BECOMING SOMEBODY - LEARNING IDENTITIES
AND TRAJECTORIES FOR STUDENTS IN A
PROTECTED REFUGEE SITUATION

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work
done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any
degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Education Degree Committee.
Abstract

Becoming Somebody - Learning Identities and Trajectories for Students in a Protected Refugee Situation

Jonathan Joseph Birtwell

Research on education for students with refugee backgrounds has extended understanding of learning experiences for students in resettlement countries but is still lacking in protracted refugee situations (PRS) such as Malaysia. Although structural barriers to access, particularly for higher education, are well understood in PRS, these do not account for the low uptake of places on higher education programmes despite high demand. Taking access to higher education as a starting point, this study used a theory of learner identity to look beyond structural barriers and explore access to higher education from a sociological perspective. The focus of the research developed throughout the analysis process to highlight a more key concern on forms of becoming for students in an education system that is annexed from the host nation. The interface between individual and society is interrogated in terms of agency and recognition that students experience as learners, and the corresponding impact this has on their learning trajectories. This study recruited 17 students in the highest level of secondary education across two informal learning centres in Kuala Lumpur were as active participants to better represent the students’ voices in the limited research conducted in this area. Rich data was gathered through loosely structured interviews, focus groups and observation, and analysed using a combination of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis. Students experienced an expanded space for authoring identities in the unfamiliar educational PRS context. However, the metaphor of a “gap” was used to express the mismatch they feel between internal and external forms of recognition. Learner identities developed on a foundation of resilience and reflexivity, which the students demonstrated in challenging standard entry procedures in attempts to be viewed as valid candidates for higher education. However, developing identities came under threat as the students approached the prospect of conforming with enduring culturally defined notions of adulthood, leading to identity construction outside of education to ensure successfully “becoming somebody”. This work helps to make visible the experiences of youth in PRS and contributes to challenging linear migration narratives by considering the complex ways that different temporal frames shape identity construction and becoming “refugee learners”.


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I would also like to thank my supervisor, Professor Susan Robertson, for her insights and dedication to my personal academic development and this project. Our supervisions have always been insightful and enjoyable occasions that have allowed the thesis and my own thinking to take several strides forwards after weeks or months of going around in circles. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr Eva Hartmann, for her enthusiastic contributions, particularly in my first year.

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## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLCs</td>
<td>Community learning centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DACA</td>
<td>Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals</td>
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<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBM</td>
<td>Identity-based motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGCSE</td>
<td>International General Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIEP</td>
<td>International Institute of Education Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGOs</td>
<td>International non-governmental organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>Protracted refugee situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVM</td>
<td>Participatory visual methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>RLC</td>
<td>Refugee learning centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDGs</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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Prior to embarking on this PhD project, I spent 18 months working for a refugee learning centre (RLC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, that provided secondary education for students who had claimed refugee status through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As part of my role as Education Programmes Coordinator, I assisted these students to prepare applications and become familiar with the academic culture of international higher education establishments. Despite the difficulties faced in completing secondary education due to the impact of forced migration, these students demonstrated considerable tenacity in their attitude towards learning. Consistent with Crea’s assertion that “those at the margins are hungry for higher education” (2016, p. 21), many of these students expressed a desire to continue to post-secondary education at one of the private higher education institutions that might accept their application. However, through the network of individuals and institutions involved in expanding opportunities for higher education to students with refugee backgrounds, I came to learn that despite the high level of interest, many of the allocated scholarship places were not filled. This was quite surprising, since from my observation the demand from suitable candidates far outstripped the supply of scholarship places. It seemed to me that higher education institutions should be able to find candidates from refugee communities that could achieve success on the programmes available.

The low enrolment rates in higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia is representative of the broader global picture. In 2019, 37% of the world’s youth were enrolled in higher education, compared to only 3% of those from refugee communities, and UNHCR has set an ambitious target of raising this number to 15% by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019a). It has been claimed that facilitating access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds can promote social, economic and gender equality, empowerment and post-conflict resolution (UNHCR, 2015); help alleviate trauma experienced through the ongoing process of conflict, exile and asylum (Baxter & Triplehorn, 2004; Lenette, 2016; A. Smith & Vaux, 2003); can afford respect to those in refugee communities (Zeus, 2011); and is important for restoring dignity, security and hope (Lenette, 2016). Considering there is
potential for such a positive impact on the lives of youth with refugee backgrounds, it seemed essential to explore access to higher education in the Malaysian context more deeply to see how opportunities available could be better exploited.

Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol and there is no formal legal recognition of those who claim refugee status. Such contexts are referred to as Protracted Refugee Situations (PRS), defined by UNHCR as a situation in which a person remains displaced for “five or more years after initial displacement, without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions” (UNHCR, 2009, preamble). This includes refugee camps, as well as urban areas in which those with refugee status are not formally recognised by the host nation, such as Malaysia. Practically speaking, youth in PRS have limited access to public services, including education. Individuals are, however, able to register with UNHCR and access work, healthcare, and education with assistance from community groups and NGOs, which are tolerated to varying degrees by the Malaysian Government. At the beginning of 2019, it was estimated that 78% of the global refugee population, or 16 million people, lived in PRS, which is a 12% increase on the previous year (UNHCR, 2020). A recent meta-scoping study by Ramsay and Baker (2019) notes a lack of research focused on education in PRS. What research exists predominantly focuses on countries of permanent resettlement (McBrien et al., 2017). This project therefore seeks to contribute to extending understanding of the relatively under-theorised area of educational experiences of youth in PRS.

In addition, research that focuses on education has been criticised for lacking input from youth with refugee backgrounds themselves (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Uptin et al., 2016). With this in mind, I conducted a participatory study working with students in the final years of education at two RLCs in the Klang Valley area of Malaysia. The first learning centre, referred to here as RLC1, is a community-based learning centre that had grown into a larger NGO and predominantly serves the Somali refugee community. Nine students participated from this learning centre, all of whom were ethnically Somali and had grown up in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, or Kenya prior to forced migration. RLC2 is run by a Christian NGO and taught students from a variety of refugee communities. Eight students participated from this learning centre. Six were from Pakistan, one from Myanmar and one from Liberia. This does not reflect a representative sample of youth who claim refugee status in Malaysia but the number of
students who complete secondary education in this context is relatively small as few learning centres offer education beyond the primary level. Working with these students, therefore, gives an insight into their learning experiences to help highlight potential avenues for future research, and comparing two RLCs helps identify how contextual factors might play a role in these experiences.

Although the research began by exploring the dynamics of access to higher education, after spending some time with the students during fieldwork it became apparent that the focus of the study was shifting to a broader theme of *becoming*. During analysis, I remembered a novel I had read by Terry Pratchett whilst teaching overseas entitled, ‘Witches Abroad’. This story follows the migration journey of a group of three witches as they travelled across their world to save a princess from being forced into marriage with a prince (who was actually a frog). As far removed as this fantasy novel seemed from the experiences of students in RLCs in Malaysia, I thought about the opening paragraphs of the story, where Pratchett argues:

> People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it’s the other way around. Stories exist independently of their players. If you know that, the knowledge is power...And their very existence overlays a faint but insistent pattern on the chaos that is history. Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper...It takes a special kind of person to fight back, and become the bicarbonate of history. (Pratchett, 1992, pp. 12–14).

Pratchett’s metaphor of stories was a starting point for thinking about life trajectories and the agency we express in the sorts of people we become. It could be asked what kind of ‘story’ the students in the refugee learning centres are expected to follow. Is it only those who are ‘special’ that can break free from imposed views of who they are, and jump into a differently narrated lane, or etch a new groove in their learning biographies? Where might these stories of becoming lead the students, what role does education more generally have in these pathways to becoming, and how do these influence the way that the students view themselves? These broad questions guided my thinking as the voice of the students in the data moved away from issues of access and suggested a more salient concern about who they would be in the face of an unknowable future.
To explore these issues, this thesis uses the broad theoretical lens of learner identity, asking the overarching research question:

_How do students in protracted refugee situations understand and experience the role of ‘learner’ in PRS and how does this affect learner identity and learning trajectories?_

Learner identity is taken to be informed by processes of recognition and agency. The broad research question above is therefore divided into three more specific questions that guide the research:

1. **What influences processes of recognition (self and other) in the learning identities of students in PRS?**
2. **How do students experience agency in the learner identities they can construct in PRS schools?**
3. **How do students construct learning trajectories in the context of education in PRS?**

The thesis is split into three sections and an overall conclusion. Section 1 introduces the background and theoretical considerations that inform the research. The broad context of Malaysia is further interrogated alongside current research on migration and mobility. This is followed by a literature review of higher education in a variety of forced migration contexts, and the theoretical tools that will be used in the analysis of empirical data is then outlined. After introducing the research sites, Section 2 presents the philosophical principles that guide the research, in this case the transformative paradigm outlined by Mertens (2007, 2009), understood through a critical realist lens. The participatory approach that is used in data collection, abductive process of analysis, and model of active participation with students is also explained, along with the difficulties faced in implementing participatory research in the learning centres. Following this I introduce Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis combined with Narrative analysis as the primary methodological approach (Patterson, 2018), the qualitative research methods I used (loosely structured interviews, focus groups and observation), and the means of ensuring quality and ethics within the research. Section 3 then presents the results across three thematic chapters. First, the students’ pre-migratory experiences; second the factors that influence identity development in the first learning centre; and the same for the second learning centre in a third chapter. This is followed by a discussion of these results in light of the theory outlined in Section 1 using the abductive approach to analysis described in Section 2. Finally, I conclude with the main findings,
limitations to the implementation of the overall methodological approach, and highlight areas for further research.
SECTION 1
BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this first section I will present a review of the literature that informed the research questions and outline the theoretical toolkit that guided the subsequent empirical work. In Part 1, I introduce the context of forced migration as it pertains to Malaysia as a country that receives refugees. I explore the ambiguous position held by people with refugee backgrounds in Malaysian society and the impact of border control on the lives of these people. I then explore a body of research on migration and mobility, highlighting areas in need of theoretical development to make visible the experiences of learners with refugee backgrounds. I also consider the paradoxical nature of education in PRS and the way in which assumptions about linear trajectories of development and hegemonic global space that limit current understandings of mobility are reflected here. In Part 2 I review current literature on access to education and experiences of transitioning to higher education for learners in a variety of migration contexts characterised by living in a state of legal and temporal liminality. Noting the lack of specific focus of this research on PRS, this search was extended to those who might not technically fall into the category of refugee or PRS but experience similar levels of exclusion from participation in systems of education. From this literature review it was apparent that learner identity would be a promising theoretical avenue to pursue, and Part 3 outlines the theoretical tools that were used in the study. Overall, I posit that to bridge gaps in understanding the experiences of learners in PRS, this research should explore how learner identity is realised through the lenses of agency and recognition. In addition, attention should be focused on the ways in which dynamics of agency and recognition decentre previous hegemonic spatio-temporal assumptions of migration and mobility.
Part 1: Malaysia, Migration and Mobility

The Malaysian Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS) and Education

Malaysia is a diverse PRS hosting predominantly stateless people (e.g. Rohingya, 102,560) as well others from Myanmar (51,790), Pakistan (3670), Yemen (3270), Syria (3230), Somalia (2640), Afghanistan (1710), Sri Lanka (1210) and others (Figures as of March 2021, UNHCR, 2021b). Malaysia has a modern history of receiving refugees from neighbouring nations stretching back 40 years to the Vietnam conflict. However, despite several decades of receiving refugees after waves of conflict around the globe, Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. There is no distinction between different categories of migrants who do not hold valid visas in Malaysian law, so there is a limited legal apparatus to formally ensure rights for those who claim refugee status (Ahmad et al., 2016). Refugee communities are therefore subsumed within a broader ‘irregular migrants’ category, leaving them vulnerable to raids, arrests, arbitrary detention, violence and coercion by law enforcement (Crisp et al., 2012; Don & Lee, 2014). However, all Non-State Parties to the Refugee Convention are bound by the non-refoulment principle (Juss, 2013), meaning Malaysia is not permitted to forcibly return anyone claiming refugee status to their country of origin. It is therefore possible to claim refugee status through UNHCR and reside temporarily in Malaysia on the understanding that you will eventually be resettled in another country. The current coalition government included a promise to ratify the Refugee Convention in their 2018 election manifesto, but at the time of writing they have not taken any formal steps to do so (Yi, 2019).

In recent years the Malaysian Government has increased its use of border patrols and security procedures to restrict the mobility of various types of migrants, both those considered ‘irregular’ and economic migrants who hold working visas (Hoffstaedter, 2015). There has also been a shift from external modes of border control to internal control through identification and surveillance using improved technologies, such as the collection of biometric data and employer inspections (Low & Mokhtar, 2017). There are no refugee camps in Malaysia, so most of the refugee population on the peninsula reside in the urban areas of Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bharu and Penang amongst local communities (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The Malaysian Government has given assurances that protection will be afforded to those who have been
granted refugee status and by UNHCR and are in possession of a UNHCR Card until they are resettled. However, this protection has not necessarily been observed with reports of bribery and extortion of individuals from refugee communities by law enforcement agencies (Crisp et al., 2012). Consequently, those within refugee communities tend to restrict their movements to their local surroundings where possible to avoid detection. This situation has been exacerbated by the use of the press by political elites to promote a discourse of refugee subjects as a “illegals, threats and victims” to justify policy decisions that deny citizenship rights (Don & Lee, 2014, p. 688). In addition, this pejorative political narrative of refugees leads to discrimination from local communities, causing them to sink further into the background and be less visible, and therefore their cases less actionable. Since very few individuals and families are actually resettled, academics and humanitarian practitioners have called for a shift to other durable solutions, particularly local integration and access to work, to better protect the rights of refugee communities (Crisp et al., 2012; Todd et al., 2019).

Given their lack of legal status, individuals with refugee backgrounds are not able to enter the formal workforce, so they resort to low-paying, potentially exploitative forms of informal labour so as to survive (Ahmad et al., 2016). Some domestic legislative frameworks have been activated to allow temporary rights to work for some refugee groups, including the Moro in Sabah (Borneo), as well as Bosnians and Acehnese in Peninsular Malaysia (Hoffstaedter, 2015). Applying such rights differentially between refugee communities is typical of the Malaysian Government’s approach to managing the refugee crisis, and creates a tiered system based on country of origin that leaves some migrants more marginalised than others. Although they haven’t ratified the Refugee Convention, Malaysia is a signatory to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. All children in Malaysia, regardless of background, therefore have the right to access education in line with Article 28, but this right has not been upheld for children with refugee backgrounds (Nordin et al., 2020). Using a children’s rights framework, Khoso and Hussin (2020) argue that Malaysia has shirked responsibility towards vulnerable children in refugee communities and shaped their social and political exclusion through a rhetoric of these children as a threat to the harmonious functioning of Malaysian society. The ambiguous position that this creates for refugee communities within Malaysia results in a complex dynamic of visibility and invisibility that uniquely characterises the spaces
within which students make claims to acceptance of public goods, such as education (Ansems de Vries, 2016).

In 2019 it was estimated that there were 23,823 people of concern of school-going age, with an enrolment rate of 44% for primary education and 16% for secondary education (UNHCR, 2019b). These youth attend one of the 128 community-based learning centres (CLCs) that have been established by a variety of local and international NGOS, religious organisations and community groups (Diaz Sanmartin, 2017; UNHCR, 2019b). These CLCs are generally monocultural and serve particular community groups in their local area due to the limited mobility of refugee communities (Hoffstaedter, 2015). It has been noted that the risk of arrest and abuse in the commute to school over long distances is a prominent reason for parents keeping their children out of school (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Since very few of the CLCs offer secondary education, students may have to travel long distances to access post-primary opportunities, exacerbating the barriers to participation. UNHCR do not run any of these learning centres as an organisation but provides support together with implementing partners via teacher training and compensation, grants for rent, renovation and materials, and information about external organisations that provide complementary education and skills-based programmes. There is no centralised learning system or syllabus, so the CLCs draw on a variety of self-made and Malaysian or international curricula, such as the Singaporean, UK, or US K-12 system (Ashik, 2019).

The CLCs are usually based in flats or commercial units that are mostly hidden from view, with most of the local community unaware of their presence (Letchamanan, 2013). Students are often required to sit on the floor or are cramped around small desks using old textbooks that have been donated. CLCs are often lacking in basic teaching resources such as writing equipment, whiteboards/blackboards and technology. Some of the larger CLCs that are supported by international doners, however, are much better resourced and have well-stocked libraries, computer equipment and smartboards at their disposal. However, the number of students that are fortunate enough to be within reach of these educational opportunities are relatively few. CLCs are staffed by teachers within the refugee community and occasional local and international volunteers with varying degrees of training. One of the main challenges faced by these centres is the high turnover of staff (UNHCR, 2019b) as teachers move, are resettled or find other employment. There is therefore a lack of continuity
in the education the students receive despite the dedication and efforts of the people who organise and implement various education programmes. Given these learning conditions and lack of secondary learning opportunities and accreditation, it is questionable whether the students in these CLCs have access to a quality education as indicated by the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action (Letchamanan, 2013) and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The number of students that achieve the level required to access post-secondary opportunities is therefore relatively low. Consequently, it is likely most of the places offered in higher education institutions are taken up by those who completed or mostly completed secondary education before arrival in Malaysia.

There is no clear data on the number of students who attend higher education in Malaysia, but in 2016 UNHCR was aware of 48 students who were enrolled on tertiary education programmes (Tan, 2016). To remove some of the administrative barriers to applying for higher education programmes, UNHCR Malaysia has signed Memorandums of Understanding with private or international higher education institutions. These institutions don’t have scholarships for refugees per se, but instead provide fee waivers and free accommodation to assist UNHCR card holders to pursue certificate programmes, foundation programmes, bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees. Some have also lowered their English language and entry requirements for students with refugee backgrounds, considering other kinds of qualification and experience. UNHCR Malaysia also maintain an email list of around 1000 people to share information about higher education opportunities. To get around the formal restrictions on offering places to students with refugee backgrounds, these higher education institutions exploit a variety of legal loopholes to enable participation in programmes. For example, they have awarded short course certificates for each module that can then be exchanged for credits towards a final degree qualification that is awarded through an institution in another country. There are also examples of post-secondary short course programmes in key skills such as languages, culinary skills and computing that help support livelihood activities for refugee communities (Project Self Help, 2021).

During my first visit to Malaysia, I helped to set up an independent short-course programme that aimed to connect students with refugee backgrounds to higher education opportunities and provide soft skills training related to university access. Through the programme participants were taught communication skills, given a tour of university campuses,
supported to write a personal statement, and paired with a mentor for six months to help guide them through decision making and application processes (Birtwell et al., 2020). However, despite the work that has been done to broaden opportunities for higher education, many of the institutions that signed MOUs have withdrawn or paused accepting applications from UNHCR card-holders due to receiving threats of losing their license to operate from representatives of the Malaysian Government. In an attempt to allow a more formal entry route for students with refugee backgrounds, a group of concerned stakeholders presented a white paper entitled *Towards Inclusion of Refugees in Higher Education in Malaysia* to the Education Ministry, Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister's Office of the Government of Malaysia (Sani, 2020). It was suggested that legislation be put in place to formally allow UNHCR identity cards to enrol on courses in private education institutions if they had a passport. Such a move would permit the issuing of student visas for the duration of study to affected students. No official response has been made at time of writing, however such a move would not provide a pathway for students without a passport, such as the majority stateless Rohingya population.

The ‘Mobilities Turn’ and Beyond

In 2007, drawing on the work of Bauman (2004), Pinson and Arnot described the state of research about refugee education in the sociology of education as a “wasteland” (2007, p. 400). They emphasised that the presence of youth with refugee backgrounds in host nation schools was “a litmus test in terms of social inclusion,” (2007, p. 405) and that the responses of education systems to the rise in forced migration could tell us something about the effect shifting global trends have on education and society. The lack of a comprehensive framework therefore stifles our understanding of the intersection of education, globalisation and migration. Revisiting this argument 13 years later, they acknowledge the work that has been done to gain an insight into various aspects of education for youth with refugee backgrounds across a variety of contexts. However, it is suggested that the sociology of education was still quite far from a comprehensive sociology of migration and education that would make the educational experiences of refugee children visible (Pinson & Arnot, 2020). Research that focuses on higher education is particularly sparse, in part due to the relatively small number of students that complete secondary education in refugee settings, and the global drive for
improving access to primary and secondary levels reflected in human rights frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Anselme & Hands, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2010).

Theories of migration have developed from simple labour models based on push/pull factors of movement from one place to another to the current “mobilities turn” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208) as an explanatory tool for migration decisions and its sociological effects (O’Reilly, 2015). Cresswell makes a distinction between movement as geographical displacement and mobility as “socially produced motion” (2006, p. 16), extending analysis to diverse systems of meaning-making that underlie decisions and drive the dynamics of migration. Rather than a focus on mapping routes and calculable movements, a mobilities paradigm bridges between disciplines and methodological approaches to explore the rich meaning that is attributed to various experiences of being mobile (Cresswell, 2011). Mobility also considers the movement and flows of not just people, but also objects, ideas, as well as the systems and means that facilitate and constrain these movements. It provides a framework to consider the relational dynamics of the movement of different people, objects and ideas and the ways in which this defines the constant construction and reconstruction of space as being in flux (Sheller, 2017).

Mobility also considers the meaning that is attributed to potential movement, immobility (such as the sensation of being spatially constrained to an area like a refugee camp), making personal connections with spaces, and how a changing environment that results from migration might influence the lives of those who do not migrate (Büscher & Urry, 2009). Mobility therefore provides a means to think about migration from multiple angles and consider an ever-changing relationship that people might have with being mobile or immobile in and through space.

After achieving some traction within the social science of migration, researchers began to focus on the temporal aspects of mobility to explore different rhythms, tempo, temporal frames (past, present, future), and interconnected temporal levels of migration (micro, meso, macro) (M. Griffiths et al., 2013). These newer theories challenged prior notions of migration, forced or otherwise, as being too linear; instead, they provide some scope for understanding the flow of people through time and space in more non-linear, circular and/or temporary ways. Robertson and Ho argue that,

* A key outcome of positioning migration studies alongside a ‘mobilities paradigm’ is that together they present a critical approach to studying how mobile subjects are
Thinking in terms of the meaning that we associate with certain categories of migrants, the
types of movements they make across or within borders, and the socio-historical reasoning
behind the emergence of these categories of migrants can tell us something meaningful about
the social world in which these movements take place.

An example of this can be found in Hoffstaedter’s use of mobility and the visibility/invisibility
of refugee communities to explore how internal and external bordering techniques used by
the Malaysian government hold refugee communities in different states of “arrested
mobility” both spatially and temporally (2019, p. 530). In this case, the concept of mobility
exposes the differential impact of border enforcement based on socio-economic background,
etnicity, and religion. Spatially speaking, different communities are restricted in their ability
to cross borders due to lack of travel documents, on the one hand, and internal movement
due to the discrimination and harassment they face, on the other. Temporally, their mobility
is hindered by the uncertainty of resettlement or gaining improved legal status in Malaysia,
holding them back from the types of lives they aspire to live in the future. Looking into the
individual community dynamics, Hoffstaedter (2019) exposes more nuance to the meaning
attributed to spatial and temporal mobility and immobility across three refugee communities.
In the Iranian refugee community, it was found that many members restricted their
interactions with other Iranians due to suspicion of spies from the Iranian embassy and fear
of experiencing the persecution they fled from. In contrast, the Chin community created a
sense of community cohesion through the proliferation of community run organisations that
seek to recreate a feeling of their homeland and spatial sense of belonging. This, however, is
accompanied by a higher level of community policing and oversight that shapes the mobility
of individuals who are compelled to conform. Finally, the temporal mobility of the Rohingya
community is divided between those who have an orientation to integration at the cost of
ethnic identity, and those who seek to reinforce their ethnic identity through seeking
recognition as a potential future nation.

Despite the reported advantages of mobility approaches, McNevin (2019) argues that these
theoretical frameworks lack explanatory power because they model migration within a fixed
globally hegemonic spatio-temporal framework. International space, in terms of the
organisation of nation states and their borders, is the assumption against which non-linear migrations are interpreted. Likewise, progressive time as a linear trajectory of development assumes stepwise inclusion with an ultimate end point in mobility that corresponds with full membership of a governed unit of international space. In not challenging these assumptions, mobility is only understood “within the parameters of pre-given subject forms that take their shape from international space and come to stand for the limits of political reality” (ibid., 2019, p. 6). Regardless of the good intentions of the researcher, uncritical application of a mobility framework may be unwittingly complicit with the subjugation of given categories of migrants as outsiders who should conform to a neo-liberal international order (Scheel, 2019).

In addition, O’Reilly (2015) argues that previous theorising around migration, including mobility, lacks a comprehensive explanatory link between structure and agency. It is argued that “migrants make choices but not in circumstances of their own choosing and, having migrated, they change societies in unintended ways that then create new circumstances for future migrants” (O’Reilly, 2015, p. 31). Taking PRS to be part of a broader, non-linear migration narrative for students who seek access to higher education therefore implies considering the impact social structure has on decision making. Likewise, we should also consider how the actions of previous students have shaped the context of access, and how seeking access influences future decisions and the actions of others.

Constructing stories of migration against fixed notions of citizenship, nation states and an assumed linear, stepwise trajectory of migration therefore obscures the “history and social force” (Nail, 2015, p. 4) of people on the move, casting them as 1-dimensional figures that lack their own subjectivity (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). An attempt to flesh out the figure of the migrant can be seen in Collins’ conceptual grammar of desire, which “reconceptualises(s) migration as an ongoing process of spatio-temporal differentiation rather than as a univalent and knowable phenomenon” (2018, p. 964). Collins argues that desire is an ongoing driver for migration linking past, present and future, rather than an outcome based on a discrete moment of decision-making made in the past. Theoretically, desire encompasses multiple temporalities and rhythms of migration. It also considers relational spatialities through the entanglement of people, place and objects that define individual life trajectories, and emphasises the role of becoming in addition to being through journeys of migration. Through the lens of desire, questions are raised about the structures that are encountered by migrants,
their subject positions vis-à-vis the expectations these structures present, and the potential for migrants to transform regimes of migration as much as migration is a means of personal becoming. Essentially, Collins’ approach conceives the figure of a migrant to be an agential force whose trajectory through migration isn’t merely an outcome of socio-historically situated migration policy. Each of the arguments presented by McNevin, O’Reilly and Collins point to problematising the assumptions about systems of migration and the people within them, and considering the interplay between individuals, policy and societies that shape experiences of migration, including educational experiences.

Paradoxes of Education in PRS

Education systems are entrenched in the neoliberal notions of international space and progressive time that McNevin challenges. This is reflected in the work of Waters and Leblanc, who argue that the link between nation building and education frustrates efforts to educate students in PRS since “the problem of refugees itself is rooted in the connection between nationalism and the state,” (2005, p. 144). Mass public schooling systems are designed to prepare students to participate in economic and social development of nation states and cultivate a sense of national identity. Students in refugee camps occupy a space of liminality with respect to the host nations which is upheld by a global order that defines the difference between citizen and non-citizen groups. They are therefore not expected to participate in future civic life of the host nation. In lieu of a national body to orient the purpose of schooling, the international refugee relief regime fulfils the role of a pseudo-state with regards education planning. This gives rise to three paradoxes of education in PRS. Firstly, International organisations such as UNHCR and INGOs, typically plan education based on lessons learned from previous interventions and neglect the fundamental link with national identity. Secondly, school curricula are embedded in nation-state politics that lay the foundation for continuous socialisation over the life course. In PRS this may encompass multiple political actors in conflict, including home and host nations, international actors, and individuals within targeted refugee communities. Thirdly, uncertainty about the forms of civic participation students in PRS will fulfil in the future makes it unclear what sort of personal and economic development their education should promote. Overall, Waters and Leblanc (2005) argue that international and non-governmental organisations are poorly placed to
create education systems in PRS, and such systems are inevitably subject to political wrangling over priorities and purpose of education in ways dictated by hegemonic global agendas.

Zeus (2009) extends this line of reasoning to a specific focus on higher education in PRS, referencing the situation along the Thai/Burma border. Firstly, it is argued that the link between higher education and nation building is particularly acute since it is envisioned that higher education institutions contribute significantly to the development of society. The liminal position held by students in PRS, however, conflicts with this notion, raising questions over the nature and logic of their participation. Secondly, PRS is understood to be temporary in nature, whereas higher education is linked to more long-term development efforts. Access for students in PRS is therefore not viewed as a priority and more attention is paid to temporary relief efforts and lower levels of schooling. There has been a shift to viewing primary and secondary education as essential in emergency response when approaching the issue from a rights perspective, but higher education is still considered a luxury that can be pursued upon resettlement. Finally, it is too often assumed that due to the poor quality of education received in PRS and the trauma associated with the refugee experience, that students with refugee backgrounds are not capable of success at the tertiary level. Education programmes are therefore more often linked to livelihood strategies and skills for employment. This forms part of a broader narrative of refugees as helpless victims and upholding higher education as a bastion for national elites, which excludes students with refugee backgrounds from participation. Many students have, however, demonstrated success at the tertiary level, including in Malaysia (Bailey & Inanc, 2019), and Zeus argues that in spite of these paradoxes higher education in PRS can be both a means and an end to empowerment (2009, 2011).

Paradoxes are also observed in programmes designed to promote access to higher education in PRS. For example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) explored the impact of transnational education migration programme in Cuba for Sahrawi refugees based in camps in Algeria enabling them to complete tertiary education. The programme was initially hailed as a South-South cooperative partnership that sought to support self-sufficiency and secure better futures for Sahrawi families and communities in opposition to dominant Global North humanitarian initiatives. However, upon completion of their degrees, many Sahrawi students, particularly those with medical degrees, left the camp to seek employment in wealthier Spanish-speaking
countries due to the desirability of their Cuban medical training. This was in part due to the lack of opportunities for skilled employment in the camp. However, the graduates also reported feelings of rejection from their community upon return, which they described as a “social problem” arising from the distance they had from the local camp culture and their experiences whilst studying abroad (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011, p. 440). This example demonstrates the degree to which attempts to support self-sufficiency through higher education is dependent on conditions within a PRS setting and the broader landscape of inequality and opportunity that leads to the eventual “brain drain” of skilled migrants (Skeldon, 2008, p. 10). Consequently, rather than supporting self-sufficiency, the educational migration exacerbated dependency as humanitarian practitioners continued to perform functions in the camp in lieu of skilled Sahrawi workers, ultimately leading to the programme being suspended.

Moving Forward

Assumptions about linear migration journeys and the globally hegemonic spatial arrangement of nation states that have undermined theories of mobility are clearly reflected in the paradoxes that face students pursuing education in PRS. The connection between higher education and the nation state, and the embeddedness of the notion of refugeeness within a hegemonic global order presents a series of paradoxes when considering access to higher education in this context. To understand the educational experiences of students with refugee backgrounds it is therefore necessary to develop a theoretical perspective that interrogates alternative spatio-temporal structures that give shape to the lives of these students. The insights into the educational migration of Sahrawi students also demonstrates the personal impact these paradoxes have on individual students and the ways in which these shape an individual’s becoming through migration. This implies more than just moving beyond a basic deficit model for the figure of a refugee and considering the entanglement of structure and agency as it is played out through experiences of education in migration. The arguments of McNevin, O’Reilly and Collins outlined earlier therefore provide a useful foundation for the broad issues that shape the sociology of migration to aid in developing a set of theoretical tools to understand the issue of access to higher education in PRS.
A recent meta-scoping study of literature on higher education and students with refugee backgrounds noted the lack of attention paid to PRS contexts in the literature reviewed (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). My own literature search also discovered only one study that addressed Malaysia specifically (Bailey & Inanc, 2019). To begin developing a theoretical direction, I have therefore broadened the search to consider studies that consider both PRS and resettlement contexts, as well as general theories about the impact of migration on experiences in education. I also explored literature that considered the educational experience of other types of migrants that experience uncertain futures and liminal legality, such as DACA\textsuperscript{1} students in the US. Sociological research into migration has been criticised for conflating refugees and asylum seekers into the broader categories of migrants (Gateley, 2015; Mosselson, 2006) and for treating refugees as a homogenous group (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). However, other categories of marginalised migrants that don’t fit the legal definition of refugee or asylum seeker face similar barriers to accessing higher education and so research with these groups could help given the limited material to work with. In the following part I will summarise the findings from this existing literature and consider how these relate to the broader issues explored in this introduction to direct subsequent theoretical development that will guide the research.

\textsuperscript{1} Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
Part 2: Transitioning to Higher Education for Students in PRS

Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Educational Experiences for Migrants with Liminal Legal Status

To gain a deeper understanding of educational experiences of students in PRS I have reviewed the literature for theoretical models applied across different contexts of migrants with liminal legal status seeking access to education. This literature fits broadly into four themes. Firstly, researchers who have applied the concepts of field, capital and habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu to explain how socialisation outside the education context of a host country affects experiences and understanding of education. Secondly, researchers who draw on theories that analyse the positioning of students who have migrated outside the opportunity structure of higher education in a host nation. Thirdly, research that focuses on the dynamics of identity and belonging and the ways in which these are defined and experienced in relation to education and higher education in exile. A final body of work addresses alternative temporal framings of migration experiences and how access to education influences the life course across multiple temporal levels in a non-linear fashion.

Bourdieusian Approaches

This body of research seeks to increase the visibility of experiences within education for students who have migrated and approaches the phenomena from several different theoretical viewpoints. Some have applied Bourdieu’s framework of field, capital and habitus to explain processes and outcomes of the mediation between structure and agency that demonstrate how individuals internalise roles that pre-exist in the social structure (see Davey, 2009). Habitus refers to the embodiment of social structures in an individual that shape a set of dispositions that in turn informs how an individual interacts with the external world (Bourdieu, 1990a). Put briefly, we live in social fields that produce and reproduce certain kinds of identities and their modes of consciousness based on their access to and recognition of heterogeneously distributed forms of capital (e.g. social, economic and cultural). The educational field in schools informs what kinds of identities individuals have available to them and habitus mediates the process of fulfilling these different identities, making certain
Bourdieu’s theories have been criticised for being too deterministic (Bottero, 2010) and erring towards pessimism (James, 2015). However, Davey, with particular reference to the concept of habitus in schools, suggests an adapted conception of “habitus [as] a never-ending process of construction, with individuals’ biographies and stocks of capital in constant tension or alignment with the field” (2009, p. 278). This provides a more dynamic concept through which we can understand processes of becoming and relationality with structural elements of social fields.

Reay (2009) and Davey (2009) propose that engagement with an unfamiliar field provides an opportunity for an individual’s habitus to be transformed. Morrice (2009, 2013) adopts the notion of flexible habitus to explore the tensions between the learning dispositions of students with refugee backgrounds and a new, unfamiliar resettlement context of the UK. In the first study, Morrice explored the trajectories followed by several students three years after attending a university access course targeted at students from refugee backgrounds (2009). Here it is argued that framing higher education and employment sectors in the UK as Bourdeiusian fields allows us to look beyond a deficit view of students with refugee backgrounds and instead consider the ways in which their skills and attributes are or are not being recognised. A key component of the access course was the opportunity it provided for students to discuss aspects of the social, cultural and political environment in the UK and gain lasting confidence through recognition of their existing capital from peers. However, it was suggested that this short course was not enough to meaningfully overcome barriers to access in terms of broader system-wide exclusion as a result of recognition of legitimate forms of cultural capital.
The second study of Morrice (2013) considered how the diverse narratives of students with refugee backgrounds in UK universities were framed along two axes, (i) belonging and recognition, and (ii) deficit and exclusion. Morrice argues that,

...the kinds of learner identity which could be constructed and the ease with which educational success could be achieved largely depended on the extent to which their existing capital could be deployed, and the degree of adherence between their habitus and the field of higher education (2013, p. 665).

Students were limited in the kinds of learner identities they could embody due to lacking institutionalised forms of cultural capital, such as qualifications and student dispositions, and the misrecognition of symbolic capital typically held by home students as legitimate competence. The students in the study viewed access to higher education as a way to gain transferrable capital in their new surroundings but found the lack of recognition of their existing capital disorienting due to having come from educated backgrounds prior to forced migration. Instead, they were seen as inhabiting a “refugee habitus” (2013, p. 655), which was defined in terms of negativity towards refugees and asylum seekers in public and policy discourses. As a result, they found it difficult to generate a sense of self-respect and dignity, which hindered their decision making and ability to engage with higher education.

Other studies that have engaged with Bourdieu’s theories have explored the ways in which students’ existing habituses have been transformed through strategies pursued by students aimed at achieving alignment with the expectations of the host nation higher educational field. For example, an ethnographic case study of a Hmong refugee learner’s trajectory throughout an adult TESOL programme in the United States mapped the transformation of habitus in the classroom through pedagogic practice (De Costa, 2010). This study highlighted the importance of the classroom as a site for the negotiation of cultural politics and habitus transformation at the interface of structure and agency. That said, it is important to note that the way in which students interact with learning activities will shape their habitus development in different ways. It is therefore suggested that teachers should develop culturally responsive pedagogic practices that embrace learners’ existing capital to allow the agential development of habitus.

Another ethnographic approach taken by a tutor of a student with a refugee background in Australia maps a similar transformation (Dumenden, 2011). In this analysis, the student took
the strategic step of requesting tuition from a Western teacher to gain capital required to navigate access to higher education, which is framed as a form of agency. In this example, the student was acutely aware of their difference and the need to develop a more Western learner identity to succeed beyond secondary education. These examples highlight the importance of recognising existing aspects of a student’s habitus to overcome experiences of exclusion in the new educational field and existence of idealised learner identities in the Western context. However, they also show that although space was provided for student agency and negotiation of the social and cultural environment of the classroom, little was achieved in terms of transforming broader academic cultural conditions that fail to legitimise alternative forms of capital. Therefore, both studies demonstrate how institutions, schools or education systems more broadly, define what kinds of identities should be adopted to demonstrate successful learning and the limited agency either student had in dictating what this might be.

**Being Outside of Educational Opportunities**

Bal (2014) also explored the learning dispositions and types of learner identities that students with refugee backgrounds from Turkey were perceived to have in US secondary schools. This study used a sociocultural approach developed by Holland et al. (1998) to explore how individuals are positioned within institutions through socially-enacted, historically-situated and culturally-constructed *figured worlds*. Figured worlds, which shape and are shaped by participants, create specific roles for actors to fill, or recognisable social types. In the figured world of the classroom there are culturally identifiable types of students, their emergence and characteristics being a product of historical development of people enacting those roles in that specific time and place. Socially and culturally situated discursive practices are constitutive of different identities, which consequently lead to the creation and dissemination of institution identity role profiles. Bal (2014) argues that generic categories, such as *ELL student* and *learning disabled* define the sorts of learning trajectories that the Turkish students followed through their time at school. Students cannot be recognised as embodying identity types that have not been conceived of within the social milieu. The learning behaviour of the Turkish students developed prior to arrival in the US, such as collaborative learning, was not recognised as a positive learner trait and was interpreted as disruptive or cheating. These students were therefore tracked into a separate ELL student class which, over time,
became populated with local students with additional learning needs, eventually leading to the Turkish students being labelled as *learning disabled*. This example demonstrates how, using a similar approach to research with Bourdieu’s theories, students who have been socialised outside of a host nation’s sociocultural context can have learning behaviours that were previously viewed as positive reinterpreted with a deficit view, leading to educational failure and stifled learning trajectories.

Núñez & Gildersleeve (2016) argue that the policy environment around access to higher education in the US can lead to undocumented migrants and their children lowering their higher education aspirations and stifling potential learning trajectories. The political landscape that sets the background for this research is the limitation of affirmative action policies that encourage under-represented groups from applying for higher education, and more recent anti-immigration policies. These political movements create a macro-level social environment of exclusion that frames migrant students as “underachieving, uninvited, and outside of higher education opportunity structures” (ibid. 2016, p. 503). Consequently, they call for a political solution alongside those that tackle structural issues, such as lack of knowledge about college application procedures, by enhancing students’ socio-critical literacy. Socio-critical literacy is realised through a pedagogical approach that focuses on the way that marginalised people and their communities are shaped by and shape socio-historical discourses along social, cultural and political axes (Gutiérrez, 2008). Núñez & Gildersleeve argue that “unlike academic and college-going literacy, sociocritical literacy recognizes the potential of challenging these inequities” (2016, p. 527). Through an access programme that embraced a socio-critical pedagogy, students challenged policies, normative understandings about US college access, and the way they related to institutional personnel to envision potential pathways to more selective academic institutions. This differs from the previous research as it opens up a space for considering how students from migrant backgrounds can speak back to social structure to transform the idea of belonging rather than fit with preconceived notions.

**Identity and Belonging**

Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020a, 2020b) explore the idea of belonging and higher education for Syrian youth with refugee backgrounds in Lebanon. In a
similar vein to the advances in mobilities theory discussed above, they challenge simplistic notions of belonging in terms of one’s home nation by de-centring the idea of the nation state. This facilitates an understanding of alternative forms of belonging and the potential in educational spaces for renegotiating these senses of belonging. Here, they draw on a “politics of belonging” developed by Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 204) and Alba’s (2005) notion of bright and blurred boundaries to define belonging in terms of claiming membership of a group and the boundaries of belonging defined by that membership. Bright boundaries of membership make it clear whether you are in or out, and hence whether you can claim a sense of belonging, for example belonging to a nationality that you were not born into. Blurred boundaries refer to situations in which membership is more ambiguous, for example feeling a sense of belonging through shared interests with others in a state-run school whilst also being foreign. Legal and institutional rules and practices, such as framework for citizenship, define bright boundaries for belonging, but also determine the degree to which certain boundaries can be blurred in different scenarios or for different groups (Bloemraad, 2018). This is understood to depend on the degree to which individuals can legitimately be perceived to embody certain characteristics to be able to blur boundaries, demonstrating the relational aspect of belonging and the importance of the perceptions of those within the boundaries.

In the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, a variety of bright and blurred boundaries were observed with respect to participation in higher education (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020a). Syrians were perceived to be in some ways similar, but also different or others based on the social and cultural history of the Levant region. A sense of belonging for the Syrian students was structured in terms of feelings of safety, dignity and relationships, which could be fostered or hindered within educational spaces. Coming up against bright boundaries in educational settings presented a risk for students sharing aspects of their identities, causing them to construct new identities to better fit within the boundaries of belonging, for example publicly claiming to have shifted political allegiance. The ability to blur boundaries in higher education was also understood to be more difficult than lower school due to the more diffuse nature of relationships in higher educational institutions. This makes it more difficult for students to attempt to blur bright boundaries upheld by institutional practice to achieve a sense of belonging. Attempts for schools to create inclusive spaces and foster a better sense of belonging amongst Syrian students, however, were frustrated by the underlying political
dimensions of education reform, which drew bright boundaries in terms of access to education based on citizenship.

A similar observation was made by Marar (2009, 2011) in the case of Palestinian students pursuing higher education in Jordan. Achieving a sense of belonging is undermined by “a hidden curriculum [that] exists among the university environment and education; one revolving around issues of academic access, capital, and identity” (Marar, 2011, p. 186). The hidden curriculum is shaped by broader socio-political factors reflected in government policies that can be either welcoming of or hostile towards those who do not have citizenship (McBrien, 2005). This is upheld by day-to-day practices and interactions with peers and teachers in educational institutions. Therefore, a tension exists between the Palestinian students’ sense of belonging in home and host nation, supported by a sense of solidarity with Jordanian students, and the animosity they experience as outsiders. Marar refers to this phenomenon as “dual/duel identities” (2009, p. 377), highlighting a tension between belonging and conflict, leading to sense of not being firmly rooted anywhere. It was found in this case that Palestinian students sought to take on a Jordanian identity in relation to higher education. This was because they prioritised academic access and the perceived benefits this would bring in terms of social and professional capital over infusing their ethnic and academic identities. These arguments around belonging reflect those of previous work discussed in which students make strategic identity choices in the face of perceived immovable structures in order to make academic progress.

