we go back and forth about this. It's not medical! The doctor is going to prove this child *can* eat pork, but you need to be culturally conscious of other cultures that just don't eat something." (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

Her frustration in having to "go back and forth" about these issues, led her to suggest that certain school personnel need to receive further training in relating with families. While her job description given by the state includes partnering with the school and community to increase awareness of such issues, she indicated that the recurrence of similar issues with certain school personnel is indicative of the need for more training.

**School's responsibility-taking initiative.** The school, in contrast to families was given credit for taking initiative, such as providing the Language Line resource for families, school personnel being involved in community events, and hiring an ESL family engagement coach who was very active in the community. In response to the question, "What's working well for these families?" Susan first applauded the school system for what it is doing to involve themselves in the community. Susan described the family engagement coach as "the face of the school… every parent knows her." This position is housed out of the ESL Welcome Center for the entire PreK-12 public school system in the city. According to the job description for the city,

this grant-funded position "exists to function as part of the network of assistance for Limited English Proficient and Refugee students and families." Susan indicated that, "she's all over the city-helping these families…assisting families with whatever" and being involved whenever there are incidents involving families from the refugee communities. However, with over 1200 ESL students in the district, Susan points out that the district should consider hiring an additional family engagement coach because she "cannot be everywhere at all times."

> "I think what has not been working is um, getting school events, parents to come to the school. So most of the time, the events that have worked is teachers going, or the school going, to the community. The parents need to be able to come to the school. I guess one of the problems is transportation. But any events in school which has been most important events in school, they don't attend. PTA meeting, teacher conference… I know some teachers, they tend to go to the parents to do a home visit, but you can only do so much for some families. You cannot go to everyone. So the parents need to know where the school is and go to the school often." (Susan, School Liaison Interview)

She described most of the initiative being taken by the school in the form of school going to the community, however in her estimation parents weren't taking the initiative to go to the school, even for important meetings. As indicated in the above quote, she recognized that a crucial challenge for many families is transportation, especially with some schools being very far from the family residences, however she still viewed it as a lack of adequate involvement from parents.

## Domain 4: Priorities Deemphasize Early Childhood Education

**Family priorities.** "It's this kind of push-push, to do something they think it's too early" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

When speaking about PreK enrollment, Susan described some challenge in motivating parents to enroll their children in PreK. She indicated in the interview that she attributed some of the reluctance to cultural beliefs that some families held in contrast with PreK, and she articulated some frustration with this. For example, with regard to the hesitation some families feel in sending their young children out of their home, she stated, "especially our Middle Eastern families… it's this very vast weird theory about someone else is teaching your child a different culture" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

Susan suggested that some of this "push-push" is a result of a lack of parental understanding of the importance of early childhood education as well as the lack of priority within her program for it. In fact, Susan indicated in her interview that one major solution would be better training for her and for parents on the importance of early childhood education. As illustrated in the following quotes, conversations with parents seemed to be focused on the elementary and higher grades. According to the school liaison, the lack of conversation about early childhood contributes to lack of parental buy-in as well as a misunderstanding of the value and importance of early childhood education.

> "Getting the parents also to be involved at that early age is really hard, compared to when kids are grown, they see the need to…nobody's talking about below K, so we talk about everything-grading.. and parents I think they come to the understanding it's not important until K" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).
>
> "I've seen families that I would make appointment for them, then the day of the appointment they say no, they say no because the entire family says it's not good for the child to go to school early. So there's really lack of training or understanding or

knowledge: why parents are not excited about PreK, why it's constantly a push-push."
(Susan, School Liaison Interview).

In the case of PreK enrollment, Susan indicated that the lack of parental initiative resulted in more work for her to get children screened and registered for the program. As described below under the school liaison's role, she has established structures and procedures to aid in contacting families when their children are eligible for the PreK program.

**Policy gap in early childhood.** "My program doesn't really make that a priority. I'm not really invested in it, so neither are families." (-Susan, School Liaison Interview).

In describing the policy regarding children and her position, Susan pointed out that her job description was entirely focused on children aged five to eighteen. As a result, she cannot document within her state reports any child under five as a client that she has served. Still, she estimates that close to 20% of her time is spent on helping families with children under five. As the following quote illustrates, her perspective is that getting students into PreK programs is a proactive strategy to ensure greater school success in later grades, where the state is concerned. As a result, she invests a portion of her time in activities supporting PreK enrollment and attendance, however she admits that her priority has to be the K-12 families since that is her state-mandated role.

"We've tried to talk to the people who fund our program that PreK is very much important as school. So then that doesn't count as my work-helping with PreK, but that's when PreK starts and if I don't help with PreK, getting into K will be very hard, and it will help in the transition." (Susan, School Liaison Interview)

The lack in focus on PreK in her job description resulted in a lack of knowledge about early childhood programs and benefits. She primarily enrolled children in the public PreK

program, but she had recently helped one family get their child on the waiting list for Head Start, which she stated is very hard to get into. Additionally, she has little knowledge about other early childhood services and programs. When asked about Early Head Start or home visiting programs that are available in the state for low income families, she responded, "I never had to help someone get into those programs. Social Services has them, they try to ensure that every child is in a program. Yes, those who maybe worked with Social Services directly" (Susan, School Liaison Interview). She referenced several organizational systems she utilizes with children under 5 that she had carried over from the previous school liaison, such as entering the date the child will turn 4 in her calendar so that she knew when to follow-up with the family. She admitted that she has received little training on both what is available and what is beneficial for families with regards to early childhood.

> "Maybe if we are given let's say training on this kind of group of children, what's beneficial for them getting ready for school and what's not, because they are not only just new to going to school, they are also new from different cultures." (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

In the statement above, she pointed out that children from refugee families might need something different than other children, but she was unsure of what that would be. At several points she stated that Social Services might be helping get children into programs, such as daycare and early intervention, but she didn't know much about those programs. The state has several early intervention and home visiting programs available to low-income families through Social Services, but her interview indicated that she was not aware of families utilizing these services as this is done in isolation with Social Services, and her job description focused on school.

The other area that the gap in policy affected was the way that Susan prioritized her time. In discussing the way that she typically assisted families with PreK enrollment and registration she admitted that it depends on the "work load" which is determined by K-12 enrollment needs.

> "So right now we have a family of 15 that just came with another single mom of 4 kids, so the work load is so much, and they cause a lot of work. So I can't take everybody to every appointment... so if I'm free, like we were really slow around May-June, I was taking everybody!" (Susan, School Liaison Interview)

At times when she has a heavy load, she has to rely on parents' initiative more to take children on their own to the screening appointment. She prioritized helping them with the registration appointment because "that's the most important part," because there is a specified time it has to be completed within. However, it requires parents to take the first step, which involves finding transportation to one of three early childhood centers in the city and having the required paperwork to prove eligibility.

Consistent with current policy discourses on Early Childhood Education, Susan indicated that children who participate in the PreK program make a smoother transition to kindergarten, however her admitted lack of expertise in the field made it difficult for her to "message [PreK] in a better way" to families. Additionally, her responses indicated a disconnect between the systematic push to get kids into preschool programs early and the cultural values of some families. She continued to encourage families to utilize PreK services because she saw that it contributes to an easier transition to elementary school for families.

### Individual Cases

Below I will present the cases of Rayna and Lisa. Rayna will be presented first, followed by Lisa, as this was the order data collection was completed in. Both mothers indicated that they

wanted interviews to take place in their home and without a translator. Table 5 shows the basic demographic information for each case. While there were many similarities shared, such as nationality, there were family-level differences regarding living arrangements as well as the PreK center attended by the child.

*Table 5: Basic demographics for each case.*

| Case | Nationality | Time in U.S. | Living arrangement | PreK Center | Data |
|------|-------------|--------------|--------------------|-------------|------|
| **Case 1-Rayna** | Syrian | 1.5 years | Husband, Mother-in-law, son, Muhammad (5) and daughter (3), (Sister-in-law and her two daughters were visiting and staying with them in their apartment during the time of the study) | Primary Blocks Center A | 1:30:22 of interviews, researcher memos and field notes |
| **Case 2-Lisa** | Syrian | 2 years | Husband and three sons, Omar (4), Haya (7), and Alan (8) | Primary Blocks Center B | 1:48:13 of interviews, researcher memos and field notes, |

**Case 1: Rayna**

Rayna is a young mother from Syria. She has two children, a son (5 years 4 months) and a daughter (2 years 5 months) who were both born in Jordan. Her husband and mother-in-law also live with them in their 1,050 sq. ft. two-bedroom apartment in a complex where many other refugee families reside. They were resettled in the United States in January of 2017, so at the

time of the interviews, they had been in the U.S. for one and a half years, and her son,

Muhammed, had just finished the Primary Blocks program.

I met Rayna while volunteering at an ESL class in the community and she agreed to help

me with my project and talk about her experiences with the Primary Blocks program. She

indicated that she was comfortable doing the interviews in English, and her sister-in-law was

visiting from Canada and would be able to help if it was necessary. This turned out to not be

necessary except for a few times during the second interview when the questions were more

"difficult," according to Rayna. Both interviews took place in her living room in the afternoon,

with her two children, my two children, and her sister-in-law's two children playing around us.

During the first interview, her mother-in-law and husband were in and out of the living room as

well, but during the second interview they were resting in the bedrooms, and I didn't see either

of them. During both interviews Rayna was dressed casually in short sleeves and her head

uncovered.

Interview 1 took 41:30 and Interview 2 took 48:52. Her son had attended the Primary

Blocks program from the beginning of the school year. The previous summer, the former school

liaison had driven Rayna and her son to the several required appointments to get him screened

and registered. Rayna stated that the school liaison helped with filling out the paperwork as well,

since she didn't understand it well, due to her lack of English proficiency. When asked why she

chose to enroll him in the PreK program, she responded that she wants him to study and go to

school. Muhammed attended Primary Blocks Center A, which is located approximately 2.7

miles, or a 6 minute drive from their apartment. This center is the second largest in the city, with

approximately 468 students and 28 teachers (Primary Blocks Parent Handbook 2018-2019).

In her interviews, she described her experiences with the Primary Blocks program, and responded to multiple questions by returning to several salient experiences she had throughout the school year. These salient experiences were marked by tensions, however, her response to these tensions as well as her other responses in the interviews indicated key supportive practices. These supportive practices were either on her part or the part of the school. Domain analysis yielded the two main domains of tensions and supports; further taxonomic and component analysis showed how these domains are interrelated and the subdomains that describe and are illustrative of them. Supports were experiences that primarily supported her and the family's participation in the early childhood setting, while tensions were those experiences where values were in conflict or posed a barrier to participation in the program. Her response to these tensions demonstrated resourceful problem solving to overcome the challenges. The tensions are expanded on in the sections below, but often tensions were primarily characterized as experiences that involved her son crying or resisting going to school. She described this as problematic for her, because she valued education and described a strong desire to have him study. An additional characteristic of tensions was confusion, which she often described as "surprise," such as receiving conflicting reports from the school, or situations in which her son didn't behave in a way she thought was characteristic of him. Table 6 describes the subdomains of the tensions and supportive practices identified through taxonomic and component analysis.

*Table 6: Tensions and supportive practices identified by Rayna's interviews*

| Domain | Tensions | Supportive Practices |
|---|---|---|
| | Parent transportation to school | Programs at the school<br> -parties<br> -presentations |
| | Child conflict with others | Translation App |
| | Conflicting communication from teacher | Regular communication with teacher on Remind App |
| | Parent-child conflict | Going to the school |
| | Son crying | Donating Items to school |
| | School attendance | Community network, social connectedness |
| | Values in Tension | Teacher responsiveness to concerns and questions |

The relationship between these two categories is not dichotomous but recursive and mediated by Rayna's decision making. Often Rayna would encounter a tension, such as a communication that she didn't understand from the school, that would prompt a response on her part, usually involving the access of social, cultural, or technological resources. This would most often elicit an encounter that was supportive and facilitate active participation in the program. Occasionally, she encountered a tension that she could not resolve, however she demonstrated resilience and persistence in problem solving when it came to interacting with her son's educational experiences. Figure 2 represents the relationships between tensions and supportive practices as well as an example illustrating the interaction. The source of the tensions varied and was influenced by several factors, but primarily was based in institutional, cultural, or personal values in conflict.
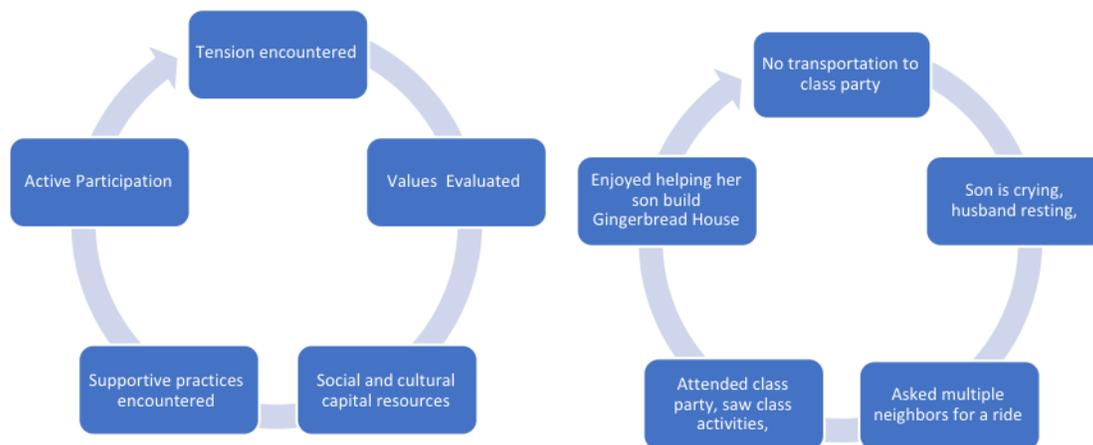
**Figure 2. Relationships between domains in Rayna's case and example illustrating how they interact in a salient experience described by Rayna.**

In the sections that follow, I will present each domain and the major subdomains that make up the taxonomic analysis. Key experiences that were characteristic of each domain are described from Rayna's perspective to highlight the key components of the domain.