Chopra and Dryden Peterson (2020b) also consider how belonging works as a component of identity-making alongside a sense of self and a sense of purpose. They consider schooling from the Gramscian perspective of a mechanism of control that protects the position of a socio-cultural elite through ideologies that in turn reinforce the subjugation of immigrant groups (Olneck, 2008). This framework is applied to explore the experience in higher education of a Syrian student who arrived in the US before the recent crisis began (and hence can’t return). In a similar way to the Bourdieusian arguments, students face difficulties in rationalising their past experiences within a new social context and lack of familiarity with social expectations and norms. This has the potential to undermine their sense of self, which is also linked to feelings of belonging in the new context. Within school settings, youth who have migrated and exist in a state of liminal legality often receive both explicit and implicit
messages that communicate they are different through prejudicial assumptions about their status, degrading their sense of belonging. However, these students may also have “multi-sited identities” (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020b, p. 88), that includes identifying with diasporic groups that stayed behind and also in the host nation. These connections provide students with a sense of purpose by providing a network through which tangible and intangible resources can be shared, as well as maintaining a sense of shared identity. In the educational trajectory of the student at the centre of this research, it was shown that a sense of self, belonging and purpose shaped their interaction with higher education. For example, initially they found they were unable to realise their initial goals and purpose in the face of discriminatory practices and became disenchanted with higher education. However, they were able to rebuild a new sense of belonging that felt authentic by shifting focus to challenging negative stereotypes, and therefore felt able to re-engage with higher education.

Exploring Temporal Frames

The example of the Syrian student above demonstrates how a feeling of authenticity and productivity in life is accomplished through achieving a sense of consistency between the present and the past. This in turn relates to a sense of belonging in the present and influences a sense of purpose along a trajectory into the future. The notions of self, belonging, and purpose, do not neatly separate into past, present and future timeframes respectively, but are interlinked in complex ways. Mosselson’s (2006) Roots & Routes approach provides a holistic framework through which to untangle these temporal links and step away from a staged approach to migration. It is argued here that “identity constructions of refugees can be better understood in terms of their attitudes to their country of origin and their diasporic community in the U.S., rather than in terms of their relationships with hegemonic U.S. society” (ibid. 2006, p. 22). Roots & Routes instead considers how individuals with refugee backgrounds and other types of migrants with liminal legality balance their ethnic identities with new national identities and how this influences the way they seek to be recognised by others. The roots element considers the relationship to their country of birth, which no longer exists in the way they knew it, while routes explore relationships with diasporic communities as a means frame future directions. Identity is then a more fluid and changing phenomenon, rather than a sequence of events that arrives at a distinct realisation upon achieving assimilation with a new culture.
Using this framework, Mosselson explores the high levels of isolation reported by students with refugee backgrounds even though they have high academic achievement. Drawing on the idea of *Masks of Achievement* developed by Gilligan et. al. (1990), it is shown that good grades are used to disguise feelings of stress, trauma and PTSD. The students in the study also reported that they felt apprehension and exclusion from school staff until they started to achieve higher grades. Academic success was therefore a symbolic device used for relating with teachers and other staff, presenting an image of being well adapted, but instead obscuring identity conflict beneath the surface. Students received the technical help they require to apply for higher education but lack psychosocial support they needed from school to realise education as a space for healing and renewed hope. Mosselson therefore argues that,

> reformulating refugee identity construction in terms of their past experiences and future aspirations, combined with an understanding of their school performance in terms of how it interacts with their identity concerns, teachers can better work with refugee students to see beyond the Masks of Achievement and encourage their goals and understand their emotional needs, rather than relying on their grades to assess their emotional well-being (2006, p. 27).

Extending beyond the temporal assumptions of linear assimilation therefore provides new ways to consider how marginalised migrant students relate to education through multi-modal identity constructions, and what we might do to address issues that present barriers to accessing education.

Dryden-Peterson observes that in the face of “unknowable futures...education might facilitate mobilities – physical and cognitive – that would help...build a more certain future” (2017, p. 17). Contrary to previous arguments that students fit their aspiration to the opportunity structures available (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Willis, 1982), Dryden-Peterson argues that education provides a means through which to anchor identity constructs to achieve objectives consistent with broader social expectations. Bellino (2018) makes a similar observation, but emphasises the pitfalls of assumed linear trajectories through education for students seeking higher education in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. In this case, youth in the camp viewed education as a vehicle for spatial and socioeconomic mobility, which is intertwined with culturally structured normative notions of adulthood. Education was a space for students to
aspire to fulfilling linear trajectories towards a role as nation builders, and achieving the status of being an “educated person” (ibid. 2018, p. 547). However,

...as Form 4 leavers, young people embodied the structural discontinuity of the camp’s educational system and the illusory promises of education as a way forward for refugee youth... In many ways, school completion raised societal expectations to a standard that was unreachable for the large majority, leading instead to disappointment, shame, and strategies aimed at alleviating that shame (2018, p. 553).

Although helping students develop positive identities at the secondary level, schools were unwittingly contributing to youth liminality and a protracting of their journeys to adulthood. An emphasis on human capital development and linear progression in global education agendas that are reflected in the operations of camp schools are therefore demonstrative of the paradoxical nature of education in PRS.

Moving forward with understanding education in PRS therefore requires exploring the multiple and interconnected temporal levels that shape aspirations for youth with refugee backgrounds. Dryden-Peterson (2017) approaches this from the pedagogical perspective, arguing classrooms should become “creative alternative space[s] of becoming” (Braidotti, 2011; quoted in Maber, 2016, p. 387). Educational spaces may then facilitate renegotiating boundaries of identity and belonging for constructing futures in the face of uncertainty, rather than just inheriting them. Similarly, Bellino argues that PRS schools should foreground the democratic role of education to challenge the rigid structure of social hierarchies and relationality this creates in achieving social status. In doing so, multiple potential pathways to adulthood and fulfilling the role of nation building are opened up “that [are] not constrained by one’s formal schooling or employment, but rather shaped by the knowledge, readiness, and capacity to contribute to the everyday civic life of a nation in transition” (Bellino, 2018, p. 553). These approaches move beyond simple notions of access to higher education as removing barriers to pursuing an internationally recognised trajectory towards success in education and life. Rather, it means challenging the foundational assumptions upon which higher education is built, the role schools have in preparing students for access, and reconstructing the aims and purpose of higher education to support trajectories towards meaningful outcomes for students in PRS.
Conclusions

Although coming from a variety of different theoretical viewpoints, there is considerable overlap in the kinds of arguments that are being made in the literature reviewed here. Firstly, the disjunctive experience of entering a new social context in which norms of behaviour and social organisation are different to those through which the students have been previously socialised. Various authors have explored how students experience their educational skills and values being viewed in a negative light, where these might previously have been positive or mundane. The research, however, diverges in the way they understand the relationship between structure and agency. Some demonstrate how the students educational experiences are clearly defined by deficit assumptions (Bal, 2014), and others consider how students actively seek to fit the mould and fulfil stereotypical learner profiles in order to gain access to higher education (De Costa, 2010; Dumenden, 2011; Morrice, 2009). Researchers have also explored the nature of boundaries and the degree to which students can negotiate identity and belonging in new environments (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020a, 2020b). In addition, the literature has considered the tensions these boundaries create (Marar, 2009, 2011) and how assumptions can be explicitly challenged in order to improve access to higher education (Núñez & Gildersleeve, 2016). A final theme to emerge is how temporal assumptions about progressive development plays into the way education is organised, reflecting the paradoxical nature of these assumptions in PRS, and the impact this has on access (Bellino, 2018; Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

A common thread throughout the literature is the idea of identity, and how this is constructed and becomes manifest within an educational setting. This is particularly relevant because it has been noted that identities and futures are “splintered in the currents of conflict, displacement and insecurity” (Oh, 2012, p. 79). In addition, “the institutions of formal education are fundamental arenas for, not only construction of knowledge, but also the construction of a sense of self” (Coll & Falsafi, 2010, p. 213). Identity has been considered quite broadly as an interaction between characteristics of an individual and the expectations and norms of the social context. Schools and classrooms are considered important sites for negotiating aspects of identity, both in the context of education and learning, and in terms of renegotiating a sense of belonging and authenticity in the face of abruptly disjointed life trajectories. Problematising the link between a sense of identity and belonging, hegemonic
nation-state structures, and assumed linear trajectories through education has also allowed an exploration of alternative ways in which students make sense of their experiences in PRS, and the problems that might arise from socio-cultural models of development in which higher education plays a role. Ramsay and Baker also highlight the potential for using identity as a theoretical lens as a counter to “a context where the identity of higher education students is increasingly being corporatized and collapsed into the highly individualised idea of student-as-consumer across the globe” (2019, p. 73). Given the limited explicit focus on identity in PRS, I will first zoom out and look at the literature on learner identity to develop a theoretical toolkit to guide the subsequent empirical work. Learner identity will then serve as a superordinate theme to understanding the experiences of education for students in the urban PRS context of Malaysia. This will be considered carefully in light of what has been discussed here to develop a sociological model that will make visible rather than obscure these experiences.
Part 3: Learner Identity

Identity is a diffuse concept that has been used to understand the ways in which we make sense of our experiences in the world as discrete, knowing subjects. Theories about identity have been developed in terms of the content of different identity profiles, stages of identity development, processes of identity construction and the dynamics of social structure and agency in forming identities. The concept of identity has also been used interchangeably with a variety of terms related to concepts of awareness or appraisal of the self, such as self-knowledge, self-concept and self-meaning (Vignoles et al., 2011). Research on identity has been applied to a variety of different fields, including developmental psychology, sociology and pedagogical studies. However, theoretical positions across disciplines have largely developed separately, with limited integration across literatures in different fields. This has made it difficult to develop a comprehensive concept for application in social scientific research (Côté, 2006; Van Doeselaar et al., 2018; Vignoles et al., 2011). Consolidating insights across these different fields could provide greater richness and complexity of understanding. However, Brubaker and Cooper argue that trying to rationalise all the ways in which identity has been conceived as a concept “saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary” (2000, p. 2). To arrive at a workable concept of learner identity I will therefore review theoretical perspectives on the use of the term and consider the salience of these concepts in relation to notions of schooling and education. This can then be explored further to identify a set of tools that could be developed from a theory of learner identity to understand how identity making is mediated by processes of forced migration and marginalisation and how this influences experiences as students in PRS.

Learning and Identity

The concept of learner identity has been used to understand individual learner experiences and the sociocultural organisation of schools. It has also been used to understand the differential learning trajectories followed by students as they intersect with other axes of identity, such as race, gender and class. Due to the diversity of theoretical contexts in which identity has been applied in educational research, Hoffman boldly states that “identity has become the bread and butter of our educational diet” (quoted in Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 14). The centrality of school in most of our lives means institutions of learning are often key sites
for discovering who we are and serve as a reference point against which identity construction occurs. We learn about who we are and who we can be through processes of identity construction in both formal and informal instance of learning. Theorists differ in their understanding of identity; as being constituted as one core self, or as an amalgamation of different selves (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, Osguthorpe (2006) argues that learner identity is a central identity around which other identity-making projects and processes are oriented, highlighting the intimate connection between learning and identity.

Wenger (1998) argues that learning is an act of experiencing identity. This reflects the view that identity is a kind of self-knowledge that is constructed through the enactment of the understandings we develop about ourselves. Hatt considers the understandings we build about ourselves to have individual and relational dimensions, and defines learner identity as:

...the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this independently shapes our own self-perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academic potential, performance and achievement (Hatt, 2012, p. 439).

We are therefore people who learn as well as learners defined by the institution concerned with learning. This self-understanding extends to how we feel about what we can achieve (potential), the way we behave (performance), and the outcomes of that behaviour (achievement). Who I am as a learner is therefore realised according to what I feel I can achieve, the way I approach learning tasks, the personal meanings that I attribute to success or failing in learning endeavours, and how the meaning that I construct in each of these respects is defined within the institutional context in which the learning takes place.

Mercer comes from a different position, defining learner identity as the “active and actionable representation of one’s self-beliefs, which are defined through autobiographical self-narration to construct an internal representation of [oneself] as a learner” (Mercer, 2017, pp. 11–12). Here, the performative aspect of identity is emphasised in the way we seek to represent ourselves to the world. Who we are needs to be acknowledged by other people, or as Coll and Falsafi put it, “it takes at least two to construct an identity” (2010, p. 218). As well as being defined as learners through the authorising power of an institution, we actively seek to be recognised by others as particular types of learners. Mercer also considers learner identity in terms of an emerging narrative that unfolds across our life course, framing identity
as an ongoing process of self-discovery or becoming over time. Our narrative learner identities tell the stories of the transformation of our identities while maintaining a consistent internal understanding of our selves moment-to-moment (Coll & Falsafi, 2010).

Taking learner identity as a theoretical lens therefore has the potential to provide insights into the learning experiences and trajectories of students in PRS and placing these in a broader learning biography. The relational dimension of identity provides scope for exploring the shifting understandings that students in PRS develop about themselves as they interact with the multiple institutions that they encounter in their migration journeys. Learner identity is also a means through which to interrogate how these institutions mediate learning experiences in PRS and how students respond to changing expectations of learning encounters that frame these experiences. In addition, the narrative aspect of learner identity allows consideration of how identity construction fits into a broader life context. This is particularly important given the emphasis on moving beyond linear models of migration experiences outlined earlier in this section. Learner identity therefore provides the opportunity to consider the dimension of becoming through learning as well as the dimension as being a learner. How then can these multiple perspectives on learning and identity be operationalised in a theory of learner identity that doesn’t burden us with a “blunt” vocabulary as Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 2) warn? This question will be considered in the following sections.

Theorising Learner Identity for PRS

Gee (2000, p. 100) proposes a framework for use in educational research to examine how aspects of learner identity are framed from different theoretical perspectives, which are summarised below:

- Nature identity – a state of being, e.g. as learners we are either born intelligent or not,
- Institution identity – a position or role we hold, e.g. leader in a group learning task,
- Discourse identity – dependent on meanings attributed to recognisable traits, e.g. an enthusiastic learner,
- Affinity identity – defined in connection to wider groups we encounter in society, e.g. a member of an academic reading group.

Either of these perspectives may be foregrounded but they may all exist simultaneously and complement or indeed contradict one another. For example, understanding learning as a
nature identity implies some of us are born as better learners (or smarter) than others, whereas as an affinity identity it means we adopt traits as a learner based on the group we associate with, for example jock or nerd (see Akerlof & Kranton, 2002). Similarly, refugee can be understood as an institutional identity because people who claim asylum must register as refugees or asylum seekers through host country governments or UNHCR. Yet at the same time the identity refugee can be constructed through discourse around what it means to be a refugee, for example images of helplessness and need (Hattam & Every, 2010). It can then be considered how these two perspectives on identity intersect to construct an understanding about what it means to be a learner from a refugee background. For example, how being a student in a refugee school as an institutional identity shapes the way individuals understand and internalise or challenge the discourse identity of a refugee student.

Nature identity refers to a state of being that assumes we are subject to the forces of nature. From this perspective, identity is a set of characteristics dictated by our genes that predispose us to the construction of certain identity profiles while precluding others. Dweck and Leggett (1988) explore how viewing learner identity from the nature perspective affects learning outcomes. They argue that “individuals hold implicit theories about the characteristics of other people, places, and things, and...these theories will predict the goals they adopt vis-à-vis these external variables” (ibid. 1988, p. 271). They found that those who believed learning was a developing characteristic had better outcomes on average than those who believed learning was fixed by nature. Believing that certain traits are fixed aspects of our nature therefore has the potential to shape how we view our own and other people’s learning and the sorts of learner identity we construct. The degree to which characteristics and behaviours are deemed to be nature identities may vary across societies. For example, Holland and colleagues (1998) explore the issue of mental illness and its potential determination by genes in Western societies and the designation of similar behaviours as divine intervention in some traditional cultures that persist today. Although the behaviours exhibited in each setting may be the same, they are subject to a very different interpretation by each society. In the Western context this is viewed more as a nature identity, whereas in the traditional society it is viewed more spiritually and therefore determined less by our natures.

Although a physical characteristic we have by nature might not affect our cognitive ability to learn, the meanings attributed to such characteristics within a particular social setting, such
as the colour of our skin or primary sexual characteristics, can shape the kinds of learner identity we construct. Socio-historically situated ideas about race and gender can therefore dictate the content of perceived nature identities. The degree to which race is viewed as a nature identity is significant to the identities of students from refugee backgrounds. It has been noted that the idea of *refugeeness* in the West has become a racialised issue due to prolonged waves of forced migration from specific regions (Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015; Tandon, 2016). Although individuals from refugee backgrounds are very diverse, the attention that is paid to particular profiles entangles the idea of being a refugee with, for example, that of being Arabic, or Muslim. The degree to which these external features are conceived within a nature perspective on identity can therefore affect the sorts of identities that are attributed to those identified as being a *refugee*. The impact of these assumptions are reflected in the stunted learning trajectories of the Turkish students in Bal’s research (2014) discussed earlier, demonstrating the damaging effect of conflating *refugeeness* with assumptions of race and intelligence as nature identities.

Institutional identities are recognisable identity profiles that have salience within a given institutional context (e.g. a school or more abstractly, the family) and are “authorised by” those who are have authority in that institutional context (2000, p. 100). These identity profiles are then internalised by students so that they are viewed as recognisable types of learners. The identity profiles are the product of socio-culturally situated practices and histories of learners enacting these identity profiles. The institutions through which these identities are enacted may also be embedded within larger institutional structures with overarching authorising power. However, Wortham (2006) notes that such broader categories of learner, such as at the societal level, can be adjusted to fit the more localised setting of the classroom. For example, the more generalised idea a good student being an independent learner is given further meaning according to how independent learning is conceived and understood in specific institutions and classrooms. This demonstrates an interaction between social structures and individual identity expression across macro, meso and micro social levels. According to Burke’s Identity Theory model (1991), we internalise these roles and then adopt a role profile depending on personal salience and demands of the social situation. For example, when entering a classroom and taking the role of a student, our learner role identity would most likely emerge as the most salient. These role profiles are then
reinforced as legitimate identity expressions each time we receive validating feedback by enacting them in a social setting.

The Bourdieusian approaches (De Costa, 2010; Dumenden, 2011; Morrice, 2009, 2013) and the concept of Figured Worlds (Bal, 2014) used in previous work with students from refugee backgrounds demonstrate the importance of identity profiles, particularly with regards access to higher education. A key barrier appears to be the ability of students to enact or perform particular kinds of institutional identities that would lead to recognition as worthy candidates for higher education. There is also the question of whether students can overcome institution identity profiles that assume that previous trauma and disjointed educational trajectories make them unsuitable candidates for higher education (Zeus, 2009). This could be reflected in a mismatched habitus, in the failure of recognition of existing capital, or in the limited ability of students with refugee backgrounds to shape culturally defined figured worlds. We could also consider whether institution identities constitute bright boundaries or if there is the possibility for them to become blurred in the process of seeking access to higher education. The key questions that arise then are: what profiles are accessible to learners in PRS, at the broader level of society and in the more localised level, and what authority do these students have in constructing and transforming institution identities to improve their access to higher education?

Discourse identities are similar to institutional identities in that they consider the way we internalise recognisable identity profiles. However, whereas institutional identities are upheld by the authorising power of a discrete institution, such as a school or homework club, the power to authorise legitimate discourse identity claims is through recognition from others (Gee, 2000). Discourse identities emerge from a series of representations mediated by semiotic or discursive practices between people (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Such practices have developed through cultural and historic practices in specific contexts. They create and sustain certain learner identity types and their attribution to individuals in classrooms and within the broader social setting in which learning institutions are based. People may seek to be recognised in certain ways through modifying their behaviour, for example raising one’s hand to answer questions in a bid to be seen as a good student. On the other hand, discourse identities can be imposed on others through unwanted recognition, or a perceived misrecognition of traits and behaviours that an individual might display. The same kinds of
behaviours can also be viewed differently in different types of people. For example, Gee notes how disruptive behaviour of African-American students in the US may be talked about as troublesome, whereas the same behaviours in White students may be framed as underachieving with less negative connotations (2000). This can also be seen reflected in Bal’s (2014) account of Turkish students being labelled as learning disabled after being moved to a separate class for adopting a collaborative approach to learning, even though this kind of learning attracted positive recognition in their previous learning environment.

Post-structuralist thinkers, such as Butler (1990), Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1972), are particularly concerned with communication and how discursive practices structure our thinking in a way that gives meaning to phenomena such as identity. Identities that we construct are understood in terms of the communicative tools we have to articulate our understandings and expressions of who we are. The discourses that exist as resources for identity construction are subject to certain social arrangements and practices that are upheld by persuasion, consensus and complicity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Butler argues that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (1990, p. 142). Identity is then not only an expression of who we are, but also consolidates the idea of those identities as real and recognisable, so discursive practices both produce and reproduce the identities that we inhabit (ibid.). The post-structuralist position also critiques the idea that languages and semiotic practices can accurately depict our social reality because there is always room for interpretation. These interpretations are not all held equally and are rather arranged hierarchically in a particular socio-cultural and historical setting. At issue here is who has the authority within the social field to arrange such hierarchies, or how is this authority distributed between people, and the affect this has on the forms of recognition that produce and reproduce legitimate identity claims. Deconstructing and analysing identity categories and the authorising power behind them can therefore lead to a greater understanding of why the African-American students referred to in Gee’s (2000) argument have the identity of troublesome ascribed to them, whereas the White students are ascribed as underachieving and therefore better positioned to make claims for alternative learner identities.

Although this thesis does not intend to develop a post-structuralist approach to the construction of identities in learning environments, it is useful to consider arguments around
discursive practices and the categories of people these produce and reproduce. In terms of discourse identities, successful identity construction depends on the extent to which students can achieve recognition as certain types of learners and the bounds that are placed on the sorts of becoming that can be legitimately claimed in a certain socio-cultural/historical context. The identity categories that are produced and reproduced within this space for agency can also be interrogated to explore how they influence the ongoing identity construction of students in PRS as they negotiate across past, present and future temporal frames of their learner biographies.

Finally, the affinity perspective on identity frames who we are in terms of who we associate with and the meanings we attribute to our participation (or lack thereof) in shared practices in a group. Wenger (1998) developed a socio-cultural approach known as *Communities of Practice* that reflects many aspects of the affinity perspective. His theory focuses more explicitly on the processes that take place in a community where we are socially connected to others with similar concerns rather than as an individual endeavour. Wenger states: “The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other...it is the social, the cultural, the historical with a human face” (1998, p. 145). Identity is defined at the juncture between participation/non-participation or inclusion/exclusion. Inclusion means enacting a recognisable identity as we participate in community practices and follow a trajectory from peripheral to core membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There are crossovers with institution and discourse identities, as participation means enacting institutionally recognised identity tropes, then developing and passing these on to new members through discursive practices. However, identity here is framed in terms of how we relate to others and establish a sense of belonging and legitimacy within a community of practice. Through our lives we find ourselves in multiple communities of practice, each of which has learning at its core. The identities we forge multiple trajectories reinforces or conflicts with one another as we attempt to balance our memberships and maintain a coherent sense of self.

Institutions of education could be considered as a combination of various communities of practice with their own sets of formal and informal structures that dictate trajectories to access and participation. The affinity perspective on identity is reflected in the work on belonging explored by Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020a, 2020b) and Marar (2009, 2011)
as they ask questions about the dynamics and boundaries of membership in the context of higher education. Again, issues of agency and recognition come into play as students construct affinity learner identities either to achieve a sense of belonging or as a response to boundaries that exclude them. Communities of Practice also adds a temporal component to identity through mapping trajectories of membership over time within a community. This can also be extended to broader life trajectories as we transition between different communities of practice, for example from school to work or secondary to tertiary education. The overlap between communities can then be interrogated, for example considering how students are prepared for entry into a higher education while at secondary school, and the connection between these two communities of practice. We see where we have come from and draw on these experiences (not dissimilar to the past informing our present habitus), and we see what kinds of identity and participation we expect in the future, which drives our motivation. However, this model has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on recognisable kinds of trajectories, and for not having the analytical power to explain complex forms of trajectories through communities of practice (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). This could be problematic for understanding the way students in PRS interact with affinity identities. Explicit focus therefore needs to be placed on decentring assumed notions of belonging in education and the tensions that arise in attempting to follow (or avoid) recognisable trajectories to group membership.

When I broadened the literature review for this research to focus on refugees and identity, I found research by Lee (2020) which is relevant to Gee’s framework in the Malaysian PRS context, although not specifically linking this to education. Lee notes that “what is unique in this study is that Malaysia’s lack of legal refugee status generates a tension between not having a Malaysian institutional identity yet requiring one to operate in society” (2020, p. 79). The youth in the study constructed dual identities mobilising the available institution identities of refugee and Malaysian to achieve goals dependent on the context, for example avoiding discrimination based on the way refugee is constructed as a discourse identity. As Rohingya and Myanmar youth, the study participants were able to present as Malaysian through aspects of their nature identity and upheld these identities through affinity by assimilating with the local community in local cultural practices. The identities that these youth constructed were both contradictory and overlapping, demonstrating the fluidity of
identity and its resistance to simply being reduced to macro social categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2010). Agency is then framed as the ability to shift between different identity constructs to achieve a purpose or aim. This is dependent on the degree of “identification or disidentification [sic]” (Kumsa, 2006, p. 246) the youth can achieve with different identity traits or profiles, or the recognition they achieve as embodying those identities. The analysis here demonstrates the depth of understanding that can be achieved using Gee’s multi-modal approach to identity.

Temporal Dimensions of Becoming

Gee’s (2000) model helps to understand different perspectives on learner identity and how this shapes the content of the identities that students construct in different socio-cultural settings. However, this framework does not provide a means through which to analyse the interconnected temporal frames which influence identity construction. Previous research has suggested that non-linear connections between past, present and future are important to the ways students with refuge backgrounds understand themselves in relation to institutions of education and experiences of learning (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Mosselson, 2006). Given that the perspectives on nature, institutional, discourse and affinity identities between country of origin, PRS context, potential future locations and through various transitional contexts are likely to be different, considering how these might be rationalised would be a useful addition to a theory of learner identity in PRS. This would help to understand how students make sense of learning in PRS classrooms and make sense of moments of misrecognition in the context of their ongoing learner biographies and trajectories of becoming (Coll & Falsafi, 2010).

A key concern regarding the identities that students can construct in PRS is the agency they have to achieve recognition of identity expressions that feel authentic to them. Evan’s argues that “agency is a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures” (2002, p. 262). Hamilton and Adamson draw on the concept of bounded agency to argue that this kind of approach embraces a dynamic temporality in the outcomes that are attributed to the exercise of agency (2013). The expression of agency therefore depends on the perceived boundaries within which students can make identity claims, which draws from previous expressions of agency, what an individual feels they can claim in the moment, and what they perceive
possible in the future. In exercising agency, students make decisions between two extremes to achieve positive recognition: changing their environments to match their expectations, or changing their expectations to match the environment (K. Evans, 2002). Considering only the discourses that shape this bounded space for the expression of agency that are present in PRS setting are therefore only likely to give a limited understanding if students’ learner identities. These must be placed in the broader context of the discourses that students have encountered before arrival in Malaysia and how they influence the scenarios they envisage themselves inhabiting in the future. The tension created between mismatched expectations in identity development and expression can therefore be explored in more detail, as well as areas of opportunity that are created for previously unforeseen learner identity profiles.

Markus and Nurius’s (1986) developed a theory of Possible Selves that could provide a means through which to further explore this connection between different temporal frames of identity. Possible selves are a component of self-knowledge (or identity) that connects cognition and motivation to explain how our future orientation is manifest in behaviour. This reflects an individual’s idea of what they might become, both in terms of goals and ambition but also the threat of becoming an undesirable self. Markus and Nurius explain that,

An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual’s particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences (p.954).

This idea can be seen in the work of Bellino (2018), where socio-culturally defined models of adulthood give form to the future self and serve as the motivation to pursue higher education. Likewise, the threat of becoming an uneducated person and the ideas associated with this form of the self represents an undesirable possible self, which provides additional motivation for pursuing higher education.

The notion of a possible self demonstrates the nature of identity as becoming as well as being, or as a continuous work in progress that negotiates between past, present and future forms of the self. The possible self is connected to but also distinct from present or past forms of the self. Past and present selves have been verified through acts of recognition during social experience, as was outlined above. Imagining possible selves allows an opportunity to explore components of our identity that extend beyond what we deem possible ourselves now. The
forms these takes are constrained by a horizon of possibility informed by previous experience. However, viewing ourselves and receiving messages that we are unsuccessful, unintelligent, or failing in some capacity now does not necessarily preclude the possibility that we can overcome this to be viewed in alternative ways in the future. Possible selves can also function as an evaluative tool for our current selves, which is interpreted in light of the context of possibility that is associated with particular events. Migration to another country, for example, could increase a sense of success by activating a possible self as one who has travelled and gained international experience, or a form of tradeable capital for the future. Forced migration to a PRS context, on the other hand, could present a current identity threat as it forecloses on previously imagined possible selves and activates perhaps previously unimagined negative possible selves. Likewise, the impact on our sense of self as a result of not getting a place at university could differ in salience depending on the range of alternative pathways at our disposal to use higher education in becoming. In this sense, agency is understood to be the possibility to imagine and maintain a set of possible selves, or the availability of strategies to avoid becoming negative possible selves.

Markus and Narius argue that it is not “the ease with which these possibilities can be simulated, or their actual potential for being realized...[but] that they exist as enduring elements that can be activated as part of a working self-concept” (1986, p. 963). However, Oyserman and Dawson (2019) suggest that action in the present towards a possible self depends on the degree of connectedness we feel between abstract representations in the future and the more concrete realisations we have in the present. They propose a model to predict when actions will be taken towards a future self using Hoerl and McCormack’s dual reasoning system (2019) with identity-based motivation (IBM) theory. The dual reasoning system has an atemporal system (thinking in time) and a temporal system (thinking about time). A clear path can be imagined that connects the present to the future self when the future self overlaps with or feels close to aspects of our identity in the present. In this case, outcomes of the future self can be felt in the present, so present and future goals are realised simultaneously in the atemporal system. When the future self feels distinct or somehow disconnected from our present sense of self, we imagine a variable pathway that connects these two selves with if-then mental simulations, and actions occur at points of decision making or the outcomes of uncertainty, which utilises the temporal system.
Oyserman and Dawson propose that “people are less likely to take future-focused action if the ways in which they reason in and about time do not match the ways in which they imagine their future ‘me’” (2019, para. 8). In addition, if the temporal reasoning system is the primary reasoning system in which people direct future-focused action, such action is less likely to be taken when individuals are under cognitive load. In the case of PRS, it has already been shown that students are likely to have to balance a number of more immediate concerns, such as supporting their families with additional income and negotiating the constraints presented as a consequence of their lack of citizenship rights (Ansems de Vries, 2016). This would clearly influence their motivations of commitment to either apply for university or take actions personally to improve their chances in achieving and maintaining access. Therefore, in addition to the forms and content of a possible future self that students in PRS can imagine, the limitations of their current situation might constrain or promote and give further shape to the identities they imagine constructing in the future. This in turn influences appraisals of their present selves. Regarding the way youth in PRS engage with education, this might mean reflecting on previously held beliefs on learning. It could also lead to foreclosure on future forms of an educated self (for example, as a university graduate) due to the bounds place on their agency to imagine routes to these forms of becoming.

**Concluding Remarks**

This section began by reflecting on the need to develop a concise vocabulary for a sociology of education and migration that provides a better framework for understanding the experiences of education in PRS. Hegemonic assumptions of international space and progressive time that define the spatial borders and linear trajectories as a backdrop against which individuals lives are interpreted have overshadowed previous work that seeks to understand experiences of migration and mobility (McNevin, 2019). It is assumed that migration journeys begin at point of departure and end with the successful integration into a new host society. However, such a model does not account for the complex journeys that various types of migrants make, the meanings they associate with having left their homeland and seeking various forms of belonging elsewhere, or their relationships with diasporic communities. These assumptions are reflected in the organisation of education systems that prepare citizens to be economically productive members of a nation state, underlining the
paradoxical nature of providing higher education opportunities for students in PRS (Waters & LeBlanc, 2005; Zeus, 2009, 2011). Understanding the experiences of these students is therefore not a case of simply mapping the barriers that they face to direct programming to overcome these barriers. Rather, it requires a theoretical approach that makes visible the impact these paradoxes have on students and what it says about the educational experiences. In addition, systems of higher education tend to be decontextualised and assumed to be safe havens for students with refugee backgrounds, as well as a space for becoming the transformational leaders of tomorrow. However, these systems and their paradoxes need to be put into focus and scrutinised to understand the ways these influence the futures and identities of students with refugee backgrounds, and the reciprocal transformation these students have on educational systems and institutions.

My review of the current literature on migrants who face uncertain futures and liminal legality sought to highlight the ways that assumptions about migrant students and their education shaped their educational trajectories and the meanings they constructed about themselves as students. Researchers explored how socio-cultural factors influenced the construction of different types of learners and the attempts to resist deficit assumptions their ability as learners. Researchers also explored dimensions of a sense of self, purpose and belonging and the role education has in these conceptions. Finally, much of the literature challenged the traditional linear trajectory of migration and instead advocated for approaches that viewed a sense of past, present, and future as complex and non-linear. In conclusion, I proposed a theoretical lens of learner identity to explore the intersection of structure and agency and the role that ambition to enrol in institutions of higher education had in the ways students make sense of themselves and their experiences. Gee’s (2000) theoretical framework for using identity in educational studies provided a means to understand different dimensions of identity, and additional reflections on identity development across different levels of time and in different temporal frames conceives identity as both a sense of being and a sense of becoming.

When considered against what was learned about education in PRS, the review of theories around learner identity brought to the fore issues of agency and recognition, which directed the research questions that were outlined at the beginning. Questions of power and agency are especially pertinent to those in refugee situations as the experience of forced migration
is characterised by lack of choice about how to conduct oneself and what kinds of life path to follow (Stewart & Mulvey, 2014). Agency is understood to be the ability of students to author their own identities as learners, as well as influence the discourses that provide the material that they can use to construct self-knowledge. Recognition refers to acts of legitimising expressions of identity and processes through which students feel they have achieved a certain identity status within the wider social milieu (external recognition). Recognition can also be thought of as an internal sense of recognising oneself as fulfilling a socio-culturally situated identity profile that feels authentic (internal or self-recognition). The interplay between agency and recognition defines the limits of a space for authoring that lies at the interface of an internal self and external structure. This space also encompasses past, present and future selves and the horizons to which individuals make sense of their past and experiment with the construction of imagined future selves. Agency therefore has a temporal level, reflected in the scope provided by this space to construct understandings about the self as a learner along a trajectory of being and becoming. Understanding the interaction of temporal levels is crucially important for students in PRS as they may experience a huge shift or threat to their identities based on a change in the potential for fulfilling drastically different future identity profiles upon forced migration, which may have a reciprocal impact on past and present conceptions of themselves.

Learner Identity therefore served as a superordinate theme to make visible the experiences of students in the Malaysian PRS context as they pursue education in RLCs and look forward to higher education. Agency and recognition are the key lenses through which learner identity reflects the experiences of these students and the impact this has on their learning trajectories in this research. The discussion on migration and mobility demonstrates the need to think about learner identity, agency, recognition and learning trajectories beyond traditional notions of space and time, and instead allow each of these theoretical tools to frustrate what has been previously assumed. This has broadened my understanding of what each can provide in the analysis of the results and drawing conclusions. In the next section, the research paradigm and methodological approach will be outlined, including the philosophical framing of the knowledge to be uncovered, methods used to extract data and how this data will be analysed.
SECTION 2
RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGY

In this section I will outline the philosophical underpinnings of the methodological framework adopted in this research and the methods that were used to address the research questions. Firstly, I will provide further context to the two research sites where students participated in the research, which will serve as a background against which methodological decisions were made. I will then explain the ontological, epistemological and axiological foundations of the methodological approach, which are based on the transformative framework that was developed by Mertens (2003, 2009, 2012) and considered through a critical realist lens. I will then explain how this transformative framework was implemented through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, developed as a method by Smith and colleagues (2009), combined with narrative analysis, inspired by the work of Patterson (2018). Before entering the field, a plan was developed to recruit student participants from refugee learning centres as co-researchers in a participatory model that utilised loosely structured interviews and focus groups. Once in the field, some of these plans had to be re-configured to overcome difficulties faced, which reduced the degree to which students could participate as co-researchers. The students’ role could therefore be more accurately described as active participants. I will present the methods that were used and how these developed in response to the changing situation met in the field. Finally, I will discuss issues related to ensuring research quality based on a model of robustness, rigour and reflexivity, adapted from broad criteria for use in qualitative studies by Yardley (2000), and ethics for research with students from refugee backgrounds.
Part 1: Introduction to the Research Sites

Research Context

Although being provided with a UNHCR identity card or appointment letter\(^2\) offers limited protection and access to some public services, youth with refugee backgrounds are formally barred from attending local schools in Malaysia. They are also unable to get a study visa to be able to attend formal private education. To fill the educational gap for youth with refugee backgrounds, around 128 schools have been established by community organisations, NGOs and religious groups, which are registered with UNHCR in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2021a). Due to the definition of a ‘school’ in Malaysian legislation, these education establishments are often referred to as refugee learning centres (RLC). They operate with varying degrees of formality, from small home tuition centres to centres with a structured progression of classes by age and ability. Some have aligned their curricula to international standards, such as the Singapore syllabus, the UK or the US. They are mostly concentrated in Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley, but some have been established elsewhere, such as Johor, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak. They tend to serve a particular local community that mostly comprises a single ethnic group, although more general access learning centres exist. Some teach using community languages and others use English as a teaching medium. Although loosely associated to UNHCR Malaysia, there is no centralised control over these schools. UNHCR Malaysia provide regular teacher training and support for schools that have registered with them and occasionally assist to connect schools to organisations that can provide financial and in-kind assistance. The quality, goals and outcomes of the centres therefore varies widely.

RLC 1

RLC 1 is based to the North of Kuala Lumpur and serves the local, predominantly Somali and Yemeni refugee community. It started life as a community organised school that had a mix of students with refugee backgrounds and other Somali students in the local area (for example the children of international students at local universities). The school was then re-established as an RLC with a more formalised NGO structure in 2009 with the assistance of

\(^2\) An appointment letter is issued when an individual initially registers with a UNHCR country office. This can be used as evidence that the individual is waiting for an appointment to be interviewed to make a claim for asylum.
local stakeholders and started teaching an English medium curriculum. The RLC has moved several times between commercial units and residential apartment blocks but now resides in a commercial complex above a row of shops. It provides education from pre-school to around year 9/10 (UK equivalent). I was first introduced to this RLC prior to beginning the PhD and worked there as a secondary science teacher and later Academic Coordinator for a period of 18 months.

The RLC has a double shift pattern, with primary years attending the morning session from 8am-12pm and secondary in the afternoon from 1:30pm–5pm. The education is based on the Cambridge International Curriculum for English, Maths and Science and students can participate in additional training programmes in a course or session-based manner, such as leadership, computer skills and confidence building. The school also has a partnership with a local international school, so they have access to sports facilities and weekly extra-curricular activities with students at that school during term time. The secondary level programme consists of 4 levels, starting with a foundation year for students with limited English or little to no prior formal education. The levels beyond this loosely align with year levels at Key Stage 3 of the UK curriculum. Prior to the research taking place the RLC had tried to deliver an IGCSE programme along the Cambridge International Curriculum and 8 students sat for exams, however this aspect of the education programme was not active during the research period.

At the time of the research the RLC had around 200 students across all levels. As the umbrella NGO organisation has developed the school has become part of a portfolio of other projects that seek to assist the local refugee community, such as livelihood projects and access to medical assistance. Initially 11 students participated in the research but 2 did not complete all stages. Data gathered from the remaining 9 students was therefore used. These students were invited from the top two year levels of the school and each expressed an aspiration to pursue higher education. Basic details of each student are summarised in Table 1. These details will be fleshed out as experiences of each are presented in the results section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest level of education before Malaysia</th>
<th>Years in Malaysia</th>
<th>Current level of education</th>
<th>Desired HE course</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Yemen</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Year 8/9</td>
<td>English or IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Somali</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
<td>Architecture or Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Somali/Yemeni</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
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<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Morgan</td>
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<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Somali/Yemeni</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
<td>Business</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ubax</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Year 9/10</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 - Students from RLC 1
RLC 2

RLC 2 is based to the south of Kuala Lumpur. It was established in 2018 by a local Christian-based humanitarian NGO that seeks to assist displaced people in Malaysia from a variety of backgrounds. The RLC forms part of a network of schools that serve different levels and communities in various locations around Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley, which serves more than 1000 students from 19 nationalities. These students study in a variety of different settings, including RLCs, in local community centres and through external education partnerships. The RLC in this research is the most recent school to open and was established in response to a need for widened access to secondary level education and formalised secondary certification (in the form of IGCSE). The RLC provides a full day programme from year 7 to year 11 (UK equivalent). The centre has around 100 students that are predominantly Pakistani, but there are also students from Myanmar and smaller refugee groups. At the IGCSE level the students prepare for 5 subjects in the Cambridge International Curriculum: English, Coordinated Science (individual sciences also available by self-study), Maths, Accounting, ICT and Global Perspectives. Alongside this the students also study a programme of moral education, sport and extra-curricular clubs on site. They can also participate in external projects, such as leadership and transferrable skills training.

Eight students participated in the research from the IGCSE programme. These students had been studying in a lower-level centre prior to the establishment of the current RLC and were selected based on merit as the first cohort of the IGCSE programme. Each of these students were due to take examinations in the May/June 2019 sitting, although this did not take place due to the Coronavirus pandemic. During the research one of the students was resettled to Canada and another left the school to continue preparing for exams at home, however all students participated in all the interviews, so all the data has been used. Although the NGO is formally aligned with Christianity, all religious faiths are welcome in the school, which is reflected in the variety of faiths in the research group. I was first introduced to this RLC as a volunteer with a university access programme. I interviewed the students for participation in the programme and built a relationship with the RLC. All the students were selected for that programme and completed a 9-day training course to build skills and confidence to apply for higher education programmes in Malaysia. I added this RLC to the research half-way through the fieldwork as I felt it would be useful to have a second site to compare findings with. Since
the schools had a roughly similar foundation, structure and aims I felt it would be a suitable match for comparison to further identify common themes and divergence. Details of each student is summarised in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest level of education before Malaysia</th>
<th>Years in Malaysia</th>
<th>Current level of education</th>
<th>Desired HE course</th>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>Year 10/11</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Year 10/11</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Year 10/11</td>
<td>ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Year 10/11</td>
<td>Science and ICT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
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<td>Year 10/11</td>
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<td>Computer Science</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<td>Marketing and Communication</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2 - Students from RLC 2
Part 2: Research Paradigm

Adopting a Transformative Interpretative Framework

This research project sought to explore the understandings that students had developed about themselves as learners in PRS and the impact this might have on trajectories towards higher education. Such a concern with subjectivity requires an exploration of understandings formed, and causal relations between phenomena (Ratner, 2002). Data of this nature is not easily reduced to numerical form, and when it is, richness and depth can be lost (Schutt, 2018). Therefore, to capture and interpret these aspects of data on learner identity, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. In its broadest sense, this is described as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 32). The precise nature of any qualitative approach is guided by an interpretative framework, which defines how the research views the world and the nature of the knowledge it seeks to uncover. Each framework has a specific set of assumptions that are formed along four interconnected philosophical axes: ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological (Guba & Lincoln, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research I opted to use a transformative interpretative framework, sometimes referred to as a transformative-emancipatory approach (Mertens, 2003; Sweetman et al., 2010), originally outlined by Mertens (2003, 2009, 2012). The ontological and epistemological dimensions were further complemented by understandings derived from critical realism. The justification for this decision will be outlined in this chapter with reference to each of the four philosophical dimensions that define the interpretative framework.

Mertens describes the transformative paradigm as a meta-theoretical framework that “directly engages the complexity encountered by researchers and evaluators in culturally diverse communities when their work is focused on increasing social justice” (2009, p. 10). A transformative framework frames knowledge in terms of its potential to create societies that are more socially just. The uncovering of knowledge is viewed as being inherently political since it is shaped by the interests of those involved, and as such, research has the potential to be an important emancipatory tool (Frey, 2018; Mertens, 2009; Mertens et al., 2010; Sweetman et al., 2010). Adopting a transformative framework therefore “extend(s) beyond knowledge generation and take(s) an activist stance in promoting social justice” (Frey, 2018,
Mertens also argues that a transformative framework focuses “on the strengths that reside in communities that experience discrimination and oppression on the basis of their cultural values and experiences” (2012, p. 804). Social research should be sensitive towards marginalized people (Sweetman et al., 2010), especially when it has a focus on values, politics of inquiry, and social justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The students that engaged with this study had few tangible rights because of their refugee backgrounds and were therefore marginalised within Malaysian society. Adopting a transformative methodological approach is therefore well suited to this research context to engage sensitively with the entanglement of power, politics and cultural difference in understanding their experiences as learners. It also allows for the uncovering of knowledge through the research process to be considered in terms of contributing to improving access to education as the ultimate aim.

A transformative framework is also focused on bringing about a change in practice, which is informed by an action agenda for change (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Given the small-scale exploratory nature of this study, a tangible agenda for change in working with students in protracted refugee situations is not suggested as a set of discreet recommendations. However, the study sought to answer the call made to include more marginal voices of youth with refugee backgrounds in academic research (Kousiakis & Benasuly, 2016) and so contributes to an agenda for change against the hegemony of Western research perspectives and interpretations. The study also contributes by considering the issue of access to higher education for students with refugee backgrounds through an alternative analytical lens, as discussed in Section 1. The conclusions therefore draw direct attention to areas where further scholarly work is required, opening potential areas for further research that aim to improve access to quality education for this marginalised group. These insights therefore contribute to a larger body of work that exposes issues faced by students in protracted refugee situations. In this way, it is part of a collaborative agenda for change in practice.

In outlining the transformative framework, Mertens leads with the axiological dimension, presumably because this has the most salience in terms of leading the philosophical assumptions that are characteristic of the approach. “The transformative axiological assumption promotes the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice on several fronts” (Mertens, 2009, p. 49). An ethical approach in transformative research must include respect for cultural norms of the group being studied and recognition that oppression and
discrimination may be perpetuated through the research process. A respectful approach to research in this sense defines the approach to methods used, such as interviewing that allows participants the freedom to speak with their own voice and express themselves through culturally contingent means. Beneficence refers to the promotion of human rights and social justice through the research. Achieving this requires a careful treatment of the data collected and means of collection to ensure that genuine needs come to the forefront. Mertens and Wilson (2012) also call for researchers to develop cultural competency, meaning being conscious and appreciative of the context in which the research is taking place and adopting a methodology that is responsive to cultural histories and norms. In doing so, researchers must be cognizant of unequal power dynamics in the research context (Symonette, 2004) so social transformation is perceived as legitimate to marginalised communities (Guzmán, 2003).

A transformative interpretative framework takes the ontological position that reality is socially constructed in terms of the meanings we attribute to objects and actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, it rejects cultural relativism by acknowledging the role of power in legitimising certain knowledge structures over others. Mertens and colleagues contend that "damage is done when differences of perceptions of what is real are accepted, and when factors are ignored that give privilege to one version of reality over another" (2010, p. 198). Knowledge production is inherently political and so failure to address the spatio-historical context in which knowledge is reified means passively subscribing to potentially oppressive social structures (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). The researcher must therefore critically examine what versions of reality are privileged in the research context against those which may lead to the promotion of social justice consistent with the rights and interests of marginalised people (Mertens, 2003, 2009, 2012). This is consistent with the idea that knowledge is not uncovered for knowledge’s sake but is intrinsically linked to social action. Regarding the students who were the focus of this research, this meant understanding what ideas they encountered throughout their experience of education, how they came to be confronted with these ideas, and the forms of agency and recognition that were employed while negotiating who they were as learners.

The epistemological assumption considers the knowledge constructed between researcher and participant and interrogates the relationships that lead to the construction of legitimate knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Taking a transformative approach opposes the post-
positivist ideal of being detached and objective in the quest for value-free truths about a
research object, and instead embraces research as a social process that puts the researcher
in a dialogic relationship with that research object (Barnes, 1977; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).
This raises questions about the nature of the relationships in the research context, implying
the need for close collaboration between the researcher and marginalised people that
addresses issues of power and privilege in the uncovering of knowledge (Mertens, 2012).
Processes through which such knowledge is uncovered may consider some voices to be more
legitimate than others, so power relations influence which of multiple potential ways of
knowing will carry more salience within and beyond the field. As a researcher who is not a
part of the community that is being investigated and someone who stands in a position of
greater power, this gives rise to an “epistemological tension” (Mertens, 2009, p. 58) that
requires a sensitive methodological approach in a transformative paradigm.

A transformative framework provides a somewhat vague lens that serves as an umbrella for
a variety of approaches that address the interaction between power and the uncovering of
knowledge (Mertens, 1999). The methodological assumption of a transformative framework
therefore doesn’t suggest a specific approach to data collection and analysis, but rather has
5 guiding principles for research that seeks to champion an emancipatory agenda
paraphrased, below (Mertens, 2009):

1) Be more inclined to the use of mixed methods in data collection
2) Be conscious of the benefits of community involvement in data collection and the
   cultural issues associated with means of data collection
3) Build trust to gather valid data
4) Be flexible to modify approaches to gather data from different groups
5) Link the data collected to social action.

A transformative approach therefore implies the use of multiple approaches to capture
diverse perspectives in the research context and is also based on avoiding approaches that
imply a deficit perspective and instead value the positive and enabling aspects of the
community in the research. These principles have been considered throughout the research
process, from design, through to data collection, analysis and evaluation, and the ways in
which they were considered against the philosophical assumptions outlined here will be
demonstrated in the following sections.
Taking a Critical Realist Stance

The transformative framework puts a spotlight on the socially constructed nature of reality to emphasise the power dynamics that lead to legitimization of different forms of knowledge. However, in rejecting cultural relativism it is assumed that there is a version of reality that serves as an objective benchmark against which other competing claims can be measured in achieving social justice. Alvesson and Sköldberg argue for the existence of an objective form of reality,

...stubbornly claim[ing] that it is pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a reality beyond the researcher’s egocentricity and ethnocentricity of the research community (paradigms, consciousness, text, rhetorical manoeuvring), and that we as researchers should be able to say something insightful about this reality (2018, p. 3).

So, although the meanings associated with objects and actions are socially constructed, the objects and actions themselves constitute an ontologically independent reality that cannot simply be reduced to competing perspectives or practices (Porpora, 2015). This is consistent with the emancipatory agenda of the transformative framework, since by nature of being transformative it is assumed that there is some way to objectively improve the condition of society (Mertens, 2003). This is not to diminish the importance of knowledge that is socially constructed. Indeed, it is the lived experience of people as they wrangle over the competing knowledge claims that leads to social inequality. However, it is assumed that there are universal values that underscore our shared humanity, otherwise the notion of emancipation would not exist as there would be no sense of right and wrong.

Blumer argues that we should avoid locating reality in perspectives alone, stating that the world of human experience “does not shift ‘reality’ as so many conclude, from the empirical world to the realm of imagery and conception. ... Such a solipsistic position is untenable and would make empirical science impossible” (quoted in Porpora, 2015, p. 73). It is further argued that empirical work is only possible because the world can “‘talk back’” (ibid.) to our conceptions of it, confirming or resisting our views of reality. There are therefore two modes of objectivity, one ontological and one epistemic, and the question is the degree of congruence between the two, not the absence of one or the other. Porpora develops this position to argue for a critical realist approach to social science, stating that “even when observing ourselves, the content of our knowledge (what we come to think of ourselves)
remains something ontologically distinct from the object of our knowledge (who and what we actually are)” (2015, p. 72). Individual agency and the inter-subjectively constructed social world can therefore be separated and sit in a dialogic relationship with each other.

Conceiving of reality in this way means accepting that our conception of what is true is essentially fallibilist (Porpora, 2015). What I believe to be the case may not be the case, regardless of my certainty about the matter. For example, I might be convinced that a student is not attending school because they have responsibilities at home that makes attendance prohibitive in their timetable. All my observations and conversations with other people may correspond with this notion, but the truth could in fact be that the student does not see value in going to school and that these additional responsibilities are not themselves preventative. To accommodate epistemic fallibility, Huttunen and Kakkori propose that qualitative work should adopt Heidegger’s notion of hermeneutical or alethetical idea of truth as unconcealment (2020). Determining the truth is then a process of working through multiple perspectives to arrive at what the world is telling us is the truth, reflected in the idea of the knowledge being uncovered that is used throughout this chapter. This suggestion doesn’t dismiss a correspondence theory of truth necessarily, but rather suggests that our judgement of correspondence between observation and conclusion is shaped by our perceptions of the object of study. Porpora’s critical realist approach upholds an alethic account of truth in this manner, arguing that the idea of correspondence “analytically separates meaning and determination of truth” (Porpora, 2015, p. 81). Our assessment of what corresponds is therefore a matter for epistemology.

Egbo draws on the work of Bhaskar to argue for the transformative potential of a critical realist approach to social science, stating:

*Because research that is based on the philosophy of critical realism seeks to transform the social world through the identification and deconstruction of operational societal structures (including attitudes, values and ideologies) that promote social injustices, it will be particularly useful to researchers in the discipline who are concerned with changing the status quo* (2005, p. 280).

The core of this transformation is the ontological and epistemological orientation of participants’ accounts as valuable social scientific data and the consequences this has for the way such data is handled. These accounts are key to understanding how the participants
perceive the world and their place in it and careful interpretation of these is a starting point for the uncovering of “emancipatory knowledge” (Egbo, 2005, p. 272) and corresponding social action. Bhaskar argues that this focus on subjective accounts from research participants, and subsequent subjective interpretations from the researcher does not diminish the utility of a critical realist approach because “accounts of social reality are not only value-impregnated but value-impregnating, not only practically-imbued but practically imbuing” (1998, p. 409). The purpose of research is therefore not to seek a value-neutral objective account of reality but to explore the way individual agents relate to each other through socially constituted means to elucidate participants’ values and sources of oppression. In doing so, we can work collaboratively with marginalised communities to transform the world to be more equitable. A critical realist ontology and epistemology is therefore congruent with the underlying philosophical assumptions of Mertens’s transformative framework.

The task here then is to unpick the various competing subjective understandings that shape the meanings students in RLCs construct about themselves. From these understandings we can converge on some ontologically objective insights about the way the world influences the meanings students construct about themselves and the impact this has on trajectories towards higher education. A practical issue with assuming a critical realist stance with an alethetical model of truth is how to manage the resulting embeddedness of qualitative researchers within the research context, which implies that qualitative research is an inherently social process. The embeddedness of phenomena like identity within a social context imbues the research object with subject like qualities from the inter-subjective relationships that define and constitute them. Unlike the focus of natural scientific research, such as molecules or weather patterns, a research object like learner identity is subject to the understandings that it can have about itself and how these are influenced by the way that it is perceived externally. Essentially, this means moving beyond a brain-in-a-jar approach to understanding identity and controlling external variables to measure predictable outcomes to observing the object of research in it’s the social world through which it attains meaning.

Sayer has developed a social scientific research model that maps out the various interpretative interactions that contribute to our perspectives of a social phenomenon, and that can help us achieve congruence between epistemological and ontological objectivities.
This model centres around the idea of “social objects” (2002, p. 16) of research that are characteristically different to the natural objects. The traditional researcher-object relationship, with the researcher positioned as a passive observer, is reconstructed as a dialogic researcher-social object relationship. A network of subject-subject interactions is then constructed on either side of this dialogic relationship, both with other subjects and intrinsically meaningless material constructs. How students think about themselves is therefore a product of a dialogic process between who they think they are, who others think they are and how various parties conceive of learner identity. My interpretation of students’ self-perceptions is then shaped by the way learner identity has been conceived in my inter-subjectively defined cultural sphere, which may or may not overlap with aspects of the students’ cultural spheres. This more complex array of interpretative interactions provides a framework to help understand the structure in inter-subjective meaning that influences knowledge about the social object, which is summarised diagrammatically in Figure 1:

![Diagram showing relationships between subjects, objects, and meanings.]

Within the transformative interpretative framework used in this research, learner identity is a social object. However, learning trajectory, the object upon which the effect of learner identity is explored is considered slightly differently. As an object of the research, it is fair to say that the concept of a learning trajectory is socially defined, however it is not socially produced in the same way that identity is because it cannot construct understandings about itself. Consistent with Berger and Luckmann’s notion of institutionalisation (1966), learning trajectories are defined with respect to the institutions through which these trajectories take place. Learner identities may then be understood in terms of, or in opposition to, the idea of
a learning trajectory and/or archetypes of legitimate learning trajectories. In and of itself, the learning trajectory is meaningless, but identity is meaning itself, so the learning trajectory has the quality of a natural object. Knowledge uncovered about learning trajectories is therefore different to the knowledge uncovered about learner identity. It is still perspectival since both researcher and student can infer different meanings from past, present, or future trajectories. However, the researcher doesn’t sit in a dialogic relationship with trajectory in the same way as the student, which is why it is positioned outside of the researcher-social object relationship shown in Figure 1.

Engaging Active Participants

Approaches to research that originate from a Western academic tradition have been accused of uncritically adopting practices embedded in colonialism that dictate how encounters with research subjects occur and the sorts of knowledge claims that can be made (Nandy, 1989). It has also been claimed that such research practices assume authorship and reap rewards from knowledge claimed about marginalised groups, which can leave them further marginalised and disenfranchised (L. T. Smith, 2012). This is clearly a key concern for research in PRS as the communities about which knowledge is to be uncovered face acute forms of marginalisation resulting from their lack of residency status. Pittaway et al. (2010) document how these issue may have a detrimental impact when researching refugee communities on the Thai-Burma border in an article poignantly entitled ‘Stop Stealing Our Stories’. In one extreme account, a male resident in a refugee camp likened the research process to presenting camp residents as monkeys to the world for financial gain. This is clearly not the aim of a researcher with an emancipatory mission, but lack of sensitivity and agency afforded to those engaged in research can have a negative impact on non-dominant communities. In adopting a transformative research approach the methodology must therefore be carefully considered to identify potential pitfalls that might allow the research to become exploitative.

In Decolonising Methodologies Smith argues that,

*When indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently. Problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms* (2012, p. 196).
Although students in protracted refugee situations are not geographically indigenous, they face many of the same issues due to being disadvantaged within hegemonic power structures. Using a participatory approach that is consistent with a transformative framework therefore has the potential for overcoming issues that relate to a power imbalance between researchers from Western academic traditions and research participants from non-dominant groups. For example, Evans used a participatory model to rationalise research with and on Bhutanese youth with refugee backgrounds in Nepal (2013). This work considered ownership of research outputs and critiqued researchers’ “authoritative” accounts on marginalised groups (2013, p. 172). Evans argues that a synthesis of observation and collaboration helps overcome limitations in both approaches. With regards observation, collaboration allowed for skills development for young people and highlighted relevant areas of insight. Regarding collaboration, observation outside of the context of research gave a backdrop to the public lives of the young people and presented other aspirations and interests. Despite the claimed advantages, care must be taken in light of the modern trend in adopting participatory methods such as this to avoid an approach that is merely transactional (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016). As an avenue to explore these issues in this research I drew on two main interconnected concepts; epistemological/epistemic violence and hermeneutical injustice.

Epistemological violence is a form of violence that is produced through the construction of knowledge. It does not derive from empirical data itself but the interpretation of that data that problematises the concept of an “Other” (Teo, 2010, p. 298). The root of this violence is when an interpretation of this Other, of which there could be several alternative interpretations, is framed as knowledge when the Other was not involved in the construction. The violence is manifest in the negative effects that such knowledge claims have on the Other through misrepresentation that make forms of knowledge belonging to the Other inferior to that of the researcher. In this research students with refugee backgrounds are constructed as the Other so research that conceives of these students with a deficit view would be considered epistemological violence. Teo argues that if a deficit were understood to be the result of the structural oppression of students, such as lack of access to higher education, then this would not constitute epistemological violence but research may still suffer from issues of lack of representation in the construction of knowledge around this problem (2010). In this sense, Teo understands epistemological violence to be a form of personal violence as
opposed to structural violence, with a subject (the researcher), an object (the Other) and an action (interpretation) (ibid.).

Spivak’s (1993) related notion of epistemic violence considers the structural dimensions as well as the personal dimensions to understand how those upon whom research is done can be silenced in the process. Including the structural element provides a way to interrogate how power differentials through research paradigms create the conditions through which epistemic violence can be perpetrated. Dominant episteme is comprised of a series of theoretical assertions that can privilege other epistemological structures, so they are "non-mutual and hierarchical" (G. Griffiths, 2000, p. 165). This becomes violence when power is entangled with the construction of knowledge. Spivak’s epistemic violence emerges from a post-colonial project based on experiences of research in the ‘developing world’ and is distinct from Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence through its attention to historic development of issues such as imperialism and sexism (Barton, 1989, p. 150). The power differential that emerges through spatio-temporal structures allows researchers to silence and obscure indigenous knowledge and maintain a Eurocentric view that perpetuates the power structures through which knowledge was constructed (or re-constructed from an ‘outsiders’ perspective).

Fricker identifies two ways in which people can be silenced through hierarchical knowledge structures; firstly by pre-emptively excluding certain voices and secondly by engaging with knowledge bearers as informants only and excluding them from interpretation of data collected (2007). Exclusion from interpretation gives rise to hermeneutical injustice that perpetuates uneven power relations:

> When one is allowed to be an informant without being allowed to be an inquirer, one is allowed to enter into one set of communicative activities—those relating to passing knowledge and opinions—but not others, precisely those others that are more sophisticated, happen at a higher level of abstraction, and require more epistemic authority: formulating hypotheses, probing and questioning, assessing and interpreting opinions, and so forth (Medina, 2012, p. 205).

In this quote Medina agrees with Fricker’s argument, however contends that this approach allows patterns of silencing to be explained in terms of the whole social context “instead of being predicated of particular ways of inhabiting that context by particular people in relation to particular others” (2012, p. 201). In addition, Medina argues that there is a communicative
as well as a structural/historical aspect to hermeneutical injustice and that misinterpretation can occur due to interpretative responsiveness of the research, or communicative failure of those being researched. This does not mean that blame is to be assigned to a participant for a researcher’s understanding, but rather that an individual may struggle to articulate their experience due to “structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). For example, those who identify outside of the traditional gender binary of male and female may not be able to articulate their experience of gender because they do not have access to a vocabulary of ‘non-binary gender’ or may have internalised the idea that gender is a binary construct without question. To overcome hermeneutical injustice, we must therefore consider the pluralistic and contextualised way that individuals are silenced and relational interactive patterns in which individuals give their accounts.

To authentically use a participatory approach that engaged meaningfully with epistemological/epistemic violence and hermeneutical injustice the students were initially invited to take the role of co-researchers (as in Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). The intention was to fully involve the students in planning, data collection and analysis so they weren’t merely treated as knowledge bearers. However, once in the field, the RLCs did not permit the level of access that I felt was required to genuinely engage the students as co-researchers. The students were able to be involved meaningfully in setting the procedures of the research to ensure sensitivity to the individuals and context. However, there was insufficient time to be able to allow students a sufficiently active role in the interpretation of results. The students were therefore only consulted during early analysis stages, which gave some control over the interpretation and presentation of the results and allowed a degree of ownership. The role that was taken by the students in this research is therefore more accurately be described as active participants since they were involved beyond simply providing interview responses. Further details of the specific activities that the students participated in is provided in Part 3 of this section.

Hart’s “Ladder of Participation” (1992, p. 84) is a model of 8 stages of increasing participation, from manipulation (1) to fully child-initiated (8), often used by action researchers to measure levels of participation in classroom research (see Figure 2). The method used would fall between level 5 and 6. I brought a framework and focus to the research as the lead researcher and the students were involved in shared decisions in drafting terms (including ethical
To encourage active participation mutual respect was built in the early stages of the research, alongside developing an understanding of community dynamics to ensure the research respected current structures in place. This is the same as considerations in Kaupapa Maori Research developed by Smith for work with indigenous communities in New Zealand (2012, p. 185). A clear “commitment to contributing to the community” (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004, p. 730) helped to build trust, which involved negotiating what can be given back to the community for their participation in the research. I was a surprised but encouraged to see that some students explicitly asked me during in the invitational stage of the research what benefit the research would have for them. I was prepared with an explanation of the benefit of learning self-reflexivity and an opportunity to map the situation of access to higher education to find some potential avenues in which they can imagine continuing their own educational trajectory. However, I also took this as an opportunity to discuss what kind of benefit that they would like to receive. Ultimately, we negotiated that I would give them a certificate of participation with a letter of thanks signed by me and the head of the Education Faculty that explained the research and the role of active participant taken by the students. There was a mutual desire to gain some certification for their participation at both RLCs, which...
also emerged as a more general theme throughout the interviews and will be explored more in the results section.

Medina calls for an “agential and interactive approach to hermeneutical injustice” (Medina, 2012, p. 216), which requires being reflexive about our role as researchers, and how the process of research may uphold structural inequality and through communicative practice. At times in the research the students struggled to articulate their experiences in English. They either paused to search for a word, gave examples through stories or used words from other languages to express their meaning. In these moments I had to be aware of these hermeneutical gaps and resist filling them with my own interpretation. To do this I drew on Smith et al. (whose methodological approach will be outlined in the next chapter) and their notion of standing opposite and standing beside the students to challenge and try to comprehend what they express (2009). Medina also states that “[n]othing short of ... reversibility and reciprocity [in communicative relations] can guarantee the equality in communicative participation required by fair epistemic practices” (2012, p. 204). To genuinely engage the students as active participants when uncovering knowledge about their experiences as learners I was therefore prepared to have the tables turned and allow them to ask questions of me and the research. As expected, this was unfamiliar terrain for the students as they typically came from backgrounds in which teachers had unquestionable authority. During the introductory period I therefore allowed plenty of opportunities for the students to ask questions and become comfortable with turning previously learned interactions with teachers on its head. During the interviews and later discussions, I also provided times where I explicitly invited them to ask questions or challenge what I said, acknowledging that I was grateful for their candidness, linking the experience to the overall concept of co-production, as was initially intended.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity within a qualitative research paradigm refers to critical reflection on the data collected, knowledge produced and the role the researcher has in the uncovering of that knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 2017). Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) argue that being reflexive is to think about the relationship between processes of knowledge production, the context in which these processes take place and the involvement of various actors in knowledge
production. As was outlined in the previous section, different knowledge systems are not considered equal and certain ways of knowing are privileged over others. To understand the experiences in education of students with refugee backgrounds more authentically therefore requires the use of reflexivity to identify areas in which hegemonic knowledge structures obscure the ways in which the students make sense of their own lives. Being reflexive is therefore not only about entertaining alternative ways of thinking and knowing about a phenomenon. It also involves critical reflection on how existing power structures legitimise certain knowledge structures over others and how operationalising reflexivity in research can challenge the inequality of these arrangements. To do so as a researcher from a Western tradition means I acknowledge my complicity with the structures that I am critiquing (Tudor, 2017). Understanding reflexivity in this way was fundamental for engaging students as active participants in this study to avoid issues of epistemic/epistemological violence and hermeneutic injustice that were discussed above.

To facilitate reflexivity, Horsburgh calls for an “active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation” (2003, p. 309). According to Mann this can be achieved when research is “[f]ocused on the self and ongoing intersubjectivities [and] recognises mutual shaping, reciprocality [sic] and bi-directionality, and that interaction is context-dependent and context renewing” (2016, p. 28). Reflexivity is therefore a dynamic process. Reflexive thinking can only be achieved when the researcher acknowledges that they are embedded in the social context in which the research takes place, and therefore they influence this context and are themselves transformed through the process of uncovering knowledge. Berger (2015) also argues that reflexivity takes different forms depending on the degree to which the researcher shares the experiences of the participants. This may change throughout the research process as familiarity and rapport is developed. In this way, Berger views reflexivity as an ongoing process and not just a mechanical application of method. Being reflexive requires the researcher to assess their position in relation to the ongoing uncovering of knowledge throughout each stage of the research and consider the changing impact this could have on the conclusions drawn. Attia and Edge also take the view that “be(com)ing” [sic] reflexive is a process (2017, p. 33). Here they emphasise a turning inwards and development of the researcher as a whole person that is “not...left as a hoped-for collateral
outcome of research experience” (ibid., 2017, p. 43). This, they argue, allows a more creative and holistic approach to qualitative research that opens new avenues for enquiry. Becoming reflexive may well be a journey that is ongoing throughout a researcher’s whole life, or indeed a meta-process that is passed on through a research community.

Before entering the field, I made an explicit plan about how to activate reflexive thinking in the data collection and analysis, starting with a reflection on the position I held in the research. As a white, middle-class male representing a globally renowned academic institution in the UK, I naturally hold a position of greater authority in the community, which may have been exacerbated by the position of need of the students. In addition, my original contact with the students was as a teacher (RLC1) or as an external project representative conducting interviews (RLC2). From these first impressions I was in a position of greater authority over the students and had the power to determine aspects of their educational trajectories. It was therefore possible that the students would have some apprehensions about challenging my interpretations on their experiences or that they may answer according to what the perceive I would find of value. In addition, my position of power may be exacerbated in the context of a one-to-one interview. Previous interview situations the students had experienced were likely to be in a position of profound need and subjugation, for example in claiming refugee status. Although I cannot assume how students experienced these situations, it was important to remember the potential that being interviewed like this in the RLC environment might have in shaping the kinds of responses students give. For example, students might have avoided giving negative reflections on the school to avoid perceived negative consequences should these reports be attributed to them.

Although these experiences may have consolidated a position of greater authority, they occurred in a context in which students were expressing a desire to seek support in applying to higher education opportunities. I was therefore confident that the research addressed a genuine need. Despite addressing a genuine need, as a researcher I sought to gain from the outcomes of the research in terms of achieving a PhD. To achieve the intended emancipatory objectives of the research, this should only have been a benefit in addition to transformative outcomes for the students. In addition to reflecting on my position and how that might influence the ways in which the students related to me as a lead researcher, I needed to consider how my previous experiences of schooling and potentially prejudicial assumptions
about the participants educational contexts might affect the way that I understand their accounts. I was fortunate enough to progress unheeded through the UK state education system and gain access to a highly selective university. Throughout my schooling I was also exposed to ideas that education in many of the student’s countries of origin were inferior to a Westernised education system. Throughout data collection and analysis, I therefore endeavoured to be conscious of moments when I had negative or unfavourable responses to educational experiences that the students reported. These moments were then an opportunity to see what learning could be gained from having a more conscious awareness of and challenging my own assumptions of education and the value and influence it might have on people.

Reflexive thinking was operationalised throughout the research process in several ways. In the first stage of the analysis, I drew on my initial reflexive account to consider presuppositions on information that was gathered about each student before conducting interviews. Doing so centred analysis on the student’s experiences individually. At later stages, the students’ accounts were considered in comparison to each other to gain further insight, and at higher levels of abstraction in which I started to put my presuppositions and those of the research community in dialogue with the data as part of a reflexive, interpretative process. Reflexive processes also entered data gathering and interpretation through the participatory processes of analysis. The participatory methods that will be outlined in more detail in the next chapter provided a forum around which to reflect on the results as they emerged. Considering Medina’s (2012) arguments about the role of communicative practices in silencing, I had a structure around which to consider how these forums could facilitate genuine participation. Reflexivity has also driven quality by moving beyond simply member-checks and triangulation and using processes in which the students’ interpretative contributions are made equal to my own. Reflexivity was then followed through to post-reflection and presentation of findings after leaving the field and engaging with the analysis at higher levels of abstraction. Throughout the following chapter I will further elaborate on how reflexivity was a fundamental part of the methodological framework.
Part 3: Methodology and Methods

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Narrative Analysis

In this chapter I will outline the methodological approach that was used in the research and how this influenced the set of methods used for data gathering and analysis. I will also outline the procedures used to ensure quality of research findings and the approach to ethics. The first part of the primary research question for this project asks: how do students in protracted refugee situations make sense of themselves as learners? This question seeks to explore personal sense making in context, which lends itself to exploration using a phenomenological approach. The breed of phenomenological approach taken here, referred to as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), is an idiographic approach grounded in concepts drawn from a hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic element directs the approach towards interpretation by acknowledging that our understanding of another’s experience is essentially perspectival. IPA is viewed as idiographic in its attendance to the experiences of particular people and contexts rather than being nomothetic. However, as will be discussed here, it is suggested the general case can be reached through exploration of experience in individual cases.

Although coined as a term in psychology in the 1800s, phenomenology was established as a more concrete methodological approach through the work of philosopher Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl argued that to understand the way individuals experience phenomena we need to “go back to the things themselves” (quoted in Willis, 2001, p. 3) with the thing in question being the content of the experience in our consciousness. Husserl, and those influenced by his approach such as Moustakas (see Moustakas, 1994) viewed phenomenology as a transcendental project; trying to understand the nature of consciousness and the value-free essence of experience itself. Doing so means approaching the research topic free from any pre-suppositions and allowing the object to speak for itself. Transcendental phenomenologists argue that this is achieved through a process of ‘bracketing’ or acknowledging and removing preconceptions from our mind before attempting analysis (Neubauer et al., 2019). Heidegger, however, didn’t agree with Husserl’s approach to phenomenology, viewing it as too abstract to be applied in a research context and claiming that bracketing was impossible to achieve completely. Rather than abandoning
phenomenology entirely, Heidegger initiated a “hermeneutic turn” in phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34) through foregrounding different facets of interpretation in processes of understanding the experience of others. We can’t completely rid ourselves of our preconceptions, but we can work reflexively to try and understand what preconceptions we bring to our interpretation of another’s experience to better understand the original intention of the author of the account (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

Phenomenology provided an approach for the students to reflect on their personal experience and the hermeneutic flavour of IPA established the requirement for me as lead researcher to reflect on my interpretation of the accounts being given by students. This dual layer of students making sense of their own experience, perhaps for the first time in an explicit sense, and the reciprocal interpretation by me as lead researcher creates a double hermeneutic (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015). Heidegger describes the understandings created by participants as an *appearing* and asserts it is the researcher’s role to facilitate and interpret latent understandings as they emerge (McNeill, 2005, p. 90). This requires a close working relationship between the researcher and the participant to ensure more concentric understanding of emerging meaning, which is consistent with a transformative framework.

The idiographic component of IPA describes how the approach attends to the unique nature of individual’s lives and experiences. Exploring the rich details of people’s experiences to understand how they construct meaning requires IPA to take a thorough and systematic approach, returning to transcripts several times and working through layers of interpretation in a process of abductive reasoning (which will be expanded upon in the analysis section). An idiographic sentiment does not mean that generalisations cannot be made from IPA studies, but rather that generalisations are embedded in particular circumstances (Harré, 1979). IPA therefore does not treat individuals as discrete entities of study but rather as embedded in networks of social relationships, consistent with the ontological and epistemological dimensions of a transformative framework. Experiences then depend on interactions in the social milieu and particular cases of experience become the focus of analysis. Given the intimate connection between the meanings we attribute to our personal experiences and our social context, these experiences will reflect any underlying general structure of our social reality. The general and the particular therefore have a reciprocal relationship in a similar way to the hermeneutic circle in interpretation. An analogy given to illustrate this point is the
reciprocal relationship of meaning between individual words and a sentence as a whole (Smith et al., 2009). Taking this view avoids some of the criticism directed at a nomothetic approach to particular cases of behaviour and meaning making, such as claims that such research is an actuarial or probabilistic project and that it characterises imaginary personalities rather than attending to real experiences of individuals (Datan et al., 1987).

To summarise, IPA is an iterative approach to interpreting individual experience that is perspectival and has an idiographic sensibility. Using IPA in this research allowed an in depth understanding of how students in a protracted refugee situation viewed their experiences of being a learner in terms of their learner identities. It also provided an approach to interpretation for managing preconceptions reflexively throughout the process. This lends itself particularly well to the transformative framework because it facilitated a space for the students to use their voice and be a part of the interpretative process, which helps to address the tension of a potential imbalance of power between them and me as I led the research.

Addressing the second part of the overarching research question, however, required a different, but complementary approach.

Combining IPA with a Narrative Approach

The second part of the primary research question asks how learner identity affects the learning trajectories of students in protracted refugee situations. Addressing this sort of question moves away from understanding lived experience and focusses more on the context of these experiences in the lives of the students, in addition to how past experiences and future hopes shape the present-day meanings that individuals construct (Tamboukou et al., 2013). A narrative approach suits this purpose because it focuses on how experiences work together to develop an ongoing story throughout an individual’s life. “IPA has a strong intellectual connection with various forms of narrative analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 196) since both attend to individuals’ meanings and particular circumstances as opposed to general rules. Additionally, both IPA and narrative approaches are designed around a strong hermeneutic outlook, highlighting the importance of interpreting a participant’s account. Additionally, both conceive of qualitative research as a social endeavour, appreciating the contextual, historical and specific nature of a student’s account and the possibility for co-constructed meaning. Denzin (1989) also highlights the potential for experienced-based
narratives to address research into influential life turning points, such as major shifts experienced by the students of this study in the form of forced migration.

The contested term, *narrative*, provides a variety of access points to understanding different aspects of accounts provided in empirical studies. IPA is exclusively concerned with experience, whereas experienced-based accounts are just one form of narrative inquiry. A joint focus on experience, however, allows the approaches to be compatible within a single study. Much (1995) claims that cultures are effectively frameworks for meaning making. To understand experiential claims made by an individual we therefore need to have some insight into the cultural contexts of the individual, which is where narratives can be of assistance (Smith et al., 2009). A key to this compatibility is in recontextualising narrative as a series of complexly interconnected experiences from the past that project into hoped or imagined experiences in the future, both of which influence meaning constructed in the present, rather than as a chronological series of events as proposed by Labov (Squire, 2013). A phenomenological assumption in this regard is that stories can serve as a medium through which experience and our understanding of our experience become part of our consciousness. An experienced-based narrative analysis enables the researcher to consider three additional salient points; factors other than events that individuals use to construct meaning, the relationship between the context of retelling and the context of the experience, and the co-constructed meaning through interaction with the researcher in the retelling (ibid.). These points facilitate additional levels of analysis that add dimension to the interpretation of a participant’s account.

Narrative approaches have traditionally been used to highlight differences between participants’ accounts or explore the experiences of just one person. In contrast, phenomenological accounts tend to be used to explore similarities as a way to access more generalised findings from particular instances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Atkinson, however, contests that “each individual life experience is simultaneously in some ways like no one else’s (unique), in some ways like some others’, and in some ways like everyone else’s (universal)” (2007). Bringing both together allowed this research to appreciate both the similarities and differences in the students’ stories and question what might underlie such accounts. The shift in narrative from events to experience as it is combined with IPA facilitated a movement away from the traditional staged migration story that follows events from preparing to leave, to
transition, and finally resettlement. Forcing a narrative into a sequence of events like this makes assumptions about what is important to an individual and may overlook key experiences that shape personal meanings that don’t fit into this framework. This framework also implies a finality in the arrival in a resettlement country, which may not be consistent with ongoing hopes and expectations individuals have as they build their lives beyond such a narrative (Mosselson, 2006). Given the attention to a variety of temporal frames and levels explored in this research, breaking away from a staged migration model has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of students’ experiences. This point is demonstrated through the high degree of connectedness between past, present and perceived future experiences that are discussed in the following section.

Patterson (2018) used a combination of IPA and narrative methods to explore realities experienced by a group of 5 secondary level teachers as they developed professional expertise through practice. It was argued that “[u]sing the lens of narrative inquiry offers descriptive frameworks to explore, interpret, explain and translate the individual experiences” while “phenomenology provide[s] a framework for thinking about and interpreting the lifeworld phenomena of the professional learning experience for the teachers in the study” (2018, p. 323). The two methods therefore enabled exploration of the topic for breadth through the narrative approach, which created space for teachers to reflect on their relationships with others in their professional learning. It also looked for depth in universally lived experience that could be recognisable and transferable to other teachers. Consequently, the combination of these two approaches allowed more diverse understandings about the phenomena of developing professional expertise in teaching. Biggerstaff (2014) has also combined IPA with a narrative approach in the field of psychology of health services. Throughout Biggerstaff’s research experience, participants were found to use narrative as a tool to express the context of their lived experiences as both overarching background stories and smaller anecdotes within these. Using narrative analysis in a multi-pronged qualitative approach therefore provided an additional way of engaging with the richness of data collected from participants’ accounts to gain further insights.

In a similar way, a combination of IPA and narrative approaches were used in this research to facilitate the exploration of the rich and situated contexts and unique stories of students’ experiences of education in PRS. IPA was used to explore the subjective meanings students
use to understand themselves in relation to education and a complementary narrative approach explored the context in which these subjective experiences were constructed. Emphasising a hermeneutic approach to the understanding of experience and life worlds along different axes allowed these approaches to be blended. The combined methodology also bridged the two concepts of learner identity and learning trajectory, allowing for richer accounts and deeper understanding of students’ lives in context. Throughout the interviews, the students used storytelling to express their experiences and their associated meanings, often in more extended periods of speech that weren’t providing direct answers to specific questions. The combined IPA/narrative approach was therefore useful to understand the context of the experiences the students reporting and from this understand the essence of specific, formative points in the students’ educational journeys. The loosely structured nature of the interviews also facilitated this kind of storytelling to provide material for combined analysis and allow freedom for the students to direct narratives in a way that was consistent with their lived experiences.

Methods

Research structure

The most fundamental data was collected through two individual interviews, written statements and a group interview conducted throughout the course of the fieldwork. Interviews were held at the beginning, at about the midway point, and finally a group interview towards the end. These interviews followed a structure similar to the combined IPA and narrative research approach taken by Patterson (2018), which is illustrated in Figure 3. The first interview focused on life history to set the context for the experiences of learning. The second took a more phenomenological turn to explore learning experiences in the current context following the previously expressed life history. After each of these stages a focus group then explored the emerging themes and allowed input from the students in the ongoing analysis. The final interview was then conducted in a group and provided an opportunity for reflection and articulation of meanings constructed by each of the students. This was also supported by a written statement from the students expressing their hopes for the future.

These three stages were followed in RLC 1, with a long gap after interview 1 due to Ramadan. Each stage of interview and analysis was completed for each participant before moving on to
the next stage. However, the process was not completely linear to allow for an iterative interaction between the narrative and phenomenological discussions as meanings about experience emerged. However, in RLC 2 only two focus groups were conducted combining the reviewed themes from the first two interviews and summary reflections. This was because the research was disrupted through the process of data gathering and some sessions had to be rescheduled to a later date. I therefore had to return for a second period of fieldwork three months after the first to conduct these focus groups. Although it would have been possible to work with the interview data collected without returning, I felt that this would not allow the students sufficient opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the analysis stages for them to be considered active participants. As a fundamental aspect of the transformative approach adopted here, the conclusions for RLC 2 would then have fallen far short of the co-constructed meanings that had emerged from research with RLC 1.

![Figure 3 - Iterative Interview Process adapted from Patterson (2018)](image-url)
Recruiting Participants

Prior to beginning data collection, the research was presented to potential participants, outlining the scope and aims as well as what would generally be expected of them as active participants. Students in the highest grade level of each RLC were invited, however in RLC 1, four additional students from lower grade levels expressed an interest in participating. Of these, two that were in the second to last grade continued to complete all stages. I decided to include their interviews because although they were not in their final year, they were old enough to apply for university and had previous qualifications or educational experiences that gave useful insights into their experiences of education both prior to and during their time in the RLC. Those that expressed an interest in participating then attended a series of sessions to explore the themes of the research and collaborate in the setting of formal research procedures and ethical considerations with me in a group. This was discussed over a series of four 2-hour sessions in RLC 1 (which were reduced to 1 hour in RLC 2 due to time restrictions) and a further two discussion sessions prior to the second interview to collaborate in setting the scope for data collection. A further check-in session was conducted in RLC 1 prior to the third group interview to review how this would be conducted. A summary of these introductory sessions is provided in Appendix 1.

As well as making the students aware of the aims of the research and their roles, this initial period was an important time to build trust and rapport with the students. When using a participatory methodology with marginalised communities, it is essential to plan for a means of negotiating trust in order to let the students feel safe and confident to share aspects of their personal experiences (Oh, 2012; A. White et al., 2010). It is also important to use this time before formal data gathering to help break down perceived power imbalances. This is both to gain trust, and to ensure that my positionality didn’t compel students to participate against their genuine interest, such as feeling a need to please powerful outsiders as has been noted by McBrian and Day (2012). My plan to build trust was to exercise interpersonal skills of “flexibility, patience, humour and warmth” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 6), especially in this early stage, to help ameliorate any uncertainty or animosity. I was also conscious to demonstrate authentic curiosity in the lives and interests of the students through active and engaged listening, both as part of the planned sessions and in casual meetings in and around the school (Liamputtong & Fernandes, 2015; Roxas et al., 2017). Part of this genuine interest also
involved reciprocity in allowing students the opportunity to ask questions about my life and educational experiences, which was something that the students seemed curious about after the initial breaking of the ice.

Establishing trust, both with the RLCs and the students, was a much more straightforward process in RLC 1 due to my prior relationship with the school and familiarity with staff and management, which was also fundamental for achieving access (Roxas et al., 2017). Some of the students also already knew me from my time working there previously and so I had already gained a level of trust with them, confirmed by their willingness to participate in the research. There were some concerns about how genuinely the students wanted to participate. One of the school managers explained that my intention to allow students flexibility to participate would result in a lack of interest and that in her experience the students needed to be told directly to do things that didn’t have any tangible benefit. The initial meeting was therefore made compulsory for all the students in the highest class to attend by the school. However, moving beyond this initial meeting I was careful to remind students about their rights to participate to ensure they didn’t feel compelled to share their personal stories. In this session one of the students asked directly what the benefit would be for them, prompting a discussion about how the research could give back in a more tangible way. The outcome of this discussion was that certificates of participation would be issued accompanied by a letter outlining the experience they gained so they could demonstrate the skills they had developed, shown in Appendix 3. This desire for certification would later become a key theme in the research and will be discussed in depth in the results sections.

A similar scenario was encountered in RLC 2, in which students were initially required to participate. Here I used the template from RLC 1 to monitor genuine desire to participate and ways of giving back. The students in RLC 2 seemed more interested in having an opportunity to share their stories but were equally keen to have some official recognition of their participation through certification. Across both sites several of the students explicitly stated gratitude for participation as an opportunity to share aspects of their journey to date, many for the first time. For some there was a tangible sense of relief, reflected in this quote from Leaf during at the end of the second interview:
I’ve spoke a lot of my thoughts and, of this period of time, and I didn’t spoke to anyone except you. I think it was just the right time to ask me this questions and I was just able to answer and say all my thoughts.

This gives me confidence that their participation was in their genuine interest. Some students also asked a lot of questions about the research process and sharing of information, suggesting careful consideration about their involvement. The final session prior to interview 1 was to set the terms of informed consent. An interesting observation was that in both RLCs, the students were keen to include a term that meant I would not ask about their reasons for leaving their home countries. When we came to discuss these scenarios, I was therefore careful to keep questions related to the impact leaving had on their education and feelings about leaving rather than the explicit reasons or potentially traumatic events they didn’t want to share. Sharing this term explicitly demonstrated a boundary that the students wished to set in terms of the trust within our research relationship and also their willingness to demonstrate agency in the research process (Brown et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Before each interview, a series of prompts was prepared to guide the interview. Preparing prompts allowed a degree of openness, but also a level of structure, that gave the students freedom to express what they wanted whilst keeping the discussion topics in line with the aims of the research (Jamshed, 2014). The prompts were developed from visual stimuli, in the form of life mapping and photographs, that the students created during the preparatory sessions and were inspired by approaches used in participatory visual methods (PVM). Visual stimuli were used "because participatory, visual methodologies allow refugee children to portray their own experiences [and] these approaches enable children to speak for themselves" (Vecchio et al., 2017, p. 140). In addition, reference to visual stimuli help to overcome difficulties in communicating experience in a language that is not a first language as it provides an alternative means of expression (Barley & Russell, 2019).

The students’ creative outputs were only used for preparing interview prompts and to aid communication during interviews. They were a tool for participation in terms of directing the themes and lines of questioning in the interview and not the core data source themselves. Therefore, their use cannot be categorised as participatory visual methodologies in the sense of the use intended by Vecchio et al. (2017) and Barley and Russell (2019). Although it might
have been useful to include some details and analysis from the visual material in this research, I was concerned that sharing photographs taken by the students might identify them or their community and risk their safety. By agreeing not to show the pictures the students also had a greater degree of confidence to share views of their lives that I would not have had access to, which prompted more depth of analysis. The students may have been more guarded about the photos they had taken if they knew they might be shared with an unknown audience. Finally, the students raised concerns about including their creative work. Not all of them were confident in their artistic abilities and so did not want others to see what they had drawn.