**Domain 1: Tensions.** Tensions were characterized by experiences which involved either confusion or her son's negative emotions. She identified several key tensions including transportation, communication with the teacher and school, and inter-personal conflicts between her son and other students. There were experiences within these areas that she came back to several times in her interviews in response to interview questions.

*Transportation.* Primary Blocks Center A is located 2.7 miles away from the apartment complex where Rayna's family lives and there are no direct buses on public transportation. A primary challenge for Rayna being involved with her son's school programs was transportation to the school. She estimated that she made it to the school a total of five or six times. Two of those times the school liaison drove her, the other times her husband either came early enough from work to drive her or she had to find her own transportation. In one instance, she describes that she found an Afghani man willing to drive her.

Principal Investigator: How many times did you go to the school?

Rayna: I think 5 or 6?... for if I can go… or if he have [need] any money for a field trip.

Principal Investigator: Ok, so you would go to the school to give that money? How would you get there?

Rayna: If my husband coming early…my husband, he take me sometimes, if he didn't come at 6 or 7 [from work].

Rayna doesn't drive and their family only has one car, so she is dependent on her husband to get her to the school when it is necessary. In the above excerpt, she explains that her husband usually works until 6 or 7 in the evening and isn't able to take her to the school, however, if he happens to come early, she can get to the school. In fact the distance and difficulty getting to the school was one of the main complaints about the school. She stated several times in both interviews that she would have liked to go to the school more and interact with the teacher more often face to face.

Rayna stated that she greatly enjoyed the opportunities when she was able to go to the class and see the teacher. She expressed a strong desire to go and visit the school more often and even walk her child to class if necessary. Because of this key tension, she missed the parent-teacher conference. She stated that the teacher sent a paper with the appointment time on it, but she couldn't attend because her husband didn't come home early enough for it. When she apologized to the teacher that she couldn't make it, the teacher's response was "no problem." However, she indicated that she would have enjoyed having the teacher come to her home to meet with her if she couldn't make it to the school.

"This is teacher of my son! I like! And I like to speak for what she like and what happened for school. That's good for me! If I didn't come [to the school], I [still] understand what my son he speak for school or what he study!" (Rayna, Interview 1)

This barrier made her feel disconnected from the school and her son's program in many ways. As illustrated in the quote above, she felt meeting with the teacher and seeing the classroom more would have helped her understand what her child was studying. When she was able to overcome this barrier and get to school, she was able to participate with her child and gain valuable insight into his experience in school. In one instance, she persevered to get a ride to attend the Christmas party, because her son was crying that she wasn't there. She got to participate in a Gingerbread House building with her son. She explained that she really enjoyed that experience, but had she not persisted and asked several people to give her a ride, she would have missed it as well. In another instance, she was able to hear her son and the other students present their drawings to the parents. By securing transportation for herself, she was able to experience some very positive aspects of the early childhood school. In fact, these were the only instances that she described participating with her child in educational activities throughout the interviews.

*Communication***.** Another salient characteristic of tensions that emerged in Rayna's case was tensions in communication between the school and home. Sometimes this was a tension because of the language barrier, at other times however, it was clearly an institutional tension mitigated by school communication norms and educational language. During the interviews, Rayna spoke frequently about communication between herself and the teacher. She often used communicating directly with the teacher as a means of understanding the written communication coming from the school. She stated several times that she sometimes doesn't understand the papers coming home, as illustrated in the following quote.

"Sometimes he's coming for [with] the paper. I didn't understand what for! Sometimes I question for the teacher, what this mean? Sometimes I understand, sometimes I don't understand." (Rayna, Interview 2).

There were several ways that she responded to the language barrier in communication, including utilizing family and neighbors as well as technology resources that are expanded upon in the next sections. Most of the communication from school to home was written in the form of papers sent through the child's folder, and Rayna stated that they were always sending stacks of papers home. She stated that this was problematic for her and her husband particularly at the beginning of the year, when they had only recently arrived and their English was not strong. In spite of being able to ask the teacher what these papers meant, she stated that she regularly threw away papers that she didn't understand because there were so many. Rayna's interview indicated that acquiring English had strengthened her participation in school activities and being able to communicate directly with the teacher.

She felt confident in communicating with her son's teachers and the school in the future in Kindergarten because her English has improved since the beginning of last year and she has access to translators as needed. Several times she stated that the teacher gave them access to the language line translators if needed over the phone.

Rayna: If me or my husband don't understand-doesn't understand anything, the teacher, she call translator, we speak Arabic.

Principal Investigator: Ok, on the phone? Ok, and that helps?

Rayna: yeah, [s]he say all the time, "if you don't understand, I can call the translator"

Principal Investigator: ok, so they say to you on the phone, the teacher will say to you…

Rayna: yeah, two days [s]he call translator, I say "I doesn't understand" and he calls

translator

(Rayna, Interview 2)

She frequently named this as a supportive practice of the teacher, and she felt that this

helped her to feel connected to the school and have access to communicating with the teacher

about her son. She felt that if she had questions, she could send the teacher a message and the

teacher would always respond and give her access to the translator if she needed it.

In spite of this confidence, there were recent communications from the school that she

stated confused her. During the initial interview she demonstrated an eagerness to discuss a

particular paper that had been sent at the end of the year from the school by bringing it up several

times.

Rayna: I see the paper.. It surprise me, but he my son, I know he very smart! All the

people, he say he very smart! In 4 months, he speak English very well!

Principal Investigator: That one paper… what did it say exactly?

Rayna: It say for a, b, c, d.. [s]he want 12 if he's good, but my son, he just say 6.

(Rayna, Interview 1)

In the above quote, Rayna describes her understanding of the paper she received with the

results of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening [PALS] assessment, an assessment

utilized state-wide to measure phonological and early literacy development in primary students.

She received the single-page results stapled to the final quarter report card, sent home in her

son's backpack at the end of the school year. She stated that with the help of her sister-in-law,

she was able to understand that one of the benchmarks for the assessment is identifying 12

lower-case letters, however, her son only scored a 6 on this section. She did not say anything

about the other sections, though her son also scored below the benchmark with the exception of rhyming.

> "I have paper for my son, [s]he say my son he won't understand small a, b, c, d, but he understand just 6. But my son, for 4 month he speak English well! He's so smart! I don't know why she write this" (Rayna, Interview 1)

As the above quote indicates, Rayna misunderstood the results sheet of the PALS assessment as a personal evaluation by the teacher of her son, and not a formal assessment. Rayna repeated that she didn't understand why the teacher would give such a low score when she had told her in all her previous communication that he's very smart and doing well. This conflicting information caused a tension for her and she indicated she was bothered by not being able to discuss it with the teacher, stating "I want asking [her] about this" (Rayna, Interview 1). During the interview, she brought out his other report cards that had positive reports in the comment section. This conflicting communication from the teacher confused and frustrated her, especially receiving it at the end of the year. When I asked if he knew his letters, she responded "I think, yes" but that he might not be able to write them all. While looking over the assessment together she asked several clarifying questions about what terms meant, such as "rhyming" and "object identification," indicating a desire to know what the components of the assessment are, but lacking the specialized knowledge of phonological awareness and early literacy.

*Conflict with other students.* In two salient experiences, conflicts with other students led to tension in the family and a significant barrier to her son's attendance. When asked about the school and how she felt about her son's experience, these were the only two experiences he had that she spoke negatively about, making them shadows on both her and her son's memories. In

general, her descriptions demonstrated that she valued her son being in preschool and learning, however, these two conflicts with other students were the main barriers for her son.

The first conflict was an incident on the bus that required the school to contact her husband. She indicated that another boy fought with her son, causing him to get in trouble and that this is behavior uncharacteristic of her son. In Interview 1 she asserted that, "he doesn't speak or fighting, just one day he punch this boy, he fight." Subsequent to that incident, he resisted getting on the bus every day for 32 days. She stated that in spite of the fact that she desired him to attend school, she couldn't send him to school crying. Having no other way to get him to school other than the bus, he stayed home. The other conflict she described was that a boy in the class cried and made it difficult for him to hear the teacher. These tensions caused him to cry and resist attending school. In spite of contacting the teacher, there was no resolution that satisfied her and the tension created between her values for education and her son's desire to avoid his conflicts was resolved by staying home. The following quotes are illustrative of the intensity in the way she felt about these conflicts and how they opposed her desire for him to attend school.

> "He like [school]! But now, if you say he go for school, he say no… and I tell you that boy all the time he's crying for the class, and that this boy is fighting all the time." (Rayna, Interview 1)

> "I tell you, just this boy crying, and fighting my son, I didn't like. I want my son study, not going to school and crying, just going [staying] for my home, saying 'I don't like going for school'." (Rayna, Interview 1)

These conflicts were the main reasons she gave for why her son didn't attend the Primary Blocks program for 32 days in the fourth quarter. She repeated several times that her son likes

school and wants to study, but these two key conflicts made it difficult for him to attend. In her talk about these instances, she described them in a way that laid the responsibility of the absences as some exterior factor and pressure on her son. The little boy crying in his class prevented him from hearing the teacher, and the boy that he fought with on the bus prohibited him from riding the bus. This tension is magnified by the transportation challenge, as had they had alternative transportation, Rayna indicated that it's possible he wouldn't have missed so much of school.

Rayna did not show clear persistence in the face of this tension as she did in others. When asked what she did to try to resolve these tensions, she only stated that she tried to talk to the teacher, but there didn't seem to be a clear resolution or plan made to help him get back to school.

> Rayna: Some boy, Africa, he fight with [my son]. He doesn't fight [back]! I tell teacher for that and he say to the teacher, "no, teacher! Everything is good!"
>
> Principal Investigator: ooh, why do you think he said that? Why do you think he thinks it's no problem for the teacher?
>
> Rayna: He afraid that the teacher will call the boy and will maybe talk the boy and [so] just say for the teacher no problem, it's ok
>
> Principal Investigator: aww, but then when he comes home he tells you he doesn't want to get on the bus, right?
>
> Rayna: one month he doesn't go school.
>
> Principal Investigator: cause he's telling you he doesn't want to go to school?
>
> Rayna: he just wants to stay with me.

Her actions show deference to her son's agency and respect of his choice in this situation in spite of her desire for him to attend school. In the interview, she related that the only reason he agreed to return to school was that she convinced him that the last two weeks of school they will be receiving awards and special parties to celebrate the end of the school year. However, these interpersonal conflicts of her son's caused him to be absent for 32 days in the last quarter of school.

**Domain 2: Supportive practices.** Many of the supportive parental actions Rayna described were responses to the above tensions/challenges. Her responses varied based on the values that sometimes conflicted. She made use of technology and social capital to solve problems involving language and transportation. Additionally, she stated that her own acquisition of English has been helpful in being able to relate to the school and her son's teacher. As the following quote indicates, she demonstrated incredible resourcefulness and persistence to respond to tension particularly when her son's emotions, such as crying, put pressure on her. In her response she describes asking several people to give her a ride, continuing to ask until she gets a positive response.

> Rayna: yeah, all the people is come, just me [not there for the party]. My son, he's crying! Some days, he's crying [so] I'm going! I tell the people Afghani, 'If you can help me?' My husband he give me key for the car. He say today the car is stay. If she have anybody who can drive, take the car..
>
> Principal Investigator: so, your husband would leave the car and leave the key and you would ask a friend to drive.
>
> Rayna: yeah, I ask some people but all the people she say if he's going for the job or…
> Anyway, just one boy he help me, one man.

Principal Investigator: oh, one man helped you?

Rayna: yeah, he didn't want to drive car for my husband, he's going car for him.

Principal Investigator: So he took you to the school and he brought you back?

Rayna: and coming back!

Principal Investigator: he brought you back?

Rayna: yes, he's going and he come back for me.

She admits that her son crying is a primary motivation for her to go to the school and in this case she showed determination and asked several neighbors before finding someone to take her. Her husband was willing to hand over the keys to someone to take her, but unable to take her according to Rayna. She knocked on the doors of several fellow refugee families that she knew, encountering discouraging answers until she finds a man willing to help her get to the school. She indicated she really appreciated this man's help because he was willing to come back and pick her up after the party as well.

***Value for education as a supportive practice.*** Rayna's responses indicated that she valued her son's education, however, in several instances, Rayna described choosing not to overcome the challenge. For example, with the myriad papers sent from the school, she related throwing many papers away. In many cases, Rayna described weighing the values that were in conflict. Often, she deferred to her son's wishes or showed persistence to appear as a "good mother" to the teacher. She was adamant that she valued education and had a strong desire for her son to study and get a good education.

She saved most of his papers from school in their apartment, showing that she valued school and enjoyed getting his craft papers back from the school. She also stated several times that her son liked school and loved to study, however certain barriers discussed above kept him

from wanting to go. She stated that he likes school and he likes to study all the time. However, when asked what she does with him at home to study, her response indicated a resistance from him.

> "Sometimes I want [to study with him at home] but [my son] he doesn't like!" (Rayna, Interview 2)

She said she never studies with him at home, although she wants to, and that the school doesn't send anything for them to use to study at home. In spite of the fact that she wishes to study with him and help him advance in school, her actions indicate that she won't push him to do something he doesn't want.

She additionally expressed that it was important for her to maintain a good relationship with the teacher and to feel close to the teacher so that she would think that she is a good mother. This desire to be seen as a good mother influenced her persistence to attend school functions and send in donated items whenever she could. When asked what she does to maintain a good relationship with the school, she struggled to describe her perspective in English and deferred to her native tongue, Arabic, asking her sister-in-law to translate for her.

> Rayna's Sister-in-Law (translating for Rayna): When they have party or something at the school she bring the cake and make birthday for [her son]. She say the teacher love her! She wanted and she bring the cake and the teachers love her and say "you are a good mother!"… "you come here, you bring something for the kids." (Interview 2)

She felt that by being involved through going to the class, asking questions regularly through messenger, and sending in items that were requested for parties she can maintain a good relationship with the teacher. She stated that by doing these things, she is seen as a "good mother" by the teacher and the school, which helps her keep a good relationship with the school.

As another example, she related that before the Christmas party, the teacher had sent a paper asking for donations among a list of items and Rayna had purchased everything on the list to send in, in an effort to demonstrate that she is involved and values the school.

These primary values of education, being viewed as a good mother, and her value of her son's autonomy and agency were demonstrated in her accounts of their year interacting with the PreK program. Occasionally, when these values came in conflict with each other, she had to choose a course of action and in several cases deferred to her son's choices above her own preferences. When her son didn't want to go to school or to study at home, she didn't force him, but did attempt to find ways to convince him to change his mind, as illustrated by her attempts to convince her son to return to school at the end of the year. She indicated a desire to be seen as a good mother by the school so that she could maintain a good relationship with them.

***Technology as a supportive practice***. In responding to tensions and conflict, particularly within the domain of communication, Rayna relied on technology. Rayna had a phone translation app that she relied on to help her in communicating with the teacher, particularly when she didn't know much English.

> "Yeah, I have translator, so if I don't have anything understand, I put in the translator… I
>
> copy what the teacher say and I put it in the translator and she tell me what the teacher
>
> she say" (Rayna, Interview 2)

She stated that her mother-in-law had been the one to show her this app and that she felt quite comfortable knowing that she had it when she needed it. She indicated that it gave her a sense of comfort to know that she was able to translate communication from the teacher, however, she did state that sometimes it translated incorrectly, and she wasn't able to make sense

of the responses. In those cases, she either chose to remain confused or asked the teacher to use the Language line translators.

The Remind App, used by the teacher to communicate with the families in her class, was another resource that she indicated significantly helped her feel connected to what was going on in school, particularly since she had limited transportation to the school.

"Remind program! The teacher she have a group and all the parents for school-no for class for this group! She send the picture sometimes for the children and the children, what he play and what he have work and what he study today!" (Rayna, Interview 2)

During the second interview, Rayna spent significant time scrolling through the old messages on the app to show me pictures of her son and his classmates. Several of the pictures skipped because he was absent on that day. She did show several pictures including him building a tower with mega blocks, some of his reading and writing on the bulletin board, and class activities outside in the school garden. She also stated that she talked to the teacher about twice a week through the Remind App in an attempt to maintain a good relationship with the teacher and stay involved. The use of this app gave her a sense of connectedness to what her son was doing in school and ability to communicate with the teacher about his behavior in class. These two technology pieces worked together and helped her feel connected to the school, because she was able to make sense of the papers coming home and the written communication through the Remind App.

***Utilizing social capital as a supportive practice.*** In problem solving and finding solutions to the tensions above, Rayna relied on social capital resources around her. These primarily included other immigrant families in her neighborhood, her sister-in-law, and the teacher herself.

When none of these resources was able to resolve the issue, such as in the case of the PALS

assessment paper, she was unsure of where to reach out next to find resolution.

> Rayna: Sometimes I understand sometimes I don't understand

> Principal Investigator: If you don't understand, what do you do?

> Rayna: I have some people, she have daughter same school and I tell her, the children for

> this women, she speak English good. I tell what she have tomorrow and she tell me.

> Sometime me, I tell her what she have, sometimes the women tell me what. (Interview 2)

In the quote above, Rayna says that she has another Syrian friend in the neighborhood

who has children who are able to speak English well. Her interview indicated that she feels

comfortable asking her friend for help in understanding what school papers mean, as she talked

about relying on her a few times. This was framed as a mutually beneficial relationship because

Rayna pointed out that she was able to help this other woman know what was coming up

sometimes. She also was able to rely on other neighborhood immigrants when she had to, like in

the case of getting to the school for the Gingerbread House building.

Additionally, she stated that she relied on her sister-in-law, who has lived in Canada for

several years, to help her understand papers, sending pictures of them along in messenger so that

she could explain them to her. Her sister-in-law was a key source of support for her because she

speaks better English than she does and has older children that have attended school before. Her

sister-in-law was visiting from Canada during the time of both interviews and assisted in

translating with a few of the questions that Rayna found more difficult to explain in English. I

observed her actively helping Rayna with her own children as well, and in a few cases, she

offered her own responses to the questions to help Rayna explain. For example, she is the one

who pointed out that Rayna sent in everything on the list from the Christmas flyer. Several times

Rayna stated that she was comforted to know that she always has her sister-in-law to defer to if she has questions about school.

Finally, Rayna indicated that she often asked the teacher for help in understanding school papers and helping to solve her son's interpersonal conflicts. She spoke about writing notes to the teacher asking what particular papers are for. She also indicated that she tried to speak to the teacher about the issues her son was having on the bus and with the student crying in class. When asked what the teacher's response was, Rayna shrugged and stated that the teacher can't do anything.

***Learning English as a supportive practice*.** A final way that she has been able to ease some of the tensions is by improving her own English. Several times she talked about how the beginning of the year was hard because she didn't speak or understand English, but now she is much better and she is able to understand and communicate with the school when she needs to.

> "Now I can understand what the teacher say. Uhh, before I didn't can't speak English
>
> good, but now I can understand" (Rayna, Interview 2)

The confidence exhibited in the above quote contrasts with her descriptions of enrolling her son and her experience at the beginning of the year. She indicated that during PreK registration, she was new and knew no English to be able to fill the forms out and was forced to rely on the resettlement agency school liaison. She also related that early in the school year, she received many papers from the school and threw them out because she didn't understand. She pointed out the advantage that knowing English will give her in the coming school year to be able to understand the school communication and participating with the school, relieving some of the tensions she experienced during the PreK year.

In spite of her confidence with English, she recognized that there was specialized knowledge relating to the school experience that she still lacked. When asked what advice she would give to a new mother whose son would attend the same program, she highlighted this lack of understanding in the school system.

> "Me new for America, I don't know… this is just one school, and my son.. I tell him the school is good and the teacher is good.. Just the boy listen for the teacher and study. Listen for the teacher." (Rayna, Interview 2)

As indicated in the above quote, she is aware of a personal lack in cultural capital that isn't rectified by learning English. Her response indicates that the best advice she can give to new PreK parents is to listen to the teacher and defer to the school, although in several of her own actions related in the interviews, she deferred to her son's wishes over the school.

Rayna's case demonstrates several tensions encountered in the early childhood education program. These included transportation, communication, and conflict with other students. Additionally, she described several strategies she uses when she encounters these tensions and identified supportive practices she encountered in the program as well as successful supportive practices she engaged in to support her child. She indicated that she appreciated communication through technology from her son's teacher. Finally, she identified her own supportive practices of utilizing social capital to overcome challenges, expressing a value for education, and learning English.

**Case 2: Lisa**

Lisa's family arrived in the United States in July 2016, approximately two years before the initial interview took place. She, her husband and their three sons reside in a 950 square foot 2-bedroom apartment which they have lived in since they first arrived. Her sons are eight, seven,

and four years old. They have a macaw parrot that they acquired from a Saudi Arabian friend of her husband that regularly talks and calls out.

I was introduced to Lisa through a mutual friend who is also a volunteer with the resettlement agency. She indicated that Lisa was interested in participating in the study, so I contacted Lisa over the phone to schedule an initial interview. The initial interview was held in July 2018 in her home and took 42:56. She indicated that she didn't want a translator since she felt she could understand me adequately. Her three sons were home at the time of the interview and they, along with my youngest son, played in the living room during the interview. Interview 2 took place in October 2018 and took 1:05:17. Only her youngest son was home during the second interview, because the older children were in school.

Her middle son had attended the Primary Blocks Center B program two years prior, when they had first arrived. At the time of the first interview, she stated that she had registered her youngest son, Omar, for the same preschool program. While the previous school liaison had helped register her middle son for preschool upon their arrival in the U.S., she had independently sought admission for her youngest son in the program. During the first interview, she stated that she was looking forward to having her son in preschool because she saw that it had helped her other son prepare for kindergarten and overcome several social challenges, such as shyness and reluctance in playing with others.

However, during the second interview, Lisa related that by the start of the school year, the school had not sent any information about Omar's bus or class. Lisa and her husband took Omar to the preschool to inquire why they had not received any information and found that they hadn't completed a required form, resulting in an incomplete application. The second interview focused on their experiences discovering that their son wasn't registered for the Primary Blocks

program and attempting to find out the necessary information from the school in order to register their son for preschool.

Lisa's interviews also gave insight into tensions and supportive practices experienced. Domain analysis of the interviews and principal investigator's field notes with Lisa developed five main domains: Conflicting Information, Family Challenges, Problem Solving, Contextualizing, and Goals Setting. Taxonomic and component analysis further defined the relationships among these domains. Conflicting Information and Family Challenges were two sub-domains of challenges. Problem Solving, a domain of itself, is a response to challenges, and it has two subdomains of Contextualizing and Goal Setting. Figure 3 illustrates the semantic relationships between the domains and subdomains that were developed from Lisa's case.
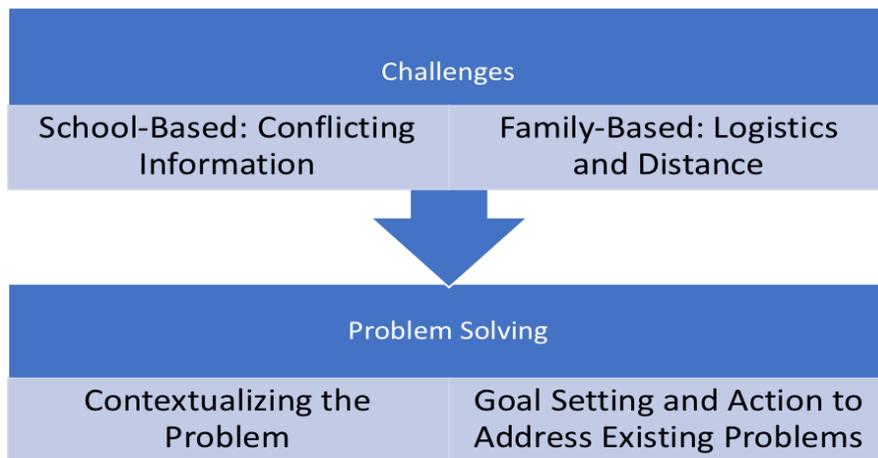


Figure 3. Semantic relationships between domains in Lisa's case.

**Key challenges.**

*Domain 1: Conflicting information.* " [school personnel]…told me no, just wait, on the list. [wait list] But then, they… last four days, she says complete the paper, maybe Omar he can go to preschool."-Lisa Interview 2

In general, Lisa spoke very positively about her experiences and interactions with both the early childhood center and the elementary school. In fact, the only barriers she described

were language-related. However, she reported that teachers and staff were willing to use the translation service when they needed it in phone conversations, and that her son's PreK teacher, two years prior, would often communicate with her through small notes in her son's folder. According to Lisa, these notes usually included short directives such as "sign here" or "study this." During the initial interview she repeated several times that the early childhood center was good for children and described the classrooms as having many toys and books. She described the PreK screening process with her youngest son as smooth. When asked if she was able to understand and navigate the process independently, she indicated that she didn't feel she had any problems understanding them because she has more advanced English skills than before. She described that her son did very well in the screening and was able to answer questions while sitting independently from her. She stated that he did so well that, "I am surprised for him!" (Lisa, Interview 1).

However, during the second interview, her responses indicated frustration at receiving conflicting information from the school. According to Lisa at the first interview, she had enrolled her son in the PreK program at the local early childhood center. At the second interview, however, she related that she had discovered this wasn't the case when they received no information for him regarding bus transportation or classroom placement. She stated that since she hadn't completed a specific form about her husband's work as part of the enrollment process, her son hadn't been registered. However, it had not been made clear to her that this form was absolutely necessary or time sensitive, as her following quote indicates:

> Lisa: I told her, I don't complete the paper first time. Say to husband, and he told just wait mail in the mail the paper. But I told her, I don't complete the paper. Then she check on the computer and she says just wait on the list.

PI: But you said you didn't complete the paper. Why didn't you complete that paper the first time?

Lisa: You know, because my husband training, not has work, you know? And me I don't understand and I think when Omar start the new year and start at the school, I complete the paper. I don't know...

PI: They gave you the paper when you went for the test right? But they didn't say…

Lisa: No! Just she say complete the paper, but I don't know I must take the paper, when she says complete the paper maybe I must take the paper next day!

When she and her husband took her son to the school to ask why they hadn't received anything, she stated they were told he had to be placed on a waiting list for admission. Subsequently, she had an American friend call for her and was told that if she completed the paper regarding her husband's work and income, he can get admission sooner. When I asked if her son was now on the waiting list, she responded, "before, yes, told me this, but now he told me, she told me if I complete the paper, Omar he can go to school." She was confused about exactly what information she needed to have to enroll her son and asked for help in returning to the school to get the specific forms needed.

I accompanied her in visiting the early childhood center the day following our second interview and my field notes indicate the response that we were given when we visited and that Lisa was frustrated by the outcome of that visit as well:

[School personnel] said that the waiting list is handled by that office [Primary Blocks central office] anyway, so we need to contact them. Since it's not handled by the EC site they don't have any way to know where he is on the list. They don't have any information unless the central office has passed on his name. So they couldn't help us. As

we were going to the car, Lisa pointed out that every time she's come she's gotten a different answer from the school personnel. She came with her husband, with her friend, and now with me, and every time it's a different answer (Field Notes, October 5, 2018).