The first narrative interview utilised prompts that are designed to explore experiences in the past and the students’ reflections on these in the present. This stage of interviewing explored the interactions of people, time, and place as they relate to their experiences (see Figure 3). To focus the interview to pertinent areas, the students were asked to create a life history as a flow chart, outlining what they felt were the key stages of their educational journey. Although the life histories tended to follow a chronological trajectory through stages of education, each was uniquely divided into different, formative experiences, highlighting areas that the students felt were major junctures in their educational journeys. The diagrams therefore directed the interview to key times, places and people that shaped each student’s experience of learning, providing greater scope for the interview to explore areas outside of my personal experience and that might not have otherwise been explored in a less participatory approach.

The students were also asked to interview each other based on their diagrams to allow them some time to practice articulating experiences and allow them to experience being in the role of the interviewer. This helped the students to gain some understanding of what it was like to be on the other side of questioning in an interview, providing a means of reciprocity with me as lead researcher, as suggested by Medina (2012). It also provided some time for students to understand and reflect on their own experiences in the context of post-hoc questioning so that they could be more comfortable discussing this with ease in the actual interview, especially since this was a second language for them (Koulouriotos, 2011). In addition to this interview practice, I asked the students to make a list of questions they would ask based on the life histories that I then incorporated into the interview prompts, allowing a degree of control over the questions to be asked. Samples of such questions developed by
the students can be seen in Figure 4. As a further gesture of reciprocity, I presented my own educational history in the form of photos and artefacts from my time at school and allowed the students to ask me questions about my experiences. I found this a useful way to introduce the concept of a life history to the students, but was careful not to model too much, focussing mostly on the concept so that students didn’t feel that they had to conform their journeys to the format in which I presented mine (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

The second phenomenological interview explored the meanings and relations of four existential concepts of spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality developed by van Manen (1997) as part of a heuristic phenomenological analysis. The prompts for this interview focused on expounding pre-reflective experiences of everyday practice as it relates to lived
experience of being a learner (Moran, 2000). The prompts for this interview were drawn from photographs students took in the context of their everyday learning. Each student was provided with a camera before the first round of interviews and briefed into how they can use it to document their day-to-day learning activities. The scope of the camera use was discussed prior to beginning the activity, focusing on the ethical dimension of photography and how the students felt this was best suited to their personal circumstances (Denov et al., 2012). Before the second round of interviewing, they submitted a selection of photos that they thought best reflected their experiences as a learner with brief descriptions of what each depicts. They then engaged in a second mock interview session with each other to help develop prompts for the actual interview. I then analysed the photos as visual artefacts alongside questions suggested by the students to identify some points around which to build a discussion in the interview (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015).

In a similar vein to the first interview, this process handed over a degree of control in the interviewing procedure to the students and provided greater transparency to the process. These photos enabled a more participatory interview process and stimulated often unexpected input to facilitate “knowledge production, as opposed to knowledge gathering” (Veale, 2005, p. 2). For example, Xhaka submitted a picture of a back street behind a fast-food restaurant. The initial assumptions I made about these in my field notes was that it depicted the journey he made to and from the school. However, in the interview Xhaka explained that this was a place where he would often hang out with his friends and use discarded drinks cups to get free refills of drinks that were part of a deal at the restaurant. Most of these friends had since left Malaysia to return to their home country or because they had been resettled. This prompted a discussion into the transience of relationships in the PRS and how Xhaka was struggling with feelings of not being able to make genuine connections with people as he grew older, and the impact this had on his sense of self. This was not part of the prompts I had prepared for the interview, demonstrating the remarkable power a relatively mundane appearing image can have to direct research to areas of personal salience for participants.

Unfortunately, RLC 2 did not give permission for me to use cameras as part of the research process, citing concerns over safeguarding. As this occurred quite late into the fieldwork, I gave the students the choice of producing a storyboard to depict their experiences by drawing or a journal style entry explaining a typical day. This latter option emerged from a discussion
with the students about alternatives they thought would be best for capturing their experience. Some students expressed that they would prefer not to draw as they did not feel confident in their artistic ability and so suggested the diary entry as a suitable alternative. Seven of the students opted for the storyboard, some representing a chronological journey through the day and others disconnected snapshots from their day. Only one wrote a journal entry focusing on an example of a typical day. I was initially concerned that the storyboards might not allow as rich a discussion as photos did in RLC 1 because they tended to focus on mundane aspects of a typical day, rather than snapshots in the context of their broader life. However, they provided a useful launch pad for discussion around what the students felt was typical of their lives at that moment and how this differed from the past and their expectations. For example, Hadi’s storyboard had 4 out of 8 slides depicting his journey to and from school. This led to a discussion about how he felt about making this journey and the importance that traveling to school had in reflecting his state of mind and relationships with friends at the school. This gave a deep insight into the spatial, temporal, corporeal and relational dimensions of the lifeworld proposed by van Manen (1997) that drove the approach to the second interview.

In the final group interview the students discussed and reviewed themes that had emerged and reflected on their participation throughout the research. For RLC 2 this was conducted at the end of second focus group. During this interview we revisited the research questions and thought about how we could answer these questions based on their reflections on the meanings that had emerged, both personally and as a group. At this stage I invited the students to reflect on the degree to which they could see themselves in the conclusions that we had drawn, which was an important aspect to quality checking that will be discussed later (Horsburgh, 2003). This stage merged aspects of analysis and data gathering as the students thought both about their aspirations for the future and what this meant in terms of their reflections on their past and present experiences (Pittaway et al., 2010). The discussion was also partly informed by written statements in lieu of separate, individual issues, which were submitted before the group interview. This gave some time for the students to consider their previous interviews and prepare some reflective thoughts for discussion. This decision was made partly in the interest of time, since preparing another round of interviews would have
extended the fieldwork and the RLCs expressed that the length of the research was becoming disruptive to other activities.

Analysis

Once the recorded interviews had been electronically transcribed, the analysis proceeded by a process of abduction, which incorporates both inductive and deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is data driven, with theory being developed from theory-free empirical data to develop general rules from specific cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Deductive reasoning on the other hand, championed by Popper (1934), outlines theory unburdened by facts of the social context that will be used in analysis prior to conducting empirical work. Criticism has been levelled against each of these approaches. For example, Ho (1994) argues that deductive approaches don’t lead to the production of new knowledge as empirical facts are only ever considered in terms of previous ideas. Conversely, Eriksson and Lindström (1997) suggest inductive reasoning leads to the tendency to operate within surface structures that are informed by previous understandings of the world, essentially arguing no observation is free from perspective or interpretation.

Although often seen as diametrically opposed, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) rationalise these opposing positions by claiming that inductive and deductive processes are not necessarily polarised. They suggest that empirical facts are never completely free of perspectives influenced by knowledge of previous theories and the interpretation of this data is fundamentally perspectival. Similarly, theory is never completely divorced from the empirical data that lead to its formulation. Consequently, they assert that “what is needed is a repeated process of alternating between (empirically laden) theory and (theory-laden) empirical ‘facts’” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 7). This iterative process of going back and forth between empirical data and theory using induction and deduction is the basis of an abductive approach. Abduction is therefore not a simple mix of both induction and deduction but rather a distinct approach that incorporates some elements from both. At its core, abduction is a process of pattern-finding that reconsiders theory and data reciprocally in light of each other. Using this process, I therefore sought to make a link between surface and deep level structures that explain social phenomena and in doing so introduce new elements that can extend knowledge.
This idea has been referred to by other terms, such as *retroduction* (Chiasson, 2005; Sayer, 2002) *complementary* (Blackstone, 2012) and *combined* (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). However, Chiasson argues that these concepts are in fact separable and that abduction can be viewed as a subordinate aspect of retroduction (2005). In this case, abduction follows a period of “musement” (*ibid.*, 2005, p. 224) about what is observed and abductive reasoning is used to guess a plausible explanation for that observation. This guess mediates the exchange of deductive and inductive reasoning using established theory and empirical data, which is evaluated cyclically. When a clear idea is formed, this is output from the stages of musing and clarified formally, explicated and evaluated using deductive and inductive reasoning to form a hypothesis ready for testing. Forming of the hypothesis is the higher level retroductive reasoning. Erikson and Lindström, however, do not differentiate between labels and instead consider three forms of abductive reasoning; explorative (pattern-searching), generative (pattern-forming), and pragmatic (pattern-renewing) (1997, p. 197). Although framed differently, at the core of different conceptions of abductive approaches are elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning and elements of imagination that seek to dismantle the limits to production of new knowledge.

IPA as a methodology is consistent with an abductive approach in gathering and analysing data about individual experiences. Understanding the relationship between what the participant reports and the context in which the information is relayed requires an interpretative process that assesses the relationship between fragments of information provided and the broader context of an individual’s lived experience. Many writers refer to this process using Gadamer’s concept of the hermeneutic circle (see Gadamer, 1990), implying an iterative approach to analysis rather than a linear or step-wise process. Smith et al. use the analogy of standing opposite and beside an interviewee (2009). Standing opposite allows us to interrogate what the interviewee reports and how they think about their experiences using pre-conceptions acknowledged in an earlier stage of musing. Standing beside the interviewee allows us to think about claims made by the interviewee free of our theories then reflect on the conclusions of these two aspects in relation to each other. Here it is clear that phenomenology and hermeneutics work hand-in-hand, as Smith and colleagues argue, “[w]ithout phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen” (2009, p. 37).
The abductive analysis used here involved a process of returning to the interview transcripts several times and identifying themes through different lenses of analysis; coding and recoding to converge on the essence of the experiences expressed by the students. Within the framework of a hermeneutic phenomenology, this iterative analysis is characterised by a hermeneutic cycle of reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (Laverty, 2003), and is depicted diagrammatically by Kafle (2013) in Figure 5. Throughout the analysis the interview transcripts were interpreted at and across different levels, looking at parts of the text in the context of the whole interview, the initial narrative account (bracketing) and in light of ongoing field observations (Smith et al., 2009). With each re-reading the analysis moved further away from the transcript text and involved more abstract interpretation. At this stage I began to considering findings in light of previous theory, using the metaphor or standing opposite and standing beside to try and get close to the essence of the students’ experience. At this stage I also reviewed new literature on theories around temporality and adolescence to allow me to activate deductive reasoning in areas not previously considered based on statements made by the students. For example, the idea of delayed trajectories and time-bound opportunities began to emerge, which hadn’t formed part of my initial literary review. Similar IPA research conducted by Smith (1994) into the experiences of transition into motherhood demonstrates this approach. The “first order analysis” considered the accounts provided by participants in their own terms, whereas a “second order analysis” consulted further reading to explore unexpected statements regarding relationships with significant others (in J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 166).
Given the idiographic character of IPA, each interview was analysed in detail as a single case turn by turn before looking for common themes and divergence between the cases. Immediately after each interview I recorded my initial observations and feelings about the interview in the field notes as a record of my first impressions and to help in reflexive bracketing of initial conceptions. The transcript and recording were reviewed several times to consider descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual/interpretative elements of the transcript. The linguistic interpretation required care as the interviews were not conducted in the students’ first language, so assumptions couldn’t be made too readily about instances of language use. As I became more familiar with the transcript, I started to make detailed notes about themes, which were then built upon in subsequent readings to create a commentary. After this intimate reading, initial themes were identified within each case. I then began mapping the themes to explore how they fit together by writing them on separate pieces of paper and moved them around whilst reviewing the initial data and commentary to identify potential connections. Some themes were discarded, and new ones were added during iterative re-reading of the transcripts. Themes were subsumed under super-ordinate themes and oppositional relationships were identified and interrogated. The output of the first interview was summarised as a narrative story, consistent with the more narrative flavour of the interview. For the more phenomenological second interview the results were summarised in a table of themes with quoted examples from the transcript.

Following this stage of analysis, the students were then consulted about these outputs and any changes or disagreements they had were recorded. This stage was fundamental for clarifying understanding and allowing the students to have input into the analysis of their own stories. The most salient themes across cases were then collated into a PowerPoint presentation and used as material for group discussion and analysis in the focus groups. During these discussions I was careful to invite disagreement and further development of ideas from the students with prompt questions and rhetorical situations so that the initial stages of analysis that I conducted alone didn’t give me too much interpretative superiority. In the first focus group in RLC1 I found that the students didn’t have much to say about the themes as they were presented. In the second round I presented the themes as provocative statements, such as:
There is no point to have dreams because you can’t achieve them here. You should just enjoy your life as much as you can each day.

When posed this way the students were more likely to state agreement or disagreement and contribute to the analysis more meaningfully. The final group interview, which was subsumed into focus group 2 in RLC 2, then reflected on these themes further in the context of educational trajectories in the future to arrive at key themes. Examples of the research output and PowerPoint presentation are shown in Appendices 5 and 4 respectively. The overall process for the research is summarised in Figure 6.

Appraising Quality and Validity

Judgements of the value of research outputs have been dominated by measures of quality within a rigid framework of internal and external validity and reliability and the degree to which conclusions can be generalised (Kvale, 1995). However, these measures were developed for use within a positivist/post-positivist research paradigm that values objectivity and eliminating bias from the research process. Qualitative approaches that engage with idiographic and subjective aspects of people’s lives do not fit neatly with this approach to quality and so have been criticised as lacking the necessary rigour to be considered scientific (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Morse, 1999). Quality also means different things for the various
stakeholders within the research community and beyond, raising questions about how to incorporate a range of perspectives (Springett et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers have therefore moved away from positivist/post-positivist language of quality, validity and generalisability and start afresh with a new, more suitable approach (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Huttunen and Kakkori argue that “the value of qualitative research does not lie in its ability merely to reproduce the outside world. It comes from the capacity of research to evoke new kinds of thinking and seeing” (2020, p. 611). The knowledge uncovered is not based on a rigid correspondence between observation and a value-free perception of an objective reality, and indeed, Cho and Trent argue that the search for such correspondence might not be the major aim of the qualitative paradigm (2006).

Many frameworks have been proposed for use with qualitative work, such as the concept of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), soundness (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), and goodness (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; J. K. Smith, 1993). However, some of these frameworks have been accused of reflecting the existing positivist/post-positivist approaches (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020). The multiplicity of methodological approaches within the qualitative paradigm is also a problem for developing alternative indicators for quality, validity and rigour (Flick, 2007). Rather than reach for an off-the-shelf framework suitable for qualitative work, Yardley (2000) proposes a set of four broad criteria for developing a framework to appraise quality and validity. Firstly, sensitivity to context asks that we consider the fit between the research questions and methodological approach, as well as the socio-cultural context within which the research takes place. Secondly, commitment to rigour refers to the insurance that sufficient competence and engagement with context and methodology has occurred for breadth and depth of analysis. Thirdly, transparency and coherence ask that the procedures and interpretative/reflexive processes are clear to an external observer in the presentation of the research. Finally, impact and importance require that the outcomes enrich our understanding of the phenomenon in question and that knowledge uncovered is of practical use to those that it affects. Here I will outline how these broad considerations have been employed to appraise quality and validity in this research along the lines of three interconnected concepts of robustness, rigour and reflexivity.
Robustness

Robustness has been used loosely in discussions of quality, but here it refers to the congruence between the philosophical foundations of the work and the methodological approach that was implemented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Robustness also refers to the congruence between the aims of the research and the interests of the participants, reflected in Yardley’s criteria of impact and importance (2000). The two main philosophical orientations of this research are the transformative framework and participation, so robustness can be assessed in terms of how the combined IPA/narrative methodologies realise the underlying emancipatory aim of the research. Philosophical application is achieved by moving back and forth between design and implementation and is not just post-hoc (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). This is encompassed by the iterative cycles of analysis in IPA. Smith and colleagues also state that IPA is well placed for achieving sensitivity to context, arguing that:

*Because such care is taken with the collecting of data from participants and with grounding analytic claims in the data obtained, a strong IPA study will thereby be demonstrating sensitivity to the raw data being worked with* (2009, p. 180).

IPA research doesn’t intend to produce generalisable results, as Horsburgh (2003) notes, complexity and contradiction are an inherent part of human existence. The students in this study also tended to think about their lives and experiences in a more specific and individualised sense. Robustness was therefore achieved here by allowing individual perspectives to shine through, and highlighting and interrogating areas of congruence and contradiction (J. A. Smith, 2010).

Springett and colleagues (2011) state that participation is not just a set of techniques, but a philosophical approach to knowledge production. This implies robustness can be judged here in terms of how genuinely the students were able to participate. To achieve this, Bradbury and Reason (2008) argue researchers should build mutuality, reciprocity, dignity and respect with participants, and in doing so exercise sensitivity to context. Emery and Anderman (2020) also emphasise that quality is manifest through the efforts made to connect with participants in a way that is respectful of their role in the research. This study aimed to show dignity and respect to the students by allowing them to contribute to each stage of the research project after they were recruited. They were also fully informed of what the research aims were and were provided an opportunity to contribute to these and the scope of their participation. The
methodology provided opportunities for students to influence the direction of the research through consultation, and the open-ended interviews and focus groups gave explicit times to contribute to analysis and interpretation. The students were also encouraged to speak back to me as the lead researcher, facilitating mutuality and reciprocity. It was also made clear that they did not have to answer any questions they didn’t want to and were given some prompt phrases they could use to move the interview on to the next question. These were used by several of the students throughout the interviews. I have also carefully outlined above the ways in which power can enter the construction of knowledge and how my positionality can obscure marginalised voices and used these ideas as a basis for reflexivity (see below).

Rigour

Rigour is another common term used in quality appraisal, but here it refers to how thoroughly the methodology was applied throughout the research to achieve the stated philosophical aims. Achieving rigour requires capturing sufficient and relevant data to inform a comprehensive set of recommendations for improving practice with students from refugee backgrounds. This resonates with Huttunen and Kakkori’s (2020) view that qualitative research should achieve new ways to see and think about the world, which is focused through a transformative framework on an action agenda for change (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Smith (2010) also argues that the results must be representative of the whole sample of students to fairly represent the range of viewpoints in the study. This can be challenging when some students are more verbose or articulate than others, providing quotes that are more appealing to the researcher for reporting (Emery & Anderman, 2020). This issue was considered in the presentation of the data and throughout the analytical process in discussion with students to accurately present the range of perspectives. In some cases, this required actively inviting less confident or chatty students to contribute during group discussions and discussing ways for respecting each other’s contributions through establishing discussion guidelines for focus groups together in advance.

A useful analogy to keep in mind for achieving rigour is that the final report should form an auditable document (Horsburgh, 2003; Yin, 1989). The reader should be able to follow the justifications made for each knowledge claim and how these fit with the philosophical foundation of the research, reflecting Yardley’s criteria of transparency and coherence (2000).
To achieve this, the justification and processes used in this research have been made clear throughout the document, and the stages of analysis are shown in the results that are summarised in appendices 5 and 6. Rigour is also often achieved through triangulation across data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018) or member checking (Tobin & Begley, 2004). However, such methods are problematic because individuals are not in a position to validate perspectives of others, so differences are likely to arise in the views towards research findings as a whole (Morse, 1998). Riessman (1993) also warns that researchers should not lose intellectual independence to research participants’ statements as uncritically valid in their own right. The conclusions drawn are a result of an interpretative process that I lead and am accountable for as lead researcher. Considering these arguments, Horsburgh therefore proposes that the final research output should also be auditable in terms of being comprehensible and recognisable to the students. This was particularly important in the final group interview stage because once I left the field, I had limited ability to involve the students meaningfully with interpretation or auditing.

**Reflexivity**

Majid and Vanstone state that “reflexivity is commonly operationalized in the majority of qualitative appraisal tools [which] forces prescription onto a form of inquiry that is antithetical to standardization and instead driven by creativity, insight, and prowess” (2018, p. 2128). Reflexivity is therefore a core component of ensuring quality and underscores each of Yardley’s (2000) criteria for good qualitative work. The importance of reflexivity to this project has been outlined in the previous section on the research paradigm, so I won’t repeat that in detail here. However, I will add here that where positivist/post-positivist research paradigms seek to eliminate bias from research to achieve quality, reflexivity in qualitative research views bias an inevitable part of our role as researchers embedded in a social context. Reflexivity is then a way of dealing with bias to drive creative and participatory thinking and the reigns to control interpretative supremacy, rather than a means with which to eliminate it. To facilitate reflexive thinking, Emery and Anderman (2020) “recommend that those interested in conducting IPA begin by studying the philosophical foundations of researchers committed to decolonizing qualitative research, including those working to amplify Indigenous perspectives” before engaging with IPA. This has been considered in depth and
presented in the previous section, and specific ethical considerations for working with students with refugee backgrounds are outlined below.

Ethical considerations

The axiological dimension is the core philosophical orientation of the transformative framework, requiring carefully considered ethical procedures for research with marginalised communities. The American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) provides an ethical framework for conducting qualitative research with 5 key principles:

- Beneficence and nonmaleficence;
- Fidelity and responsibility;
- Integrity;
- Justice;
- and Respect for other’s rights and dignity.

In the first case, the research doesn’t intend to bring harm to the students, however care must be taken to ensure no indirect harm comes through the sharing of personal information. Trust was built on a platform of openness and the genuine intention of highlighting the interests of the students within the theme of learner identity and becoming. The students were fully briefed, and the research process, intentions, and use were transparent through regular check-ins. These check-in sessions provided the opportunity to update students on progress and allow questions and discussion about the research to ensure informed consent could be given meaningfully. In the interest of informed consent, the right to withdraw was a part of the research, however this is time-bound to the point of thesis submission to make the extent of this right clear and also uphold the integrity of the research (Smith et al., 2009). The RLCs and students have also been anonymised and referred to with pseudonyms to protect their identities.

All students who qualified to participate had the opportunity to apply to be students, however all students who expressed an interest were allowed equal access to any benefits that come from my involvement with the school. This alleviated potential reproduction of patterns of exclusion in the local community, which could arise due to contextual factors limiting participation, that has been observed to arise in similar projects with marginalised communities (S. White & Choudhury, 2007). Through reflexive practice and open and honest
interactions that were student driven, the rights and dignity of everybody involved were upheld and any conflicts or issues addressed in a fair and transparent manner. This formed a part of the initial discussions around research terms, so the students were fully briefed about the meaning of their participation. Finally, access to a qualified counsellor was made available during the data collection through a partner organisation since personal experiences of conflict, trauma and infringements of rights may be discussed and cause distress to the students. This was taken up by one student who expressed some issue of concern during an interview.

Bailey and Williams (2018) highlight the increased vulnerability of populations with refugee backgrounds as a concern for ethics in research due to their lack of rights and unclear political status. However, there is only limited literature that address the ethics of research with individuals from refugee backgrounds specifically. Developing this discussion, Kia-Keating (2012) argues that universal frameworks such as the one provided by the APA are tied to Western values and may overlook issues pertinent to ethics in non-Western settings. A framework is therefore proposed with three domains, namely values, power and rights, to guide ethics of practice with communities in refugee situations (ibid., 2012):

**Values**

At issue here are the values and positionality brought to the field by the researcher and the impact on the students. Within the qualitative framework used, reflexivity is a key component to ensure interpretation of the students’ experiences match as closely as possible to their personal understandings. There is therefore an explicit opportunity for reflection around being a researcher as an active agent and potential conflicts in values with the participants as students. This hopefully ensures values and respect are upheld as well as maintaining a philosophical commitment to uncovering ‘the truth’ in light of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research. Bailey and Williams (2018) also argue for an ongoing reflexive approach to ethics rather than following a set of procedures set prior to entering the field. This allows for adjustment to the terms of ethics used to ensure that research participants can assume agency towards the ethical values they bring to the research. The initial lead-in to the project and ongoing check-in sessions provided occasions for ongoing reflection on values that informed implementation of ethically sound research that was sensitive to context.
**Power**
There exists a fundamental disparity of power between me as the researcher and the students based on my privileged position in the field. A consequence may be that the students felt obliged to give accounts about what they perceive I expected to hear rather than what they really thought. A far-reaching consequence of publishing such accounts is that other researchers and potentially policy makers base decisions and information about this community on false information, which may in turn cause harm through badly informed interventions. Avoiding this problem is difficult, so to do this as much as possible I sought to build trust and rapport with the students. This was an easier process in RLC 1 since many of the students already knew who I was. However, in RLC 2 I was first introduced to the students outside of the context of research, which meant I wasn’t entering their lives and learning environment as a stranger. The research was also designed in such a way to incorporate the students as genuinely as possible in the process from beginning to end to ensure they maintain a degree of ownership over the information. This follows principles developed for community participation (for example, Shore, 2007) and is consistent with the transformative approach.

**Rights**
As stated above, informed consent was sought from the students in the form of a written agreement that contains a clear outline in plain English regarding their rights for participating (see Appendix 2). Since issues of language, culture, educational background and social norms may be a barrier to this process (Leaning, 2001) the students developed these terms together before starting data gathering to ensure clear expectations from the start. The foundation of this document was set in RLC 1 and was then used as a point for discussion in RLC 2. The students in RLC 2 did not want to change any of the terms in this written agreement. I was concerned that they might not have felt confident enough to question something that I had presented to them. For example, Leaning (2001) raises the issue of fear of harm and mistrust based on previous infringements of rights. Consequently, clear communication of the rights of participating, whilst being aware of the issues of power outlined above, was ensured regarding the potential impact of sharing personal stories and images (Pittaway et al., 2010). In this case, I emphasised that the terms had been set through participation in a similar kind of RLC to help set the expectation that the foundation of the research was a result of
negotiation. The terms themselves were also a useful vehicle for exploring issues of participation and informed consent that the students had never thought about before. I am therefore confident that given the ongoing opportunities to check in and question the research process, the students in RLC 2 were able to provide genuine informed consent. Finally, the information provided will only ever be used for the stated purpose and to further the rights of people in refugee situations.
SECTION 3
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section I will present data collected through interviews, focus groups and observations at RLC1 and RLC2 and consider the meanings that can be extracted from these following the process of abduction outlined in the previous section. In the first part I explore the pre-migratory experiences of the students in both learning centres to gain an insight into the understandings they form about themselves with regards to education in their early years of schooling. Following this I present findings about the learning experiences in Malaysia and the students’ future aspirations in Parts 2 and 3 for RLC1 and RLC2 respectively. Here, I consider learning trajectories that are built on the earlier experiences shared in Part 1. Given the fairly monocultural nature of the participating students from each learning centre it makes sense to consider the findings of each of these as separate cases first. This will give an insight into the unique learning environment of each learning centre and how these contexts are influenced by and influence the students’ developing learner identities. In addition, it allows an exploration of differences between the students within each learning centre. For RLC1, this comparison is between Somali students who had formative learning experiences in different countries of origin, while in RLC2 the comparison is between experiences of the predominantly Pakistani group and the students from Africa and Myanmar. This approach reflects the joint IPA-narrative approach to analysis outlined in the previous section that considers both the similarities and difference between experiences of learning in each of the RLC settings. In Part 4 I compare the findings in each learning centre in light of the research questions and present the insights that have been gained about the learner identities and trajectories of students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia.
Part 1: Pre-migratory Experiences and Transition

In this part I present data related to pre-migratory learning experiences of the students in their countries of origin to understand how these provided a foundation upon which students make sense of their ongoing learning biographies in Malaysia. I also consider how trajectories were disrupted while making the move from their country of origin to Malaysia, which in some cases meant transiting through several other countries while remaining out of school. For RLC1, all the students were ethnically Somali, but their first educational experiences were in countries of origin across the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. In RLC2, most of the students were from Pakistan, which is where they had their first experiences of education, however Darlie was born and attended primary school in Myanmar, while Harry is Ghanaian and attended primary school in Liberia. In the interest of consistency, the term *home country* will be used throughout this section to refer to the country where each student has their ethnic roots, and *country of origin* will refer to where they had their first formative educational experiences.

Refugee Learning Centre 1

*Somali Muslim Learners*

The students of RLC1 had a range of pre-migratory experiences of education. The most common country of origin is Yemen (Alex, Joseph, Rebecca and Tom), two students grew up in Somalia (Geele and Ubax), two in Kenya (Sam and Xhaka) and one in Saudi Arabia (Leaf). However, for each of the students the first step into education was learning about the Islamic faith and reading the Quran. This often came before schooling and was a standard part of their early education, like for Ubax:

> My mum say, like, you should learn Quran first before you go to school or learn something else...you are young, you should go to the Quran first. Some of [the local people] learn Quran the same time they go to school but for me I was just learning Quran.

Learning about the Quran is viewed as a distinct kind of education compared to academic learning at school. The students learned practical skills, such as reading Arabic, whilst the focus of these religious lessons was to develop a superordinate moral character. This was to
lay the foundation for how the students interact with the world and make sense of other kinds of learning, for example, Geele says:

He's the only who can guide you to the, to the right path. So, no one can guide you even if the all the people wants to guide you they can’t guide you. They can, like, they cannot make you right person. They cannot make you good person. Only Allah or God can make you a good person.

Learning about Islam is viewed as an essential prerequisite for being a member of an Islamic society and broader socio-political group, as Joseph explains in the following statements:

Since you are born in Islamic culture, you’re a part of the Islamic religion, so, you must know the history about the religion, and who was the Prophet...you have to learn about your Islamic religion and how does it go. So, you have to defend Islam sometimes, and sometimes there’s Islam says about just the war and deliver the message just in peace, so, you need to learn about your Islamic, how does it work.

It made me who I am today, ‘cause I’ve learned to be patient, learn a lot of stuff. Part of it how to communicate, how to respect other people. As an adult that I’ve grown up, so, do not be silly.

As well as helping to define a sense of belonging and identity through a shared base of knowledge, for Joseph this extends to intergroup communication and defending his identity against negative stereotypes about Muslim people.

Most of the students in RLC1 had a relatively uninterrupted trajectory through grade levels of schooling. Although they have fond memories of their time at school, they remember the school environment as being quite strict, for example, when Xhaka talks about learning multiplication:

Yeah, it was different, ‘cause here they would teach you first, you would have to stand up and memorise all the multiplication, times tables. That’s all you have to do, memorise it. Before the class start, the teacher will come, and you have to stand up and you have to say. If you didn’t study, and you didn’t revise it, you will have to go to the office and get beat up.

Rebecca also reminisced about skipping classes to avoid punishment when she hadn’t completed homework:

Sometimes we hate Science, we skip the Science teacher class, that’s it...Because we don’t like science. Maybe the teacher was, erm, she was so bad. If you don’t write the homework, she will beat you, she will beat us, so, we will skip the class.

For the most part, learning prior to arriving to Malaysia for students in RLC1 was characterised
by rote methods of learning and strict enforcement of standards of behaviour, even if beating was not tolerated in their school. However, there were also moments of fun, such as a bazaar day, that Alex described as a celebration with fun activities for all students at the end of the school year:

*On bazaar day, like, it’s a day that they will help students to gather and then each one of them will do what they are good at, some will be drawing, some will be playing, like, decorating the whole school, like, it depends which student, like, who’s good at what. So, they give chance for each student to experience and express themselves to do what they want. So, each student will do what they are good at, basically.*

Bazaar day was viewed as a different format of learning to their day-to-day schooling and more as an opportunity to learn about yourself as a person, or as Rebecca puts it:

*To teach the students how to make their own way.*

Events like bazaar day can be understood as a fun complement to the students predominantly book-based learning.

Although the students varied in the degree to which they feel this kind of education defined them, explicit religious learning, rote methods, and strict standards of behaviour seemed to be fundamental building blocks of their pre-migratory education. These shared early educational experiences appeared to lay a foundation for a broader socio-historical category of *Somali Muslim learners* that links them as students. Consistent with the theory developed by Wortham (2006), such superordinate identity categories are key to setting the parameters of how the students see themselves in relation to education and learning but are developed in more nuanced ways at the meso-level of the national education system and micro-level of the classroom. Despite the localised differences, the superordinate category of *Somali Muslim Learner* creates a recognisable identity profile that links the students as a wider diasporic group. Shared diasporic identity was also important in the work of Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020b) for giving students in higher education a sense of purpose, and is also pivotal to understanding the experiences of exile in the *Roots and Routes* approach developed by Mosselson (2006). In RLC1, the students had a similar understanding of what education was and should be upon entry to Malaysia that provided them with a sense of what it might mean to be in a learning community. For example, during the focus group there was a mutual understanding about what was meant by the term bazaar day that allowed the students to articulate and understand a shared sense of experience. This provided a basis upon which the
students might orient themselves in the RLC1 community and regain a sense of themselves as learners. This issue will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

**Boundaries to Participation**

With the exception of Ubax and Geele, each of the student’s families had left Somalia either before or shortly after they were born. Moving to Malaysia was therefore a second displacement for most of the students. Growing up outside of their home country influenced their engagement with education through the limits it placed on their participation as foreigners. In Yemen, Alex, Rebecca and Tom attended private schools, since they were not able to attend government schools. Although they felt that this gave them a good foundation in education, and the private schools were better quality, this was a significant burden, as Alex explained:

*No, always a Yemen private school are the best...and they take care of more of the students and let's say more quality education...because the government school have many students in one class, which, if you understand or not it's your problem, so, they don't focus more on student. The reason why I couldn't continue was school was pretty expensive...Yeah, so, I had to change. That was the reasoning.*

Alex was able to make a transition to a lower cost government school due to a relationship her family had with the school management, demonstrating a degree of flexibility in the rules governing access:

*...the manager, one of the teachers knew the principal of the school and they are strong, like, relationship, so, I was there, yeah.*

For Joseph, the financial burden of private education in Yemen was too much for his family since his father died when he was very young. He was therefore not able to start school until he was older, after attending religious classes from the age of about 5. In his words:

*Situation in my family because, as I told you, I went to school around 10, maybe 9 years old, when I was at that age. When I was younger, I couldn’t go because the financial situation, ‘cause of the money.*

Joseph was able to enter school eventually because his mother also negotiated access to a government school. However, as he grew older, he became more aware of the age gap between him and the other students in his class, which made him aware of the disadvantage he had faced in accessing education:

*Coz me, at that time, I was the only kid who was 13 and then, I don’t remember what*
age that time, and then I saw the others are younger than me. Then I realised that I was in a bad situation 'cause they started, they kick it off with the young age, but me, I wasn’t. So, then I went and played with myself again, I went to ask my mother, like, “Why didn’t I go to school when I was 6?” but she said, “Son, my financial situation was very bad, that’s why we couldn’t afford,” and I went to government school, so not private school.

This feeling of difference made Joseph feel isolated and different at school and among his peers. This was also exacerbated by having to work to help support his family and feeling that he had to grow up faster than other children his age:

When I was young, so, I missed, like, my childhood, like, a lot of people they grow up they take their children, they play, they go for fish...or traveling, or hiking, bicycle, all type of doing a lot of activities with their sons, but me, I have none of that. I never experienced like that one before, so, I had to do this kind of a job, like adult.

Sam had a similar delay in starting his formal education after relocating to Kenya. At first, he went to a boarding school to learn about the Quran, but following an incident where he was injured due to bullying, his mother took him out of the school, and he went to work with his older siblings to help support the family:

Because then that day my brother, my young brother and my sister were studying, so, my mother, she couldn’t afford to pay all that money in the same time, so...she said that you will help me to get money, work with your big brother, try to get money.

Being an older sibling meant that both Joseph and Sam had to take on responsibilities associated with working so their younger siblings could go to school. Although briefly attending a night school in Kenya, Sam didn’t begin formal education until he arrived in Malaysia. However, both Sam and Joseph point to useful skills they learned by being employed at a young age:

Sam – At that job I learned a lot and I had a lot of experience since I was young. So, people are calling me. and every people come there, they just ask for help because I have a lot of experience.... I learned how to communicate with different people...and since I didn't have any experience or knowledge, I tried to like learn things like wh-, how you communicate with different people and how you need to treat with them.

Joseph – [I learned to] communicated as a person, and then respecting the manager, and then understanding by the groups, so, I'll say four things: respecting, understanding, communicating, and...time management, I say time management. Managing your time. This was very hard.
Being the youngest sibling in her family, Leaf was at the other end of the spectrum and able to go to school, whereas her older siblings worked or got married. However, since she didn’t have any formal identity documents, she wasn’t able to enrol in a local school in Saudi Arabia:

Saudi people is first to the education and then other nationalities... So, for Saudi people, of course, it’s their country, it’s their school and this education is free so, they don’t have to take their kids to a small schools.

Instead, Leaf attended an informal home school for foreign children. Although she was able to attend school consistently from a young age, she does not consider that this kind of school provided a quality education experience:

It was, it wasn’t a real school. It was just in a house with a lady that we already know. It was just small. I was just maybe 3 or 5 years old.... It wasn’t even a class. We was sitting on the floor. It was just, like, this room without chairs or tables.

Throughout her educational experiences Leaf had developed an idea of what a normal school experience would be and that this was something that she was excluded from due to her residency status. As she grew older, she was able to attend a school that catered for mature students who had missed out on formal education. Leaf attended with one of her sisters, but felt uncomfortable initially as the youngest students in the class:

That was a little bit weird for us. We wasn’t mixing with them, we was feeling, like, sitting with our mum and her friend. It was just sitting alone, me and her talking and then a little bit, week by week, we used to it. We was just talking with everyone.

In this school Leaf could complete her primary education but this was delayed due to having to repeat learning from the informal home schools she had previously attended. However, when it came time to join the high school, Leaf was not able to participate in classes due to her age and residency status and was only allowed to attend for exams. She describes the whole situation as being unfair because she was excluded from access to the resources to progress through school in what she considered a normal way, and the delay that in gaining official recognition of her learning as a result:

“That was a really, really, really unfair. That a really unfair because I have learned everything but just because I wasn’t in a government school they didn’t accept me in grade seven. They could take exam for me and then put me in grade 7 because I took all the memory I’d finished in the primary but in a small schools, like, in the house and that thing. I didn’t have any certificates but I have learned the same thing that they have learned in government schools, but they didn’t, they say that I need to again study the primary. So, I spent three years for my life studying, again.”
The ability to engage with education outside of their home country was dependent on the degree to which students, like Leaf, could mobilise capital to overcome the administrative barriers placed in the way of their participation. By way of contrast, the social capital Alex’s family had allowed her to circumvent the usual rules on access to continue learning despite financial difficulties. However, Sam and Joseph were less able to mobilise their family capital and therefore faced many delays and difficulties. In turn, the responsibility they had to support their families placed limits on their participation in education and experiences of childhood. Joseph and Leaf had the feeling of being out-of-place due to their age difference to other students at various stages of their schooling. Considering Bourdieu’s theory (1990b) it could be argued that these students began to incorporate a feeling of being different into their learning habitus, manifest in Leaf’s feeling of her experience being unfair and Joseph considering the ways he had missed out and felt he was in a “bad situation”. The results also reflect an observation made by Sam and Finlay (2015) about birth order, and the timing of entry into the education system. Sam and Joseph’s trajectories were shaped by being both male and an older sibling, whereas Leaf was less restricted so was better placed to focus on learning since she was the youngest sibling. In their attempts to access education despite the conditions that excluded them, these students have also begun to develop a sense of socio-critical literacy similar to that explored by Núñez and Gildersleeve (2016) as they challenge the inequalities they face rather than accept them as an essential part of their difference. They also focus on the learning that they have achieved, evident in the way that Sam and Joseph talk about their working lives in terms of the transferable skills they gained, rather than developing a habitus based on deficit.

**Disruption to learning before and during transit**

For Geele, although he was able to attend school as a local student in Somalia, his schooling was often interrupted due to spates of fighting in his area:

*Because when they, when they start to fight, when the armies or people start to fight, school be close, so, like, tomorrow, like, when start, today start war, tomorrow we not, there’s no school tomorrow, so...you cannot go to school when there, there’s war. Can, you go there’s a lot of place firing...So you’ll be hit.*

At this time, he was too young to appreciate the impact that this had on his education, but upon reflection he feels that this disruption has had a negative impact on his learning:

*Because we stop le-, going to school, right? So, they stop, no more learning, so, it*
already affected our, our education.

Many of the students also suffered delay and disruption to learning after leaving their country of origin. As mentioned earlier, for some this meant transiting through one if not more other countries before arriving in Malaysia. These journeys were unexpected and did not allow for much planning for continuing their education. Tom described his attempt to ensure the best chance in continuing his education in the unknown context he was about to enter:

No, actually my parents didn’t tell me that we gonna leave. Only, like, the last one month they informed me that we are leaving, but they didn’t inform me what day we are going to leave. So, in that one month...we were, like, one month away from school finishing and doing the exam, so I have to take that exam before it’s finished... ‘cause I didn’t want to just leave the sixth grade and then I’ll be, like, in mid-year I still haven’t finished grade 6. I was, like, let me finish grade 6, when I go there I’ll just start from grade 7.

Education was clearly very important for Tom, and the idea of leaving was a threat to ensuring his success. He hoped that having his grade 6 certificate would help him pick up his educational trajectory in Malaysia.

Whilst transiting through other countries, maintaining consistent schooling was a constant challenge. Rebecca found it very difficult in Indonesia because she could not find a school to attend:

We live in Indonesia, and I really give up, more than I was in Yemen, because when I came to Malay-, Indonesia, no one speaks English...No one speak Arabic. No schools. No nothing. Just you will live like the animals [laugh], I will say that. Just living, eating, erm, watching movie, that’s it. All their life. I think I give up here.

She describes this experience as living like animals, suggesting a feeling of distinct insecurity and precarity; of losing a sense of purpose and direction derived from living day-to-day, with no aim to achieve anything beyond this. Similarly, Joseph travelled through Somalia and spent some time staying at home without education. During this time his mind turned to university:

I was, like, about two years and I’m gonna have to be in university, and I didn’t finished my grade 8 and 9. It’s high school. Then I start thinking, thinking, but there is no way because they say, you don’t do the action, nothing will be success. So, no, actually nothing work, is gonna work, so, I just sit there, nothing, doing nothing, until my mum call me and then we have to go, we have to go [to Malaysia].

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Joseph struggled to imagine a way in which he could make progress in his education to enter university without being able to access a formal school system. Alex shared these concerns as she reflected on her attempts to access education while transiting through Egypt and Sudan:

*I still think until now what's gonna happen...basically it's, it's a bit confusing, you know, like, nothing's clear, you know. When you are, like, you can't take decision because of, there is no something for you. When you have a system you can, you can, you already know what you're going to do, what's going to happen and stuff, you can take position, but now it's not clear, so, I'm just thinking what's gonna happen now? What's the next move? What's going to happen later?*

These comments highlight the centrality of a graded school system to the students' concept of what it means to be educated at this time. Being on the outside of such a system, they find it difficult to orient themselves in terms of education and rationalise a learning trajectory that will link them to a future self. The uncertainty they faced was very challenging for maintaining a consistent sense of self and so the students began to feel hopeless.

Each of these remarks demonstrates a feeling of life having paused or stagnated, and the necessity of formal education for it to continue moving. The disruption forced migration caused for the students’ sense of self can be understood by considering learner identity in terms of a life-long self-narrative as Mercer (2017) suggests. Not being able to participate in some form of formal system of education means not being able to follow an imagined, expected and familiar learning trajectory. This is also consistent with Osguthorpe’s (2006) assertion that learner identity is the central identity around which others are oriented since, in the absence of education, the students find it difficult to understand who they are and their position in life. As children and adolescents, school has always been a very central part of their lives and as a meaningful artefact in understanding themselves through a consistent narrative connecting past, present and future selves. A feeling of not being able to embody and enact aspects of the profile of a learner identity resonates throughout their core sense of self as learner identity is used to orient other ways in which we perceive ourselves. Since the move was very sudden for each of the students, they had limited time to plan, and many had to take quick actions to try and collect certificates to prove their education credentials with the hope that this would help them to find a footing when they arrived in a new place. Although the students’ time in Malaysia could still be considered a transitory stage in their migration journeys, it is distinct from previous experiences because they have been able to
access education. This will be considered in the next chapter as students start to regain a sense of themselves as learners following this period of disruption during transit.

Refugee Learning Centre 2

**Value of education in society**

Most of the students in RLC2 are of Pakistani origin and so had their first educational experiences in schools in Pakistan. However, given the range of circumstances the students found themselves in, their experiences were quite diverse. In addition, Harry, although Liberian, grew up and was educated in Ghana, while Darlie had her first school experiences in Myanmar. These differences uniquely characterise the student’s early trajectories through school but there are some common experiences that influence how the students understood themselves at this time in relation to school. Unlike RLC1, all the students in RLC2 were able to participate in their home country’s formal school system. Each attended schools that used local or international curricula and progressed through in a stepwise, graded fashion. Some of the students entered school early for their age. For example, Jane’s mum worked at her school, so she was able to start kindergarten early:

*Because my mum was a teacher in that particular kindergarten, so that’s why she used to, like, take me there and then use to study with other students who were four at that time... so I was only two.*

Darlie also noted the relative ease of manipulating documents in Myanmar to join school early so that she did not have to wait another year because she was born in September, the month school began:

*My mum reduced my age to minus four months, so, that September become May and I joined school earlier, instead of going for the, waiting for the next year. So, my sister [cousin] was older than me, but we’re in the same class.*

Having extra tuition was also common among these students to help get ahead or keep up with difficult subjects. This seemed to be the norm in Pakistan, as Jannat explained:

*Yeah, quite normal, because they used to be, you know, many aunties who are going to teach. They, almost in every house there is one lady was saying that it’s a tuition centre, you can enter and you can just get low fees.*

Mariam also received support at home from her parents and was able to read and write before she went to school, which she felt gave her an advantage:
It gives me that time because most of the students in our school don’t know that stuff. So, it was good for me to know everything before I went to primary.

Each of these examples demonstrates the importance of education to each of the students’ families and their attempts to help their children have an advantage within the local education system. Education was therefore fostered as a central aspect in each of the students’ lives before they arrived in Malaysia.

Several of the students noted that their schools were considered the best in their area. For example, Fred passed the entry exam to gain entry to a selective school after nursery:

I did a test to go to another school. So, I pass the test and join another school. That was the best school in the, like, my city, and I joined that school...I was proud, because it was the best school and I got selected in that. And I made new friends, new teachers, everything was new. And it was really fun. And I enjoyed learning there. Enjoyed my, spending my time there.

Hadi also noted the prestige that was afforded to schools that had teachers who had graduated abroad:

Mmm, definitely. Just like, it was English medium school and our principal, he was a graduate, he graduated from London, so, respect, he was respected among other people in the community. So, because that the school was famous in the area.

And Jannat highlighted that it was noteworthy for a school to teach an international curriculum:

I went to, for my primary 2, I went to a different school. Oxford, it was Oxford, Oxford school.

The students saw value in these competitive school traits and felt that by attending these schools they were receiving a good education. In Pakistan students are also separated into subject streams, which guides them towards specific career paths after Primary, as Jane explains:

It depends because we have science stream and we have arts stream, so when we are studying the science subjects, the specific ones, like, chemistry, biology and physics, and the ones who are taking arts, they will have their separate subjects.

However, these streams are not viewed as having equal value, which is reflected in Mariam’s comment:

Everyone only studied science. And my mother also, said, you have to study science, because there are more opportunities if you study science stuff rather than study arts, because in our country or our area, there was no, they will not give more importance
to the arts subjects, they will say it’s just a waste of time to study art subjects, you will study the subjects which gives you benefits and future.

The Pakistani students’ understanding of what constituted a good education was therefore influenced strongly by the broader societal view of valued forms of learning. In this case, international curricula and selective schools are considered to be better, as is pursuing studies in science due to a belief that it led to more respectable job opportunities in the future.

The perspectives shared here demonstrate that the students come from cultural backgrounds that value education and from families who endeavour to access the best educational opportunities that they can. This reflects a discourse within the cultures of the students’ home countries that frames education as a means to become successful and valued members of society (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Exploring this discourse in the Pakistani context reveals that a higher value is placed on an international system of education than local curricula, and that science subjects are valued more highly than the arts. These ideas form part of the metacognitive narrative that dictates the ways in which the students engage with the Pakistani education system, similar to that of the Somali students in RLC1 (Wortham, 2006). The students were therefore predisposed to pursuing a science route and developed competitive traits in their learning that caused them to seek high grades to prove their success in learning. Since Darlie and Harry were still in primary school when they left their home countries and had been in Malaysia for several years, they only had vague recollections on what kinds of discourse might have shaped their education at this time. However, they became aware from a young age that education was important for ensuring a good future and were supported by family to pursue primary education.

**Embodying positive learning dispositions**

All of the students described their time at primary school as being fun and relaxed, and that it was a mundane though central part of their everyday lives as children. For example, Jane commented:

> It’s not like I will not do my homework and all, but mostly I was, like, I did not care much about it because if you care, you care a lot, you would go into depression, anxiety, and all. So, I was okay with that. Whatever I, I get, I’ll be happy with the results.

Whilst primary school was a time for fun and games, the transition to secondary school marked a shift in the student’s approach to learning. For example, Mariam noted:
I was naughty in primary school but like, when I went to secondary school, they focused more on, on our behaviour, like, how to be more disciplined in your work, or how to talk to teacher, and how to present and, like, presentations you have to do. And then they really focused on our behaviour. And also, in education they focused on how you can study more. And, like, you have so, many subjects and how you will manage your time to study all these subjects. So, I think my behaviour changed in secondary because of the teachers and the, because they’re more focused on our behaviours.

The students felt that the Pakistani secondary system strictly fostered certain kinds of behaviours in students that were conducive to studying effectively. Coming from a competitive entry school, Fred was concerned that he would have to work harder to prove himself as a top student as the best students from several primary schools came together in the secondary school:

So, I was scared, in primary school the competition was not that good in studies. But in secondary, the competition is very good. Everyone wants to get high marks. So, I was scared, so, I won’t get this much marks.

This posed a threat to his view of himself as a top student, causing him to work harder to maintain his position. Finally, the transition to secondary caused students to start thinking ahead to the next step and entering adulthood. Hadi reflected that his initial thoughts were to study abroad to get the best educational opportunities:

Hmm, at this time I think, I definitely had no idea of Malaysia, but I wanted to be in a foreign country to study further...Because of opportunities they provide. Yeah, scholarship, I was hoping to get a scholarship to go outside my country.

Again, this suggests the value Hadi perceived wider society placed on an international education, influencing the kind of learning trajectory he intended to pursue.

Although the students were mostly quite young before moving to Malaysia and reported not having too much concern about their studies, they recognised the importance of doing well overall. This recognition is reflected in this exchange with Harry:

Interviewer: So, were you happy just to be a C student?

Harry: No...this was embarrassing sometimes...Because, like, usually at the end they have, like, end of the year ceremony. So, basically, they’ll call the people who had the top two in the class all the time. So, it’s kind of embarrassing [laugh], but we still got over it.

These end of year ceremonies were common among the students’ experiences of school both before and after arriving in Malaysia. These were an opportunity to showcase the most
accomplished students and set the standard for what it meant to be a good learner. This was not just based on academic merit, as Fred explained:

There was one award, one award for best behaviour...I have got that for almost five years...the final award function, they will come to your class, and they will take the three person who got the first position and the best behaviour. So, they will sit a bit, like, in front. So, that was really proud moment [laugh]. So, getting selected in that.

Achieving these very public accolades influenced how the student was viewed by others. In Fred’s case, he became the model of what it meant to be a well behaved and obedient student:

Interviewer: So, did everybody think that, oh, you're the one that's the most, best behaved in the class?
Fred: Yeah, so, like, even if they'll ask who is, like, who is the best boy, so, everyone will shout at me like, ‘Fred, Fred.’

This was both a reason to feel proud and demonstrated how Fred embodied a positive learning discourse. He was therefore part of propagating a socio-historically defined profile of a good male student in both the school and the local context. In addition to these formal ceremonies, the students discussed class rivalries and internal competition with other students to be the best. For example, Hadi commented on his competition with a friend:

Because he was the, I wouldn't say he was the smartest but yeah, he tried to be the smartest and I tried to be the smartest, like, beat him. He was good. He was really intelligent.

This level of both formal and informal competition was important for proving to the students that they were successful learners and illustrated their value as individuals with respect to the education system.

As the students progressed through school, they were encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning and received explicit messages about the learning dispositions that were expected of a good student. In addition to good grades, having the right kind of behaviour and showing respect to teachers was important for success as a student in school, as it modelled the sorts of behaviours that were expected in society. These messages about what it meant to be successful at school were upheld by various semiotic practices and artefacts of intelligence within schools, such as awards days and sharing of exam results (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). These ideas frame internal recognition as the students developed learner identities by attempting to be viewed as embodying positive learning traits (Gee, 2000), such
as competing with others and striving to be on the stage during an awards ceremony. This is also manifest in the embarrassment that Harry described feeling at receiving lower grades, and the fear Fred had that he wouldn’t match his previous performance in the face of tougher competition. Each student interacted with the school system to develop their own distinct learner identities. However, the semiotic practices that influenced the broader values of education seem to have had a distinctive effect on the students. These values were upheld with a high degree of complicity throughout society. It was therefore not until they had left these national contexts that the students were able to explore alternative values and develop more distinct identities.

**Separation and Disruption**

Although the students were able to participate in state provided education, for the Ahmadiyya Muslim students in Pakistan this was in gender segregated schools that only served their religious community, as Mariam explained:

> It was only our community people study over there. Only girls, Ahmadiyya girls study, and teachers were only female. There were no male teacher over there.

This is due to the discrimination and lack of acceptance their community faced in Pakistan. Mariam continued to explain how this dictated the sort of learning that occurred in the school:

> Yeah, we cannot separate culture from your, the religion, because it's same. In our area, the culture and religion was same. In school also, they taught us more about our religion, and also, education.

Being marginalised in the national education system in this way built a separate local curricula and school culture that focused on the needs of that community and the values and beliefs that it wished to uphold. As a Christian in Pakistan, Jane was able to attend a Christian school and have Christian religious education whilst studying alongside the majority Muslim students. Although she left Pakistan before reaching grade eight, she noted that she would have been expected to participate in lessons about Islamic faith regardless of her beliefs at this stage:

> When you will go to class eight, you have to study Islamiyat, which is the Muslim teachings. Like, you have to learn Arabic. Just to pass the exam. You have to give Islamic exam.... Thanks God I didn’t [get to that level].

The idea of being subject to this kind of religious learning was clearly a concern for Jane as it
conflicted with her core beliefs. However, she did note that there were advantages in being a minority student in her school:

> From that type of environment, I learned that how to survive in different, like, religions or different races and all. And at the same time, we learn how to be friends with boys as well, because most of if you go to Pakistan, Pakistani schools, you will see that girls are at one side, boys are one side.

This taught her to interact with other kinds of people, which was good preparation for entering a multicultural school environment in Malaysia.

Jannat had quite a disrupted experience of school while she was in Pakistan because her parents moved around their city a lot for work and had to organise transport to school for several siblings at different levels of education. She feels that this had an impact on her education as she didn’t receive continuous learning through a core syllabus:

> It wasn’t really a good idea because, like, when I switched my school, some schools, like, they, you know, they have made their own syllabus…the primary 1 that I went to, their school, they didn’t teach us much. And when I went to the other, the [incomprehensible] school, they have already covered the area that I didn’t cover. So, I had to, you know, study all that on my own. And also, I had to skip classes, sometimes. That was because the age was different.

She felt that this was a challenge, especially in Maths, because the content she learned was quite disjointed. Fred also experienced brief disruptions to his primary schooling after a traumatic incident:

> So, the terrorism was really like, at its peak. I was in year three. So, our school, they trained us for like, if any, any emergency or anything, so, you can be, so, you can run. So, they even put a siren in the school so, the whole school can hear if any emergency... But once like, they didn’t tell us anything and we were playing in the playground, and suddenly the siren was there, so, everyone was shocked and everyone ran into the class because they didn’t know that it was fake. And everyone was crying and this and that. And it was really, like, sad. And then you’re all lie down in the in the class and after I think 15 minutes, someone came and they said it’s okay, everything is fine, nothing happened, that was just fake. We just, require our practice but, like, the students were really shocked, even me. I didn’t go to school after that for two weeks. I was really, like, touched [laugh].

This close reminder of the threat of terror that surrounded his community tainted his feeling about school, and made him feel less safe, even though he had not experienced an actual terrorist attack.
These instances illustrate the challenges faced by the students throughout their education in Pakistan. Although they were able to attend school, they were marginalised within the broader system based on their religious identity, and they did not feel a full sense of belonging outside of their community. For the Ahmadiyya Muslim students, this limited their education options as they were only able to attend schools that catered to their community. For Christians, with the close connection between school and religious values being taught, participating in education meant an encroachment of mainstream values that might conflict with their core beliefs. These issues reflect the arguments of Yuval-Davies’ (2006) politics of belonging; a politics that also underscored Chopra and Dryden-Peterson’s work (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020a, 2020b). Pre-migratory education occurs in the context of conflicting values with the mainstream Pakistani society which positions the students as different to the norm and in a state of belonging contingent on their accepting the superiority of values that are not their own. Their education also took place in a broader context of struggle and conflict, reflected in Jannat’s experience of disruption as her parents moved for work to support their family and the looming threat of terrorism that was present in Fred’s day-to-day experience of school. The Pakistani students therefore already enter the Malaysian context having experienced education in a position of struggle and marginalisation.

**Education and Transit**

For all the students, leaving their home country was sudden and unexpected. Many had to leave quickly without having time to say goodbye to friends and family. Some of them didn’t know where they were going and why, as Darlie explains:

> Before I came to Malaysia, I wanted to join the dancing. You know, we have a concert day at the end of the year, to, you know, to celebrate and all that. I wanted to join but then my mum said, we’re going to somewhere, I don’t know where she going to, but which is Malaysia ...I don’t want to go, I just want to go and perform.

Darlie did not understand what was going on and only learned much later the reason for leaving Myanmar. She could only make sense of the experience in terms of what she knew and understood, which was missing out on a fun activity at school. Jane had a similarly disjointed experience of transition:

> Basically, like when you move out of your country, like, and I moved here when I was 11 years old, it was a really big deal for me because I had to leave my friends, my family, relatives. So yeah, it came to me as a nightmare...Because I had to, had to leave
my education and I didn't know that what I'm going to do next. Which is still a question
till today. So, yeah.

Jane’s parents initially told her that they were going on holiday, and she only learned in
Malaysia that they were not going to return to Pakistan. Having her life turned upside down
in abrupt fashion left her feeling confused and anxious, and she reported that it left her with
difficulties trusting people. Jane was not the only student who was worried about her
education after moving. Mariam even attempted negotiating to stay to finish her secondary
school:

I feel very sad because I didn’t want to go anywhere, leaving my friends and education.
I was 13, but I had to because it was my parent’s decision, so, I have to obey them. I
didn’t have any other choice. I asked them I will stay over here and stay at hostel or
somewhere to study but they said no, I have to come with us. So, it was sad, it was sad
for me.

However, not all students had such a traumatic experience. Elise, being much younger than
Mariam when she moved, described a sense of excitement even though she was sad for the
bonds that were breaking with her life in Pakistan:

I was happy, I wanted to explore so, I was like, it’s a new, new country, and then I’d be
happy there...I was sad because I left my friend. That was the only reason, otherwise I
was okay.

Each student therefore entered Malaysia with a different range of feelings in terms of hope,
despair, and confusion that they had to negotiate upon gaining refugee status and picking up
their educational trajectory. What they shared, though, was a feeling of loss with their
previous life and uncertainty about what would come next.

Darlie had a more unique experience of understanding herself in relation to education after
entering Malaysia. Her mother is ethnically Burmese and her father ethnically Karen. For most
of her life her father lived and worked in Malaysia, which was one of the reasons why her
family decided to move there when they left Myanmar. In Myanmar, she grew up in Yangon
and did not have much connection to her Karen roots on her father’s side. However, the first
school she attended in Malaysia was a Karen community boarding school, and during this time
she had an opportunity to explore Karen culture:

Darlie: I joined Karen class. Also, like, the traditional dance class because we celebrate
our Independence Day and all that, Karen, separately from Burmese. So, like, I learned
a lot of things that I actually, yeah.
Interviewer: Did you feel much connection with Karen culture...?
Darlie: Yeah. Because like, I first, I don't know, like, who, I don't even know what Karen's Karen, like, flag colours is and we learn all this thing...then my friends also, like, told me about, you know, their story sometime.

Although always considering herself to be part Karen, it wasn’t until Darlie’s time in this school that she had the opportunity to explore her Karen heritage. However, Darlie also had a negative experience at this school due to bullying for her lack of knowledge of the Karen language:

I hate that school [laugh]. So, but it’s not I hate everyone just that I hate a few of them that bullies me. But actually, they make me stronger, you know, like, being able to stand all these for, like, half and a year, and then it actually makes me more independence, yeah. So, I know how it feels to bully so, I don’t like to bully other.

Her time at the Karen school prior to joining RLC2 was instrumental for Darlie in developing a sense of her ethnic identity through school and gaining independence and self-reliance. Following the death of her father and the birth of a sibling, Darlie left this school to help support her mother by living at home. These skills were then important for how she continued to develop as a learner when she moved to RLC2.

The abrupt move to Malaysia was met with a mix of emotions including loss, distrust, and excitement. Similar to the students in RLC1, the confusion of emotions associated with the move was understood in terms of the impact it had on each student’s education. This is consistent again with Osguthorpe’s (2006) claims about learner identity being central to how we come to understand ourselves. This can also be further understood in terms of the disjointed sense of identity that connects the students’ past, present and future to achieve a consistent sense of self-narrative (Mercer, 2017). Without the familiar sense of education that was a large part of their daily lives, the students struggled to hold onto a feeling of who they were and their purpose in life. However, the students’ experiences of transit and its impact should not be understood completely in terms of this loss or disjointedness. As Elise stated, moving was a chance to explore, and for Darlie the experience was also an opportunity to explore new horizons such as her identity and ethnic roots in a somewhat paradoxical context away from her home country. Darlie’s experience especially highlights the need to explore the nuance of becoming through migration by considering interconnected temporal dimensions that link time and place in a less linear manner (McNevin, 2019). A Karen cultural
space created in Malaysia is a link to a homeland that she had not previously connected with in understanding herself but had felt was always a part of her. This echoes the connections the Somali students of RLC1 felt to their diaspora though multiple displacements.

Concluding Remarks

Each student had a unique set of circumstances which in turn shaped their experiences of early education. Their specific understanding of what education was and how they view themselves in relation to this is therefore similarly idiosyncratic. However, they have a shared experience of disruption due to forced migration. The students at RLC1 shared a common ethnic background, whereas those in RLC2, although mostly Pakistani, were more culturally varied. The superordinate cultural discourses about being a Somali Muslim Learner has a deeper impact on the students in RLC1, which helped them feel a sense of purpose and legitimacy in their learner identities despite facing barriers to participation in education because of their residency status. This has also helped maintain a sense of consistency as a learner as they entered a mostly monocultural environment of RLC1. The students of RLC2 were able to participate in state run education, but for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Pakistanis this was in the context of marginalisation from the broader national educational discourse. Their identities upon entry to Malaysia have therefore been constructed in a more localised context and they have been through a system of school that is influenced much more by international models of education. For each group of students, the specific content of the learner identities constructed prior to arriving in Malaysia is not the key concern. It is rather the degree to which these identities translate into the new context through the connections they might maintain with intangible resources of their diaspora, and the degree to which they hope to maintain this connection, similar to the Roots and Routes argument of Mosselson (2006).

A clear theme that is shared by students across both learning centres is that education is a core part of who they are not only as learners, but as members of a society. Going to school was an essential and at times taken for granted aspect of their day-to-day lives. Some of the students were still quite young when they moved so perhaps didn’t question the logic of going to school prior to being forced to migrate. However, many of the students commented on a feeling of loss and confusion about themselves at the prospect of taking time out of education, and uncertainty about when and whether they would be able to continue.
discourses that they develop about themselves as learners is therefore a foundation to how they understand themselves, not just as learners, but also within the broader scope of society (Osguthorpe, 2006). However, as was particularly visible in the case of Elise and Darlie, it is important not to essentialise the sense of disjointedness and loss in the experiences of migration. Although this is a key theme at the point of departure, educational trajectories are disjointed, not necessarily lost. Instead, these experiences are the basis upon which they continue to develop their learner identities and reinterpret or transform their previous understandings of themselves in light of their new experiences as learners with refugee backgrounds. It is difficult to fully understand the kinds of learner identities the students had before entering Malaysia as these insights are retrospective and I was not able to observe identity expression in practice. However, these results provide an important foundation upon which to reflect upon the results in the following two parts.
Part 2: Results from RLC 1

In this chapter I will present the findings from RLC1 and consider the insights that can be gained by thinking about aspects of agency and recognition in the learner identities of the students. A key concern that will be explored is the importance of achieving a sense of belonging within the RLC and regaining a sense of self on a trajectory towards becoming an educated person. I will also discuss how the students’ perspectives on education have changed as they encounter new forms of learning in the RLC and the corresponding shift that occurs in their learner identities as they make sense of this with respect to their previous learning experiences. This involved a shift from viewing education as a project of learning facts to developing creative problem-solving skills and becoming a good person as well as a skilled person. There was also a shift in taking more personal responsibility towards learning in response to a lower-resourced environment, manifest through the mantra of “being serious” about learning. A major drawback was the limited possibility to gain formal education credentials in the form of a recognisable qualification, and the experience of feeling there is a “gap” between possibilities available to the students compared to local and international peers. I explore how the students express agency within the bounds set on the opportunities available to adjust learning trajectories, but also how they use these opportunities to push the boundaries placed on recognition of their suitability to access higher education. Finally, I will consider how students feel they have been held back in their educational journeys through perceived misrecognition of their ability, and the resulting demotivation and uncertainty they feel towards their futures.
Regaining a Sense of Self as a Learner

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the move to Malaysia was an understandably turbulent and challenging experience, and especially so for Geele who travelled without his parents, and for Sam who had to wait several months in Kenya before joining his parents and siblings in Malaysia. Even for students who travelled directly to Malaysia, upon arrival they would often spend several months without attending school. As a result, they reported feeling concerned about their future without access to education. Ubax expresses why this is a serious concern:

> So, it's like, education is, like, the most important for all of us because I believe, like, if you don’t, like, have education, you can’t survive in this world because this world is like, people are more intelligent than you and you have to catch up with it.

Without access to education, she therefore feels that she is being disadvantaged compared to other people who do have continuous schooling and so perceives facing challenges in the future to live the sort of life she imagines for herself. For other students this was a repeat of the frustrations that they had experienced prior to their arrival in Malaysia, for example Leaf commented:

> Yeah, I was worried about the school, about everything. I was, like, OK, now the same story from, I started studying and now I’m reading my studies and I’m going to another country to study again, and that was a lot. A lot a lot of years studying without going to university, until now.

This sentiment was echoed by Joseph:

> I missed a lot of things. A lot of studies and I'm just, I'm, like, I'm 19, I should be in the university now but I'm not, because I missed it when I was young, like, 2, 2, 3. I think around five to six years I haven't been in school, so if I was 7, at age of 7, maybe this time I could finish it.

The students therefore struggled initially to ground themselves in their learning when they arrived in Malaysia. Their dream of going to university seemed to be consistently held out of their reach and they felt they were not able to make progress towards their educational and life goals.
Throughout the research, students used the idea of becoming an “educated person” or “being educated” to express the importance of school and education in general. This is reflected in Geele’s comment:

I think someone who is educated and someone who is not educated, they are not same. They cannot think the same, or there’s a big different between these two people.

Being educated is therefore a recognisable identity profile that describes the kind of person that the students want to become. Yet what it meant to be educated was framed quite broadly. In some ways it was a means to an end for accessing certain types of job that infer respect of social status, as Tom explains:

Actually, like now, if you have a good education, you can apply and do what you like to achieve or what you like to do. But if you don’t have that enough education, you will not do. Now if you are aiming to be like a businessman, but you don’t have the enough education to be a businessman, you cannot apply for it. So, you have to go and find another work. So, that’s it.

However, the students also made a distinction between being academically educated and being educated in terms of knowing yourself and interacting competently with the world, for example Alex explains:

I would say being educated is not just being academically educated, but it’s more to emotionally educated, physically educated, and it’s not, like, only being educated in, like I said, academically. It can be in many, many, many different ways.

Leaf also describes being educated as having a disposition towards wanting to build and improve the kind of person that you are:

You can’t just depend on the school to be an educated person, so to be educated person is, like, the school is just part of being educated person. First, yourself, you need, and decide to be educated, and educate yourself, and look for resources you can use to educate yourself from, not just depend on the school.

Being educated is therefore a composite of academic knowledge gained through school, of knowledge of yourself and your place within the social world, and as having acquired a disposition or attitude towards wanting to learn and improve yourself. Each of these aspects spoke to a view of education as a process of becoming and the importance of participating in education throughout migration to maintain a trajectory on this journey of becoming.
From this perspective of education as becoming, education is also considered as a strategy to avoid a less desirable future identity profile. Ubax used the example of getting married, which was a feeling that was shared amongst the girls:

*Let’s say, like, I don’t want to, like, marry, like, at this age, but let’s say, uh, in the future I will get married. So, I won’t be just at the house cooking. I will go and, like, use the education that I have, and I will work.*

Getting married before completing her education would likely foreclose on her aspiration to become an educated person. For the boys, this fear revolved around having to enter the workforce at a lower level to support family before having time to complete their education. Completing school within a timeframe that encompassed culturally-defined norms of family formation was therefore a key concern. However, there was also a general consensus that you didn’t strictly need school to be educated. Joseph thought that learning from experience in a job was another way in which you can gain the kind of knowledge you need to be considered an “educated person”:

*Experience...some people who work in that environment, so you get some experience from them, so, you like, inherit some stuff, like that, and that’s how you get from work with people, it’s not always depend on the school.*

He also looked to some famous examples of people who had left education early to illustrate this point:

*Listen, like, sometimes, you know, we’re just working, you get some experience from it and you can do your own business sometimes. Like some people did, like Bill Gates, and Ali Baba. They do great work.*

Being aware of some famous success stories in this case gave the students confidence that they could succeed in becoming an educated person despite the challenges they faced. However, participating in and completing formal education and gaining a degree is considered the most reliable route to fulfilling this identity profile, particularly given the difficulties that they would face trying to gain training and experience in the Malaysian PRS context.

Articulating a learning trajectory in terms of becoming an “educated person” finds a clear parallel to Bellino’s (2018) study on youth aspiration in Kakuma refugee camp, where students used the same kind of expression. Like the students in Kakuma, being an educated person conferred status within the community and value as an individual. However, for the students in Malaysia this identity profile is not constructed in terms of returning to their homeland to
become nation builders. This is presumably because in the Malaysian PRS setting, resettlement is favoured over repatriation, with the result that being educated is a more personal project of developing the self. The view of an educated person as a disposition reflects Gee’s discourse identity perspective (2000). Being educated is not only an institutional identity verified through certification but encompasses the traits and attitudes that would be associated with an educated person. Being part of a school system allows students to feel they are on a familiar learning trajectory, facilitating physical and cognitive mobilities that give students a feeling of certainty about the future, as Dryden-Peterson argues (2017). However, understanding the status of being educated in terms of a discourse identity provides a space to fulfil this identity profile outside of a school system if necessary.

The idea of becoming an “educated person” links the present self to a future self as Markus and Nurius (1986) describe in their theory of possible selves. Failing to achieve this status after succumbing to cultural expectations to form a family by a certain age is analogous to an undesirable possible self. This in turn appears to motivate the students to pursue education within a socially prescribed timeframe of opportunity. However, since the students have developed an understanding of being educated in terms of a disposition rather than as a strict institutional identity, they are able to imagine alternative routes towards this goal. Within Oyserman and Dawson’s (2019) arguments about future directed action, this discourse identity profile falls within an atemporal reasoning system. The traditional school route towards higher education uses the temporal reasoning that links becoming an educated person to stepwise progression through grade levels. The atemporal identity discourse perspective, however, allows students to imagine a series of less clearly defined alternative routes, reinforced through famous success stories. They can therefore achieve additional certainty about the future even with the threat of undesirable selves in the quest to become educated people and feel a sense of stability in their learner identities. However, as Bellino (2018) warns, there is a risk the learning centres are giving students false hope through the illusory promise of higher education, when in fact few will achieve this goal in the current climate. There also remains only a diffuse hope of achieving the status associated with being educated in an uncertain future as there is no guarantee that being educated as a discourse identity will be recognised as the students hope after resettlement or in another context.
Being part of the refugee learning centre was also important for regaining a sense of their identities as learners through achieving a sense of belonging. For example, Rebecca commented:

*In this small school...it's not a big school that, I think we just have in all school around 130 or 140, it's small family, but the student who came here he or she take a lot of experience out, but for myself, I have a lot of experience, good experience, bad experience, er, but now I am so happy. Whatever I did in this school, yeah. I feel like somehow proud because I did a lot of things, a lot of things. Even I cannot count what I did here.*

Re-engaging with education gave Rebecca a stronger feeling of being part of an educational endeavour and a learning community, as well as a personal journey of becoming. A key part of this belonging originates from having a sense of mutual understanding with other students in the same situation. Alex describes a frustration in trying to keep difficulties to herself after arriving in Malaysia:

*I don't feel like I'm the same person anymore. I need to speak up and tell about my feelings. I need to do that every once in a while. Because if I don't do that, I feel like I'm under pressure and I'm dying and I can't breathe, so I have to tell my feelings.*

Alex stated she did not share her most personal feelings with those outside of her family. However, having trusting relationships and mutual understandings with others is an example of students feeling a connection to a broader school community. Xhaka felt this connection to the school and his friends there quite deeply. Unlike the other students, he arrived in Malaysia with a visa and joined an international school, later registering for refugee status when his family couldn’t renew their visa:

*I used to, I used to feel like, when I was with my friends, they are all doing UN, you know, I will be very honest, I used to feel like I am acting, like, bigger than them because I have visa, I stay in Malaysia, so I always used to wish to be one of them, one of the [RLC1] refugee students. So finally, I say, “Alhamdulillah,” when I hear, when I become one of them, refugee, and I become same, like my friends.*

Having refugee status was important for Xhaka so that he could feel he was on equal ground with his friends, and because he could join the refugee learning centre and study with them. He is more comfortable studying in RLC1 because he feels more at home than he had in his previous Arabic language international school.
Being a student in an RLC is therefore meaningful by framing learner identity as an affinity identity. RLC1 could be considered to operate as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) that sits outside of Malaysian national education system and so develops its own set of rules and practices that give meaning to activities, as Rebecca expresses above. The students are able to achieve a sense of belonging within this RLC community of practice in a similar vein to the experiences of youth with refugee backgrounds explored by Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020a, 2020b) and Marar (2009, 2011). This sense of belonging is fostered through the mutual understanding the students achieve through associating with others in the same position as themselves and working towards a common purpose in a shared experience. They are, therefore, able to achieve a sense of authenticity in their learner identities as they have a place within this community, no doubt facilitated by the broader diasporic Somali Muslim meta-identity explored in the previous sections. Achieving this sense of belonging is observed in a more extreme sense with Xhaka. The feeling of belonging he achieves through mutual understanding with his Somali friends at the RLC is more salient to him than his participation in a formally recognised Arabic international school. Achieving the institutional identity of a refugee allowed him to have a greater feeling of affinity through the valued relationships with peers which in turn makes his experience as a learner feel more authentic. Overall, the students feel a firmer sense of themselves as learners and individuals, both in the present and the future, through re-engaging with education and achieving a sense of belonging in a learning community.

Engaging with New Forms of Education

After enrolling in the refugee learning centre, the students were faced with a new learning environment with different demands from that in their countries of origin. Each of the students had an experience of predominantly exam-focused rote-style learning. The refugee learning centre, however, draws on a broader international model of learning, particularly the Cambridge International Curriculum, which exposed the students to new styles of teaching and learning that they enjoyed. For example, Ubax was impressed by the use of video in lessons, which she felt was a good tool to aid understanding, particularly for the primary students:

*I was inspired by the teacher that was teaching this section, grade 4. So, when I was in my [previous] school, if there’s a topic the teacher won’t have a display, and show it to*
as a video...So, I have never had a chance, like, to watch this except when I came here. So, the schools here are different from my country. So, I was like, inspired by them. And they were like, more focus on the topic.

Other new learning methods that the students enjoyed were working in peer groups to complete projects, challenging each other with questions as a revision exercise, and opportunities to step out of their seats and physically move around the classroom to illustrate more abstract concepts. In addition to these new learning activities, the idea of beating students in school as a punishment caused some conflict in opinions. The refugee learning centre had a policy of no forms of physical punishment, which matched the experience of a few of the students. However, physical punishment was a familiar approach to discipline in each country of origin, as Xhaka stated:

In Somalia, you want to learn, they have to beat you.

Some of the students felt that this would still be necessary for students who had low internal motivation to study. However, upon reflection, Joseph explained how his idea about the use of such disciplinary methods had changed:

It depends on the person. If he understand, then he can understand, but if he didn’t understand, you didn’t have to beat him...so you have to explain to them slowly so they get the concept, but beating them is actually going to make them scarier...panicked.

Shifting to a new educational context therefore caused the students to develop ideas about learning and the role of the learner in education in different ways to how they might have if they hadn’t left their countries of origin. Being separate from the Malaysian education system, these ideas are more heavily influenced by international models of education which the refugee learning centre has drawn on through what has been made available by the international relief regime. These models tend to favour students as active and independent learners, which is reflected in the comments that the students made here.

As well as experiencing alternative forms of teaching and learning, the students continued to develop their ideas about what it meant to be a good learner. This is represented through three dimensions; thinking out-of-the-box, having a growth mindset, and being a good person. First, Rebecca explains thinking out-of-the-box:

As I told you before, out-of-the-box, out-of-the-box, sometimes you have to think out of the box. Okay, in the book there is good information, but out of the box there is amazing information. We have to add it more, yeah.
Succeeding in learning with out-of-the-box thinking means going beyond what you have learned in class and looking at alternative ideas and thinking about what you are learning in new ways. Alex also considers smartness to be a feature of being a good student in terms of out-of-the-box thinking. She describes this in terms of curiosity and willingness to learn:

"I would say to know someone smart is someone who always ready to learn, willing to learn. Someone who is, who is curious to know more about everything. Someone who is, someone who tries to, you know, not wait for information to come but actually go to search and see, look around, you know, yeah. If you, you trying to do that I consider that person as very smart person. Sometimes go into school and getting high marks doesn't mean that you're very smart... So, you don't only limit yourself with what you have but actually think out-of-the-box."

Smartness is also framed in terms of having a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset, which is an idea that is explicitly taught by the RLC and a foundation to their philosophy about learning. This was evident in Sam’s reflections on difficulties he faced in Science:

"The only thing is the Science class. But the end of the last week of exam, it was very easy for me, I don’t know. It’s because it, I had fixed mindset of Science, like, I cannot understand, I don’t want to understand Science at all, but I found it, like, it’s easy if you keep in your mind if you want to study. It was easy."

Here, a fixed mindset refers to a lack of willingness or openness to learn, whereas a corresponding growth mindset means being open to new knowledge and believing you can learn successfully. Finally, the students considered that being a good student was not just about academic success but also about striving to be a good person, as Geele explains:

"I think so. Sometimes if you are, you’re good person but you don’t have good, like, marks, you mean marks... You don’t have good marks, so, sometimes can happen but you’re good person, good student. Always be trying the best."

These changing approaches to understanding how they can relate to learning underscore the processes through which the students endeavoured to become educated people.

Adapting learner identities and dispositions demonstrates the flexible nature of student habitus and the ability for it to transform to meet new needs of the learning environment, a point made by both Reay (2009) and Davey (2009). As students interact with new ideas and norms of learning, they develop their ideas of what is possible through learning, and the potential new identities they could embrace. However, they don’t completely abandon previous understandings in favour of new ones, as demonstrated through the discussion on
beating. Some students hold on to their support for this practice, even though it is not formally accepted in the RLC. Others have built on their understanding of beating as a practice to gain new insights into processes and understandings of learning, demonstrating the fluid nature of their habitus, or “adding layer upon layer to habitus” (Davey, 2009, p. 283). New understandings about learning and education have been facilitated through abstract artefacts, such as the concept of a ‘growth mindset’, and semiotic practices that communicate values associated with the international curricula being taught (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Ideas such as thinking-out-of-the-box, or exploratory and independent approaches to education, are characteristic aspects of the international curricula being taught which students like Rebecca use to make sense of experiences in their past. Whether Rebecca’s understanding about thinking-out-of-the-box came before engaging with learning in Malaysia may be like questioning which came first; the chicken or the egg. However, the important thing here is that this kind of learning is validated in the RLC learning environment and so is adopted more eagerly as part of her developing learner identity. However, the international curriculum is not adopted blindly as the ideal form of learning. Constructing a good learner in terms of being a good person demonstrates how this is entangled with the students previous religious and moral learning, reflecting the way in which global or external discourses are reinterpreted at a local level to construct distinct learner identity profiles (Wortham, 2006).

The structure of the education programme in RLC1 was also different to what students had experienced in their country of origin. The school programme had three core subjects, English, Maths and Science, and this was complemented with a series of externally organised workshops and programmes delivered in partnership with the centre. Some of the students experienced trips and activities in their previous school but noted that these were more for fun and less focused on soft-skill or career-directed learning like those that had been organised for students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia. Ubax finds these programmes very useful for giving her some idea about what she would like to do in the future:

So, it’s actually really important to participate more programmes coz there’s this advice our teacher gave us, he said that if you want to join a workshop or programme, you need to look at it, like, is it good for you? What’s the benefit? Can it help you in the future?

Tom also emphasises the importance of gaining experience to give you direction and understanding about different job-related fields:
Maybe to gain experience, have more, like, open thoughts to it, coz if you are aiming for something and you don’t have the experience of it, maybe it will be hard. So, maybe projects or programmes can help make the thing you are aiming for easier, maybe.

In addition to this, Alex points out that these workshops and programme are a very timely addition to their education because she feels the teenage years are a time when you should reflect on what you would like to do career-wise, but also to gain experiences more broadly in interacting with different sorts of people:

*I think through programmes we actually gain a lot of experiences that may actually help us to figure out what we want to do, because as a teenager we are confused and we’re always trying to figure out what we wanna do, because of course we have a dream, but do we really want this dream forever? Is it the thing that we are looking for? So, by going to different programmes and interacting with different people, different mindset, different opinions, it help us and give us a sense of, yes, I do wanna do this thing, or no, I don’t wanna do this thing. So, it helps you to find out if you really want to do your job.*

Geele appreciates the opportunity to meet people and make friends from outside his very mono-cultural community through participation in workshops and programmes:

*I only did one programme in this school...it was a great experience...I made a lot of friends and they’re not from Somalia.*

And along with Joseph he appreciates the break programmes and activities, especially residential ones, allow to their usual routine.

*Joseph: The last three months, every morning, waking up, doing the same routine, we just go there but different kind of activities, we learn some new things.*

*Geele: The only thing that I like about this programme is that I get out of Kuala Lumpur [laugh]...I don’t like to stay in Kuala Lumpur, basically...I’m just tired of being in Kuala Lumpur.*

These interactions outside of their rather sheltered refugee community are important for gaining the life experience and knowledge about the world that the students value as part of being an educated person. For example, Joseph explains:

*That programme is actually gonna give you a point of clearness that they show you how the world is actually dealing with each other outside the box, not inside, always. So, we go there, we discover new things that was actually useful, on my opinion.*

The programmes and workshops give a greater exposure to the outside world than the students experience in the classroom with their refugee peers. They can therefore develop
life skills and experience and are exposed to different ideas that can shape how the kind of becoming they want to achieve through education.

As noted by Ansems de Vries (2016) and Hoffstaedter (2019), the ambiguous position occupied by students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia creates a complex and paradoxical dynamic of visibility and invisibility in Malaysian society. Workshops and programmes not only complement the somewhat limited secondary education programme provided by RLC1 but also provide a vehicle through which the students are more visible, either to other refugee communities or Malaysian citizens and expatriates. Feeling isolated within in their marginalised community is stifling for the students, whilst the opportunity to meet and mingle with other kinds of people gives them a sense of freedom and an additional space in which to legitimately express their learner identities. This is particularly important for adolescents who like to experiment with their identity expression. The students therefore interact with different ideas and ways of being that in turn provides alternative material for identity development. This is manifest in the ways they imagine their futures, articulated in terms of the salience between how they view themselves as individuals and their career ambitions and complementary to the previous discussion on flexibility within their habitus. It is hard to say how the students’ ideas about education and learning would have changed had they not experienced forced migration. However, exposure to a new set of educational values and learning structure has expanded their horizons of becoming and what the students feel they can achieve through education.
Experiencing a “Gap”

RLC1 was one of the better resourced centres in Malaysia, however it was still lacking in good quality educational materials and was only able to run a half day secondary school programme. The students felt the staff at the school were doing the best they could with what they had, and felt that learning was a personal responsibility, as demonstrated in this interaction with Geele:

G: They, we just bringing good teachers, everything. But we students must improve ourselves.
J: Okay. So, do you think the students have more responsibility to do better here or is it the same as the other schools?
G: I think it’s not the, is not the same. They just need to give effort because they don’t have, they don’t have what the other students or the other schools have. They must, they must give effort by themselves. Do more, do hard work. Yeah.

In lieu of the resources that are available to local and international schools in Malaysia, the students feel that it is them who have to compensate with additional effort. They use whatever resources they can find to try to learn new skills, for example, Alex describes borrowing a laptop to improve her word processing skills:

So, I thought, I’ll take the laptop from a teacher, I borrowed the laptop, and I thought that I need to do something, and it’s okay, it could be simple at the beginning until I learned it very well, like, and then, you know, try to master it. And then I said, I need to make it myself. Because I don’t, until when am I going to depend on someone? So, I thought, like, yeah, I need to do it and then I’ve done, it’s very simple here and I’m sure it’s not the best, but I just, I tried.

In addition to tangible resources such as a laptop, Tom explains how he used the available learning opportunities to try and furnish himself with skills where specific training in his desired future career is not available:

So, I said if it’s business, let me focus on business and then when I learn about business, I will try to open my interior designing company...I think business is a part of the thing that I want like interior designing. Now, example, I study for interior designing and I know everything, but I cannot just start right away and say I am not an int-, interior designer. So, I have to start a business that include interior designer to or try to apply for a place that maybe they will accept me as an interior designer.

These examples reveal that students demonstrate agency in working with the resources and opportunities they have been afforded to try to make progress towards specific goals.
Taking personal responsibility for their education is described as “being serious” about learning. Xhaka illustrates this idea in contrast to his own primary learning using a photo he took of a primary class at the RLC while he was helping as a student teaching assistant:

_We didn’t used to be serious like the way they are now. You see they are serious in doing colours? And they’re quiet doing their work and we used to be naughty, disturbing._

Sam sees being serious as being positively engaged with one’s studies. He draws a contrast with a friend who he sees as being intelligent, but does not have a serious approach to study in Malaysia:

_I know some person, he just said, like, when I go some country, I will study, and he’s growing, growing, and he doesn’t know he’s wasting his time...he says, like, in this country, Malaysia, there’s no study. He’s not serious, you know, he’s just, he just wants to have fun...I think he’s educated, but he doesn’t want to study, like, he’s just forcing to study. He just come to school, sit there and go back._

Using the analogy of wasting your time by not being serious illustrates the importance of engaging with and getting the most out of studying while you can. Waiting for resettlement to properly engage with education might be too late, in which case they will have missed the window of opportunity to learn. Finally, being serious is also reflected through exercising self-control, which will help you moderating how you feel about studying and other things you encounter in life, which is reflected in Alex’s comment:

_I believe that there shouldn't be a situation where it makes me really angry, and if it does, I need to change my mind. Because we all get angry, and it’s just an emotion that’s in us, we have to go through it and, and it's helped me to manage myself actually. Whenever I see there is nonsense and something that I don’t like, I could change my feelings and my emotions to be okay, calm and just to let go of whatever is happening that I don't like._

Perceiving learning success as a personal responsibility demonstrates a shift from the students’ previous understandings of a predominantly teacher led education. Being in a low resourced environment has prompted the students to increase their agency in achieving success in learning. They have come to the realisation that the resources, both tangible and intangible, they have at their disposal are lacking, but more importantly, there are actions they could take to help move them towards their educational goals. They are therefore exercising agency through their ability to modify their learner identities to achieve a learning
outcome they believe will be recognised positively in the broader social context. Similar responses to a feeling of lacking resources was seen in the conclusions derived from Bourdieusian approaches in studies by De Costa (2010), Dumenden (2011) and Morrice (2009). Here, agency is constitutive of the students’ habitus via their endeavours that in turn develop learner identities which respond to the demands of the new environment. In the Malaysian case, this is manifest through the mantra of being a “serious student” that is characterised by individual effort and self-control. Using this phrase is also a mechanism to communicate and proliferate this idea within the learning context. Additional agency is observed in students’ efforts to work towards their learning goals along alternative trajectories, for example Tom approaching Interior Design from the more feasible opportunities available in Business. This reflects arguments from Bellino (2018) and Dryden-Peterson (2017) that education provides a means through which to anchor identity constructs to achieve objectives, but that these are not necessarily limited by the opportunity structures available in a prescriptive way. Tom has not abandoned Interior Design in favour of Business but is rather imagining a way in which the Business programmes he attends can assist him to achieve his initial goal.