These were problematic for her family, and she had to find ways to make sense out of the conflicting information she was receiving. As discussed below, she often contextualized the problem in what she knew about the culture and her past experiences with the school system.

*Domain 2: Family challenges.* "Before, he [husband] doesn't sleep, he doesn't take rest, every time busy busy! Told me, this is not good for me! And you know, in my country, not same here. . because here… every time I have, we have appointment with dentist, with hospital for checkup… every time have appointment, but husband he can't do all this!" (Lisa, Interview 2)

During the second interview, Lisa described specific challenges that her family has had to face. As indicated in the above quote, these included what she described as a "busy" life in America compounded by her husband's job location and scheduling leading to a hectic lifestyle. According to her interview, when they first arrived in the country, transportation was a big problem for them because bus transport wasn't efficient. She further stated that this is a problem that they have significantly overcome, the means of which is described in the next section.

Lisa's account of their experiences indicated that her husband has worked several different jobs that were all a significant distance from their home. This caused him to have long hours away from home. Additionally, the recommended regimen of doctor and dentist appointments for all three of their sons added stress and strain to his busy schedule because he would have to drive them. When discussing going to the school to find out more information of how to enroll her youngest son in preschool, she stated the following:

"Because husband take one day in a week, just one day and you know, here America…

appointment. All people busy. Every time. And when he's take off one day off, and he

has more thing he must do. Go to appointment, go to hospital, go to… same this.

Yesterday, told me husband, you must go to the school, but I don't find the time. You

know? He's go to [various surrounding cities], I don't find the time." (Lisa, Interview 2)

As indicated in the above quote, Lisa didn't want to ask her husband to drive her to

another appointment on his only day off in the week. She describes this strain on her husband as

the main reason for learning to drive and getting a car. In her interviews, she stated that her

husband drove their children to school on some days and enjoys taking them to the beach and the

zoo. Still, she related that her husband worked far away and that this was difficult for them as a

family. She expressed a desire to move to the city her husband worked in, but the housing is

more expensive in that city.

**Domain 3: Problem solving.** "I like to solve my problems. I like to find solutions!"

(Lisa, Interview 2)

Problem solving was a primary domain in Lisa's descriptions of her experiences with not

only the preschool and elementary school systems, but life in the United States at large. Lisa

spoke repeatedly about overcoming challenges and problem solving. This was both a key praise

for particular teachers and their practices as well as a value she strives to attain personally and

with her family.

When asked during the second interview about her experience with teachers, Lisa stated,

"the teacher very good and you know, friendly…and.. she solve the problem, if I told her he

[son] has a problem she solve the problem." She indicated the importance of this to her by

bringing it up several times when describing teachers and ways that they helped her sons. In

addition to solving problems, she described the teachers as helping her son "escape this problem" (Lisa, Interview 2). In fact, during the first interview, she described her middle son's experience in preschool and stated that the teacher helped him overcome his personal challenges, such as difficulty playing with other children and accepting hugs and affection from the teacher.

During the second interview, Lisa spoke at length about how important it is to her to solve her own problems. At the end of the interview she summarized by stating that problem solving, overcoming obstacles, and having a better life are important to her because she, "hopes for a better life." She stated that her biggest obstacle to life in the U.S. right now is speaking English, so she has a plan and has given herself goals to overcome this challenge. This response of making personal goals as a way of problem solving is described more thoroughly in a further section, as it emerged as a domain of its own. As indicated in the following quote, she additionally described that learning to drive and getting a car was a solution to some of the family challenges they faced.

> "First time I don't have car but here in America I must have car because my son at school if they have problem or if I must go to school I want car. And husband everytime work far. This not good, if I want husband, I can't told husband, take me." (Lisa, Interview 2)

Lisa states that transportation is no longer a challenge for them because they were able to purchase a car, which had required the help of friends connecting her husband to an auto auction, and obtain her a license. However this comes with its own challenges such as maintaining car insurance and registration, which they have had to learn the hard way. She stated that she still is uneasy on highways, but as long as she is able to provide transportation for her family when needed, this is all she sees is necessary.

*Contextualizing as problem solving.* "You know this, with the uniform! Why every time his teacher tells him, why don't wear the uniform everyday. If Alan must wear the uniform, she must take the note with Alan or the school call us, "Alan must wear the uniform," because Haya [middle son] doesn't… and I see children, student outside go to the school no wear the uniform! Why everytime say uniform, you must wear the uniform? Why? And I see student, not… because this school not all student wear the uniform. She must take the note with Alan, not just told him" (Lisa, Interview 2).

In discussing problems over her children's schooling, Lisa's descriptions demonstrated that she drew on previous experience and cultural capital to understand and explore solutions to the problem. In the quote above, the I had asked what kind of problems she encounters in school, and Lisa related the above, stating that her oldest son has been worried about wearing clothes that aren't the uniform. In discussing the problem, she contextualizes the facts within her understanding of the culture and systems and draws on her experience with the school policy from last year and seeing the other children in the neighborhood who go to the same school.

Another example of making sense was the way she described attempting to solve the problem of her son's enrollment in the preschool program. I had asked what her plan was and she started by discussing who could help her because she wanted someone else to go with her to the school. She stated that she has an American friend that isn't an agency volunteer, but that she doesn't always have time. She then pointed out that she was told that the resettlement agency was supposed to help with children for 5 years, however she didn't know who to contact and hadn't received any help from the agency since their first few months after arrival. When asked if she wanted to contact the agency to get help, she drew on her more recent past experiences

with agency personnel canceling an appointment on her regarding community college enrollment.

In conversing with the school, she was active in attempting to figure out what the cause of the miscommunication was. When she was told by school personnel that her son wasn't enrolled, she stated that she was the one to point out that the form verifying her husband's income hadn't been completed. Only after she told them this form wasn't submitted, the school personnel stated that if she was able to submit it, they could get him re-enrolled without having to stay on a waiting list. She stated that this process was new to her since her husband had been the one to go along with the resettlement agency personnel to register their middle son for preschool. While she stated in the first interview that she felt her English was good enough to understand the essentials, clearly there were miscommunications that she had to later contextualize and connect with other experiences in the U.S. in order to solve.

***Goal setting to address salient problems.*** "I think this good. Me and husband learn. Maybe first time I don't know what I do… but second time I can" (Lisa, Interview 2).

The above quote illustrates Lisa's approach to challenges, such as lack of assistance from others. She sees it as an opportunity for personal growth. As stated above, Lisa indicated that she liked to take an active role in solving problems for her family. This was evident in her description of her reasons for learning to drive as well as her described motivations for learning English. Additionally, at the second interview, she stated that she had registered for community college classes in nursing, something she later had to withdraw from when she discovered her son was not enrolled in the PreK program. She described that this was a goal of hers because she wanted to improve her life and her family's situation. She described the loss of this opportunity as one of the main negative consequences of the misunderstanding with the registration process,

as now she was inhibited from meeting her goals by staying home with her son, as indicated in the following quote.

> "If you have baby at home, you can't do anything! You can't study, you can't go to school, go to work! Just stay at home with your son" (Lisa, Interview 2).

She stated that her main goal was to learn English so that she could take nursing classes next semester. She stated that she felt like learning English at home by watching TV was not as effective as going to class or going out and speaking with Americans. She stated that this was a goal that would benefit her family greatly so that she can help her children solve their problems in school and understand the doctors and teachers, the two main professionals that the family interacts with. Additionally, she pointed out that she doesn't like to "stay the same" but wants to learn at least a word a day to feel satisfied. She stated that as long as her time is put to something that is beneficial for her family, she is happy. In the short term, she wants her family to find better housing, which requires her to have a better job than the food service job she had previously. In her perspective, she must attend community college classes to increase her chances of getting a better job to help better her family's situation.

This attitude was also reflected in how she described helping her children solve problems. For example, she stated that her middle son had a difficult time separating from her during his preschool year. In spite of the fact that she didn't like hearing him cry, she followed the teacher's advice to leave him at the front door of the school rather than walking him to the classroom everyday. She saw that this helped him to overcome his own problems of shyness and appreciated that the teacher insisted on this. In her perspective, it was more important to see him overcome his challenges than to see him happy all the time.

## Cross-case Analysis

*Table 7: Cross-case analysis of Rayna's and Lisa's results.*

|  | Rayna | Lisa |
|---|---|---|
| Primary Challenges | • Communication-Language Barrier<br>• Conflicting communication<br>• Transportation<br>• Interpersonal Conflict of the Child | • Communication-Language Barrier<br>• Conflicting communication<br>• Pace of life in the U.S. |
| Response to Tensions | • Asking the teacher for help<br>• Asking SIL or neighbors for help<br>• Avoiding the tension | • Problem solving by using cultural capital<br>• Contact school personnel<br>• Making goals to build cultural and linguistic capital |
| School Supportive Practices | • Having parties and presentations of student work<br>• Using the Remind App to send photos and updates<br>• Offering to use the Translator Service if needed (Language Line) | • Utilizing translation services<br>• Responding to and solving problems<br>• Helping child overcome challenges |
| Parental Supportive Practices | • Going to the school<br>• Sending in items to the classroom<br>• Talking to the teacher multiple times a week | • Driving children to school daily<br>• Solving problems<br>• Helping with homework |

This section details the central findings that emerged during cross-case analysis of Rayna and Lisa's cases. After conducting cross-case analysis, I identified several broad domains describing the resettled refugee mothers' experiences as well as several differences in the way they described those experiences. Domains were identified both deductively to address the research questions and inductively to reflect the voices of the participants. For example, while

the mothers identified challenges or tensions and practices they found supportive, they did not

differentiate between school supportive practices and parental supportive practices. To

differentiate the results to a level to draw implications, supportive practices were separated into

the two domains. Table 7 shows the domains identified as well as several important examples

from each mother within those domains. Cross-case contrasts indicate family- and individual-

level differences, particularly with regard to the way the mothers respond to the challenges or

tensions encountered

**Primary Challenges**

Cross-case analysis indicated that salient challenges for families were cultural, related to

immigrant status and language acquisition; economic, related to the family socio-economic status

and residing in a low-income area; and individual, related to personal differences in the child and

family. The school-based challenges that were encountered within each of these were similar,

and responses from the school liaison supported that these were common experiences within the

context of the study. Each of these categories of challenges are detailed below with examples

from each case.

**Cultural-level challenges**. A primary challenge described by both Rayna and Lisa was

the challenge of communicating with the school. Susan, the school liaison also articulated that

this was a key challenge for families she has assisted through the refugee resettlement agency.

While Rayna and Lisa described the challenge of understanding English as a primary challenge,

there were other communication challenges, particularly when it came to cultural routines

regarding school and preschool in particular.

Both Lisa and Rayna described their experiences with communicating by including

repeated statements about how they didn't "understand English" or "speak English," particularly

when they first arrived. For example, Rayna described often throwing away papers if she didn't understand them. However, they felt that many communication challenges were mitigated by their acquisition of English over the previous year or two. Both mothers contrasted their early interactions with the school with more contemporary experiences. Rayna for example stating in her second interview, "now, I am good!" Many of the supportive practices they identified were in response to this language challenge for them, such as teachers being willing to summarize directions on a sheet of paper or use the Language Line translation service to speak over the phone.

Additional challenges indicated by the mothers were related to cultural routines surrounding school. Mothers had to make sense of information brought home from school within a cultural context that they were still learning. For example, while Lisa was describing her challenge in understanding her son's distress over the school uniform, she stated that she understood that here in the U.S., students don't have to wear the uniform. In her opinion, the teacher had not communicated effectively about this change in the normal school routine. Additionally, Rayna, upon receiving a flyer asking for donations for the class's Christmas party, bought every item on the list, stating that she felt that would make the teacher think she's a "good mother." The school liaison listed several school routines that were often difficult for parents to understand, such as the bus pickup routine and leaving the child in school while he or she is crying. Susan stated that these challenges led to confusion on the part of the parents and they often called her questioning the practices of the school.

The practice of assessing young children and screening them for eligibility was one that all participants indicated was a challenge. Rayna stated that the previous school liaison had driven her to the appointments and helped her fill the forms. However, she stated that she was

surprised and confused by the results of her son's end of the year PALS assessment, in which he scored well below the expectations. She stated that she didn't understand why the teacher would give him a score of 6, when throughout the year, she had always indicated to Rayna that her son was doing well. The lack of information about the purpose and use of the assessment caused Rayna to feel confused at the conflicting information she had received from the teacher. Additionally, Lisa stated she was surprised and proud of her son being able to answer most of the questions correctly during the screening. This was consistent with the school liaison's indication that most parents didn't understand that it is beneficial for the child to do poorly on the screening so that they are found eligible for the program.

        **Economic-level challenges.** Several challenges described by the mothers were related to the socio-economic status of the family. Both mothers described family tensions and challenges related to finances and transportation that directly affected their ability to be involved in their child's education. Both families lived in apartment complexes that according to Susan, the school liaison, were heavily populated by low-income families. Lisa complained about the apartment indicating that is wasn't well taken care of and they didn't have desirable neighbors. Rayna stated that a main reason her son didn't want to ride the bus to school for so many weeks was because another child in the neighborhood was fighting with him. Susan's interview provides additional perspective to this situation. She stated it's common for the children in that neighborhood to get in fights on the bus: "That's a big problem… we've even had principals come to the apartments and we have that talk. So the thing is they live in a very low income area and they live with other people- African Americans and whites who are poor and not all the time they are very welcomed by the people…" Susan's interview also indicated that there is jealousy on the part of other families due to the special services that refugee families receive from the

resettlement agency and other non-profits and churches in the area. She indicated that in her perspective these community tensions sometimes result in conflicts on the buses between students.