A key issue that the students viewed in terms of gaining access to higher education was having a certificate to show that you had completed secondary education. Gaining a recognised certification was one of Geele’s main ambitions:

I just want to try to get my high school certificate to go to university by whatever it takes…I mean I will do whatever I can to get the certificate…I can apply for online courses.

RLC1 did not provide education beyond the equivalent to UK Key Stage 3 (although after the fieldwork period they launched a GED programme that some of the students began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). The students were therefore not able to gain a recognisable qualification through RLC1. To compensate, students used certificates from workshops and programmes to build a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate their ability to succeed in a higher education programme. Tom explains how this is a common perspective within the school:

Actually, one of the teachers told me that try to achieve, like, a lot of things, try to apply for, like, there’s a lot of programmes, try to apply there and these things. So, they can even now, even if the exam for the IGCSE and you passed or you fail, maybe
if they accept you, they accept you. If they didn’t accept you just try to show them what experience you have done, what are the things that you did to, in your life, what experience you have and these things. So, this is why I’m trying to aim for a lot of certificates and these thing. Not focusing on studying and this thing.

This view is supported by examples; for instance, Rebecca describes being inspired by a youth from a different refugee community who had gained some fame within the broader refugee community for his voluntary work and presentations at various meetings and conferences:

I saw one boy, he didn’t have the high school certificate, but he’s, like, he’s someone famous, like, he always help the refugees and that stuff. So, he did a lot of programmes and he went to [university] and he said he don’t have high school certificate, and they say, ‘Sorry, we cannot accept you.’ And after a few days, they call him again and said, ‘Ok, show us what you have.’ And he bring the school a lot of certificates and he start showing them. So, after that, they accept him.

Having role models like this gave the students hope and confidence that they had a strategy to ensure success within their grasp which then enabled them to form a plan and orient their efforts to seek access to higher education. However, they still considered this to be an uphill struggle and required personal effort and motivation, as Ubax explains:

Persuade, it’s kind like, persuading, because I really, like, hat-, if I don’t have high school certificate, because it’s quite hard to get in. Like, when Tom said we need to go to high school, but, like, another high school...if you don’t go to high school, you need to manage it by yourself.

The necessity of a high school certificate to access higher education reflects the formal aspects of recognition of institutional identities similar to that in Gees’ framework (2000). The limitations in gaining official certification places students outside of higher education opportunities in an administrative sense. However, the students demonstrate agency in their attempts to overcome this administrative barrier and “persuade”, to use Ubax’s term, higher education institutions to recognise them as suitable students despite lacking the essential paperwork. Anecdotal evidence from other students in a similar position has provided them with a strategy to seek institutional recognition through attempts to use a portfolio of unofficial certification to demonstrate their academic competence. The students’ have not given up on higher education but rather exercise their agency by using the resources at their disposal to try and achieve desired identity confirming feedback of their learner identities by alternative means. This contrasts with the agency that the students expressed in aligning their
subject choices to the options available in the field discussed above and reflects a more complex interplay between recognition and agency. Making claims for recognition based on alternative certification is a less familiar strategy for access or has perhaps previously not been acknowledged by the higher educational field in Malaysia. The students are therefore attempting to widen a space for access and appeal to authorities to develop new modes of legitimising learning success. They are therefore pushing beyond the bounds for the expression of agency that have been suggested by Hamilton and Adamson (2013), even if choices they make in other areas of their learning, such as subject choice, operates within these bounds.

Alex used the metaphor of feeling a “gap” between their educational experiences and those of their settled peers.

Alex: *I don’t know how to describe it, but whatever it is that you’ve done, and you’ve achieved, there should always be a gap that, like, being a refugee itself is just a gap, like, whatever you do, when you study and you try to take the exam, you will still have a gap there.*

Interviewer: *Do you think you feel this gap when you’re trying to get to university? Alex: Yeah, still, anywhere, not only, like, here in the school, but like, everywhere, this gap will always be the same.*

She feels that the experience of being a refugee and living with that label sets her apart as a student, even if she completes the same examinations that local and international students do. This was elaborated upon further in the final focus group. Some students felt that this “gap” is experienced only as a lack of access to resources and the limited timetable that is offered at the RLC.

Geele – *There’s a big different. The RLC, but other schools are, or, government school, or private, they have lab. This school doesn’t have lab, right...So, also, it doesn’t have big classes.*

Rebecca - *Before, I studied 12 subjects and I was so serious, and now, I just take three subjects. That’s the difference.*

However, others described this “gap” in less tangible ways. For example, Joseph describes this in terms of a sense of belonging:

*It’s not about the student, it’s all about the school, because as we go to other schools, we take the work, education, we have variety of programmes...any kind of ways of learning stuff. At this place, we don’t have that kind of thing. We have limited, but we*
The students can feel that they belong in their school and their community, but this is separate from the broader societal context. They may attend other schools as a part of programmes and other activities, but they are visitors, and can never attend those schools as students. Alex also elaborates further on these trips:

*It shows you that there is a big gap, actually...so students from an international school, right, so, they invite students over, they actually invite refugee schools over there, so they also learn from how refugees think and that, but we don’t get an opportunity to invite some international schools here and see how they think. We are only able to go there, invited. At the same time, if you look at the whole situation, it shows you that there is a gap....it makes me feel that there is a gap, like, why is this happening?*

The gap she feels is therefore at a deeper level of belonging and manifest to the limits on the terms of her participation in educational activities beyond the RLC.

The metaphor of a gap used here is analogous to the “politics of belonging” developed by Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 204) and bright boundaries described by Alba (2005); an approach drawn on by Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (2020a, 2020b). Although the students successfully negotiate a feeling of belonging within the safe space of an RLC, the are conscious of the limits to which they can negotiate this boundary of belonging within the wider community. For some of the students this is only a practical difficulty in terms of learning, requiring only a structural change to the resources they have access to that would allow them to negotiate a sense of belonging within the educational field, although perhaps not more broadly as a citizen within Malaysian society. However, other students are very conscious of a gap in terms of their ability to negotiate a sense of belonging in the field of learning beyond the RLC. In the example given by Alex, she feels that by being invited to other schools, her life and experience is co-opted as an opportunity for the other students to learn and broaden their understanding about the world. However, they do not have the same level of privilege to bring students to the RLC so that they can learn and grow on their own terms, which demonstrates a fundamental gap between the rights and experiences that students with refugee backgrounds can claim from education compared to their local and international peers. Ultimately, this underscores an essential feeling of being different to, or other, in their education as this
manifestation of the “gap” is something that they can’t do anything to bridge on their own or blur the boundaries to achieve a more genuine sense of belonging.

Learning Challenges and Uncertainty

One of the key frustrations that the students feel is in having their education delayed both because of the change in teaching medium and time spent out of education. Almost all of them were placed in a grade that they felt was below their level. This was clear in Geele’s case:

_**Geele:** I think that I will go to school, I will start from grade 11, but I went back to grade 8.
_**Interviewer:** Ok, and how did you feel about that?
_**Geele:** I was not feeling Ok [laugh]. But just accept everything... Because, I think in this time I, I suppose-, I was supposed to finish high school...But I’m in grade, grade 9, so, I think I’m behind.

For students like Leaf, this was a repeat of the frustrations she felt throughout schooling in her country of origin. She describes how she felt about education as she arrived in Malaysia:

_**I was worried about the school, about everything. I was, like, OK, now the same story from, I started studying and now I’m reading my studies and I’m going to another country to study again, and that was a lot. A lot a lot of years studying without going to university, until now.**_

Having to repeat grade levels made the students feel their goal of attending university was being pushed further into the future and thus constantly kept out of their grasp. It was also frustrating for them to see local students, and those who remained in their country-of-origin, progress onto university, as Joseph explains:

_It's, like, I don't know how does it feel, but seeing, like, people, like, the same age of yours studying at universities, but you're not participating in that place does. I don't know how it feel, like, crying, upset._

Tom made several attempts to make progress by switching schools. However, after several moves due to various circumstances, he remained at a lower level and was frustrated that he was powerless without his previous educational credentials to prove his ability:

_What happened to us is another different story that I have to repeat classes over and over and over and over and over for the past six years and I was very, very angry about this....I was at the limit of saying that I don’t want to study. I have to go out of any school, like, or go back to country and, er, do everything, not, like, study from the_
beginning, go back to the country or tell someone to send me the certificate or any grade of that school so I can start.

As well as the lack of classes beyond the UK Key Stage 3 equivalent, the change to English as a medium of instruction was a key reason for holding students back. All of them had studied English in their previous schools, but only as an isolated subject (except for Ubax, whose school taught several of the subjects in English). They therefore didn’t feel their level of English prepared them suitably for the shift in the medium of instruction, and their English classes in Malaysia were more demanding as more was expected of their language ability for learning. Some students found this frustrating because they had to repeat material they had already covered in another language, such as Joseph:

Our studies that we took here, we already took them before, but come here just learning the same thing, but the language is different, so understanding it is very hard, intelligent subjects that we’re taking now, every word is a new word skills.

But for some, their whole school experience was centred around developing language skills, for example, Alex explained:

What I am learning now is only the language, like, the same concept...so I don’t have particular difficulty understanding the concept and, yeah, but the language I continue.

The students didn’t report English as a medium of instruction having any value over their previous learning in Arabic, Somali or Swahili, because the subject based content was the same. However, they noted that it was advantageous in the PRS context because if they were resettled it would likely be to an English-speaking country. Despite this perceived advantage, the delay that it had caused in their learning challenged their motivation to study as it made them feel that they were being held back from fulfilling the identity role of an “educated person” whilst they could see their settled peers make progress.

The frustrations that students feel about delays in their education reflect various processes of recognition of their ability. Having made consistent progress in education before arriving in Malaysia, they felt that they should continue where they left off. The perceptions that teachers in the learning centre had about their English ability was in some ways practical. Since they had only learned English in an artificial manner before they were not prepared to use it in authentic communication situations. However, assumptions about their language ability were also tied to overall academic ability as it was assumed that the English language
curriculum required an academic ability beyond the equivalent level in the student’s countries of origin. There are some similarities here with the observations made by Bal (2014) in the study about Turkish origin learners in the US. The students were not tracked into a separate class since all students in the RLC have refugee backgrounds. However, through comparison with their peers who had not left their home country, they are subject to a figured world of difference based on their experiences of migration and transition across school systems. There is evidence of agency demonstrated by students to break away from this perceived difference, such as Tom requesting to take levelled tests to move up. This shows the attempts that students make to prove their ability by exploiting institutionally legitimised forms of recognition of academic ability.

It is interesting to note here that RLC1 initially did not refer to the classes in terms of a grade system. The students were either in Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3, but these levels roughly corresponded to year 7, 8 and 9 respectfully in the UK school system. There was also a Preparatory class for secondary education and a Foundation level for those who had very little English or school experience. This school structure was meant to overcome the difficulty that students had over feeling they were in the wrong grade. However, the books used stated the level they were used for and people around the learning centre often referred to the levels by their grade equivalent, demonstrating the foundational thinking of an education system in terms of a stepwise graded system. Despite attempts to match education provision to the need of the students, the resilience of this thinking about schooling in the minds of the students underscored an institutional identity profile (Gee, 2000) of a “refugee learner” as a student who could not cope with the advanced demands of an English Language curriculum. Such an institutional identity profile could also be understood with reference to the figured world (Holland et al., 1998) of a refugee learning centre embedded in a broader context of educational experiences of Somali Muslim diaspora. The frustration that students feel originates from the sense of difference they feel with their international peers and the mismatch between the ways they recognise their ability internally and acts of external recognition.

The delay in learning is not the only source of demotivation to study for the students after arriving in Malaysia. Geele describes some complex feeling he has about being by himself in Malaysia while most of his family remain in Somalia:
Interviewer: So, do you feel less motivated now than you did before?
Geele: Ah, maybe coz my parents are, my parent are not here, so my big sister, she motivates, but still, still missing something. My parents are not here, so I-
Interviewer: So, you feel you're missing something, because your parents aren't here, or do you think there may be something else?
Geele: Oh, I cannot. I cannot describe what I'm feeling [sigh].

Here he is clearly conflicted because he wants to do well in his studies, but he is finding the experience of being away from his family in an unfamiliar place difficult to make sense of. Xhaka also describes moments in which he has felt low motivation due to a lack of confidence in the opportunity to make progress towards his goals in Malaysia:

*For me I’m not serious about studying, I just study...I felt like I don’t want to continue studying...It is a long story. I stopped before I started IELTS. I stopped to study, high school and everything, university, to make my dream true, maybe. So, I felt like nothing you can make you achieve in Malaysia, so I just give up study here.*

He still attends school but feels that at times he is just going through the motions and moves back and forth between wanting to make progress and feeling hopeless.

Another source of demotivation is the uncertainty the students feel about the future. Although they can imagine the kind of person they would like to become in the future through education, they struggle to see a legitimate pathway that will link them to this image in their minds. For example, Tom explains that he is demotivated to study because there is no clear step to take after the final year in the RLC ends:

*For me, I already finished this school, right, and there is nothing more we have to do, so that means for my fellows that are going to come, I’ll just, I don’t even have to inform them. They just have to know by themselves that this is a dead end, just have to get enough knowledge in yourself, and go try and apply for another school.*

These feelings of demotivation present a challenge to the students’ identities. For Sam, this comes in the form of pressure he feels to work:

*Sometimes [my mother] said, like, ‘When are you going to start working?’ I feel, like, shock...because I want to continue studying but I don't think this situation, like, I will continue...Because now, I believe, like, if I get my certificate, I can go high level, study in university and somewhere else, but I don't think I will get that opportunity. It's not possible.*

In this case, education has given him some hope. However, he struggles to rationalise the new perspective and identity he has constructed through participating in education with going
back to the same kind of low-skilled work he did before. Leaf also struggles to understand how she feels after having lost motivation when faced with uncertainty about the future:

*These doubts, and these questions, and these thoughts are just, like, stopping me from motivating myself to do something.*

*Normal student like I'm just trying to pass. I'm not trying to be the first one. I'm not trying to get the highest marks. I'm not trying to be the smartest in the class. For this period of time, because I don't have any motivation.*

*I just find my head is just so empty. I don't have any thoughts, even. I don't have any other thoughts.*

Previously, Leaf had been highly motivated to study and try to get the best grades in the class, but with doubt about the future of her education, she has begun to question who she is and where she is going. Rebecca also struggled with a period of doubt and left the school:

*I was feeling stressed, upset, giving up. I was feeling a lot of things, and first I didn’t find what I want from [RLC1], I start to give up more, more, more, more. And, yeah, and I came back, with more power. I said have to plan, and I planned, and my plan is going until now.*

When I asked what made her come back, she said:

*I came back, the things changed...education, Rebecca, everything...the school even changed. The school are more serious now, more than before.*

The time away gave her a chance to regain a sense of her identity in the RLC. This was complimented by some restructuring within the school and a better delivery of the high school program, which allowed her to imagine her place as a student again.

A final challenge that students faced is rejecting the perceptions that others had about them. For Tom, this gave him motivation to study:

*Coz now, if you prove them, like, they told me to, you cannot do anything, and if I do it and show to them, they will say, “Wow, you really achieve it,” and they will just try to avoid me to tell them that you are wrong and never tell me that you cannot do anything. Coz actually, I one time proved someone wrong...they told me that you cannot come to my class, you cannot even surpass me...I told the teacher can I do the placement test, can I do the placement test? I repeat it over and over and over until I did the placement test. So, I just jump classes, jump, jump, jump, jump until I reached to his class.*

Trying to show he was worthy of studying at a higher level gave him the push to convince the teachers to let him do placement tests and move up through the grade levels more quickly.
However, Rebecca recounted an incident where she felt the students were unfairly criticised by a volunteer teacher which presented them in a bad light to the school:

If I complain, they will, they will, how can I say this? Just they will tell us um, she gives you her time, her energy, she came from far away just to teach you, and so, why complain. At the end, no one will listen to us...Like, they forget everything, everything we did, we, they forget every project we attend how was good. They forget everything. They just remember that teacher, and every time like now, they are just focusing, and they are just like, looking for small mistake to call our parents or kick us out of the school.

In this scenario, she felt that her opinion was not treated as valuably as that of the volunteer due to her lower status as a student. It also reflects an expectation that the students should be grateful for whatever help has been offered to them, even if they feel that it is not quality education. This subordinates their needs to that of the volunteers and reduces their agency towards their education at the learning centre.

The students express a feeling of conflict in their identities because of everyday institutional acts of misrecognition. They struggle to rationalise their internal feelings about themselves as learners with the feedback they receive from the environment. With a disrupted sense of self as a learner, the students struggle to make links to the possible selves they imagine in the future, which undermines their motivation to study (Oyserman & Dawson, 2019). Such demotivation feeds frustration at the delay in learning the students described. The acts of misrecognition that are constructed through the socio-culturally defined figured world of difference (Holland et al., 1998) between the learning centre and the broader educational world disrupts the ongoing learner identity narrative that the students are constructing. As discussed throughout this chapter, the students have demonstrated agency and resilience through the flexibility of their habitus to adapt to a new school system. However, this is being undermined by the difficulty they face in rationalising internal and external modes of recognition (Gee, 2000). Framing learner identity using the model of an internal self-narrative set out by Mercer (2017), it is clear to see how the students have become demotivated as they struggle to connect the loose ends of their learning trajectories to continue to make sense of themselves as learners in a broader life project. This is particularly true in terms of how they project an image of themselves into the future.
Concluding Remarks

Being a part of RLC1 has allowed the students to feel they are continuing a trajectory that has been disrupted by forced migration towards becoming an educated person. Given the centrality of education in their lives, participation in some degree of formalised education provides and anchor around which to build a sense of self on this trajectory that links their past, present, and future selves in a narrative fashion. Exposure to alternative forms of education has influenced the ways in which students relate to learning, which illustrates the flexibility in their learning habitus. Their habitus development has been influenced by the discourses that are communicated through a relief regime that is influenced by an international perspective on education. However, learner identities that they constructed prior to forced migration are not completely replaced. Previous understandings still influence the ways in which they position themselves with respect to new and unfamiliar ideas about education that they encounter in the PRS context, illustrating the reciprocal and non-linear ways in which they relate past and present senses of self. The new ideas that the students have been exposed to have also shaped the model of an educated person by framing being educated as a disposition towards self-improvement and thinking out-of-the-box. In the face of few opportunities and limited resources in RLC1, the students have increased their personal responsibility towards learning and its outcomes, manifest through the mantra of “being serious”. They use the resources and opportunities at their disposal to improve their chance of accessing higher education, but do so creatively, without completely abandoning their pre-migratory ambitions.

Being a part of RLC1 is also important for students to achieve a sense of belonging. Interacting with peers from the same or similar backgrounds in an educational setting builds a community of practice through which they can achieve mutual respect and understanding. Access to programmes and workshops outside of the school also helps the students to feel a greater sense of purpose and belonging beyond their community. It also exposes them to other cultural points of view that allow them to consider alternative ways of being and understanding themselves in relation to the wider world. However, the students also feel a gap in the rights and experiences in comparison to their local and international peers. For some, this is just a resource gap, but for others it is fundamentally about an inability to escape the label of being a refugee learner and the deficit view that is associated with their learner
identities. One way in which this is manifest is the difficulty that they face in achieving recognisable certification of high school completion for access to higher education. In addition, everyday institutional acts of perceived misrecognition, such as being placed in a lower grade level, conflict with their internal sense of self. This mismatch between internal and external forms of recognition demotivates the students, which exacerbates the conflict they feel in their learner identities and causes some students to go to lengths to align these modes of recognition. However, viewing the notion of being an educated person in terms of a disposition provides scope for students to consider alternative learning trajectories and seeks access to higher education through alternative means.
Part 3: Results from RLC2

In this chapter I will present the findings from RLC2 and reflect on agency and recognition in the learner identities of the students in the same way as in the previous chapter. I explain how, like RLC1, the students reflect on the purpose of education as they engage with new forms of learning when they re-connect with education in Malaysia. The ways in which they understand this new learning is manifest through the notion of being a “good student”, and I explore how this is influenced by international curricula used in the RLC. Drawing another parallel to RLC1, I examine the impact that being placed in a lower grade has on the students, as well as being moved between classes as the learning centre restructured. In addition, I discuss how the students respond to education in a low resource environment and how they reimagine and reconfigure learning trajectories based on opportunities available in a similar way to the students in RLC1. Like their Somali peers, the students felt the need to take more responsibility over their learning and its outcomes. A key difference between RLC1 and RLC2 is that there is a much weaker connection between RLC2 and the communities that the students come from. I will therefore examine the impact this has in the form of separating identities between RLC and family/community life, particularly with regards to the more relaxed expectations around identity expression in the RLC. Finally, I will discuss the students hopes to “become something” in the future, and the tension this creates regarding the role education takes in this becoming as the students get older and feel greater pressure to leave education and get a job.
Evolving Understanding of Learning

Once the students had arrived at RLC2 they were confronted with a new and unfamiliar learning environment. A major difference was that the medium of instruction was English. Although the students had studied English before, they had rarely used it for communication in school, as Fred explains:

*I think the first one was language. We had to speak English only, so I was not used to it but then slowly I got used to it, and I think now I can speak it very well.*

At first, this made it difficult for the students to adapt. The multicultural environment also exposed them to a variety of unfamiliar English usage, which was a problem for Jannat:

*If felt] a little left out because we don’t understand the English and I did not understand the English and sometimes I won’t understand their accent, so it will be hard. It was hard.*

With time, the students learned more English and were able to communicate more confidently and understand the lesson content. English then became the primary language for academic exchange. The Pakistani students described a divide between English as an academic language and Urdu as a cultural and everyday language. For example, sometimes they did not know the Urdu word for a new academic concept they had learned while in RLC2. Hadi explains this difference:

*Urdu is not, is not, like, I do love it. I read poetry and still, but there is a difference when I want to learn new things, or when I want to know about history, and I’ll definitely go to Urdu. So, if I want to learn about Area 51, I would go to an Englishman who knows about it, not some Urdu guy who has no idea.*

There is a clear association between the language used and the content of the knowledge that is being communicated. Beyond the initial difficulty of getting to know a new language, the students had to adapt to using this language in communicating an alternative knowledge system.

In addition to acquiring a new language, the learning culture within RLC2 was also unfamiliar to most of the students. Many commented that the approach taken in RLC2 was more fun and relaxed, which made learning more enjoyable. Mariam appreciated being able to have more friendly interactions between teachers and students in particular:

*I think the behaviour of students over here is different from the, we had in Pakistan. We are, we never talked to our teachers, like, more friendly way in secondary, we*
always, like, too afraid to talk to them in like, we always, like, stand properly. But here we can talk friendly with teachers. So, that's different for me.

Elise feels the more relaxed atmosphere was a result of the variety of different backgrounds of the students she studies with. She feels this allows them to broaden their perspectives on learning and how it can be achieved:

I think this is the culture. Like, here, all the teachers are from different, different countries and they're all different-,. in Pakistan they are, like-. So, in my school, like, that, all the teachers will be from, they'll be Muslim, so, they will, there's not really a lot of culture, so yeah. So, we will be, like, only, only, we have only one, one point of view. So, now we as in this, being in the school, I think it's, it's, it has increased my way of thinking and all, that my perspective, this school, like, how I look at things and how I see things.

Elise’s perspective on education has therefore changed and led her to think about learning in different ways. Shifting cultural expectations have also influenced Hadi’s capacity for reflexivity regarding education systems and their links to contemporary societies:

The world has evolved so much. We don’t read newspaper anymore, we go online. And then here we are, the students. We still have a table, a blackboard and a teacher. Just like old times, like, 80s to 60s… I think we need to make progress in it. Most of the students, most of the colleges, they do provide universities. But the primary and secondary education still have the same blocks.

Hadi’s thinking about learning has therefore changed over his time at RLC2; this is represented in the kind of learning he expects to meet in post-secondary education.

The development of the students’ ideas about, and approach to, learning are illustrative of the flexibility and adaptability of their learning habituses, consistent with arguments by Reay (2009) and Davey (2009). Classrooms have the potential to be sites for the negotiation of cultural politics and habitus transformation (De Costa, 2010). As the students enter the multicultural environment of RLC2, they are exposed to alternatives; these might be both conflicting and complementary learning expectations compared to their countries of origin. They therefore encounter a broader space through which to negotiate alternative ways of relating to education and learning. Friendlier relationships, particularly with staff, facilitate a more horizontal power structure in the school which in turn allows the students a greater degree of freedom to explore new ways to express their learner identities.
It is interesting how students relate to differences in the forms of knowledge that are associated with different language traditions. The development of a learning habitus is associated with a particular set of ideas which can be communicated using English language as a medium for instruction. However, certain cultural ideas, such as Urdu poetry, seem to be somewhat tangential to the student’s overall habitus transformation, presumably because English is not typically used in discussion about such subject content. The students therefore appear to develop parallel learner identities that they can draw upon according to the subject content and ideas that can be communicated using the associated language tradition. The kind of knowledge that is valued for IGCSE examinations for access to higher education is located within the English language learner identity. Although there is greater freedom for identity expression in a multicultural environment, habitus development is more firmly rooted in the signs and semiotic practice associated with ideas that can be communicated with English.

The changing approaches to learning are also influenced by the switch to an international curriculum. The students felt that the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum was higher quality and more prestigious than local curricula. This is reflected in the following interaction with Darlie:

*Darlie: It’s more, like, international, you know? IGCSE, because Singapore levels are also international but then we didn’t do IGCSE from, like, from the Singapore levels. Now we’re doing Cambridge. So, it’s, and then lot of people are also doing so, it’s kind of, like, I don’t know, find it okay to do it and it’s normal. Even though it’s hard, it’s, you know, like, this is IGCSE and everyone’s knows about it. So, yeah.*

*Interviewer: So, you think it’s more recognisable?*

*Darlie: Yeah...This one is more valid compared to saying, like, I did the, I finished my high school with the Singapore syllabus, than to say that, oh, I finished my high school with IGCSE.*

There is a strong feeling the Cambridge IGCSE brand of education has greater validity as it is more widely recognised and is taken by students all over the world. Being able to follow this curriculum feels “normal” for Darlie, making her feel less marginalised as a learner as she can now associate it with not only an international context but a prestigious institution. However, Fred expressed the difficulty and change in expectations for learning that come with this new curriculum:

*Fred – It’s almost the same but some subjects are different from others. For example, like, Global Perspective, we have a Global Perspective here in Malaysia but in Pakistan*
we, we didn’t have it, but we had Social Studies. And there are some more subjects, for example, Accounting. We didn’t have Accounting in Pakistan.

The students have needed to adapt to learning unfamiliar subjects like Global Perspectives, which demand an approach to the subject content they have not experienced in their previous learning. They have also had to cope with a demand for higher levels of understanding, which has caused them to develop new learning strategies. This is especially relevant to the format of the IGCSE exams, as Harry explains:

*They want longer answers or more straightforward answers sometimes. So, they’ll ask you describe or just...if they ask you to describe or explain you have to give according to what they want. Not, don’t give too much information not too little information...If we misunderstand the question, zero. Bye bye marks.*

Overall, there was a feeling that the IGCSE syllabus required students to develop a deeper level of understanding about the subject content. Consequently, the students must put more effort into understanding the concepts they are learning and look beyond the content in the books to access higher grades. Mariam gives an example in science:

*Like, if I’m studying Science, so, I should know the specific topic I’m studying, I should know everything about that topic. Not the only thing I’m studying from the book, should I know, but I should study the past papers and everything to get good grades, like, A* or something like this. So, I have to focus and take, make that, make environment in which I can study deeply that topic to remember it.*

The students also felt they needed to spend more time outside of school developing their understanding, where previously they viewed homework as a more instrumental task, as Harry explains:

*Well, before most of the homework is just for practice. But now, the homework is mostly on to understand. So, if we do the homework, it’s easier to understand. But before if we do the homework, it will be, like, will be easier for us to answer the questions, like, that.*

However, whereas other students see the new syllabus as requiring greater depth, Hadi considers that the curriculum is still lacking in terms of the kinds of learning it supports and the materials he has access to:

*It’s just, it just feels like the books, they just really specific about a topic. They don’t tell you about anything more, like why did it happen or how did it happen. They just tell you that. They don’t go deep enough, like, the psychological level. So, I’m always curious, I want to learn why and how.*
Although there is a narrative of seeking deeper understanding, he considers that the examinations are quite prescriptive, and the textbooks don’t satisfy his curiosity of the subject. For a more challenging and genuine level of understanding he feels he needs to do his own research and experimentation with ideas.

The interconnected changes in language medium, learning environment and curriculum have influenced the students’ views on what it means to be a “good learner”. In this new context, a good learner is someone who can move beyond memorising to understanding concepts, as Jannat explains:

Like, for Maths, the formulas, or, you know, using equations, like, you only know the formulas, so you only apply that, you not even understand what it is used for. So, the one who can understand what it is used for, that is a good learner.

They have also extended their thinking to challenge stereotypical notions of what a good student is, reflected in Harry’s statement:

I guess most schools define good learners as the ones who ace the class, kind of that stereotypic idea of good students and good learners. So, if they are getting good grades and they are follow the rules, do everything they are supposed to do then they are considered good learners... [but] just doing the test doesn’t define if the person is a good learner or not.

Facing more challenging learning demands has caused the students to reflect differently on what constitutes a good learner and to challenge the simplistic notion they previously held. In response to the increased learning demands, Elise highlighted that a good learner should be proactive about their education:

That involves asking questions in the class and then if you don’t understand something, I’ll just ask a question in, in front of everyone, so that others also learn and then you also learn. So, if we, if I ask something in the class, sometimes what happens is that teachers also give us, give me the answers, but the, the information I get from the teacher, and plus the information I’ve had from the students also, so, that will combine them.

And finally, Darlie spoke about the need to be open-minded to be able to think more critically and engage more productively with learning and engage with other people:

Because if you’re not open minded, you will stick to one things and you will not, it’s like critical thinking, you will not be able to, they strengthen your ability to know things...if you’re open minded, just go with it, like, learn it. It’s not affecting you in any ways. You just learn it, put it in your brain and just knows about it. So, that when anything
The higher value placed on the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum demonstrates how external recognition drives students’ understanding about learning. This in turn influences the forms of internal recognition that the students negotiate as learners, for example feeling more “normal”, as Darlie put it, by being able to participate in a system of learning they share with their international peers. The international focus of the curriculum also gives them a way to orient their learner identities towards a qualification that can be recognised anywhere, which in turn gives them some certainty about being well equipped for wherever they will find themselves in future. The prestige that comes with the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum also influences the values the students associate with learning. The students did not have a common phrase to articulate the idea of a model learner, so I used the term “good learner” for the purpose of discussion. The perspective on deep understanding and being open-minded are the foundations upon which ideas of being a good learner are built. This is a move away from previously held values of both achieving high marks and being a polite and well-behaved student, although these are still valued in an instrumental sense. The IGCSE curriculum is therefore a meta-level artefact for organising the sorts of learner identities that the students construct, which is legitimised by the global coverage and prestige associated with the curriculum’s reputation. This is then interpreted in idiosyncratic ways at the local level of the RLC, much as Wortham (2006) suggests, which in turn influences the transformation of student habitus in the new learning environment.

Adapting and Facing Difficulties

The students felt the change in school culture and approach to learning for them was beneficial, but they also experienced difficulties during their time in refugee education. Like RLC1, most of the students were placed in a lower grade than they expected to begin with. However, following a restructuring of the school and introduction of the IGCSE programme, many of the students skipped grades, as Harry describes:

*I digress back by two classes, so I went from standard 6 to standard 4...then I skip level 7, and also level 9.*
Mariam – Obviously, I didn’t feel very happy. Because I wasn’t comfortable with studying everything from the beginning because I finished everything before.

Jannat – It’s quite embarrassing. I mean, you know, you’re already so old and now you’re going to such classes.

Jannat also felt that there had been some prejudicial attitudes that led to holding the students back:

That was because in this school, right, I think almost everybody who came to the school, they gave a lower class. Like, for example, if I was in year 6, they gave me year 4 first, then they promoted me to year 5. The same year, actually, they promoted me to year 5, and then I did my year 5 and 6. It was because one of the teacher who was deciding all this, right, told that we were not really, you know, good enough for this. So, she just put everybody in a lower class. She, she was like, maybe, you know, people from different countries, you know, countries that are not really well educated and all that, so, they’ll be, like, you don’t really know English and all that. So, you won’t be able to cope, so you’ll start from the lower class.

It seems that the decision makers in this situation felt the students would not be able to cope with what they perceived to be a more advanced curricula than the students had encountered before in a new language. This was also dependent on specific country of origin, with the students suggesting that those from Myanmar in particular were viewed as being more behind than others in their education on arrival at the learning centre.

Fred had a slightly different experience because he requested to be placed in a lower grade from the outset:

In Pakistan, I left year 7, I did one month there. So, I had to come here. So, one and a half year I didn’t study anything. So, I’ve forgot most of the things, so I gave the test without any preparation. Like, before, she said that you can go to level 7, but some of the things are, like, I’ve totally forgotten. I asked for them can I do that with 6 again.

He was concerned that with the extended time he had spent out of education, he would find it difficult to keep up. Darlie also expressed the difficulty coping with the changing requirements of the different curricula she encountered as she was jostled between grades:

Yeah, it does. And it’s kind of, like, erm, it’s not, like, it’s hard but then it’s, like, you just change suddenly every time. So, which is why I’m, like, kind of slow, like, hard to cope with because every time they’re changing the syllabus...different syllabus, different way of learning. So, it’s, like, when you switch from this one to another one, it’s just,
like, a little bit, like, okay, I’m not used to this, but then later you get used to it, so, it’s hard, but then you stick and cope with, it’s just you need time to adjust.

A feeling of being behind in their learning was common amongst the students as a result of skipping forward to enter the IGCSE programme, as Elise explains:

So, if you skip some, skip 7 or 8 and you jump to another class, so you might not be able to grasp the basics that they’ve learned in the previous.

However, Harry also pointed out that even though they had been advanced to grade 9, they were actually covering material from lower grades, particularly in Maths:

The face is grade 8 and the make-up is grade 9...it’s ok, as long as your foundation and understanding is ok. I mean, I’d rather stay back in the class I’m supposed to be in, learn properly than be accelerated and not understand what I’m learning.

Being placed in a grade level that doesn’t match their personal appraisal seems to create a sense of conflict between internal and external modes of recognition (Gee, 2000). Jumping forward was also clearly difficult for the students, despite the positive recognition they received that confirmed their ability as learners. It gave them a feeling their learning was scattered and inconsistent, leaving them with gaps in their knowledge and uncertain about how to feel about themselves as learners, analogous to the disjointed narrative perspective on learner identity that was experienced by students in RLC1 (based on Mercer, 2017). However, as a response, the students have also reflected more meaningfully on their own ability. They now view their learning in terms of building the foundational blocks of understanding and developing a deeper understanding of concepts, as discussed above, rather than arbitrarily moving through graded levels. Similar to RLC1, the students also experience being characterised by a deficit figure of a refugee learner, a point well made by Bal (2014) in the wider literature. This has been constructed in terms of assumptions about the ability to use English and previous learning. However, in RLC2 there are additional forms of differentiation; the students note certain racial profiles tend to be tracked into lower grades more consistently than others. This suggests more nuanced constructions of the figure of a refugee learner based on country of origin.

Another difficulty which the students reported was remaining focused and enthusiastic about learning in a learning centre that is lacking in resources. Due to difficulties maintaining teachers and volunteers to deliver the IGCSE programme, the timetable was arranged in such
a way that the students would either study one subject for the whole day or have one morning session and one afternoon session. There were also limited breaks in the day, which the students found exhausting. Fred states that the timetable is quite monotonous, and that it was difficult to concentrate without variety in the school day:

Timetable, I think the timetable that have one class the whole day, that you know, that, I don't like that, because you will be tired of studying one thing for the whole day...Because they'll be the same teachers and you're studying the same thing for the whole day and then I don't like doing that.

However, the value that is added by the prestige associated with the curriculum and the opportunity to sit for an internationally recognised exam gives the students some motivation to continue, as Hadi’s comment suggests:

It's just that three hours long period, like, three-hour long classes, they're quite difficult. So, the education is just fine, it’s good. I mean it's Cambridge, so, yeah.

Since the learning centre is a converted office unit above a shop, like many of the RLCs in Kuala Lumpur, the architecture and environment were also limiting features of the learning environment. Darlie points out that the lack of resources beyond classroom learning, such as social spaces in and around the school, limited their educational experiences:

Not just because we cannot have, like, cafeteria, like, cafe place where we can just hang out and eat. We just, like, you cannot even go out, so, like, I think this, because some other school you, they don't provide lunch, you have to go and buy yourself. But this one we cannot go out.

Darlie also said some difficulties also arose with a lack of resources at home to navigate an approach to learning that focused a lot on individual research and group projects and presentations:

I don’t have computer at home to, like, go for PowerPoint, but I do have PowerPoint in my phone. So, you are, yeah, you still can do that as well as to do research.

In addition to the difficulties in staffing, the lack of learning resources limits the options students have for a range of subject-based learning experiences, for example, the school had no access to laboratory facilities for science practical classes. This was frustrating for Mariam as she wanted to study the sciences as three separate subjects, but instead had to do them as Combined Science, which was studied as one examination subject:

It's, like, we don't have very, we don't have too much, like, too many teachers. For science subjects we have only one teacher. So, he has to teach a Combined Science and
separate science, it’s very difficult for him to teach and I am the only one person who is taking separate Science.

Jane feels the lack of choice in examination subjects limits the freedom they have in their education, and in terms of their eventual career choices:

[In our home country] we’ll be free...because we’ll be in our country, so it will be easier for us to, like, study for a particular, you know, occupation, but here, it’s very difficult because we have to do this ourselves. So, we have to depend on the opportunities and limited resources. So, these two go hand in hand.

Elise suggested that with reduced choice, students aligned their ambition with the subjects that were on offer and gave a clear pathway to a career, for example accounting:

Like, some of the students they want to be something else, but after Accounting they say that they want to be accountant.

This suggestion led to some disagreement in the focus group, as exemplified in the following interaction:

Harry: If that’s how they change their ambition, then every time they master a new subject or they can understand a new subject...

Jannat: No, but they didn’t have opportunity to become a doctor because of the limited resources, and Accounting, they will get diploma and all that, so they [incomprehensible] for that.

Harry felt that the interest in accountancy reflected the flippancy of students aligning their interests to whatever subject they passed. He had a more idealistic attitude that was shaped by the idea of following your dreams, believing that with effort and commitment you could find an alternative way despite facing challenges. Jannat, however, took a more pragmatic approach, interpreting these decisions as practical choices made within the limitations of the opportunity structures that they faced. This disagreement demonstrates that the differential responses students have are dependent on how they view the ease with which they can navigate the difficulties and setbacks they face.

Whether an idealist or pragmatic learner, the students have developed the view that overcoming difficulties in learning was a personal responsibility. This is reflected in the following comment from Harry:

It depends, like, on the student, I guess. Because even if the teacher teaches, it’s left with the student. I mean, if the student doesn’t understand, will just have to ask the teacher, and doesn’t ask then, that’s not the teacher’s fault, right? You cannot force the knowledge into the student’s head.
Elise also reflects on the feelings she has that she may let the teachers down if she doesn’t hold up her end of the learning relationship and get good grades:

*We should really try our hard-, our best to do whatever you can, and then the teachers, whatever they have taught. So, if you don’t, if you fail, that it means that whatever the teacher’s taught you, you really, don’t really go home and go through the questions and all that. So, that was very embarrassing.*

The students’ thinking has developed from a view of learning that is mostly teacher-led, to a more dynamic set of student-teacher learning interactions. In doing so they assume more agency in the process of learning and responsibility for its outcomes.

Hadi also states it is important to take some personal ownership for dealing with difficulties that they each face and do so in a way that maintains a level of dignity:

*Because, like, people keep pushing you down if you don’t look up. If you keep looking down and they’ll keep pushing you down, so you have to stand up. But it should be in a proper way, not, like, fighting or, like, vulgar fighting, you know?*

It isn’t always clear whether these attitudes are the result of migration or a product of maturity in response to increased demands of secondary education. However, some students made more explicit comments, linking their increased effort and responsibility to learning to the lack of educational opportunities for them in Malaysia, for example Fred:

*...now I’m working harder because, like, in Malaysia, there are not many opportunities, as compared to Pakistan, I had opportunities. So, if I study hard, I got good marks then only I can get an admission in a university or college.*

Jane explains you should always seek out opportunities wherever you can and proactively develop independence to navigate challenges in the future:

*So, this is like my, my parents also believe that if, if you want to study you have to, like, go out of your way and study, like, if there’s, like, no opportunities. So, yeah, I believe that I should also go out and explore for myself because I’m not going to be with my parents forever. So, it’s, that’s why I have to explore.*

Like all the RLCs in Malaysia, the structure and form of the education programme offered by RLC2 is restricted by its circumstances and arranged to make best use of the resources available. These limitations serve as a reminder that the education they are receiving is lacking with respect to what many of them felt they had before and what they believe their settled peers receive. The challenges they face both shape and yet also depart from the kinds of learner identities the students want to construct. For example, difficulties teaching science
limits the degree to which students can successfully imagine a trajectory to science-based careers in the future, such as being a doctor. There is evidence students have aligned their ambition according to the kinds of learner identities they believe they can successfully construct. However, the students interviewed have also developed a disposition towards learning that also takes personal responsibility for its outcomes. While working with restricted resources, they commit themselves to the education they have and seek further opportunities to try and author identities that they feel they can realistically achieve. The RLC provides the site and place in which to anchor these identity constructs, as Bellino (2018) and Dryden-Peterson (2017) suggest, so the personal commitment to education and its outcome creates some space for the exercise of their agency, though with significant limitations. Viewed in this way, learner identities are not constructed by the environment but are constituted through a reflective process of engagement with the resources that are available.

Interface Between School and Community

A significant difference between RLC1 and RLC2 is that RLC1 was predominantly a community-based school and most of the students were ethnically Somali, whereas RLC2 was run by a larger Christian organisation and served students from many different refugee communities. Some of the students at RLC2 had to travel long distances to get to the school and so there was not such an intensive interaction between the school and community. Mariam notes that some people in her community are not supportive of the youth attending this school:

Yeah, like, their thinking is, like, quite old. Like I said, for the most of our community members, they think if you go to Christian school, you will become Christian.

She describes this as quite old thinking, suggesting a more modern view would be that mixing between religious communities is not a threat. She also comments that in Pakistan she would not be able to mix with boys in the same way as they would tend to be educated separately in secondary school:

In Pakistan, I didn’t really talk to boys more, like, I only talk to my cousins or when they come to our house or visit us. And I only have one brother, so, I only talk to him. And, but here, like, we are studying together, so, we have friends, like, for my mother, for our culture, if we have, we should have only girls friends, like, not boys as a friend...They just have different perspective.

Practices in the RLC are therefore in direct opposition to some of the more traditional views in the community. These views are clearly not held so strongly by the students or their
families, however there is a tension between perspectives that influence the expression of identity in the RLC and those in the community.

Jannat believes that she has a greater freedom of expression in the school compared to in a community setting. She feels some resonance with the term “tomboy” because she is quite sporty and doesn’t fit the traditional community values of femininity:

*Interviewer:* So, is there any expectation for you to, like, wear a head covering or things like that?

*Jannat:* Yeah [sigh], wear a hijab, like, more cover and all that, yeah. And wear clothes like girls, and also, sit like girl, and behave like girls.

She also feels some pressure from the community to conform to traditional religious and cultural standards as she grows older, however she’s not comfortable with this:

*Jannat:* I don't want to, I mean, I'm comfortable with this [sports clothing]...we have to grow hair long, like, you know, putting up together, making a ponytail and all that, it's going to be really hard. I don't want to imagine myself wearing those clothes.

*Interviewer:* Do you intend to start dressing in that way or do you not want to?

*Jannat:* I don't want to, but I think I will have to. Because obviously, because of my religion and even people around me, they, like, wear these clothes. Wear the girl’s ones.

The thought of having to conform to the cultural standards of her community as she gets older conflicts with the identity that she has developed in a less prescriptive school environment.

The less strictly defined cultural expectations within RLC2 has given the students an opportunity to explore different aspects of their identities through new activities. For example, Mariam has developed an interest in basketball:

*Like, so, I didn't know how to play basketball before. When I came in Malaysia, and I joined the school then I learned how to play basketball. So, maybe it will help also in uni. If we want to choose any club, we would, I would choose sports club.*

Elise also had more freedom to focus on leisure activities that would not have been valued to the same extent in her home country:

*I started drawing because I thought I was [incomprehensible] for an art competition, so, then I got a chance to really paint and things. But then I don't think if I were in Pakistan, I would have been able to, like, draw some stuff. I don't know. I'll be more concentrated on my studies. Because we, in Pakistan, they like, schools, they don't really sponsor such stuff. Drawing and painting and all that kind of things.*
Jannat also explored a range of performance activities through the clubs and societies at the school:

Yeah, clubs and society and all that. Like, there was no drama, like, no skits to perform also. They only had things, like, singing. Not really singing, also have speech and stuff like that. Because it was an Ahmadiyya school, right? Our religion one, so, they, they don't allow dancing, singing, and all that. So, we only have some religious stuff and speeches. When we came here then I saw drama thing. I came across drama.

Engaging with clubs at the school, along with workshops and other activities targeted at refugee populations, exposes the students to new ways of understanding themselves. They could therefore see themselves as a drama person, sporty, or an artist, and explore these possibilities in the construction of their identities.

The relaxed cultural expectations that are the result of a multicultural learning environment have facilitated a greater degree of freedom in the exploration of personal identity. In a similar way to the new expectations of learning discussed earlier, the students can relate to learning and the system of schooling in a new way. The students have been presented with a new set of social stimuli somewhat separate from the socio-historical context in which they had previously been socialised, and so have a space in which to construct alternative responses and identities. Interacting within the RLC2 therefore opens a broader space for authoring identities and new ways of being in the school context. This is facilitated by having a broader range of interactions with people than they would have had in their countries of origin, such as with people from other cultures, religions and being able to freely mix with adolescents of the opposite gender. As we also see in the case of Jannat, she is able to explore alternative identities, such as the idea of being a tomboy, which reflects aspects of both institutional and discourse identities (Gee, 2000) centred around alternative ideas about gender roles encountered in the RLC environment. This sits at odds with the discourses available to her in her community environment. The less prescriptive cultural context of the RLC allows her to legitimately embody this alternative identity trope, now upheld through processes of consensus in recognition (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Although there is some dissent from members of their community about being allowed to mix more freely in RLC2, the importance of education that the students’ families place on education overcomes the values that might restrict their participation.
One consequence of the gap between the RLC and community cultural environment is that some students have formed separate identities for interacting in each setting. Mariam attributes this to balancing competing demands of school life and community life:

There I have to think about other stuff also. I don't have time to think about school stuff [laugh]. School negative situation...Because we have Pakistani culture. We have to, we have other stuff to also, like, family problems and other, so, I have other issues in, at home, I mean school, also. I just forget everything when I leave school, and go back home. I have to find something else and I have to focus on that thing.

She faces problems while learning and at home, but she doesn’t view these as overlapping so she thinks about each issue separately. Jane feels that she has to hide aspects of herself when interacting with her religious community, which is made up of Pakistanis and local Malaysian people:

They think I'm an introvert, but, which I'm not, but in school I'm an extrovert. Completely different...Church is a place where we learn more about our faith and all that, so, at school we, we don't really have that, that type of, like, aspect, so, that's why I keep that separate, separate.

She feels that she can be more herself at school because her friends there know her very well, whereas in the religious community she feels she has to uphold a respectable persona, and also faces racism:

Because I, you know, when you're with friends, you can, you can talk about anything, you can use words and then you can just talk about anything but when you are in Church, I have that feeling that I can't really, like, mix with them because if I'll say something bad you, know you, if you are in Church and you cannot say those words and cannot talk about things...and they are very racist and all that.

I myself, like, feel very bad because I'm a very, like, jolly type of person. I will make that other person laugh, like, for sure. So, when I can do that in, like, another place, I feel very bad for myself also, because I can’t portray myself as I am. I have to be someone else just to show people that I am a very good person, and all that, yeah.

Having to suppress what she feels to be her “real” self is clearly upsetting for Jane, which illustrates the importance of the genuine friendships and mutual respect she has built with her peers in RLC2.

For all of the students in this study, the school is experienced as a safe space in which they can build trusting friendships between people from different backgrounds but who all face similar circumstances. This is particularly important for some who feel quite isolated from the
community where they live as attending school facilitates mixing with people of their own age. For example, Elise explained:

*I was very excited when I heard about, from my parents that I will be studying in this school. Actually, I was very excited because I wanted to meet other students because I was also bored, I didn’t have really, really have many friends in my area. There were, like, two or three of friends of mine, so, I was very happy and excited about the school.*

In RLC2, the students seek to build meaningful friendships by achieving a sense of mutual understanding with their peers. They also value the opportunity to learn about ideas from other students’ cultural backgrounds. For example, Harry sees this as an opportunity to broaden his horizons and build on your own cultural understanding:

*We’re not exactly bound by culture because there’s a cocktail of cultures, so everything’s mixed up, so you can learn from other cultures and correct ours and we can also teach others how our culture is like.*

Harry approaches other people with an open mind, entertaining the possibility of improving his world view, reflected in his choice of phrase to “correct” what he feels to be errors in the views he previously held. Being open-minded and respecting the cultural backgrounds of others are values championed by the school and explicitly so through the timetabled class on *Character Building*. Hadi appreciates that these values are fostered within the school and feels that it creates an atmosphere in which they can all identify with a shared cause:

*...for us we are all equal. Like, we don’t see any person as a Christian. They don’t see me as a Muslim. We are good friends, and nobody even, they don’t talk much about being Christian, like, apart from the morning devotion. So, yeah, it feels like we’re all under the same flag.*

The RLC and community contexts have their own norms, practices and boundaries to what participation and inclusion means, in turn constituting what Wenger (1998) calls a community of practice that the students navigate in their daily lives. Within the RLC, students feel a sense of belonging through their interactions with like-minded peers who empathise with their experiences as learners with refugee backgrounds. The less prescriptive social expectations also provide a space through which to explore alternative self-views in the construction of their identities. Trajectories to belonging within the RLC community of practice also facilitate explicit teachings and messages they encounter while learning, which fosters an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual understanding. However, the sense of belonging they achieve as part of the RLC community of practice is not replicated in other communities of practice, such
as Jane’s participation in Church and Jannat’s fears about a trajectory in gender expression as an Ahmadiyya Muslim woman. In the RLC, various boundaries of belonging are able to be blurred (Alba, 2005), similar to the experiences of secondary education for students in Chopra and Dryden-Peterson’s study (2020a). The students state that they feel more able to achieve a sense of genuine identity expression that is less restricted. However, these boundaries are not so easily blurred in other communities. Managing the boundaries of belonging across several communities are at times conflicting and gives rise to the feeling that students must hide or separate aspects of their identity. This may be sustainable while they are still students in the RLC, however it is not clear if they will be able to continue to feel a genuine sense of belonging once they graduate.

**Learner Identity: Conflict and Becoming**

A major motivation for persisting with education, despite the difficulties faced, was that the students wanted to “become something” or “get somewhere”:

Fred – *Before I just was, like, I was like, studying for only the exams, but now I’m studying like, I want to become something. I want to do something in future so, that I’m like, I’m more serious now.*

Jane – *My motivation to study, my, erm, from 2006 to 2014 it was just like, I want to study, I want to study, I want to study. It was my own motivation. And my parents forcing. My parents forcing me. Now, it is only me, like, I want to study and I want to get somewhere.*

Prior to arriving in Malaysia, the students were mostly concerned about exam results and demonstrating progress in the education system, but as they get closer to university and adulthood they are looking more to the future and what will come next. Being someone is articulated in terms related to fulfilling a role in society that garners respects, reflected in Jannat’s comment:

*Like, you have, you know, like, you have a reputation or something like that. Respect from people and all that.*

This could be in terms of the job that they do and their demeanour, as Fred explains:

*In our society they do get respect if you are well-educated because of the mindset the people have, in that, people who are educated are well-behaved and that, right.*

Or, as Jane describes, it could also be reflected in the ability to demonstrate your knowledge and be independent:
Reasons, at the moment, like, I want to become something. Reason one, yeah, is that...and then someone will ask me a question, I will be able to answer it. And if not, somebody will be answering for me, but I’m, I myself would be able to answer it.

Education plays a key role in the “somebody” that students want to become. Similar to the students in RLC1, hopes for the kind of person they want to be in the future are articulated in terms of being “educated”, as Fred explains:

Fred: Because I won’t any education. I won’t be, like, highly qualified like, some other people, and I won’t be happy because I haven’t, like, fulfil my dream.
Interviewer: So, do you think it’s important to be an educated person?
Fred: Yes, it is.

The students were worried that without completing a minimum level of education they would be left behind and viewed as having less worth in society. However, Harry also believes that being educated is not a guaranteed ticket to a successful future:

... being an educated person doesn’t necessarily mean going to school because you could learn at home, and even if you’re educated, you won’t necessarily be successful, because in the end it takes a lot of hard work. And even if you study and get all those degrees, they’re not essentially going to help you in your job because sometimes when we study that’s not even relevant to the job that we get in the future.

A distinction is drawn between the value of being academically educated and the value of having functional skills and expertise in a profession, as Jane notes:

Like, for some technical jobs you don’t have to be that much educated but you must have that, you know, that skills. So, if you have those skills then you can be successful, but it doesn’t mean that you have to be educated and all, so yeah. Coz our society makes it more important, coz you know, our parents and our background, we are forced to study. We are forced that, from a very young age we are told, like, my family, have been told that I’m not educated, then do not be successful. So that is something that has been with me for a very long time. So, now I think that we don’t have to be educated, that you don’t have to be, like, you don’t have to have to get a PhD to become successful.

Although the students recognise the value of non-academic skills, they are acutely aware of the differential worth placed on academic versus non-academic professions within society. That said, they also view success in terms of the ability with which you can perform within a professional field, indicating a degree of opposition to the privileged status they see being attached to the more academic professions by the wider social context.
To continue along a trajectory to become “somebody”, most of the students had to realign their ambition according to the available resources. A key problem was the lack of options to pursue science topics both at school and at the universities that accepted applications from students with refugee backgrounds. Jane originally wanted to be a gynaecologist but switched to pursuing Law, which for her was a major adjustment that she felt went against her core learner identity:

*Interviewer:* Do you think, were you really committed to being a doctor? Was there something about medicine that was particularly appealing to you?

*Jane:* Yes. It was, but now, you know, due to circumstances, you have to make some choices that against your instinct.

Similarly, Elise wanted to enter the army, but this was not an option since she is not a citizen of Malaysia and is unlikely to return to Pakistan:

*So, I want to be an Army officer, but I can’t. Like, I have to go to an Army school and train with them, so I couldn’t. Then I chose to be a lawyer, so, now I want to be a lawyer. So, there’s one university taking people who want, that are offering courses of Law people, but then I have to enter the university first. To enter there are main things that I have to do first. Like, they might not take me in as we are refugees and all that. So, yeah, it’s very difficult. So, when we think about that, we might change whatever we want to be and use the other resources that they offer.*

Each of the students must make a difficult decision about how to continue with their education and face the reality that they may never fulfil their original career ambition. However, in their endeavour to “become somebody”, it could be argued that they think about how they can derive a learner identity from the available options and constraints to continue along a trajectory that is meaningful in terms of the way they view themselves.

In addition to pursuing options for higher education, Darlie had a dream of becoming a singer. Education is where she places most of her energy because she feels this is more likely to provide a secure future. However, she also uses Instagram to try and build a profile as an influencer so that she feels that she is still making progress towards a potential singing career:

...singer doesn’t make sense because a lot of people have good voice and a lot of people want to be a singer as well but not many people become famous earning a lot of money, so, I think Instagram is one of the social media platform that helps you. It’s, like, a stand-by, second choice. Okay, you are still studying but then still second choice, like, so, if let’s say, when you become famous in Instagram and then get a few foll-, like, 200, er, 2 million followers and all that, then you can, like, decide to go for singing,
you know, career because you already have, like, 1 million follower and then you still finish your study but then you say have this, you know, it's just, like, the second choice but it works.

Darlie is using the resources that she has at her disposal to maintain multiple possibilities for the future that resonate with key parts of herself. Comments like this demonstrate a disjoint between trajectories of becoming that the students value and those that are available to them through the RLCs. This reflects observations made by Wexler and colleagues (2005) in their work on becoming somebody through school when there is no clear link between the aims and practices of school and that of society more broadly. This is certainly true in the annexed refugee education system in Malaysia since the opportunity to utilise the capital gained through education is limited in PRS. Students therefore entertain alternative pathways for “becoming somebody” to establish a base for identity construction outside of formal education.

Through articulating their ambition to “become somebody”, the students in RLC2 view education as a trajectory of becoming towards a broad socio-culturally defined identity profile associated with certain educated career categories. Similar to the narrative of becoming an “educated person” in RLC1, this draws parallels with Bellino’s study (2018) of trajectories towards adulthood in Kakuma camp. However, the students also consider that a trajectory towards vocational skill-based jobs or less academic-based career roles could also be a successful form of becoming. Vocational professions and academic professions represent different institutional identity profiles that are defined around discourses around what it means to be educated (Gee, 2000).

Cultural discourses about the value of being educated are well engrained, even if there are tensions there in terms of how the students imagine a successful adult life. This is manifest through the shifting of academic fields to ensure access to higher education. Although disappointing, the students consider it is better to fulfil the institutional identity profile of a degree graduate to be considered to have become somebody. To ensure success in a trajectory towards a positive imagined future, the students use the resources and opportunities at their disposal. They do so reflexively, thinking about how they can best match their ambitions to the pathways they imagine are possible. Education is therefore a system through which to anchor identity constructs, as suggested by Bellino (2018) and Dryden-
Peterson (2017), and despite limitations the students have some space through which to exercise agency over trajectories of becoming. However, as is exemplified by Darlie’s use of Instagram, there is also potential to build the foundation for alternative identity constructs outside of the resources provided by education, demonstrating multiple sites upon which to lay the foundation of identity construction.

Given the difficulty accessing a higher education course in his favoured area, Hadi entertained the idea of pursuing a livelihood option that was often promoted to refugee communities:

* I think I want to do hospitality course or something else, like, but the other part wants me to study. Some kind of confuse between that. Should I get experience, or should I get degree because I don’t think degree matters anymore. Like the time when I’ll be older, nobody would be going for degree or something. They just want experience.

He felt that the experience he would gain would be more valuable to him in his current situation, particularly as he was getting older and felt responsible to start work. Some of the older students were already feeling under pressure to stop studying and start work, for example, Elise commented:

* Some of the feel pressure because of what other people say. Like, most of the people will say, ‘You’re too old, stop studying and concentrate on your working life,’ and all that.

The student’s views were also influenced by a fellow student who had dropped out of the IGCSE programme to pursue hairdressing. Jannat was a close friend to this student and explained what she thought had influenced her decision:

* Well, she was old. She was already you know, 20, and we will we have been doing, we have been planning this IGCSE thing, it’s already third year, and for her, if she wait for, like, let’s say she waits for two more years, I guess, but if she waits for two more years, it’s like, already 22, and then she will have to do some other course for a job. So, it will take her more time. So, she was like, I will just start doing hairdressing course.

The delays that the students had experienced in preparing for IGCSE, having been on the programme for almost four years at the time of the focus groups, together with the pressure they felt within their communities to start working and providing for their families, was causing them to experience a degree of internal conflict over whether it was in their best interest to continue in school-based education.

The students also struggled with the uncertainty they felt about the future. For Fred this is a
major source of tension as he is not sure whether he will be able to achieve his ambition.

When I will be into software engineering, I’ll be free that, I have be now I don’t have any tensions right now, but now I have really a lot of tensions that, what if I don’t become a software engineer? What will happen?

Jane also struggled with rationalising the future now that she is on a different educational trajectory to the one that she began in Pakistan:

Because, you know, why you’re in a cert-, when you’re in a certain place, you know, that if I would be in Pakistan right now, I would finish my class 10 and then go to FSC, and, and I was like, very sure that I’m going to take medicine. But now that I’m here, nothing is that clear for me. Nothing is that clear for me. I have limited opportunities and resources as well.

The students felt they would have more certainty about their education when they had resettled. However, with the resettlement process becoming increasingly protracted, they struggled to orient themselves and their education planning in Malaysia and what they imagined lay ahead. For example, Mariam said:

I cannot imag-, like, see what will happen in my future. It seems like nothing is happening right now. I wanted to, I, like, most of the people in our community are going to Canada, or England. So, I was, like, when I will go and continue my education over there. Like here, it’s, like, we have, you have a lot of money to continue our education. So, I say like my fut-, my present is really dark.

Harry also emphasised the disadvantages he felt they faced in Malaysia and the uncertainty around whether they would be able to get a job, even if they successfully accessed higher education:

Even if you have the degree and all that and you apply for a job, the possibility of you getting it is quite low, because there are many other people with the same degree or even better, and most of the time when you have a degree, they will usually chose the person who is the best. So, for example, we have limited resources, so at most, even if we do get a degree, there will probably be a few subjects, but for them, they can do much more. So, technically their degree will have more value, so they would rather pick them over you...in here in Malaysia. If you go to a third country you are going to be a citizen, so your privilege will be much higher there.

As a consequence of this uncertainty, many of the students felt demotivated in their studies. For example, Hadi described feeling stuck:

Interviewer: So, were you worried about your education when you came here?
Hadi: Actually, I was, because I was in, I was in level 10 at that time in Pakistan and I would have been in the university by now. So, I’m still stuck in high school...I want to get out of [high school] as fast as possible and do studies in universities.

Mariam also questioned whether she should stay in the school or if she should just continue her studies herself:

Yeah, I’m still thinking, because many students left this year also because they are doing everything by theirself at home...So, but because they are giving for me, I don’t have so, much money to give for my exam. So, if I studied this school, they will give us scholarship, so it will be easy for me to study with scholarship.

Eventually, Mariam did opt to leave the school and she was not present when I returned for the second period of fieldwork to conduct the focus groups. However, the students who remained engaged with the opportunities they had in the present and endeavoured to take the greatest advantage of these while they could.

Fred – But now I’m working harder because, like, in Malaysia, there are not many opportunities, as compared to Pakistan, I had opportunities. So, if I study hard, I got good marks then only I can get an admission in a university or college.

Elise – I think I’m very grateful and thankful that I got, got a platform, platform where I can study. I think it’s really helpful, like, they are, they are giving us education, the school supporting us education, they’re not gaining anything, but they are giving us something, so that’s really good.

And finally, Jane explained that in the face of this uncertainty it was important to have a flexible and open mindset to avoid feeling demotivated and hopeless:

Yes, you should have this because if you do not have it, you cannot, you know with certain mentality that I want to be this and I this and this. You can’t. You have to adapt to changes...Like, you will feel that you are stuck. No opportunities and you will know, you will not go out of your, like, comfort zone and, like, look for, like, something that can help you get that new, like, stick to one thing only. You cannot move on to the others. You cannot explore. Yes.

The students in RLC2 shared similar pressures to work and complete their education in a socio-culturally defined window of opportunity before adulthood. Using Markus and Narius’ theory of possible selves (1986), students switch their trajectories in order to have the best possibility of fulfilling a desirable possible self and avoid an undesirable one. However, there seems to be some tension in the forms of possible selves. Although they are subject to discourses about being educated, they are able to imagine alternative routes to desirable
future selves that do not involve higher education and rely more on developing skills that they perceive to be desirable for employment. In addition, although there was a general view that higher education could be pursued during their adult years, being a 20 plus year old still in secondary education seemed to be a more immediate threat in the form of an undesirable possible self.

Using Oyserman and Dawson’s (2019) arguments about future directed action, the trajectory towards being an adult stuck in secondary education occurs within the atemporal system since the students can imagine a clear set of steps that would lead to fulfilling this identity profile. This drives their determination to complete their studies, but also leads to demotivation as the possibility of not finishing secondary education looms ever closer on the horizon. In a similar way, the individual with a degree and no job prospects in Malaysia is another undesirable self that exists within an atemporal system. An alternative possible self that lies beyond higher education then exists in the temporal system, which is exacerbated by the uncertainty that students feel about the future. The students are trying to simulate possibilities to arriving at this future form of themselves but have to balance this against the threat of the undesirable options in the atemporal system. Constructing a possible self within this atemporal system, such as Hadi’s idea to pursue hospitality, seems to be a response to balancing the tensions that exist between the various options the students can imagine.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the students of RLC2 experience a tension between having a bigger space for authoring learner identities and having their learner identities restricted by lack of opportunities and resources. The multi-cultural environment allows them to experiment with new possibilities for identity expression and construction through exposure to new approaches to learning and activities beyond the socio-cultural setting of their countries of origin. The students have responded by developing a flexible habitus that embraces the potential provided by the alternative education system. They have bought into the new education system based on its seeming legitimacy and prestige, which they feel is giving them the best chance to pick up on the educational trajectories that were ruptured when they were forced to migrate. However, this is also met with limitations in the options they have, for example not being able to study separate sciences or access courses they initially hoped to
pursue at university. Processes of recognition that have framed them at times in a deficit view, and at others in a positive light have disrupted their educational progression and made them feel a bit lost in terms of their trajectories. It has also exposed them to new conflicts in their learner identities as they experience a mismatch between internal and external forms of recognition. However, they have responded to this challenge by demonstrating agency through taking responsibility for their learning and its outcomes.

A consequence of the greater degree of separation between RLC2 and the students’ respective communities has led to the separation of identities as they negotiate multiple memberships of different communities of practice. This is manifest in alternative perspectives on forms of knowledge the students associate with different language traditions. The relatively more relaxed cultural expectations allow them to blur boundaries of belonging to feel a greater sense of authenticity in their learner identities in RLC2, which creates a conflict with the identities they feel compelled to express in other settings. There are also tensions and conflicts in how the students imagine a trajectory of becoming in the context of an uncertain future. Ideas about being educated which originate from their cultural backgrounds persist in terms of their expectations for learning despite the greater freedom in which they imagine success in the future. In response, the students shift their learning trajectories to best align with the opportunities and resources available to fulfil the expectation of being educated by having any university degree. That said, the conflict between the various trajectories they imagine for themselves is exacerbated further by the threat of undesirable possible selves that loom in their not-too-distant future and the contrary cultural expectation to abandon education in favour of taking on adult responsibility and work to support their families.
Part 4: Discussion

In the previous three parts I presented the results arising from the individual interviews and focus groups that were held with the students and began to explore how these findings related to existing theories in the broader literature. These were considered separately for each of RLC1 and 2. Here in Part 4 I compare these findings and explore how they relate to previous theoretical insights. To do this, I discuss the ways in which the results help to understand the construction of learner identities and trajectories of the students in relation to the research questions asked at the outset of the research. Firstly, drawing on the work of Gee (2000) I will consider aspects related to processes of recognition, considering how this is threaded through the four perspectives on learner identity. Following this, I address the important matter of agency across four dimensions: (i) the ability to negotiate discourses; (ii) the ability to achieve identity confirming forms of recognition; (iii) bounded agency; and (iv) agency to imagine pathways to desirable future selves. Taken together, I then explore how these aspects of recognition and agency influence learning trajectories. Here I consider the role experiences in the RLCs have in construction of learner identities, and question what outcomes these might have for the students. Finally, I make some reflections on the role gender could play in the construction of identities and summarise the comparison between the RLCs to highlight how learner identities may be influenced by the wider PRS context and different learning environments.

Research Question 1: Recognition

*What influences processes of recognition (self and other) in the learning identities of students in PRS?*

Recognition Relating to Nature Identities

Within Gee’s (2000) analytical framework of learner identity for research in education, a nature identity refers to the perspective that who we are is determined by aspects of our nature which is beyond our control, for example our genes. This perspective was reflected in comments made by the students in both RLCs that suggested some learners were more intelligent when they could learn concepts more quickly. However, there were also counter statements that considered learner identities to be mostly constituted through dispositions
that anyone could adopt. This was especially true in RLC1, where concepts such as having a growth mindset, an idea originating in the work of Dweck and Leggett (1988), explicitly divorce the potential for learning from assumptions about natural intelligence by being framed in terms of one’s willingness and openness to learn. Learner identities were therefore constructed with the understanding that they may only be influenced by biological characteristics in limited ways, and anyone had the potential to be successful in academic endeavours. The students’ fundamental perspectives on the meaning and significance of learning are therefore transforming as they have new educational experiences in PRS.

Students across both centres described having their knowledge and ability questioned due to their limited English fluency on arrival. However, the role that ethnicity plays into assumptions made around language ability was only visible in RLC2 due to this centre having students that came from a greater variety of national contexts than RLC1. Jannat explained that the teachers believe Myanmar students “don’t really know English [so] won’t be able to cope, so … start from the lower class”. This demonstrates an awareness of an ethnic bias in the external recognition students receive. As a phenomenon this has been well documented in the wider literature (for example, Bal, 2014; Gee, 2000) and suggests students will be directed down particular trajectories due to assumptions made about their ability to learn based on their biological characteristics.

Recognition Relating to Institutional Identities

Institutional identities in Gee’s (2000) framework are those that are authorised by the social organisational scheme of an institution. This could be a formal organisation with clear roles, such as teachers and students in a school, or those defined less tangibly, such as the identity roles that work together to form the classroom community (e.g. class clown, or teacher’s pet). A significant facet of this perspective that emerged from discussions with the students in both RLCs is the institutional identity of a secondary school leaver/higher education applicant, authorised by attainment of a secondary school leaver’s certificate from an official examination board. Certification has been widely acknowledged in the broader literature as a structural barrier for access (e.g., Anselme & Hands, 2010; Bajwa et al., 2017; Crea, 2016; Fricke, 2016). However, comments made by the students suggest proof of credentials goes beyond instrumental aspects of access and reflect a fulfilment of a recognisable identity profile in the field of higher education.
A complement is seen here with the work of Perry and Mallozzi (2017), who argue that the educational experiences and aspirations of youth with refugee backgrounds are often not visible to authorising figures within higher education institutions. Furthermore, although a variety of certificates are accepted within the RLC environment, recognised certification falls within particular local and international academic traditions, with a deficit view taken of qualifications gained in non-English speaking national settings outside of Malaysia. The requirement for qualifications such as IGCSE is therefore more than just a measure of ability to succeed in higher education; it is also a form of gatekeeping learner identities that are perceived to be legitimate. Again, much like those in Perry and Mallozzi’s (2017) study, the students are acutely aware of the way they are positioned within the broader educational institution in Malaysia. They are understandably anxious about their ability to achieve access, especially in RLC1, which did not have an examinations programme at the time of the fieldwork, so had less access to opportunities develop learner identities that were legitimately recognised.

Having come from backgrounds with less marginalisation, the students hope to regain a sense of the learners they felt they were prior to forced migration. In lieu of formal qualification, the efforts that the RLC1 students take to prepare a portfolio of less legitimately recognised certificates is the result of an attempt to circumvent the standard institutional identity profile. They hope that the volume of certificates will be a suitable substitute for a formal secondary school completion certificate to get them into an interview and plead their case, or as Ubax suggested, “persuade” admissions staff. Here the students demonstrate an attempt to blur boundaries of belonging associated with access procedures, similar to the observations made by Chopra and Dryden-Peterson (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020a, 2020b). Although much of the work in these studies refers to experiences after achieving access, the observations made here reflect similar limitations in the ability of the students to blur boundaries in the context of more opaque institutional norms of higher education compared to secondary level. However, the presence of sympathetic individuals with authorising power in the higher education field means some institutions accept applications from youth with refugee backgrounds, which provides an explicit space in which the students can make a claim for recognition. Together with a legitimate example made by trailblazing PRS youth who succeed in accessing higher education through this alternative recognition pathway, the students in
RLC1 have within their grasp a strategy to influence the way they are recognised through the application process. This strategy underscores the difference in approach to education that students in RLC1 have as they are more inclined to pursue opportunities provided by programmes external to the school, whereas RLC2 mostly provides such opportunities in house.

The annexation of the refugee education system as informal learning centres creates the refugee learner as an institutional identity profile that is authorised by a variety of decentralised stakeholders. As Sulgina and Gopal (2018) note, the education system open to PRS students in Malaysia is not accurately described as parallel to that of the host nation due to its profound disadvantage in terms of resources and opportunities available to students. Many researchers have focused on the refugee learner identity profile in settled situations and have noted that these students are often positioned as lacking compared to their local peers (e.g., Bal, 2014; Morrice, 2009, 2013). However, the separation of these students into ‘inferior’ RLCs in the Malaysian PRS creates a whole system, as diffuse as it may be, that defines and upholds an image of the refugee learner as one who is lacking due to the limitations of their educational opportunities. The refugee learner is also shaped as an institution identity through the limits placed on what institutions and courses students can apply for, and the procedures they use to apply for these. For example, when Jane said “due to circumstances, you have to make some choices that against your instinct” to explain why she switched from pursuing Medicine to Law. Being positioned as a refugee learner therefore imposes structural boundaries on the kinds of learner identities that students can gain legitimate recognition for, which is especially true for science-based learning opportunities.

Recognition Through Discourse Identities

A discourse identity is one that is constructed intersubjectively through discourses and their material circumstances, and is subject to the power of recognition that is legitimised between players in a social field (Gee, 2000). Institutional identities, such as that of a refugee learner discussed above, are upheld by legitimised discourses and discursive practices that give meaning to the presence of individuals who are positioned into certain institutional categories. In RLC1, the students differed in their understandings of the discourses that shape the refugee learner institution identity. Those who viewed their relative difference within the field as being mostly subject to a resource gap believe that they can garner recognition
equivalent to local or international students if their schools had greater study opportunities or facilities. Others, however, perceive higher level discourses about what it means to be a refugee to uphold the refugee learner identity profile. For example, when Alex explained that “being a refugee itself is just a gap, like, whatever you do, when you study and you try to take the exam, you will still have a gap there.” Similar to the argument made by Piacentini (2012), broader notions of refugeeness obscures the diversity in identities that can be legitimately expressed by those who are recognised with this label and positions the students as fundamentally less capable. These alternative perspectives result in different approaches that are taken to traverse the metaphorical “gap”. As a resource gap, the students feel that with enough personal dedication they would be able to find alternative routes to achieve the kinds of recognition they desire, such as via work experience. The other group of students, however, feel that they have limited power to challenge deficit discourses to achieve the kinds of recognition they seek. They don’t believe they can ever be viewed as equal to their peers but can still achieve access to higher education with external assistance to challenge these discourses.

A more general theme across RLCs is that a global rhetoric about the centrality of education has had a clear influence on the forms of recognition. For example, the association between the international syllabus that is taught and the IGCSE qualification with the ‘Cambridge’ brand confers greater legitimacy on the students’ achievements in secondary education. As Darlie comments, “Now we're doing Cambridge ... this is IGCSE and everyone’s knows about it.” The students believe that they would be viewed as more capable and therefore better placed for entry to a university with a Cambridge certificate rather than an equivalent certificate from a local or other national education system. This is illustrative of how Westernised educational discourses are legitimised as privileged forms of knowledge, as argued by Apple and Buras (2006), and define the identity profiles of acceptable candidates for higher education who can fulfil these. Separation of the RLCs from the local education system and limited oversight from the host nation, as observed by Sulgina and Gopal (2018), has created spaces through which such discourses can proliferate. This is illustrative of the ways in which a diffuse humanitarian relief system influences the development of refugee learner identities. Narrative tropes about “thinking-out-of-the-box” in RLC1 and “going deeper” in RLC2 are a clear indication of students resonating with the discourses associated
with Westernised models of education. Students may have already begun to develop these kinds of views about education prior to forced migration. However, these ideas have been supported and encouraged to flourish as key parts of their learner identities during their times in the RLC due to the greater legitimacy afforded to the international brand of education and the value this infers on their experience as learners.

Wortham (2006) argues that students and teachers also bring their previous learning experiences and the expectations of the processes of recognition that they will encounter, which are built upon and transformed at the school level. Similarly, Yuval-Davies (2006, 2010) argues a variety of discourses that are encountered contradict, overlap, and complement each other in a way that cannot be reduced to macro social categories, which can be observed in the RLC environments. In RLC1, the international education rhetoric met the metacognitive model of being a Somali Muslim Learner, and in RLC2 this was interpreted alongside diverse and multicultural expectations of education. The students’ ongoing identity development was therefore subject to a dynamic interplay of receiving new information and making sense of it in terms of their previous understandings. As discourses developed in different social contexts meet, there are areas that reinforce previous understandings, those that complement or extend, and those that conflict. What it means to be a good or successful learner is therefore upheld by a hybrid model of recognition that encompasses the multiple perspectives on learning held by individuals at the RLCs. The discourse identity of a good learner might not be so heavily dependent on getting good grades and certificates at school as it was before, but students in both RLCs maintained their beliefs about being a good person and found ways to fit this with the demands of the new environment.

Recognition Through Affinity Identities

The affinity perspective refers to identities that are constructed in association with groups of people through mutually recognised semiotic practices (Gee, 2000). Throughout their daily lives, the students operate within various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that place different demands upon, and create the conditions for, alternative or competing expressions of identity and modes of recognition. RLC2 had a weaker alignment between communities of practice in their RLC and refugee/religious community lives compared to RLC1. Managing the different demands of recognition in each led to the separation of affinity identities as the students moderate their behaviour to achieve a sense of belonging in each community. Some
of the students in RLC2 felt they could express a more authentic identity in the RLC, and that they needed to hide certain facets of their identities outside to avoid negative recognition. For example, Jane stifling her normally bubbly personality at Church but feeling more open with friends in the RLC. It is possible that some identity moderation is experienced by students in RLC1 too but given the closer match between RLC and community values these did not conflict to the same extent. The multicultural environment of RLC2 provides greater scope for recognition of previously illegitimate identity expressions as new ideas were jostled between and experimented with. However, these do not necessarily translate beyond the socio-cultural space of the RLC, causing the students to retreat to previously established norms in their identity expression. Students therefore balance internal representations of themselves with divergent external representations, depending upon the recognition they receive (Holland et al., 1998; Vignoles et al., 2011), leading to a tension in internal processes of recognition.

The authenticity achieved in their identities within both RLC settings arise from feelings of mutual understanding with peers who could empathise with their situation. This is reflected in comments such as Rebecca describing the RLC as a “small family”, or when Hadi explains that the students stand “under the same flag”. Through these vital peer relationships, the students construct their own community of learners, and through acts of recognition amongst themselves negotiate the boundaries of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The RLC and broader curriculum and practices set the framework within which this construction takes place, for example by facilitating certain patterns of interactions through the timetable and classroom activities. However, the students fill this out with various communicative and semiotic practices that define what it means to be a learner at that school. The notion of “being serious” in RLC1 illustrates this quite clearly. The teachers and other figures of authority may insist on the need to be serious about their education, but what this means is interpreted by the students who adopt it by consensus as a running mantra and support each other in upholding this message through their learning. Similarly, the idea that school was not strictly necessary to achieve success in life was shared by students in both RLCs. Sharing these discourses about education brings the students together and gives them a sense of being connected and motivated to continue learning despite facing challenges. Together they
Conflicting Processes of Recognition

Throughout their time in the RLCs each of the students have had to negotiate a degree of conflict between internal or self-recognition, and the ways they are recognised externally as “refugee learners” across the four identity perspectives suggested by Gee (2000). Instances of a mismatch between internal and external forms of recognition, such as being placed in a lower grade than expected, has led to frustration and demotivation. This is partly due to feeling their progression through education is being stifled, but more fundamentally due to the difficulty it causes in relating to education and learning in a context that is unfamiliar and at times quite alien to what they had experienced before. Consequently, the students can feel quite lost in terms of their ongoing identity construction, which was demonstrated clearly in Geele’s difficulty explaining why he felt demotivated while in Malaysia without his family. This feeling is often quite pronounced at first, but never fully subsides since the students face profound uncertainty about their futures and struggle to rationalise facing difficulties and demotivation in areas that previously seemed mundane.

As the students acclimatised to the learning environment (or gained more familiarity with the rules of the game in the Bourdieusian sense) they were better able to match internal and external forms of recognition. Doing so gave the students a more secure grounding in the learner identities they constructed and allowed them to achieve a sense of themselves as a refugee learner that felt more authentic as part of their ongoing narrative learner identities (Mercer, 2017). Shifts in behaviour to achieve this alignment were evident, for example, when Tom “told the teacher can I do the placement test, can I do the placement test? I repeat it over and over and over,” in a bid to prove his ability to study at a higher level.

Even in situations where students repeatedly encountered misrecognition, such as negative appraisals of their work or having their needs subjugated to outsiders, they did not completely abandon previous understandings of themselves and build radically different learner identities in the RLC. Their tenacity in persisting in RLC-based learning is illustrative of the flexibility in their learning habituses; this plasticity is also recognised by Reay (2009) and Davey (2009), adding layers and reconfiguring a previously developed habitus rather than
passively incorporating socio-cultural practices (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The values they associate with being a good learner, such as standards of behaviour and a moral code developed in childhood, are not significantly challenged in the new context. These consistent values assist in bridging towards rationalising new or developed forms of internal recognition, such as “being serious” about learning or “going deeper”, which encompass the new understandings students have developed. What it means to them to be a learner in a PRS context is therefore a complex interplay of recognition they received in the past and renegotiating how this works based on the forms of recognition they encounter in the RLC setting.

A sense of mutual understanding that is constructed through the affinity perspective of their learner identities with their peers helps the students to remain committed to education, despite conflicting recognition elsewhere. Feeling like they are in the same boat helps the students feel a level of authenticity in their identities. Yet they still feel frustration at not being able to fully achieve the recognition they desire outside of these peer relationships. These competing emotions are in a delicate balance. An important aspect of what keeps students committed to pursuing their education and persisting with a project of aligning internal and external forms of recognition is their emotional commitment to fulfilling the roles of refugee learners in multiple dimensions in their RLCs (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). The affinity perspective on their identity is fundamental in underscoring this emotional commitment in being able to identify the sorts of learners they wish to become in other students that face similar challenges to them; the identifying with aspect of identity (Vignoles et al., 2011). However, there is a limit to how far this solidarity can sustain commitment to the RLC, since it is possible for students to maintain friendships beyond the RLC. For example, Rebecca left and re-joined RLC1 only after she felt she could achieve identity salience in learning once again, and Mariam had left RLC2 when I returned for the second period of fieldwork to pursue examinations by herself to prepare separate science subjects.
Research Question 2: Agency

*How do students experience agency in the learner identities they can construct in PRS schools?*

Agency to influence discourses

De Costa (2010) argues the classroom has the potential to be a site for the negotiation of cultural politics and habitus transformation through the expression of students’ agentive will. How, then, is this agentive will facilitated or constrained in the context of the RLC classroom? As Wortham (2006) suggests, meta-discourses are interpreted and take on new or alternative forms at the local level. What it means to be a learner, a refugee, and a refugee learner, although influenced by external discourses, are also negotiated through daily practice within the classroom. In addition, encountering new discourses from different educational perspectives, and interacting with people from other learning cultures, creates a wider space for authoring identities through which agentive will is exercised (as discussed by Holquist, 1990). The students then demonstrate agency by contributing to the proliferation of intangible artefacts and semiotic practices that define the boundaries of the new space of authoring. Adopting and developing ideas, such as “being serious” or “going deeper”, express the meanings that the students associate with processes of learning that underscore the construction of learner identity. For example, when Sam describes his friend at school in the following:

> He’s not serious, you know, he’s just, he just wants to have fun...I think he’s educated, but he doesn’t want to study, like, he’s just forcing to study. He just come to school, sit there and go back.

Here Sam identifies a difference between going through the motions of learning, and actively engaging with the process of learning, which in turn shapes how he approaches education to fulfil the trope of being a “serious student”.

Encountering different cultural perspectives gives the students freedom to experiment with new identity constructs that were not perceived as legitimate in their previous learning. They can therefore construct identities that encompass previously illegitimate self-knowledge and associated expressions. However, while this expanded space for authoring facilitates a greater degree of agency in identity construction, there are also aspects of students’ previous experiences and understandings that are excluded. Despite this, there is evidence that
students maintain personal understandings that are not positively recognised in the RLC environment, such as beliefs about punishment in schools. This was much more evident in RLC1, where there were closer links between RLC and the community and therefore a greater degree of overlap between the identities roles the students embody in and out of the RLC. However, there were some cases where students in RLC2 maintained previous ideas, particularly around challenging lessons learned through their Character Building syllabus. Students therefore maintain aspects of their identities constructed prior to arrival in Malaysia as part of a working self-concept, even if these aspects are no longer considered to be legitimate. This suggests that identity confirming recognition that was achieved prior to forced migration can transcend national and temporal borders to facilitate agency in the construction of learner identities. The students may choose to abandon previously held ideas, or they may be convinced to through ongoing debate and negotiation of boundaries. Nevertheless, having the internal sense of legitimacy to hold on to these values, or not, illustrates an additional dimension to agency that defines a personal space for authoring that does not fully overlap with that understood more broadly in the RLC.

The students also exercise their agency by resisting external rhetoric about refugee learners being less capable due to having interrupted learning or suffering from trauma, as noted by Zeus (2009) in the context of the Thai-Burma border PRS. Being part of a learning community that is composed of individuals who have experienced forced migration and those sympathetic to their experiences allows meta-narratives constructed around deficit to be challenged as part of a space in which agency can be expressed. Discussion of these themes is included in non-assessed aspects of the curriculum in RLC2 and workshops related to personal development such as building self-esteem in RLC1. This is in stark contrast to the experiences of students with refugee backgrounds in resettlement contexts, who as minorities often fall victim to negative stereotyping of their ability and lack of agency to construct positive learner identities (e.g., Bal, 2014; Morrice, 2009, 2013). However, even in the relatively safe space for negotiating the politics of identity construction in the RLCs there are still instances in which the students have their agency stifled. For example, when Rebecca explained that she felt negative comments made about her and the other students’ behaviour by a local volunteer were taken verbatim by the RLC leadership and used as a reference for judging their future behaviour. In these instances, negative external perspectives on the
agency that should be afforded to students in RLCs creep in and taint the positive messages that the curriculum seeks to foster. The students are then once again positioned as helpless victims who should be grateful for the philanthropic actions of a privileged outsider. This observation is illustrative of the difficulty in extending agency afforded in the RLC community of practice beyond its borders.

Agency to achieve desired forms of recognition

Agency was both facilitated and stifled in the students’ efforts to be recognised externally in ways that they feel is consistent with their internal recognition. This was achieved with varying success, for example Tom’s attempt to switch classes by taking some initiative to prove his ability. However, it was also met with failure, for example when Rebecca explained that the RLC “forget everything, they just remember that teacher” in favour of a negative account of the students’ behaviour by a volunteer teacher discussed above. Successfully challenging undesirable forms of recognition to be seen in a way that feels consistent with a core sense of self is important for students to feel they have re-established a meaningful learning trajectory and a sense of self as a learner. This reflects Dumenden’s (2011) argument that agency is expressed through attempts to build capital positively in a new cultural context to achieve recognition as a capable learner. However, failed bids for recognition lead to a feeling of stagnating, giving rise to uncertainty in learning trajectories. Denial of agency through misrecognition is both exacerbated by and exacerbates the feeling of being trapped in other areas of their lives, resulting in demotivation towards learning. This feeling can be understood in terms of the socioemotional base of the students learner identities and the threat of a developing apathy towards learning that doesn’t feel authentic to their understandings about themselves as learners (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Thoughts of abandoning education in the RLC were clearly expressed by some of the students, which demonstrates a form of agency to choose between meaningful life pathways. However, at the time of the fieldwork, they felt sufficient agency in claims for recognition to have a positive payback on their emotional investment in learning so persisted with education in the RLC.