Second to her lack of understanding English, Rayna described her challenges in getting transportation to the school most frequently. While her husband owned a car, he needed it to transport himself to work. Her interviews indicated that whenever she wanted to go to the school, she had to work around his work schedule, which was inconsistent. As a result, she was unable to attend parent-teacher conferences or several other special events she wanted to. Lisa, similarly, stated that before their family bought a second car and she learned to drive, this was a challenge for them. When her son refused to ride the bus to preschool, she would have to wake her husband to drive them to the school before leaving for work. Rayna, on the other hand, stated that when her son cried at getting on the bus, she had no way to get him to school since she the distance was too great to walk. Lisa stated that their acquisition of a second vehicle made their participation in school easier because they were able to drop their children every morning.

Susan's interview further supported that transportation was a major challenge for resettled refugee families. This often affected her because when children were needing to be picked up at school, some families would call her to bring their child home since they lacked their own transportation. Additionally, the following response indicated that parents weren't able to participate often because of the challenge of transportation: "The parents need to be able to come to the school. I guess one of the problems is transportation, but any events in school which has been most important events in school they don't attend… The parents need to know where the school is and go to the school often" (Susan, School Liaison Interview).

Lisa, in particular was cognizant of the impact economic factors had on their experiences. During her second interview, she described her desire to get out of that apartment complex and move to an area with better schools and neighborhoods. Her plans were to attend community college to become a nurse so that they can improve their housing situation. While she had no direct complaints about the school, she indicated in her interactions with office staff in attempting to enroll her son in the PreK program that they "don't take care" (Lisa, Interview 2). She did not indicate if that was due to language or economic factors, but felt that the staff weren't attentive to her needs as a mother trying to enroll her child. She also indicated that the agency was not taking care to help her and she had not been contacted by the current school liaison for help in enrolling her child in the program.

**Family-level challenges.** Several challenges that the mothers described were dependent on family-level factors. For example, Lisa indicated that her middle son was "not the same" as her other sons and didn't appreciate social interactions with others. As a result, he often refused to ride the bus and would not play with other children in class. She indicated that she would have to walk him to the classroom each day, and only when the teacher insisted, she began to leave him at the door of the school. Rayna's interviews indicated that a challenge for her family was her son's attendance. During the school year, he required surgery to extract several baby teeth. This caused him to miss two weeks of school, however that extended to over a month when he started to have trouble on the bus. According to Rayna, she didn't like him missing so much school, yet she stated she allowed him to stay home with her because that's what he wanted. These challenges elicited several responses from the mothers in their attempts to solve them.

**Responses to Challenges**

Cross-case analysis showed that each mother responded to the challenges and tensions they encountered in individualized ways. While they both utilized multiple strategies and demonstrated persistence in solving problems, they each approached the problems differently. Rayna primarily utilized social contacts and other forms of social capital to solve the problems and challenges she encountered. In contrast, Lisa focused on utilizing and building her own cultural and linguistic capital as a way of overcoming her challenges. While they each had a distinct way of responding to challenges, neither stated that they reached out to the school liaison or other agency personnel for assistance. In fact, both mothers stated that they didn't know who the new school liaison was to be able to contact her. This differed from the school liaison's responses, which indicated that when parents had challenges, they would contact her, for example to provide transportation or assist in communicating with the school during a problem. Susan had also indicated that if they didn't contact her, she assumed that there were no significant challenges. However, this was not the case from the mothers' perspectives. The two main parental responses for dealing with challenges, utilizing social or cultural capital, are contrasted in the subsections below.

**Rayna-utilizing social capital.** Rayna's responses indicated that she varied her response to various challenges encountered. With some challenges and tensions, she chose not to take action to resolve it. For example, she stated that, "He [son] bringing paper, and I didn't what this paper… I didn't speak English. Sometimes I write for paper I say, 'teacher, what this?' and he say. Sometimes I didn't write" (Rayna, Interview 1). She stated that when the PALS assessment results were sent home at the end of the year, she didn't call the school or ask the teacher, yet she stated that, "I want asking about him [the report]" (Rayna, Interview 1). She desired to reach out

and find out why the results were under the expectations, however, she stated that she didn't take the action to reach out to the teacher about it. Instead, during the interview she asked me to explain the results of the paper to her, asking why the teacher would send this paper when she had told Rayna that her son was doing well.

When she chose to solve problems, she most often looked to her social connections, such as family, neighbors, and the teacher for assistance. Rayna stated that she sometimes would ask her sister-in-law for help in understanding papers since her English was more advanced. She stated several times that she talked to the teacher or asked the teacher questions when she was confused. For example, she told the teacher about the problems her son was having on the bus, however she did not indicate if any action was taken on the part of the school. Since her son continued to tell her he didn't want to go on the bus, she continued to allow him to stay home. Additionally, when transportation to the school for events was a challenge and her husband would not drive her, she reached out to her neighbors and other friends in the apartment complex. This resulted in her depending on an Afghani man to drive her, when her husband was home resting. Her social circle, such as family, friends, neighbors, and even I, served as key resources for her in solving problems and overcoming challenges encountered.

**Lisa-utilizing and building cultural capital.** Lisa's responses to the challenges faced differed from Rayna's. Lisa spoke about challenges and overcoming challenges much more than Rayna, and she stated several times that overcoming challenges was important to her. She also stated that her husband was involved with helping solve problems with the school, including going to the school to talk to the office staff and dropping the children at the school when bus transportation was a challenge. When she described the challenges with communicating with the school, she indicated that she didn't like that she couldn't understand. As a result, she is working

on her English so that she doesn't have to rely on translators. She expressed that her desire to study English and attend community college were related to her desire to solve problems and improve her family's situation.

Additionally, when she described challenging situations with the school, she spent time describing them in the context of her understanding of the school system. For example, when she realized that her son was not registered for PreK, she stated that she realized that she must have misunderstood the employment verification form's deadline. Stating that she had assumed it would be due at the start of school, she indicated an understanding that many forms are due to the public school system at the start. The particular practice of enrolling in preschool, and having to gain admission before the start of the year was not part of her cultural understanding of the paperwork process here. Additionally, when describing the problem of her son's dressing, she related that her understanding of the uniform being optional came directly from her observation of other students in the neighborhood and her own children's experiences at the school in previous years.

While Lisa did state that a friend helped her once in attempting to contact the school regarding her son's registration, she also stated that it was good for her and her husband to do it on their own so that they will have the experience to know better next time. Furthermore, when I questioned if she ever contacted the school liaison to assist her, she stated that while she knew that they were supposed to assist families for five years, she didn't even know who was in that position anymore. Her response indicates that she had knowledge of the policy, however her connection to the individual in that position was non-existent.

**School Supportive Practices**

The school was described by both mothers as helping the child and having practices that supported their involvement in their child's education. Additionally, the school liaison described that the school system as a whole had put supports in place for the refugee families, such as the newcomer program and the family engagement coach position. While these supports were designed for the PreK-12 population, neither of the mothers mentioned these programs, indicating a lack of awareness of the available services. Instead, the mothers focused on the teachers' efforts to support their child's individual growth and communicate effectively with them, as parents. In the subsections below I present the main school supportive practices identified by mothers: helping the child, bridging the language gap, contacting the parents, and holding special events.

**Supporting their child's individual growth.** This subdomain was characterized by supportive behaviors that the teacher took to assist individual children with their development and learning. Examples of behaviors were helping children overcome fears and challenges, learning and growth, as well as treating the child in a supportive way. During her first interview, Lisa identified supportive practices that the PreK teacher had helped her middle son overcome his challenges with social interactions and prepared him for kindergarten. Although she did not identify specific behaviors the teacher engaged in to support his development, she indicated that she was pleased with the growth and readiness he demonstrated for kindergarten as a result of her support. She indicated that she appreciated that the teachers at the school paid attention to the children and helped them learn what was necessary for success. Similarly, Rayna stated that she liked her son's teacher because she was "nice" and "good" (Rayna, Interview 1). She also indicated a value for education, stating that she wanted her son to learn and to study. She

demonstrated this value for education further in stating that she kept all of his school work in a folder in her bedroom to look back on it. In fact, she stated that she didn't like that other children were crying in the class, causing her son to have difficulty hearing the teacher. She stated that in spite of bringing both this and the bus situation up with the teacher, there were no satisfactory solutions.

**Efforts to bridge the language barrier.** Another supportive practice identified by both was the efforts taken by the teachers to bridge the language barrier. Both mothers stated that the teachers would initiate use of the translation service if needed, when speaking on the phone. Additionally, they both stated that the teachers were positive and accommodating when the translator was requested. Lisa described that her middle son's PreK teacher would sometimes write short instructions on the paper such as "fill and bring to school," to help her sort through all the papers in English. On the other hand Rayna described the overwhelming task of sorting through the papers, and occasionally having to contact the teacher for clarification on the importance of them. In her case, she had to take the effort to contact the teacher for further direction, and if she chose not to, the paper would be thrown away.

**Ongoing contact with teacher.** Both Rayna and Lisa expressed an appreciation for the amount of contact that the teacher kept with them. Additionally, they both used the examples of pictures of their children in school as especially meaningful. Lisa, in relating her experience with her middle son in PreK, described the daily folder as the main means of communication between the teacher and her, stating that she liked it very much because there were always notes from the teacher. Rayna, on the other hand, described the teacher's use of the Remind app as the main means of communication. She stated that the teacher would both send class-wide announcements as well as direct communication with her regarding her son. Scrolling through the messages, she

selected several pictures the teacher had sent to share with me, including one of a tall tower her son had built with MegaBlocks, and several outdoors in a garden.

Similarly, Lisa had pulled out an album that had been sent by her son's kindergarten teacher of pictures throughout the year, including pictures of his birthday and field trips. They both expressed that they enjoyed getting these pictures. Rayna, additionally, stated that she used the app to contact the teacher when she had questions or needed clarification about something sent home. She stated that she liked that the teacher talked to her consistently through the app.

Rayna, additionally pointed out that she was unable to get to the school for parent-teacher conferences. When questioned about whether she would have enjoyed the teacher visiting her in her home, she exclaimed, "of course!" (Rayna, Interview 1). So while she had regular contact with the teacher, asserting that she spoke to her "two or three times a week," she still wished she had a closer connection with her, indicating that more face-to-face time would have been desirable to her.

**Special events.** In addition to consistent contact with the teacher, Rayna described several events held at the school that she enjoyed being a part of. She described an event during which she saw some of her son's drawings displayed on the smartboard, and smiled and said she liked it very much. She also enjoyed the Christmas party, during which she got to help her son make a gingerbread house. She expressed that she enjoyed being in the school and seeing that her son is happy and learning. She also stated that her son enjoyed her coming for these events as well, relating that he cried during the Christmas party when she couldn't come, which prompted her persistent attempt to find transportation through the neighbor.

Lisa, by contrast didn't describe attending special events at the school. She did, however, state that she loved that her son's kindergarten teacher had given him a special birthday party,

including a gift of a toy truck. She showed me the picture in the photo album of him with his class, holding the gift. She indicated that she felt that her child was supported by the teacher through her efforts to create a special event for him.

**Family Supportive Practices**

The last domain was parental practices that the mothers identified as supportive. Although the mothers in the study talked less about their actions in directly supporting their sons' education than they did about the school's support, they did identify particular practices that they engaged in to participate in their child's education by maintaining contact with the school. Both mothers indicated that their awareness of their child's acquisition of skills came from school. Rayna, in spite of asserting repeatedly her value for education, stated that she didn't help her son study or learn at home since he didn't want to. When asked if he can identify all of his letters during our discussion of the PALS results, she hesitated and then asked her son for his evaluation. Lisa, having older children in the home, stated that her youngest son learned English from his brothers and watching English cartoons. While she related that he did well on the screening assessment, she stated she was surprised, indicating that she hadn't realized how much English he knew including some letters, colors, and shapes. While neither mother described activities they did at home to support their child's education, they both described ways they maintained a good relationship with the school, such as going to the school, regularly contacting the teacher, and responding to school requests.

**Transporting the child to school.** Lisa stated that she or her husband took their children to school on most days. She explained that she likes this as it gives her a chance to see the school everyday and see that they get there safely. Particularly when her middle son was in PreK, he refused to take the bus, resulting in her and her husband driving him to school. She would walk

him in to the classroom daily, stating that she got to see the teacher everyday and speak with her about how he was doing in class. This regular face-to-face contact helped both to reassure her that her son was adjusting to the school and to build a relationship with the teacher.

Rayna, on the other hand, stated that she could not drop her son at the school and had to rely only on the bus to transport him. She stated several times that she "hope the school is close," indicating that she wished it were closer. She related that she liked to go to the school and was "happy to see all the teachers teaching," when she got the opportunity.

**Contacting the teacher.** Both mothers stated contacting the teacher and asking questions of the teacher helped them to stay involved. Rayna stated that she tried to talk to the teacher multiple times a week to ask what her son was studying and how he was doing in class. Additionally, she stated that she contacted the teacher with questions about the papers sent home and with help when her son encountered challenges such as the bus fight and discomfort with school. In her interviews, she wasn't clear how the teacher responded to these issues, only that she had contacted the teacher. She did, however, say that the teacher always responded to her messages and answered her questions. Lisa stated that she often didn't call the teacher or school, because she would just speak to them when she dropper her son of at school.

**Responding to school requests.** Rayna stated that another way she built a good relationship with the school was by donating items to the school. She described sending in items both solicited and unsolicited by the teacher. For example, she explained that on her son's birthday, she sent in cake, indicating that the teacher liked this a lot and it supported their good relationship. She also related several instances of taking money to the school for field trips when it was requested as a way of staying in touch with the school and maintaining positive relationships. While Lisa didn't describe sending anything in to the classroom, she did indicate

that she responded to the teacher's requests for information as well as instructions on what to study with her child.

**Summary**

Cross-case analysis demonstrated that both Rayna and Lisa, while two separate independent cases, shared many similarities in their experiences such as challenges and supportive practices encountered. The challenges that the mothers encountered were cultural, economic, as well as individual to the family. Examples of cultural-level challenges were related to communication and cultural routines around schooling such as strict bus pickup policies and assessment procedures for young children. Other challenges identified by the mothers were related to socio-economic status, such as problems in the neighborhood and difficulty finding transportation to the school. Some of these challenges with school cultural practices, communication and transportation are congruent with the school liaison's description of the context and challenges met by families accessing and participating in early childhood education. The final category of challenges described by mothers were related to the individual child and family. For example, Rayna's son missed school due to necessary oral surgery as well as interpersonal conflict with other students. Mothers described responding to these challenges in different ways, utilized both social and cultural capital to navigate the challenges they encountered, however neither indicated reaching out to the school liaison or other school supportive programs as a resource. Both mothers also indicated supportive practices on the part of both the schools and their own efforts to facilitate their participation.

<div align="center">

**Conclusion**

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This chapter has provided a description of the findings of the data analysis. Through domain analysis and multiple rounds of coding within each participant's data, initial domains

were identified for each of the two cases as well as the school liaison's perspective. Then, a cross-case analysis was conducted to find similarities and differences across the cases, compared to the school liaison's interview data. The findings indicate that the resettled refugee women experienced challenges at the cultural, economic, and personal level, that they met with varying degrees of persistence and different techniques. Rayna focused on utilizing more social forms of capital, while Lisa focused on building and utilizing more cultural forms of capital. They both highlighted very similar supportive practices that the schools and teachers engaged in, and gave examples of actions that they took to engage the school in a positive relationship.

The next chapter will discuss the findings in light of previous research with resettled refugee mothers of preschoolers in the United States. Additionally, a robust discussion of the limitations of this research, including the challenges in conducting research with a protected population in the current political climate where immigration and refugee resettlement are in a constant state of politicization and flux.

CHAPTER 5

**DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

In this final chapter, I begin with an overview of the study's purpose, guiding questions, research design, and findings. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings for various stakeholders including resettlement agency staff, school personnel, and policy-makers. Additionally, a thorough discussion of the limitations of the study and implications of doing research with the resettled refugee population are included. Finally, I present areas of further research needed in this field.

**Overview of the Study**

The United States has the largest refugee resettlement program in the world, receiving an average of 75,000 refugees annually from 2002-2016 (USDS, 2019). Recent years have seen a drastic decrease in the number of refugees received through the program and a related decrease in funding to the resettlement agencies contracted to support their transition to the United States. Refugees resettling in the United States are being permanently resettled under internationally recognized agreements that the government will provide them a durable solution and a path to citizenship. Early childhood services throughout the country are fractured and individual to each state's policies and budgets leading to varying levels of utilization as well as awareness (Park, Katsiaficas, & McHugh, 2018).

There is a rich body of literature on immigrant parents' experiences of the United States education system; however, the majority of it focuses on older students. Additionally, few studies focus on the particular population of resettled refugees within the immigrant population, who are often eligible for more support than their voluntary immigrant peers (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016). While several studies and white papers have attempted to describe the

utilization rates and accessibility challenges of resettled refugee parents within early childhood education services (Gross & Ntagengwa, 2016; Hooper, Zong, Capps, & Fix, 2016), few have taken a qualitative approach to gain the perspective and direct experiences of mothers in accessing and participating in early childhood programs. Additionally, while there have been studies that focused on refugee families participating in Head Start programs (Tadesse, Hoot, & Watson-Thompson, 2012), there is no existing literature examining the experiences of parents with public PreK programming through the state public school system in the United States.

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of resettled refugee mothers with accessing and participating in Primary Blocks, the public PreK program in the target city. I utilized a critical theory lens (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2013) to intentionally listen to the voices and experiences of a population often left out of the research. As such, the study utilized a qualitative multiple case study methodology (Merriam, 2009), focused on exploring and representing thick descriptions of the mothers' experiences. The following questions guided the design, data collection and analysis of the study:

1. How do refugee mothers give voice to their experiences with accessing and enrolling their preschool aged children in early childhood programs?

2. What cultural and social capital do mothers identify as valuable in their relationship with the school?

3. What actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

    a. What school-based actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

b. What parental actions do refugee mothers identify as supportive of their child's early learning experiences?

I recruited participants through personal connections with the resettlement agency and the community, targeting mothers resettled within the past three years who had a 4-5 year old enrolled in the public PreK program. The current research study treated each mother as a separate embedded case within the context of the city and the resettlement agency services provided. Data collection for each case consisted of two in-depth semi-structured interviews along with artifact-elicited responses. Additionally, the Primary Blocks online resources such as website, parent handbook, and other publicly available resources were included in analysis. As an additional data source, the resettlement agency school liaison at the time, Susan, was interviewed to provide further description of the context and triangulation purposes.

Chapter 4 reported on the findings of the analysis of the data for the context, each individual case, and a cross-case analysis. Rayna was recruited directly through my experience volunteering for an English class for refugee adults. Her son, Muhammad, had just finished the Primary Blocks program at Center A. She had received assistance from the previous school liaison in enrolling her son in the program and described an overall positive experience with her son's school, particularly the teacher. However, her responses focused on several salient experiences that indicated several key tensions and supportive practices that she experienced. Domain analysis revealed two broad domains of tensions and supportive practices. Tensions were characterized by experiences in which she experienced confusion or her son exhibited negative emotions. Supportive practices that she engaged in were often a result of meeting tensions, such as valuing education, and utilizing technological and social resources to clarify her

confusions. She also indicated that her improvement of English had supported her ability to understand and feel connected with her son's school.

Lisa, the second case, was recruited through another volunteer with the resettlement agency. She reported that her third and youngest son was enrolled to start in the Primary Blocks program at Center B in the fall where her second son had attended the previous year, however, at the follow-up interviews, she stated that she realized at the start of the school year that she had been unsuccessful in registering him. During her interviews, she described several key challenges including receiving conflicting information from the school and logistical challenges for her family. Her responses indicated several problem-solving strategies that she took in relating to her sons' schools and teachers. These responses indicated a high reliance on her own cultural capital and goals to build her linguistic and cultural capital through learning English and attending community college.

Cross-case analysis, also reported in detail in chapter 4, triangulated the findings from both case studies to describe the experiences of resettled refugee mothers in the study. I described the common and individual challenges described by the mothers as well as their unique ways of responding to those challenges. Common challenges included language and communication and economic challenges such as transportation to the school. Individual family-based challenges were described by each mother as well, such as inter-personal conflicts with the child or the family pace of life. Each mother responded to these challenges in unique ways, utilizing their social and cultural capital. Rayna relied more on social connections, such as friends, family and neighbors, while Lisa stated that she chose to overcome her challenges by learning how to solve her problems on her own, building cultural capital through learning English and attempting to communicate to the school directly. Additionally, I recounted the

supportive practices that were described by the mothers and the school liaison, such as the use of the translation service by teachers, ongoing communication between home and school, and attempting to go to the school whenever possible. What follows is a discussion of the implications of these findings to multiple stakeholders as well as a discussion about the limitations of the study and challenges encountered in the act of research.

## Implications

Given the scarcity of research involving resettled refugee mothers on their experiences and perspectives with early childhood education programming in the U.S., this study provides an initial, exploratory account of two mothers' perspectives and experiences. While the findings from this study are not intended to be generalizable to a large population, they can serve to illuminate areas of implications for stakeholders such as policymakers, agency, and school personnel. Additionally, the research highlights several systemic issues with the policies that impact the services provided to resettled refugee families.

At the source, there is a lack of specificity in policy affecting resettled refugee services on young children and their families. For example, young children and their educational and developmental needs are not addressed in the policy, as policy is primarily concerned with employment of adults in the family. The policy as it is currently written does not address connecting families to available or beneficial programs that would aid in the child's development and integration into school. To further complicate the issue, early childhood services in the U.S. are fractured and bounded to certain localities as a result of varied funding streams which is in contrast to the public K-12 educational system which has a centralized source of funding.

As a result, services and information provided to families are left to the individual discretion of resettlement agencies and the specific employees working with the refugee families.

The fractured responses to meeting the needs of young children in refugee families is further exacerbated by the high turnover of resettlement agency employees and a lack of training in the needs of young children. Responses from the school liaison in the current study, Susan, indicate that the lack of specificity and priority in the policy influenced her own decision making in providing services to families, including deemphasizing early childhood education and relying on the previous employee's recommendations for supporting families with young children.

Without coordinated support services for refugee families with young children, women in the study indicated that they did not have adequate support or awareness of programs and services that were available to them. Furthermore, their responses indicate that services that the school liaison provides are not explicitly made accessible to all eligible families, as the women in the study were not in contact with Susan. Rayna and Lisa were unaware of other programs that their children could be participating in, and when they encountered challenges within the system, they were left to navigate those challenges with their own cultural and social resources.

The findings of the current research study suggest implications and suggested practices that are focused on two main areas: collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders and targeted program support services. Addressing these areas would positively impact the experiences of resettled refugee mothers in the early childhood educational system. These areas are described in more detail below with subsections describing the categories within each major implication.

**Collaboration and Cooperation**

The findings of the study suggest a major need for an integrated, collaborative approach between stakeholders involved, including policy-makers, agency staff and volunteers, school personnel, and families to provide accurate information and streamlined services for families.

Morland, Ives, McNeely, and Allen, (2016) describe two contexts in the U.S. where such

partnerships are taking place between Head Start and refugee resettlement agencies. In spite of

differing funding streams and national oversight offices, these communities have been able to

improve access to early childhood education for resettled refugee children and enroll them in

Head Start and Early Head Start programs at rates comparable to the proportion of children

resettled in the area.

Responses from the mothers in the present study as well as the school liaison indicated

that there are informational gaps between different stakeholders in the target community, such as

the school, agency, and parents, and these gaps cause family-level challenges that the mothers

found difficult to overcome. These gaps indicate a critical need for policy to address connecting

families to relevant early childhood services. Additionally, by addressing critical training needs

of both the agency workers and the school personnel, some of the cultural miscommunications

and confusions might be minimized. Finally, partnerships and data sharing between agencies

could increase the ability to meet the needs of these families and identify gaps in services in spite

of staff turnover by understanding more about the service utilization of families within early

childhood programs.

**Policy gaps.** One finding of the research was the gap in the refugee resettlement policy

for early childhood education services. The school liaison, Susan, indicated that children from

birth to age 5 are not addressed directly in the policy or her job description, which was confirmed

by the analysis of policy documents available, such as state contracts and proposals with the

agency. Susan stated that she and others in her position have attempted to speak to the state-level

policy makers who set their job description to emphasize the need for more services for families

at the early childhood stage, however, she indicated that these attempts have been largely

unsuccessful. Others (Xu, 2007) have pointed out the lack of consideration of children in resettlement policy in the United States. Particularly because of the rise in families with young children being resettled recently (John, Tilhou, & Eckhoff, 2017), providing resettlement services for families with young children aimed to connect them with available programs within their city could begin to address this gap in services.

Resettlement programs are aimed at supporting integration of adults as fully participating citizens. Efforts are focused on language support and early employment for working adults in the family as indicators of integration. Children from the age of five to eighteen also receive support in school through programs such as the Refugee School Impact Program which specifies that funds should only be used to support children within that age range within the first five years of their arrival in the country. Susan pointed out that families may be utilizing certain other early childhood services through social services, but she has no access to that information or direct knowledge of the programs available. Additionally, the Office of Refugee Resettlement states that Refugee Social Services "supports employability services and other services that address barriers to employment such as…day care for children" (ORR, 2018, paragraph 1) indicating the focus is on obtaining child care to promote employability of the adults, rather than addressing young children's development and family support.

Refugee families and children would benefit from policy directly addressing families' need for access to early childhood care and education services as such services are critical to families' long-term success and contribute to their integration. Susan's tendency to enroll children in the public PreK program as opposed to Head Start or another early childhood program came from her established relationship with the public school system through her job as well as the systems set in place by the previous liaison. She recognized that it was not within her

job description to support early childhood access and enrollment, however, she dedicated time and effort to the task because she believed it was important and would impact families in a positive way as they later entered school. However, she was mandated by the state to make K-12 her priority in allocating time to families, occasionally putting families in the position of having to navigate the process on their own. Susan stated that her lack of understanding of benefits and available programs was directly related to the lack of priority in the policy. Policies need to address the needs of families with young children and train staff members to support families with early childhood educational needs.

Furthermore, if the application and enrollment process were streamlined for families, saving time for the school liaison and recognizing the challenges families have in navigating the process, more families would be able to complete the process independently. Morland et. al. (2016) found that communities that had established collaborative relationships were able to adjust local screening processes to better accommodate refugee families, such as adding eligibility points as well as a separate selection box for "refugee" on the application form. The frustration that Lisa felt when she had difficulty enrolling her son could have been avoided by local policy changes that allocated services to families based on their status as resettled refugee rather than other risk factors. By increasing collaboration to address the policy gaps, we can better meet the needs of the families during their resettlement.

**Training needs.** In addition to policy needs directly addressing services for children under five, a critical need identified by the school liaison was training for herself and others in her position on important benefits of early childhood programming available to families. Some of Susan's statements demonstrated a perspective of needing to convince families of the benefit of early childhood education programs. She stated that families needed training in the value and

benefits of the program, so that she didn't have to push them to enroll. She made the judgement that some mothers choose not to send their child because that would require them to go to work based on the benefits they receive from Social Services. At the same time, she admitted that families have very little "agency" in the decision as there is only one program made available to them. Additionally, based on her experience, she stated that some school personnel demonstrated a need for more training in cultural sensitivity and the tools and accommodations necessary for families. Both the need for training in early childhood programs and cultural awareness are described in more detail in the subsections following.

*Available early childhood programs.* The school liaison as well as the mothers in the study admitted to having limited knowledge of the programs available to them. When questioned about Early Head Start or other early childhood programs, Susan stated that she didn't know about them and that if families participate, it would be through Social Services. Her experience with Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early intervention or home visiting programs that families may benefit from was limited, in part because the previous liaison had said she had trouble enrolling children in the past. Lisa, whose youngest had received daycare services through Social Services, also admitted to not knowing of any programs available for her son with the exception of the public PreK program. While waiting to receive admission to the PreK program, Lisa expressed the desire to have her son attend something outside so that he is not at home all day. When I inquired if she had ever tried any programs at the public library or community center down the street, she stated that she had no knowledge of such programs. Rayna, when asked if she had considered other programs for her son, stated that there were no other programs, and this was the only one. In this regard, Susan is correct, that families are left

with minimal agency reduced to a yes or no to this one particular program: the public PreK program.

According to the city website, both Healthy Families and Parents as Teachers, two research-based home visitation programs, are in operation in the city. According to the national Affiliate website, Parents as Teachers, a universal access program, focuses on families with increased stressors such as income, refugee or immigrant status, education of parents. While families have to apply and be accepted to these programs, neither participant mentioned being aware of these programs or others like them. Additionally, the city library has a variety of storytime programs available for various ages from birth to five years old. These programs are free and open to the public, still neither of the mothers were aware of them; however, Lisa indicated that she would gladly take her son to such programs if she knew how to find them since she didn't want him sitting at home all day. By training resettlement agency on the different available programs and their benefits, as well as providing a clearinghouse of available programs to families as part of the resettlement services, we can support connections between families and community programs that will aid in their integration and family well-being.

*Cultural sensitivity training.* Another critical need for training that was identified by Susan was cultural sensitivity. She indicated that certain school staff, such as front office and nursing staff, would benefit from more training in the particular needs of this population. This was confirmed by some of the experiences of the mothers in the study. Mothers recounted salient experiences with staff that indicated that they lacked awareness and sensitivity to them. Lisa received incongruent answers from various staff members, causing her to feel frustrated and not listened to. When I approached the school with her to inquire for a third time about her son's enrollment, I observed that the staff spoke to the me instead of the mother, in spite of the fact

that Lisa had initiated the request for information. These kinds of interactions suggest a lack of patience to explain and inflexibility that often isn't congruent with eastern cultures. Training for front office and support staff in basic cross-cultural communication with culturally diverse parents and common misunderstandings, such as the need for adhering to rigid deadlines and paperwork procedures would help in improving relationships between the school and parents and improve some of the frustrating communication parents receive from the school.

**Need for partnerships.** Even with more training available to the agency workers, a major challenge within the resettlement agency is turnover of staff. The school liaison who assisted the mothers who participated in the study had left the agency a full year before the study was conducted. Additionally, Susan left the agency shortly after this study's data were collected. Mothers who I spoke to were unaware of Susan's name or contact information in spite of being well within the five-year resettlement period that is within the liaison's purview. Because of the turnover of staff within the resettlement agency, partnerships with other agencies would help with consistency in the transitions.

Greater partnerships between agencies could create a pathway for more transparent data sharing. Based on the contact list provided to me by the school liaison, Susan was unsure of which children were enrolled in PreK and which ones were not. Additionally, she stated she was unaware which parents were utilizing daycare services or other early childhood education programs through Social Services. By collecting more data from programs being utilized by families, the resettlement agency could better assess the needs that are and are not being addressed.

One implication of data collection and data sharing between agencies is the increased surveillance on an already closely managed population. In considering families' privacy rights

and rights to certain services, there is a delicate balance to be determined. On the one hand, families are permanently resettled with the goal of integrating and becoming citizens of the United States. On the other hand, families are entitled to certain privileges and services based on their status as resettled refugees in the country, such as the right to access to the School Liaison for support. However, keeping parents aware of these available services and evaluating the effectiveness and ongoing need for them is difficult without some collection and sharing of data. In a climate of uncertain funding for the refugee services, data may be the greatest influencer to emphasize the need for such services. Now I turn to describe a few of the recommended services that the research points to.

**Targeted Services for Families**

The results of the study indicate that targeted services for refugee families would benefit and support their experiences with accessing and participating in early childhood education programs. Some of these were supportive practices that the school engaged in identified by mothers. For example, both women expressed appreciation for teachers and school personnel who offered to use the phone translation services. This support in helping to bridge the language barrier encouraged their participation and communication with the teacher, which helped them feel connected to the school and aware of how their child was doing. In addition to the supportive practices identified by mothers, the challenges and tensions they experienced indicate that targeted services in two key areas could improve their access and participation in the programs. These two suggestions, cultural liaisons and transportation assistance, are described in the subsections below.

**Cultural liaison.** The mothers in the current study both received communication from the school that confused them. The deluge of papers sent from the school overwhelmed them,

and while sometimes teachers made an effort to simplify directions, it would have helped for them to have someone to call that would be able to explain it to them. Several studies have suggested the strength of utilizing cultural liaisons with refugee populations (Morland & Birman, 2016; McBrien & Ford, 2012). Parents were more aware of what was going on in the school and more comfortable with asking for help when they needed it. Additionally, they found that their school and teachers' attitudes and behaviors changed towards the refugee parents as a result of more communication and partnership. Massing, Kirova, & Hennig (2013) have suggested the benefits of employing cultural liaisons within the preschool program in Canada to increase the ability of classrooms to be culturally relevant and include parents. At least one city in the Virginia is making use of bilingual home-school liaisons to improve services for resettled refugee families (Garcia & Carnock, 2016). Providing a cultural liaison would improve the relationship and communication between school and parents.

**Accommodating transportation limitations.** In addition to the cultural challenges encountered by mothers, they indicated that transportation was a key challenge. As a major barrier to participation, transportation limitations should be accommodated for families. Particularly since the Primary Blocks program explicitly requires parent participation and presence at certain events, there should be accommodations to meet the needs of those families who don't have transportation to the school. While providing transportation for all families would not be financially or logistically feasible, utilizing technology in creative ways could help families feel more connected to school and special events. Mothers in the study expressed a desire to go to the school more often and that meeting the teacher face to face helped to strengthen their relationship with the school. Rayna enjoyed attending the special events at the school; however, she wasn't able to get to the school to attend many of them. Furthermore, she

indicated that she would have appreciated a home visit from the teacher since she was unable to attend parent-teacher conferences. The school liaison also admitted that families had difficulty getting to the school and that the school system had events within the community for families to participate in. These events, however, were focused on K-12 education and the PreK mothers in the study did not report participating in any of these events.

In summary, implications for policy and practice pointed to the need for greater collaboration and cooperation as well as targeted services for families. Within each category, several recommendations emerged from the research as shown in the list below:

- Collaboration and cooperation
    - Address the policy gap by specifying services provided to families with young children including connecting them to early childhood resources.
    - Address training needs.
        - Provide training for parents and agency personnel in early childhood programs available and their benefits.
        - Provide cultural sensitivity training for school personnel such as front office and nursing staff.
    - Formalize partnerships to increase data collection and sharing regarding services.
- Targeted services
    - Hire cultural liaisons to help bridge cultural and communication gaps.
    - Accommodations to address the transportation barrier many parents expressed.

These recommendations would address many of the challenges expressed by mothers in the study, such as transportation and conflicting communication. Additionally, it would serve to prioritize early childhood education for families and connect them to critical resources that mothers and agency staff were not previously aware of.

**Limitations**

This research was limited to the experiences of two women in a very particular place and time in history. It has been pointed out that early childhood services are disparate in various communities, therefore the findings of this study are limited to this particular community and the practices regarding early childhood enrollment and eligibility in effect here. Additionally, the

historical and political climate in which the study was conducted effected the study in numerous ways, including the difficulty in recruiting participants. Even within the interviews collected, participants asked me about my personal political feelings regarding the president, clearly embodying an "us" vs. "them" mentality.

Since the 2017 Executive Orders 13769 and 13780, known as the "refugee ban," refugee resettlement has been in the political and media spotlight, with multiple courts arguing the legality and illegality of the Executive Orders. The Executive Orders called or a complete shutdown of the refugee resettlement program for 120 days, and subsequently, increased "vetting" of refugees coming from certain "territories" (Anonymous, 2017). The resulting media coverage of refugees and the resettlement program have framed refugees as a threat or sought to refute this discourse through counterframing. One study found that exposure to such media coverage directly impacted individuals' support or opposition to refugee resettlement within the nation and their community, but only if they didn't live in geographic areas that had already experienced significant refugee resettlement (Ferwerda, Flynn, & Horiuchi, 2017). In the same study, researchers found that there was a significant difference between individuals' support for the resettlement program in the country as compared to support within their community regardless of political affiliation, demographics, or geographic location. The phenomenon of not-in-my-back-yard syndrome (NIMBYism) has been used to explain the tendency of individuals to support the program in other parts of the country, but not their own community.

Another recent study examined the refugee resettlement program and surveyed leaders in the refugee resettlement agencies across the country. The researchers found that salient issues for agencies and their work with Syrian refugees were fear of limited funds and community fear, distrust, and political climate. This climate of fear and distrust was attributed to lack of

awareness of the refugee resettlement process, sometimes making integration difficult (Utrzan, Wieling, & Piehler, 2018). Participants in the current study did not directly reference any of these issues in their own interviews; however the school liaison, consistent with the above referenced study, referenced community distrust and dislike as impacting refugee families' experiences.

According to Bhatia and Jenks (2018), the discursive acts of President Trump regarding refugee resettlement and conflating refugee and illegal immigration have led to counter-narratives that rely on framing refugees as victims and yet capable of achieving the American Dream. Their analysis of some media portrayals of Syrian refugees for example, reveals that "by portraying refugees as resilient, hardworking individuals who escaped war but now face additional challenges of creating a better life in the United States, media discourse can situate Syrians within and alongside other fellow Americans who aspire to achieve the American Dream" (Bhatia & Jenks, 2018, p230). On the other hand, media portrayals defending an isolationist ideology of fear of the "other" frame Syrian refugees as potential terrorist threats based on their geographic origin (Bhatia & Jenks, 2018). These media portrayals serve to reinforce the neoliberal ideology that only those who contribute to the economy in ways consistent with capitalistic values are deserving of full citizenship and rights (Grace, Nawyn, & Okokwo, 2018).

The competing narratives in the media of refugees has contributed to mistrust on the part of the refugee community. The implications of doing official research with women from this community require the researcher to speak against these discourses of "victim vs. terrorist" or utilizing a human capital argument to support refugee resettlement. The refugee is a naturally politicized figure and individuals from a refugee background are aware that this current political

climate makes them targets for these narratives. Several women that I had built trust with through hours of supportive interaction became suspicious and refused to participate when asked to sign the informed consent document. Given that other studies with refugees have found the informed consent document to be a barrier to consent (Gillam, 2013), I hypothesize that the required signature of consent placed the women in a vulnerable position due to their personal histories with governments and officials.

Given the difficulties in recruiting and retaining women for the study, it is imperative to note the limitations this puts on the implications and findings of the study. This study, during another period of policy implementation would have likely had different limitations; however, the findings, while influenced by the political context, are likely to be similar. Given the lack of presence of young refugee children in policy and the recent growth of public PreK programming, it is likely that much of the challenges that families face would be the same in a less volatile political time.

## Further Research

Because the body of research within the United States on refugee mothers with children in early childhood education programming is limited, there is a great need for more research with mothers of children both enrolled and unenrolled in early childhood education. While this study attempted to answer questions about the experiences of these particular mothers, it does not answer questions related to the experiences of resettled refugee mothers in other areas of the country or even resettled refugee mothers from other cultural backgrounds.

There is a critical need for more case studies such as the one conducted to compare experiences and build broad generalizations of women's experiences. Mothers from diverse national backgrounds, such as Afghani, Congolese, and Iraqi, should be included to represent

some of the larger resettled refugee populations within the United States. Additionally, the perspectives of women who choose not to enroll their children in early childhood education programming should be included to offer a more diverse perspective of mothers. Research needs to explore more about what attracts mothers to enroll their children in a program when offered choices and what influences their decision making. We currently know little about their preferences because most families are limited in available programs in their area due to fragmentation of early childhood education programs in the U.S. (Park et. al., 2018).

Future research with resettled refugee women should continue to utilize critical theory and seek to empower and give voice to women and their capabilities to speak against the current deficit perspective. At the same time, there is a dearth of quantitative data on families' utilization of programs and services in their community. While the Refugee Resettlement Program collects data on employment, income level, and utilization of cash social services, they don't track data on utilization of other community resources or the impact of those programs. Collecting and centralizing data on utilization of early childhood education programs would help in targeting services for families.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

This study set out to explore the experiences of two Syrian resettled refugee mothers within a particular context of accessing and participating in the public PreK program in their community. Through an exploratory dual case study, I attempted to describe the experiences of two mothers, Rayna and Lisa, with the public PreK program in a mid-sized Virginian city. Mothers were each interviewed twice and the resettlement agency school liaison was interviewed to add context to the study. Qualitative data was analyzed using domain analysis to establish domains and sub-domains and the semantic relationships between them.

Mothers in the study had unique experiences with the PreK program, and yet identified similar challenges such as communication and transportation. The ways in which they reacted to those experiences differed to each individual. However, they both utilized social and cultural capital and demonstrated persistence and tenacity in the face of challenges. Both mothers demonstrated a dedication to their families and their sons' educations through a willingness to overcome barriers preventing them from being active in their education. While the school liaison highlighted support services available both through the school system and her own position in the resettlement agency, neither mother indicated an awareness or utilization of these services. Mothers instead relied upon their informal social networks of friends, family, and neighbors and speaking directly to the teacher.

Their experiences shed light on a critical need for policy reform and addressing the needs of young children of resettled refugees in the United States. By addressing young children in the policy, agency personnel would be empowered and equipped to support families in obtaining early childhood education for their children. Providing direct services through the resettlement agency and streamlining the enrollment process in early childhood programs for resettled refugee families would offer families more support in the process and prevent eligible children from being left out of programs. Additionally, partnerships between agencies serving families and other eligible programs would allow for more appropriate utilization of services and data sharing to evaluate the effectiveness of programs being used.

Furthermore, the study suggests that the current services being offered through resettlement agencies, already insufficient, are at risk of being cut due to budget constraints and political decisions at the national level. Additionally, some families may feel unsupported in their efforts to meet the needs of their young children and would benefit from greater assistance

and awareness of programs available. There is a critical need to connect families to appropriate

resources including educational programming for their young children.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH INFORMATION FLYER

## Volunteers Needed to Share your Story!
Hi! I am a doctoral student at ODU in early childhood education and I am interested in hearing about your experiences with preschool in the U.S. The purpose of this study is to express the experiences and perspectives of newcomer families assisted by CCC (Commonwealth Catholic Charities).

### Are you a mother and:
Newly settled in the U.S. (within the last 3 years)
Living in the U.S. at least 3 months
With children currently in preschool (prekindergarten), ages 4-5
Speak English, Farsi, Arabic, or Swahili

### Participation will involve:
Sharing your experiences with preschool in the U.S. over 2-3 interview times (20-40 min each)

Participation is completely optional and voluntary.
If you are willing to participate, please contact Rebecca John at rroji001@odu.edu or 757-513-6761.

## Wajitoleaji Walihitaji Kushiriki Hadithi yako!
Habari! Mimi ni mwanafunzi wa udaktari katika ODU katika elimu ya utotoni na nina nia ya kusikia kuhusu uzoefu wako na shule ya mapema nchini Marekani. Madhumuni ya utafiti huu ni kuelezea uzoefu na mitazamo ya familia za wageni zilizosaidiwa na CCC (Misaada ya Kikatoliki ya Jumuiya ya Madola).

### Je, wewe ni mama na:
Mkaaji mpya nchini Marekani. (ndani ya miaka 3 iliyopita)
Unaishi Marekani kwa angalau miezi 3
Una watoto walio katika shule ya mapema kwa sasa, umri wa miaka 4-5
Mnazungumza Kiingereza, Kifarsi, Kiarabu au Kiswahili

### Ushiriki utahusisha:
Kushiriki uzoefu wako na shule ya mapema nchini Marekani zaidi ya mara 2-3 ya mahojiano (dakika 20-40 kila moja)

Kushiriki ni chaguo na hiari kabisa.
Ikiwa una nia ya kushiriki, tafadhali wasiliana na Rebecca John kwa rroji001@odu.edu au 757-513-6761.

داوطلب نیاز داریم که قصه خود را شریک کند!

سلام! من از یک شاگرد دکترای در دانشگاه علد دومینیون در رشته آموزش اولی اطفال هستم. من میخواهم از تجربه شما در مورد آموزش پیش مکتبی در ایالات متحده بشنوم. هدف این مطالعه این است که تجربه ها و دیدگاه های فامیل های نو آمده به کمک خیریه کاتولیک رفاه عمومی (سی-سی-سی) بیان شود.

آیا شما یک مادر هستید و:

اخیرا در ایالات متحده ساکن شدید (در بین ۳ سال اخیر)
در امریکا حداقل ۳ ماه زندگی کردید
همراه کودکان تان که فعلا در پیش مکتبی (پیش کودکستان) است, سن ۴ تا ۵
به زبان انگلیسی, فارسی, عربی و ساحلی حرف می زنید.

اشتراک شامل:

شریک ساختن تجربه از پیش مکتبی در ایالات متحده در ۲ تا ۳ مرتبه انترویو (۲۰ تا ۳۰ دقیقه هر کدام)

اشتراک کاملا انتخابی و داوطلبی خواهد بود.
اگر می خواهید که اشتراک کنید, لطفا با ریبیکا جان به آدرس rroji001@odu.edu یا به شماره 757-513-6761 تماس شوید.


مطلوب متطوعون لیشارکوا بقصصهم!

مرحبا! أنا طالبة دكتوراه في مجال التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة في جامعة أولد دومينيون وأنا مهتمة بسماع خبرتك في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة في الولايات المتحدة. والغرض من هذه الدراسة هو التعبير عن تجارب ووجهات نظر العائلات من الوافدين الجدد بمساعدة (CCC) أو (كومنولث الجمعيات الخيرية الكاثوليكية).

هل أنت أُم و:

استقررت حديثاً في الولايات المتحدة (خلال السنوات الثلاث الماضية).
تقيمين في الولايات المتحدة منذ 3 أشهر على الأقل
لديك حالياً من الأطفال من هم في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة (ما قبل رياض الأطفال) وتتراوح أعمارهم بين 4-5 سنوات
تتحدثين الإنجليزية أو الفارسية أو العربية أو السواحيلية

تشمل المشاركة التالی:

مشاركة تجاربك في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة في الولايات المتحدة على مدار 2 إلى 3 مقابلات (مدة كل منها 20 إلى 40 دقيقة).

المشاركة اختيارية تماماً وتطوعية.
إذا كنت ترغبين في المشاركة فيرجى الاتصال بريبيكا جون عبر البريد الإليكتروني rroji001@odu.edu أو هاتف رقم: 757-513-6761.

## APPENDIX B: INTRODUCTORY INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

Interview protocol for semi-structured Interview 1 with mothers.

1. How did you find out about the Early Childhood (EC) school?

2. What did you have to do to enroll your child?

    1. Did anyone help you in enrolling your child?

3. What were your reasons for enrolling your child in that program?

    1. Did you consider or know about any other programs?

    2. Had your child been to school before? (are there siblings in the school?)

4. How does the school communicate with you?

    1. Did you have a parent teacher conference?

    2. Do you have any flyers or papers the school has sent?

5. Tell me about the school.

    Probes:

    1. What do you like about the school?

    2. Would you change anything about the school?

    3. In what ways do you feel the school helps your child?

    4. Is there anything you think the school could do to help your child more?

6. If you have other children in school in the U.S., How is this child's experience in school difficult from your other children?

# APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

Interview protocol for semi-structured Interview 2 with mothers

1. How does your child feel about school?

    a. What's his/her favorite part?

    b. What kind of things do they do in school?

    c. Do you have any of his/her work you want to show me?

    d. What do you think of x procedures in school?

    e. How does it make you feel when they do x in school?

2. How do you communicate with the teacher and the school?

    1. What challenges are there for communicating? How do you overcome them?

    2. What helps you feel connected to your child's school?

    3. If you really need to get hold of the teacher, what would you do?

    4. How often do you go to the school?

    5. Tell me about some of your interactions with the teacher? (or)

    6. Tell me about a time you had to contact the teacher?

3. What are some things you do to help your child in school and with learning?

    1. Has the school asked you to do anything with your child at home?

    2. Do you feel you have a good relationship with the school? Why or why not?

4. What advice would you give parents new to the U.S. about having their child in this early childhood program?

**APPENDIX D**: **CASE WORKER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

This interview protocol will be used to interview case workers who regularly work with families with preschool age children.

1. What kind of preschool and early childhood services are available to your families?

2. How do you find these resources?

3. How do you determine what preschool and early childhood services are a good fit for the family?

4. What help is offered for families with case management services when signing up for preschool and early childhood services?

5. What help is offered for families without case management services when signing up for preschool and early childhood services?

6. What are the strengths of the policies in place for refugee families with young children?

7. What are the weaknesses of the policies in place for refugee families with young children?

**CURRICULUM VITAE**
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**EDUCATION:**

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
**Doctoral Candidate**
**Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction, August, 2019**
Concentration: ***Early Childhood Education***
Dissertation: *Refugee Mothers' Perspectives on Early Childhood Education in the United States: A Multiple Case Study*
Advisor: Angela Eckhoff
Walden University, Minneapolis, MN
**M.S. of Ed., Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, 2012**
The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA
**B.A., Linguistics and Elementary Education, *cum laude* 2005**

**ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT HISTORY:**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2019-current | Adjunct Instructor, Tidewater Community College |
| 2017-current | Graduate Teaching Assistant for Teaching and Learning, Old Dominion University |
| 2015-2017 | Graduate Research Assistant for the *Virginia Early Childhood Policy Center* Old Dominion University, |
| 2017-current | Consulting Evaluator for Practicum Students in STEM Education, ODU |
| 2016-current | Consulting Research Assistant for independent research projects, STEM Consulting Services |

**TEACHING:**

**Old Dominion University**

**TLED 679-Advanced Behavior Management (Instructor of Record-Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Fall 2018)**

**TLED 408-Reading and Writing in the Content Areas (Instructor of Record-Summer 2018)**

**TLED 301-Foundations and Introduction to Assessment of Education (Instructor of Record-Spring 2019)**

**Tidewater Community College**

**CHD 205-Guiding the Behavior of Children (Instructor of Record-Spring 2019)**

**Supervision:**
2017-2019 University Supervisor for Student Teachers at Old Dominion University
2017-2018 Consulting Observer and Evaluator of Practicum Students in STEM Education at Old Dominion University

## RESEARCH:

**Refereed Articles and Book Reviews:**
John, R. (April, 2018). "Book Review of *Unsettling Colonial Places and Spaces in Early Childhood Education*" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood.* 1-3. Doi: 10.1177/1463949118771499

**Other Refereed and Creative Works:**
John, R., Tilhou, R., & Eckhoff, A. (November 2017). *Refugee resettlement in Virginia: Spotlight on resources and services in Virginia.* Old Dominion University; Virginia Early Childhood Policy Center (VECPC). https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/col-dept/vecpc/docs/refugee-resettlement-in-virginia-a-spotlight-on-services-and-resources-in-virginia.pdf

Eckhoff, A., Baker, P., Faulkner, D., John, R., & Tilhou, R. (2017). *Child maltreatment in Virginia: Support for further advocacy efforts.* Old Dominion University; Virginia Early Childhood Policy Center (VECPC). https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/col-dept/education/docs/vecpc-child-maltreatment10_17-1.pdf

Baker, P., Eckhoff, A., Miller-Stevens, K. , & **John, R**. (2016). *Virginia's Early Childhood Home Visitation Programming: Support for a Collaborative Model between Sectors.* Old Dominion University; Virginia Early Childhood Policy Center (VECPC). https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/col-dept/education/docs/virginia-s-early-childhood-home-visiting-programming.pdf

**Commissioned Works:**
John, R. (In progress), Sustainable Development Goals. In Cook, D. (Ed.) *SAGE Encyclopedia of Childhood and Childhood Studies,* (anticipated publish date 2019).

**PRESENTATIONS**
**International:**
John R. (2017). "Borders in Research with Refugee Women." Paper presented at the 25th annual Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE) Annual Meeting, Toronto, Ontario.

**National:**

John, R. (2019). "Mothers' Voices in Early Childhood Education: Resettled Refugee Women's Experiences." *American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting.* April, 2019. Toronto, Ontario.

**John, R.,** (2018). "A Synthesis of Research on Resettled Refugees in Early Childhood Education in the United States." *National Research Conference on Early Childhood.* June, 2018. Arlington, VA.

Austin, N**., John R.**, & Eckhoff, A. (2017). "Public School Discipline Policies and Practices in the United States: Implications for Early Childhood Education." *American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting.* May, 2017. San Antonio, TX.

**John, R**., Baker, P., & Eckhoff, A. (2017). "Kindergarten Readiness in the Elementary Principal's Perspective." *American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting.* May, 2017. San Antonio, TX.


## SERVICE

**PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

American Educational Research Association (AERA)
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

**SERVICE TO THE FIELD**

- **Consulting Editor**, National Association for the Education of Young Children, January 2018 to present.
- **Peer Reviewer**: Annual Meeting 2019, American Educational Research Association Early Childhood/Child Development Special Interest Group
- **Peer Reviewer**: National Research Conference on Early Childhood 2018, The Administration for Children and Families
- **Planning Committee**: Early Childhood Symposium, Norfolk, VA 2016,
- **Interview Panel Participation**: Applicants to the Teacher Preparation Program at Old Dominion University


**AWARDS AND GRANTS:**

| | |
|---|---|
| 2019 ODU | Selected speaker for SciencePubs Talks, for Department of Research, |
| 2019 | Finalist in 3 Minute Thesis competition for Graduate Studies, ODU |
| 2019 | Travel Grant from Darden School of Education, C&I Department |
| 2017 | Linda Z. Bamforth Scholarship in Early Childhood Education |
| 2017 | Travel Grant from Darden School of Education, C&I Department |
| 2017 | Travel Grant from Darden School of Education, C&I Department |
| 2016 | Travel Grant from Early Childhood/Child Development AERA SIG |
| 2016 | $10,000 PNC Grant for Early Childhood Symposium, Role: GA |
| 2015-2016 | $4.5 million Child Care Assistance Means Parents In School Federal Department of Education Grant, Role: Grant Administrator |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2008 | SmartBoard Grant Recipient, American International School-Chennai |
| 2005 | ETS Recognition of Excellence for Praxis II score |
| 2005 | Meritorious New Teacher Designation |