The students of RLC2 also activated their agency when they shifted between identity profiles to achieve a sense of belonging in different contexts. This reflects a similar observation made by Lee (2020) in exploring dual Malaysian/refugee identities expressed by youth with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia. This was more salient for the students of RLC2 who felt that they
separate and demarcated identities between school and community contexts. Their shifting behaviours aligned their identity expression to the kinds of discourses and recognition they met in different environments. However, when it comes to understandings about learning, there is evidence of the students challenging the discourses that they encounter outside of the RLC. Although each student stated that their families and communities placed high value on education, there was also elements of tension and distrust for the RLCs, and a feeling of apathy for education amongst some of their peers. Some students actively challenged these ideas to promote the importance of continuing learning while waiting for resettlement. Emphasising aspects of their learner identities as a discourse identity through narratives of becoming also represents having sufficient agency to shift between identity constructs in time. By focusing on the developing dispositions alongside the formal artefacts of education, such as examination certificates, they broaden the scope of what it means to be educated, as Harry expresses, “just doing the test doesn’t define if the person is a good learner or not”. Whether they achieve access to higher education or not, they can achieve a personal sense of being an “educated person” or having “become somebody” and in doing so express agency in the identity they have constructed.

Agency bounded by the social structure

Evans (2002) notes that expressing one’s agency is a socially situated process that incorporates understandings of our place within the social milieu that is itself shaped by the past, framed by options available in the present, and by perceptions about what possibilities are available in the future. This is reflected in the limits placed on agency by the lack of tangible resources such as learning materials, and intangible resources such as the RLC structure and programming, that were available to the students in the Malaysian PRS. These limitations reduce the ability of the students to construct identities consistent with the kinds of learners they want to be based on prior understandings and hopes for the future. This resulted in the shift in trajectory which some students, like Jane, feel go against their natural learning interests. In response, however, the students have reclaimed agency in the construction of the learner identities by assuming more responsibility over learning and its outcomes. They may not be able to choose the subjects they want to study but they have adapted their study habits to ensure success in what they could do. For example, being seen to have cultural capital by becoming a doctor may not be possible, so they might switch to
achieving such cultural capital by becoming a lawyer. In RLC1, the students also engaged with any opportunity to gain certification through programmes and workshops to ensure progression towards educational goals. However, Stewart and Mulvey (2014) note that fear and uncertainty about the future may force individuals with refugee backgrounds to make choices under conditions that are not of their choosing, leading them down paths they would otherwise not have considered. Switching to another educational trajectory may give greater sense of security about their futures, as Ubax explains, “if you don’t, like, have education, you can’t survive in this world”. However, it illustrates the bounds within which socially-situated expressions of agency, as described by Evans (2002), are exercised.

Reorganising learning trajectories to recapture a more abstracted form of becoming demonstrates how the students across both RLCs exercise agency within this bounded space. A deficit rhetoric is challenged by reconstructing what it means to be a student in PRS, making visible valuable forms of capital that are often overlooked in the case of new migrants in higher education, as claimed by Harvey and Mallman (2019). Being a refugee learner is restructured by showing resilience through an ability to adapt to and withstand the change in learning environments and trajectories imposed by forced migration. It is also understood in terms of the development of socio-critical literacy (Gutiérrez, 2008; Núñez & Gildersleeve, 2016) in being reflexive about who they are in the face of negative assumptions and repeated set-backs. Agency is therefore expressed through the resilience and reflexivity that the students construct as part of their learner identities and is manifest in the self-control they exercise in response to challenges. The opportunity structure may be limiting, but agency can be exercised by pushing the boundaries of this space and reworking the tangible and intangible resources at hand to pursue alternative outcomes to those that seem pre-destined. This was especially important for the students in RLC1 in the absence of an IGCSE programme to help them fulfil legitimate learner identities for access to higher education. They therefore have to push a little harder against the boundaries of this space and do so through challenging higher education access procedures.

Agency to imagine a positive future self

A temporal dimension of agency as captured by Markus and Nurius (1986) is manifest in the ability for students to maintain a variety of possible selves as part of a working self-concept, and in strategies to avoid becoming negative possible selves. Participation in education allows
students to assume some agency in this regard by opening opportunities to imagine being an educated person and the possibility, even if it is somewhat limited, to realise this through higher education. Students across both RLCs developed a broader understanding of what it means to be educated in terms of dispositions, maintaining alternative possible selves and imagining trajectories to fulfil these different identity profiles. This proliferation of new possible selves, however, is met with foreclosure on previously imagined possible selves. Although students demonstrate agency in trying to mobilise resources to fulfil goals that they had in mind prior to forced migration, some have switched pathways and given up on some possible selves. Agency also diminishes with time as the students move closer to culturally defined expectations to form and support a family. This diminishing agency is manifest in the foreclosing of previously imagined pathways to higher education. The older students face this looming threat to fulfilling identities as educated people and are in a race against time to complete secondary education and progress into higher education within a culturally defined window of opportunity. As time moves on, they are left with fewer strategies to avoid negative possible selves. The space in which they have to express agency is therefore reformed as a result of forced migration, providing new possibilities whilst also limiting other options.

The students’ frustrations are exacerbated when seeing their local and international peers and those who remained in their countries of origin progress into higher education. Meanwhile, seeing peers with refugee backgrounds abandon secondary education in favour of livelihood options is an ever-present reminder of the threat to their possible selves. However, as suggested earlier, higher education is only a part of the picture that links students to desirable possible selves through different temporal frames of reasoning. Oysermen and Dawson argue that “people are less likely to take future-focused action if the ways in which they reason in and about time do not match the ways in which they imagine their future ‘me’” (2019, para. 8). The students maintain a sense of agency by keeping a view of themselves in the atemporal reasoning system. Higher education is then a variable aspect of this image of a future educated self. Completing higher education would infer the institutional identity profile of a graduate. However, they imagine the educated self in a number of ways; including through social dispositions, work-related experience or expertise, and having sound moral character. They can therefore create mental if-then simulations that could link themselves to
desirable possible selves despite uncertainty about where these possible selves will be in the future. Failure to access higher education is then not as great a loss as it might be if the students were pining all their hopes on future becoming within this temporal reasoning system. The shift in the way that student reason in and about time is therefore key to operationalising their agency and moderating their motivation to continue with education.

Research Question 3: Trajectories

*How do students construct learning trajectories in the context of education in PRS?*

The key goal that mediates and shapes students learning trajectories in both RLCs is the general idea of becoming an “educated person” or as Wexler (2005) argues - becoming “somebody”. This influences the students’ educational decision making through an interplay of past, present and future notions of self. The choice to apply to university is not made at an isolated point of time at the end of secondary school, characterised by the specific socio-cultural arrangement of forced migration. Rather, it incorporates multiple temporal levels through which the students construct identities, drawing parallels with Collins’ (2018) theory of *desire*. These temporal levels combine to define what it means to be educated, or who the “somebody” is. The students bring ideas from their pasts and reconfigure them in terms of their present realities in the ongoing construction and reformulation of a future image of themselves. This in turn influences the trajectories that students take to achieve a desirable form of becoming (or avoid becoming that would lead to negative imagined possible selves as Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest). Participation in higher education is also not an end in itself but fits into this broader trajectory of “becoming somebody”. Students find ways to make education and higher education opportunities fit with a preferred future self, such as Tom pursuing Business with a view to Interior Design, or Mariam leaving school to prepare for separate Science IGCSE exams. They also re-direct trajectories via different subject options to achieve the status of an “educated person”, as discussed above, or even entertain trajectories that don’t involve higher education at all. In this way, the students are not passively subject to options that are available to them but rather use these options to reclaim the trajectory that was disrupted by forced migration. Understanding learning trajectories towards higher education therefore requires placing decision-making processes in the broader context of an unfolding life narrative.
Education, and higher education in particular, is enshrined as an essential facet of becoming through the socio-cultural discourses that the students have been exposed to. However, being a part of a marginalised PRS education system has distanced the students from opportunities that enable the participation in this trajectory of becoming. A parallel can be seen here to Wexler and colleagues’ (2005) theory about the decline of the social in schools of the urban underclass in the US. With limited opportunities to follow the expected trajectories of becoming, the students find an alternative grounding to establish a sense of becoming somebody, in what Hattam and Smyth (2003) describe as an ongoing project of establishing a social identity. The students must therefore find a way to re-establish discourses associated with recognisable trajectories of becoming that have been lost during disruption caused by forced migration. This is possible through the construction of a future identity profile as a discourse identity that can circumvent the institution identity profile of a university graduate. Being able to hold the position of prestige or respect in society that is associated with being educated/somebody can be achieved through recognition of experience related to expertise in a field. It is also constructed in terms of creative problem solving and an ability to hold your own in social interactions. Additionally, it is achieved by being recognised as a good person, which is built on a foundation of a moral character influenced by the students’ backgrounds, and by being open and non-judgemental of other cultures.

Broadening the view of possible trajectories towards becoming educated/somebody to routes that do not involve higher education is therefore a way for the students to maintain a positive future self-image in the context of uncertainty. Like the students contemplating school to work transitions in Hattam and Smyth’s (2003) study, the students seek to position themselves advantageously in terms of available opportunities. This was demonstrated when Hadi asked himself, “Should I get experience, or should I get degree because I don't think degree matters anymore... when I’ll be older, nobody would be going for degree or something, they just want experience,” or Darlie’s investment in social media “as a stand-by, second choice,” to promote a potential career in singing. However, the students are acutely aware of their own lack of legitimacy to influence discourses that may influence their trajectories towards becoming “somebody” due to their refugee status. There is therefore much greater validity in fulfilling the institutional identity profile of a higher education
graduate because this confers firmer recognition in an international context. Essentially, graduating from higher education and the associated discourses about being “educated” and becoming “somebody” can more reliably overcome the refugee institutional identity profile and its associated deficit discourses that would limit alternative claims for recognition. Although feeling conflicted, the students are somewhat reluctant to abandon the pursuit of an educational trajectory through higher education.

Although students may entertain the idea of entering higher education at a later point in their lives, the opportunity to do so is constrained by an enduring socio-culturally mandated window of opportunity defined by the expectation to form or take a role supporting the family. In this case, an undesirable self is constructed through failure to successfully complete secondary or higher education. It is not necessarily the fulfilment of a familial obligation because becoming a wife, husband, parent, or supporter, may be seen as a desirable form of self. Like the students of Kakuma Camp in Bellino’s (2018) study, education provides a promise for the future but this promise may not be able to be realised against the social obligations the students face and the structural reality of the refugee education system. Hadi’s dilemma above is therefore indicative of a struggle to choose what the best trajectory might be to achieve a desired future identity status before the onset of an undesirable possible self.

Although there are examples of students that have successfully gained access to higher education in the Malaysian PRS context, they are few and far between. There is also no guarantee that the returns on higher education will lead to opportunities to work in the associated profession, raising questions about the purpose of participation as suggested by Zeus (2009) and Waters and LeBlanc (2005). Investing in pursuing higher education therefore poses a risk of failure to fulfil a personal expectation, as well as the expectations of those around them, which could have a significantly negative impact on the students’ self-esteem. For the younger students in the study, such as Tom, Jannat and Harry, this is less of a threat since they feel they have time. However, it is a significant source of uncertainty and angst for older students like Hadi, Rebecca and Sam, who are quickly approaching a point in time in which a firm decision needs to be made that might foreclose on a range of imagined possible selves.
Gender and Learner Identity

Although not the focus of this research, it is evident from the results that the students had different gendered experiences as learners in the RLC that cut across each of Gee’s (2000) perspectives on learner identity. The Somali and Pakistani students who received secondary education in their countries of origin attended gender segregated schools and had limited social contact with boys of their own age outside of their families. These gender segregated schools set the expectation for how the students were expected to fulfil gender roles in society in their respective countries of origin and reinforced modes of recognition that supported development of gendered learner identities. An analysis of the specific context of gender and education in countries like Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen is beyond the scope of this research. However, many of the girls expressed hearing more traditional ideas about girl’s education prior to arriving in Malaysia, for example when Rebecca said:

*When I was in the high school, most of the girls in my class, they were, they were married. Why? They will just say, tell me, that’s our culture.*

Although the students were also exposed to contemporary discourses that reflected the changing role of women in their societies, many of their peers didn’t perceive much value in investing in education if it wasn’t going to be useful for a future that they imagined was inevitable. The girls therefore had to negotiate conflicting discourses about the roles they were expected to fulfil in society as they built understandings of themselves as learners. Rebecca described her family as being more “open-minded” and was therefore better able to develop some internal recognition as a learner on a trajectory towards being a professional woman. Similarly, since Leaf was the youngest girl in her family, she felt she could also engage more with contemporary discourses about becoming a professional woman since her older sisters had already fulfilled a culturally defined family duty to get married and provide a family.

None of the girls in this research expressed that they had a desire to leave school and get married or that they were under significant pressure to do so. In a similar manner to other aspects of their learner identities, a greater degree of exposure to international discourses through the RLCs has favoured a more Westernised view of women’s participation in education (Apple & Buras, 2006). Both RLCs had explicit messages about promoting girls access to education, which reinforced the learner identities that the girls had been developing.
prior to forced migration (Wortham, 2006). The girls were therefore quite acutely aware of their right to access education and were sympathetic to others in their community that felt a tighter grip on the boundaries applied to their agency through the limitations placed on their ability to develop positive learner identities as girls (K. Evans, 2002). Mariam was able to challenge some of the limitations her parents placed on her pursuing education as a girl. For example, when her parents express a concern about her travelling alone to university in Malaysia, Mariam argued:

"My parents] said you have to study. You don’t stop studying. So, if I cannot travel to that place, how I will study? So, maybe [laugh] they will obviously say, “Yes, okay, you can go.” Or they can trust me that I am going alone. I'm not a kid. I'm a young girl. So, I can travel alone.

The girls therefore feel a greater degree of agency in the construction of learner identities that challenge traditional stereotypes of girls in education, and some have also constructed an identity around taking the role as a role model and activist on this front within their communities.

The broader space for agency and ability to explore previously illegitimate expressions of their gender is also seen in some of the girls’ participation in sport. Mariam has developed a love for basketball, Elise plays mixed-gender cricket, and Alex and Leaf are enthusiastic about playing with the RLC1 girl’s football team. Jannat also explored developing a learner identity around participation in sport (she was also elected RLC2’s women’s sport captain), and along with other students identified her gender expression using the term “tomboy”. This was a term that she learned when she came to RLC2 and was used to gain legitimacy in a more androgynous identity, preferring to keep her hair short and not behave in a typically feminine way:

"I used to play a lot of sports. And even after school, we used to have to wait for, like, one hour, 30 minutes for the bus. So, in that time, it used to be, you know, really sunny. So, it would be really hot. So, instead of sitting, like, how in this school, typical girls sit, I would just run around with guys and play the games that they are playing. So, they’d be, like, tomboy, tomboy, tomboy.

Although she would occasionally receive negative recognition, for example being asked if she was a girl or a boy, gaining positive recognition through valued relationships in her peer group community of practice (Wenger, 1998) allowed Jannat to incorporate “tomboy” as a positive part of her learner identity in the RLC. This would not have been likely had she stayed in
Pakistan as she would have faced more pressure through school and community to wear a hijab and present in a way that was more consistent with the image of an Ahmadiyya Muslim Woman.

The wider space for agency within the RLC provides flexibility in the ways that the girls express their gender identity, breaking the traditional patterns of gender performativity, to use Butler’s (1990) expression. Previously, the girls would be influenced by behaviours and discourse about what it means to be a girl and how this is manifest in the school environment in their countries of origin. They would therefore reproduce a variety of identity tropes associated with being a female student that would reinforce these gendered identities and continue the proliferation of ideas about who a girl at school could be. The RLC environment disrupts these patterns of performativity, exposing the girls to new ways in which they can construct gendered learner identities. The girls also expressed that entering a mixed gender environment allowed them to develop social skills for interacting with boys in the future. This demonstrates an expectation that in the future they will conduct social relationships in a different way to what is traditionally expected in their communities. A broader space through which to express agency in the RLCs therefore facilitates the flourishing of learner identities that the girls had begun to develop prior to arrival in Malaysia towards the possibility of becoming professional women.

Despite the opportunity to develop more positive feeling learner identities as girls, Jannat’s experience shows there are still stricter community expectations on gender expression. Her identity as a “tomboy” is a more explicit example of a subversion of a traditional gender role, and Jannat expressed concerns that one day, when she had left the school, older women in the community would view her more as an adult and expect her to present herself according to community standards for an Ahmadiyya Muslim woman. Like many other aspects of the students’ learner identities discussed in this chapter, gendered aspects of Jannat’s learner identity might not be legitimately recognised beyond the space of the RLC. This is just one example of the tension that is faced in the construction of gendered learner identities in the RLC environment. As was discussed in the trajectories section, the boys also expressed concerns about how their trajectories were expected to unfold as men, and Sam’s story of having to work in childhood as the oldest male is a counter example to Leaf’s the opportunity to pursue education as the youngest girl. Although a full discussion of gendered experiences
as learners is beyond the scope of this research, these examples show that there is a clear need to explore these experiences in more detail to understand the differences in trajectories the students may follow.

Conclusion

When re-entering education following forced migration, the students must negotiate a changing relationship to society while navigating their role as a student in an RLC. Many of the students join their RLC still trying to understand what it means to them to be a refugee. This shows in their personal narratives of migration, and they continue to make sense of themselves in their new and unfamiliar situation as they re-establish learning trajectories in a context of marginalisation. The main theoretical driver that influences the students’ behaviours and identity construction is the concept of becoming, whether that be becoming an “educated person” or a more abstractly defined “somebody” to use Wexler’s (2005) phrase. Considering their experiences as learners in RLCs seeking access to higher education as part of a broader life narrative in this way allows us to understand how a variety of factors across temporal frames influence the learner identities that the students develop. What they chose to do in terms of accessing higher education encompasses the understandings they have constructed in the past, hopes that they have in the face of an uncertain future, and how these meet with the resources at their disposal in the present moment of considering a study application. On these journeys of becoming, recognition and agency are interlinked as the students navigate new spaces for authoring identities. Throughout the discussion here it is evident that contextual differences across the two RLCs shape different patterns of recognition and space for agency. It is therefore possible to explore the similarities and differences in the learner identities and trajectories that the students construct, which are underscored by an abstract shared sense of becoming.

Across both RLCs, the students expressed a similar experience of frustration at being recognised in ways that differed to that which they had experienced prior to forced migration, and that conflicts with the ways they recognise themselves as learners internally. In addition, a limit to the tangible and intangible resources at their disposal restricts the agency with which the students can construct learner identities consistent with trajectories of becoming that they had imagined prior to forced migration. However, the students demonstrated that
aspects of their former learning experiences that are no longer viewed as legitimate can transcend spatial and temporal borders and continue to influence identity construction. Within the RLCs the students also had a wider space within which to express agency in their learner identities and drew on resources available to reconfigure their learner trajectories to recapture a positive sense of becoming. Despite this, their reconfigured trajectories are tentative due to the culturally imposed expectations from the students’ communities to conform to expected patterns of becoming adult community members, manifest through the expectation to form and support families according to traditional expectations of gender. The learner identities that the students constructed were therefore tentative and so they were anxious to complete secondary education before the opportunity to access higher education expired.

The RLCs differed in that RLC2 had an IGCSE programme, whereas RLC1 did not, and RLC1 had a much closer connection to the refugee community that RLC2. Without a certificate programme, the students in RLC1 were driven to push the bounds set on their agency to create a wider space through which to make claims to be recognised as credible higher education candidates. The students in RLC2 did not face the same pressure, since they had access to internationally recognised certificate that they could use to access higher education. However, the difficulty and setbacks faced in pursuing this kind of learning trajectory has left the RLC2 students somewhat disenchanted with RLC-based education, causing them to lay bases for identity construction outside of formal education to ensure alternative pathways for valued becoming. The closer connection between RLC and community in RLC1 means that learner identities developed through learning are more informed by community values, and particularly so because of the mostly mono-cultural student body. The greater distance, both geographically and culturally, between RLC2 and the students’ communities, and the more diverse student body has created a broader space for experimenting with previously illegitimate identity expressions. However, it has led to the sensation of separating identities for some students, meaning identity construction within the RLC, although feeling salient and authentic, might not be transferrable to other contexts in their lives.

Many of the students at each RLC experienced low motivation to continue studying, which challenged the way the felt about themselves as learners since they had enjoyed and achieved a sense of personal worth from their previous schooling. The hopes that they have of entering
higher education is therefore similarly low. However, there are limited examples of students from RLCs accessing higher education in Malaysia that gives hope to students. This is thanks to the willingness of certain institutions to open places for students in PRS and exploit legislative grey areas that allows them to enrol. The students have therefore not abandoned the possibility of higher education playing a part in a life trajectory towards becoming someone. However, even if the students succeed in enrolling on a higher education programme, there is no guarantee that they will be able to reap the rewards of returns on their personal investment in their education due to the restrictive labour policies in the Malaysian PRS.
CONCLUSION

My own recognition of the importance of this research project stemmed from my time working in a refugee learning centre in Malaysia. I noticed that many of the seemingly capable youth in the learning centre and beyond that were of university age were not filling all the funded places in higher educational programmes on offer to them. This made me think about what might be limiting access for these youth to higher education opportunities, despite the removal or compensation of many of the structural barriers. Given the somewhat convoluted way in which higher education institutions exploited loopholes to make places available for youth in PRS, I also wondered how being educated in a marginalised system affected the way youth in PRS feel about themselves as learners. Being excluded from participation in state run education sends a very clear message about being unwelcome and raises questions about how the education the students did receive would make sense in their lives given the strong link between systems of education and preparedness for adult citizenship.

To explore these issues, this research set out to answer the following overarching research question:

*How do students in protracted refugee situations understand and experience the role of ‘learner’ in PRS and how does this affect learner identity and learning trajectories?*

Reviewing the current literature on migration and mobility revealed the need to explore the interaction between structure and agency, as well as think about migration in terms of a non-linear relationship between past, present, and future temporal frames. Research should think about those who are subject to forced migration not solely in terms of two-dimensional figures subject to conditions beyond their control, but as individuals who influence systems of migration and host nations along a complex journey of becoming. Rather than refugees or asylum seekers, the students in refugee learning centres make sense of themselves not only in terms of their journey through forced migration, but also through a range of understandings developed before and during these journeys and mediated by hopes that they have for the future. Using learner identity as an analytical lens, this research therefore sought to understand the forms of recognition and agency that the students experienced in their role
as students, and what impact this had on their trajectories, understood as a broad and not necessarily linear temporal horizon.

**Becoming a “refugee learner”**

So, who are these students as learners and what has been learned about their experiences of education in PRS? It is important to note that none of the students ever expressed an explicit sentiment to the effect of, “I am a refugee learner,” or, “being a refugee learner means this to me.” However, they are acutely aware of the disadvantage they face as learners due to having the status as youth in PRS, and that they are viewed as different to their local or international peers because of this. Upon entering PRS they are confronted with a new institutional identity profile of *refugee learner* (Gee, 2000), upheld by the annexation of learning for those who claim refugee status through the network of RLCs in Malaysia (Sulgina & Gopal, 2018). Within each RLC, the students receive messages about ways in which they can construct positive learner identities as youth with refugee backgrounds. These messages are influenced by Westernised discourses that are associated with international education relief initiatives and are understood alongside previous understandings of learning, in a manner that was suggested by Wortham (2006), to create localised patterns of recognition for “refugee learners” in each RLC. In RLC1 this was predominantly in the form of Somali Muslim diasporic learners, emphasising the need to become good people and respect your religious identity. In the more multi-cultural RLC2, the students structured identities around respecting difference and understanding for other’s beliefs.

Despite the discourses that have shaped positive learner identities, neither RLC was immune to the threat of deficit discourses about learners with refugee backgrounds being too traumatised to succeed in education (Waters & LeBlanc, 2005; Zeus, 2009, 2011) and that their previous educational experiences did not sufficiently prepare them for an English-medium curriculum. These discourses were manifest through requiring students to repeat grade levels in English and cases of subjugating their needs to those of volunteers and teachers. Although the students were able to explore a wider space for identity expression than they had in the pre-migratory education experiences, they felt that there was some tension between the forms of recognition they received as learners and the ways they recognised their own ability internally. Looking forward, they also perceived that they would encounter deficit views of their capability as they made claims to fulfil other institutional
learner identity profiles, for example as a legitimate candidate for higher education. In RLC1, feelings about this situation were expressed using the metaphor of a “gap”, with students differing in terms of whether they perceived this to be a resource gap, or as a lack of ability to influence discourses that shaped the kinds of recognition they encountered. In RLC2, students differed along lines of being pragmatic about their future educational trajectories and what they could realistically achieve, or being idealistic, believing that with enough effort they could accomplish what ever dream they set out for themselves. These divergent views in each RLC split the students into two broad camps of those who thought they could escape the “refugee learner” institutional profile and those that felt they couldn’t.

Regardless of which side of this divide the students found themselves on, they challenged deficit views associated with the label “refugee learner” and reframed these in terms of reflexivity and resilience. Reflexivity is demonstrated in their ability to rationalise divergent experiences of education between their past and their present and restructure learning trajectories to hold onto a positive and valued sense of becoming. Past, present, and future temporal frames combine as part of an ongoing internal negotiation of the students constructing a sense of themselves as learners and cannot be easily separated to narrate a linear progression of their learning biographies, which has been noted in previous literature (Collins, 2018; Mosselson, 2006). Resilience is shown through the tenacity that the students have as they face multiple instances of misrecognition of their learner identities, as they are confronted with a deficit view of their capability as learners, and in face of pressure to leave RLCs in pursuit of low-skilled and potentially exploitative paid work. Resilience is also shown in the agency that students demonstrate to reconfigure learning trajectories and push the boundaries that are placed on the agency they can legitimately express when seeking access to higher education. However, there are limits on these aspects of reflexivity and resilience according to the tangible and intangible resources available for students to construct identities and the temporal horizon imposed on the exercise of learner identities before culturally defined expectations of family formation.

As the students navigated a changing educational context in PRS they developed an understanding about being a refugee learner as a discourse identity (Gee, 2000). Although the specific content of these discourses depended on the environment in each learning centre (Wortham, 2006), common themes that were found at each RLC was that a good or effective
learner was someone who had good moral values, could develop useful practical skills for the workforce, was able to successfully navigate social situations, was open and respectful of other people’s cultures and beliefs, and had good problem solving skills. Developing these kinds of discourses about learning are in some ways influenced by values taught through international curricula (Apple & Buras, 2006), however they also show a degree of scepticism about traditional book-based learning and the need to gain experience that is not typically assessed as part of an internationally recognised high school leavers certificates. Legitimacy for these discourses are upheld through the affinity identity (Gee, 2000) that students create as they build mutual understanding with their peers as part of an RLC “family” (Rebecca, RLC1) or “under the same flag” (Hadi, RLC2). These “refugee learner” discourse/affinity identities may help the students regain a sense of themselves as learners but there is a risk that they won’t have legitimacy beyond the RLC environment. This is manifest in the case of separating identities that was expressed by some students in RLC2 and in the concerns that the students have about entering higher education before succumbing to culturally imposed pressures to form a family and abandon trajectories of formal learning.

The lack of legitimacy afforded to the refugee learner discourse identity is likely to be even more important as students leave the relative safe space of the RLC and interact with a higher education field that is embedded more firmly in the host nation context. These identities are also unlikely to be visible to authorising figures in higher education institutions (Perry & Mallozzi, 2017), and the institutional identity of a refugee learner, together with its deficit views, is likely to be more salient. However, participation in a migration regime of education not only leads to the transformation of PRS students, but also the educational system and associated practices itself (Collins, 2018; O’Reilly, 2015). The RLCs develop programmes and activities to support the students’ trajectories towards higher education, engaging a variety of other organisations. For example, the CERTE Programme that runs an intensive course to help the students gain soft skills for applying to higher education (Birtwell et al., 2020), international schools, and local people to help with resources, and examination centres to provide a space for students to gain qualifications. The students also try to subvert existing regimes of higher education by appealing to higher education providers to provide alternative routes for entry, reflected in Joseph’s remark, “If they didn’t accept you just try to show them what experience you have done, what are the things that you did to, in your life, what
experience you have and these things”. The presence of these students in the system, as marginalised as it is, has raised questions about the practices and logic of the system itself and potentially the development of a more emancipatory view of the institutional refugee learner identity.

From the outset of this research, it was clear there would be no single answer to the question of how students in PRS understand and experience the role of learner. Attempting to do so would be to reduce the experiences and identities of the students to an artificial, one-dimensional figure, which is contrary to the transformative paradigm adopted in this study. However, concluding by analysing the identity category of a refugee learner has given a valuable insight into the identities and experiences of the students in the two RLCs. Exploring the discourse and affinity perspective of learner identity has provided a clearer view of how the students view themselves as “refugee learners” beyond institutional categories that set them apart as being less capable. Part of becoming a “refugee learner” is to restructure learning trajectories to fit with a higher-level sense of becoming certain types of people in the future, while also attempting to avoid undesirable future identities. Becoming a refugee learner is therefore fraught with tension as the students balance competing demands on what sorts of people they should be and negotiate trajectories of becoming that reach into an uncertain future. It is easy to see why some students are tempted to abandon school-based learning trajectories for alternative pathways of becoming outside of education. However, for now they persist with attempts to access higher education and overcome imposed views on what it means to be a “refugee learner” on a journey to “becoming someone”.

**Methodological considerations:**

This research is based on the transformative philosophical foundation understood in terms of a critical realist perspective. The primary methodological approach to realising this philosophical understanding was the use of a participatory model based on recruiting students in learning centres as active participants, and analysis using a combination of interpretative phenomenological and narrative analysis. As was outlined in Section 2, there were difficulties in implementing this approach as originally planned due to obstacles faced in the field. Firstly, I was not able to secure the level of access that I felt was required to be able to fully engage with the students as co-researchers. I had some pre-existing relationships in the field that worked as an entry point to the two learning centres, which facilitated an
initial level of trust when entering preliminary negotiations for discussing access. However, both learning centres limited the time that I was able to spend with the students and my ability to observe the general goings-on. Although there might have been some slight hesitation on grounds of trust for allowing unhindered access, much of this came down to the centres being stretched for resources and not feeling able to monitor a fairly intensive research project in addition to competing demands in the delivery of education programmes and other activities. This was clear in the safeguarding concerns that RLC2 cited regarding the use of cameras. Although it would have been possible to alleviate these concerns, it was easier for the learning centre to just say no as the additional oversight they felt they would have needed to commit to an external researcher was a lower priority.

Despite the limited access, I was able to spend a good deal of time with the students to facilitate engagement as active participants. As previously discussed, this research falls at level 6 of 8, under “adult initiated shared decisions”, on Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992, p. 84). I brought the topic and broad scope of the research, but the students were able to contribute in terms of setting the groundwork and boundaries of what would be discussed in the one-to-one interviews. This was particularly important for achieving a sound ethical foundation, particularly with the active intention of me using personal reflexivity to engage with the issue of there being a power imbalance so that I wasn’t coercing the students to participate on terms that they didn’t agree with. Reflecting on the outcomes of the interviews, both one-on-one and in the focus groups, provided some valuable insights into how the students made sense of themselves and the situation they were in. For example, I initially thought that the learning centres were fundamental places for making connections and building friendships and that this was a key finding. However, when reflecting on this with the students, they were quite dismissive of this idea and most felt that friendships within the school were secondary at best to their other motivations for joining the RLCs. In this way, they were able to contribute meaningfully to the analysis of the data and the overall direction towards the conclusion.

A longer period of time in the field during the writing process and more access to the RLCs during the main education programme rather than after the school day had finished would have allowed for much more depth to these discussions, since the focus groups felt quite rushed. However, it is important to consider how the students wished to benefit from the
research. It is clear from the candidness in which they spoke during their one-to-one interviews and the impassioned way in which they debated with their fellow students in the focus groups that they wanted their lives and their experiences to be visible and understood. Some commented that they had not discussed these topics with other people and had not had a space in which to reflect on the ideas that they had presented, so articulating their ideas was a useful activity. There are also some students who have reached out following the end of the research to ask me questions about higher education as they continue to make sense of their educational trajectories. However, more access would have meant being more invasive, which might not have been what they wanted. Other research of this type notes research fatigue that participants experience when they are caused to reflect on issues that may be difficult for them to think about or make sense of (Karooma, 2019; Omata, 2020). In future work that I conduct that seeks to incorporate a model of co-research, I would therefore think about how to engage participants that in turn allows for meaningful contributions to the research product without encroaching on other activities and priorities. For example, an initial scoping stage might explore what activities they already engage with that might blend with a research activity rather than defining too many explicit time slots for data gathering or reflection.

Contribution:

This research contributes to a wider body of research on learner biographies, identities and access to higher education for students with refugee backgrounds by providing greater insight into the relatively less theorised experiences of students in urban PRS rather than resettlement contexts or camps. In urban PRS there is an important interplay between the relatively isolated refugee education system and the field of higher education, which is explicitly placed within the broader educational and national development context of the host nation. Identity development is then subject to opportunities that are available to transition this divide. The students must therefore link the positive and authentic feeling identities they develop in their RLCs with the ways in which their identities are legitimately recognised outside of this context. This contrasts with access to higher education programmes that are explicitly targeted towards camp settings or those that engage with youth that have right to remain and can therefore participate more meaningfully in civic life of the host nation. The insights here reflect the discontinuity in the refugee education system that Bellino identified
in Kakuma Refugee Camp (2018) but highlights that this discontinuity is characteristically different as the students generally do not have an expectation to participate in nation building of their home country. There is also broad agreement with other work that identifies school as an important place for students to anchor identity development in the face of an uncertain future (e.g., Dryden-Peterson, 2017). However, drawing on other bodies of work not necessarily related to experiences of students with refugee backgrounds (e.g., Hattam & Smyth, 2003; Wexler et al., 2005) exposes competing demands that directs bases for identity construction outside of the school context.

Considering research into migration and mobility more broadly, the insights gained here support an approach to considering experiences of migration and forced migration in a more holistic context of the whole life of the individual (Collins, 2018; O’Reilly, 2015). It also demonstrates that richer insights can be gained by challenging normative notions of time and space (McNevin, 2019) and the complex and non-linear ways in which those who are subject to forced migration relate to these (Mosselson, 2006). The aim of this research was not to provide the comprehensive approach to the study of migration and education that is requested of the broader research field by Pinson and Arnot (2007, 2020). Rather, as a research project that seeks to implement a transformative philosophical approach, the work hopes to contribute meaningfully to a collective agenda for change in the way that research seeks to represent the experiences of those who are forced to migrate. It does so by demonstrating the deep and unexpected insights that can be gained into the experiences of PRS by applying the theoretical perspectives on approaches to forced migration in empirical work.

As is outlined in the introduction, this research began with a concern about access to higher education for students in PRS, but this aim developed over time to become an exploration of becoming. The issues that emerged from the data explored the construction of identities and reconfiguring of learning trajectories as these pertained to education but also the students’ future aspirations more broadly. This thesis therefore contributes not only by conducting empirical work with a group of students that are profoundly marginalised in the broader literature on the topic, but also by directing the theoretical discussion to an exploration of the genuine voices and concerns of the students. Although I was not able to facilitate student participation as co-researchers as intended, engaging them as active participants through a
methodology designed within the scope of a transformative paradigm has made the lives and experiences of the students more visible to a multidisciplinary field.

What has been made visible more specifically is that becoming refugee learners is a process fraught with conflict between how the students view themselves and how they perceive the world wants to view them. They have agency to push the boundaries that are imposed on the types of trajectories they are expected to follow or use this agency to explore routes to pursue valued forms of becoming outside of education. Higher education is only a piece of the puzzle in the broader aspect of the students’ lives and their ongoing journeys of becoming. Thinking back to the quote from Terry Pratchett (1992) that caused me to muse on the experiences of the students at the beginning of the research, the students are looking for pathways down the proverbial mountainside that will lead them to become the type of person they wish to become. They try to avoid being pushed along the deep grooves that have been trodden by so many before them towards an expectation of academic failure and a lower station in life than they’d hoped for. The students push back and try to forge their own path. Further opportunities should be presented to facilitate student agency, so they don’t have to be the “bicarbonate of history” (ibid., p.14) in order to be treated equally to their local and international peers.

As an exploratory study the aim of this research was not to produce a list of recommendations for working with students in PRS to achieve access to higher education. Some broad suggestions, however, can be made, such as further encouraging higher education admission staff to consider the learning and experiences that students have that do not fall within the framework of currently recognised qualifications. In addition, it could be suggested that RLCs think critically about the messages that are received by students in their curriculum and that they prepare capable students for navigating the difficult divide between their RLC experience and that which they will face when being educated alongside local and international students. As an exploratory study, there are questions that arise that warrant further research. Firstly, there needs to be ongoing work that looks at what happens beyond completion of higher education in PRS, linking back to work already completed that explores the logic of student’s participation (Waters & LeBlanc, 2005; Zeus, 2009, 2011). At the time of the fieldwork the first tranche of students who had achieved access were graduating, raising questions about how this in turn fits into their journey of becoming as it became a reality. The research here
also focussed on students who were in education and were motivated to apply for higher education. These students did, however, talk about their peers who had abandoned education or who were not fully invested. Drawing on work related to school-to-work transitions (e.g., Hattam & Smyth, 2003), it would be a useful complement to this study to understand experiences that might have led youth away from formal education. This would provide greater insight into the frustration and conflict that students in PRS face as they express agency to make decisions about their futures and how higher education may or may not fit into that picture.
Appendix 1 – Introductory Sessions

The first stage of the research is the most intensive as there are many topics to cover to ensure that the co-researchers (students) understand the aims of the research and are able to make an informed choice about whether they want to participate. Ideally the 8 sessions will take place over the space of a month, however they can be condensed to one session per week. There should be enough time if sessions need to be delayed due to other activities in the school although I hope to complete this stage in less than 6 weeks. Each session is designed to take 1 hour, or 2 hours if they are combined. There won’t be any homework, however the co-researchers may be asked to think about what we have discussed in the session or bring specific things to the class. In the final session the co-researchers will make a decision about whether they want to participate in the research and permission will also be sought from parents and then the research can begin.

Session 1: What is research and why do we do it?
In this session the students will be introduced to the idea of research and how it is done at Universities, in the Government and at research institutions around the world. They will be shown the process and various types of research about different topics and understand the difference between qualitative and quantitative research.

Session 2: What is learner identity
The research primarily aims to explore how learner identity influences the decisions refugee students make about pursuing higher education and how this impacts the way they interact with the process. Various concepts of learner identity will be presented, and the co-researchers will think about what they understand about learner identity. The co-researchers will also be introduced to reflexive thinking so that they can find ways to understand themselves through the process of research.

Session 3: What is an interview?
In this session the co-researchers will learn about different types of interview and what their purpose is. They will also get the chance to design their own interview and then interview each other about a chosen topic to experience both sides of the interview process.

Session 4: Hermeneutics – understanding how other people experience the world
A key part of qualitative research in trying to match your understanding about another person’s life experiences with how they understand those experiences themselves. The co-researchers will explore some of the issues in achieving such a match and how our own experiences may shape the way we view the lives of others.

Session 5: What kind of questions can we ask?
In this session the co-researchers will start to develop questions that could be asked around the theme of our past educational experiences. Working in groups they will find out more about each other’s educational journey and what was important to them along the way. The questions developed in this session will inform the sorts of questions asked in the actual interviews.

**Session 6: Presenting research**

In this session the co-researchers will learn more about how research findings are presented and distributed throughout the academic community and to the general public. They will also explore how research can have impact with policy makers to make a lasting change for communities.

**Session 7: The research agreement**

In this penultimate session the co-researchers will explore issues of their rights and ethics of research in more detail. They will also work together with the lead researcher to develop an agreement that will dictate how the research will proceed so that they can formally give their consent to continue.

**Session 8: Finalising and signing the research agreement**

The final session is for finally reviewing and then signing the agreement formulated in the last session. Practical considerations for the interviews will then be addressed and the research can formally begin.
Appendix 2 – Participant Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Access to Post-Secondary Education Research for Students in a Protracted Refugee Situation

This informed consent form is for secondary level student in the Somali Refugee Community and who we are invited to participate as co-researchers in the project titled "Access to Post-Secondary Education Research for Students in a Protracted Refugee Situation”.

Name of Principle Investigator: Jonathan Joseph Birtwell
Name of Organization: University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education
Name of Sponsor: Cambridge Trust
Name of Project and Version: Access to Post-Secondary Education Research for Students in a Protracted Refugee Situation

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:
- Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)
- Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

I am Jonathan Birtwell, researching about access to post-secondary education for my PhD project at the University of Cambridge. I am doing research about how secondary school students experience barriers and develop learner identities in protracted refugee situations, like that in Malaysia. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in the research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research.

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me or of another researcher

Purpose of the research

In Malaysia only a few refugee students manage to go to university. This research aims to understand how more students can be successful in going to university by understanding the problem from the point of view of the students themselves. In the research we will understand how refugee students develop as learners in refugee learning centres and how this affects their
The research is also participatory, which means the students will be involved in planning and analyzing the data that is collected and helping to make conclusions.

**Type of Research Intervention**

This research will involve your participation in three interviews that will be one hour each. It will also involve focus group discussions, classroom observations and participation in research planning sessions. For parts of the research you will also be asked to complete tasks such as mapping your educational journey and taking photos for a photo-diary.

**Participant Selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because you are currently a secondary school student in a refugee learning centre that is due to graduate soon and is perhaps thinking about continuing your education. Your knowledge and experience is therefore valuable for the project.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. If you choose not to participate you can continue studying in the learning centre and your studies will not be affected.

**Procedures**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in:

- 3 interviews, one-to-one that will be one hour each
- Follow up meeting, one-to-one, to discuss the outcomes of each interview
- Research planning sessions before each round of interviews
- Focus group discussion at the end of the project
- Record a photo-journal as part of your second interview

During the interview we will sit down in a private part of the learning centre where no one will be able to listen to our discussion. In the interviews you will be asked to talk about your experiences of education in the past, present and future. You will be asked questions about how you feel about learning; what you think about the way you learn and what you hope to achieve in the future.

If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question. No one else but the interviewer will be present unless you would like someone else to be there. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else will access to the information documented during your interview. The entire interview will be recorded, but no-one will be identified by name on the tape. The recording will be kept on a secure cloud computing service (OneDrive). The information recorded is confidential, and no
one else will have access to the recording. The recording will be destroyed after July 2020 at the latest.

Duration

The research will take place over a 4 month period starting from 26th March 2019. During that time the tree interviews, focus group and research planning sessions will take place. This will usually require 2 hours a week during school term times, except for the focus group, which will take a full afternoon.

Risks

In this research you may be asked to share some personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion, interview or focus group if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give us any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview.

Benefits

By participating in this research as a co-researcher you will develop skills in researching, including planning research and analyzing data. You will also learn how to be self-reflexive so you are better able to understand and overcome challenges you face in education. As a mark of appreciation for participating you will receive a certificate and a letter that explains your participation form the University of Cambridge.

Reimbursements

If you need transport to or from research sessions or interviews you will be reimbursed for taking a GrabCar or similar service.

Confidentiality

The research being done in the school may draw attention and if you participate you may be asked questions by other people in the school. I will not be sharing information about you to anyone outside of the research. The information that will be collected from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a pseudonym on it instead of your name. Only the researchers will know what your pseudonym is, and this will be stored on a secure cloud computing service (OneDrive).

I will ask you and others in the group not to talk to people outside the group about what was said in the group. We will, in other words, ask each of you to keep what was said in the group confidential. You should know, however, that we cannot stop or prevent participants who were in the group from sharing things that should be confidential.
Sharing the Results

Nothing that you tell me today will be shared with anybody outside the research team, and nothing will be attributed to you by name. The knowledge generated from this research will be shared with you and your school before it is made widely available to the public. Each participant will receive a summary of the results. Once the results have been shared with the school and research participants, they will be published so that other interested people may learn from the research. The results may them be shared in academic journals and at conferences.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so and choosing to participate will not affect your status as a student in any way. You may stop participating in the research at any time that you wish without affecting your studies. I will give you an opportunity after each interview to review your remarks, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask them later, you may email me at the following email address:

<email redacted>
Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have been invited to participate in research about access to post-secondary education research for students in a protracted refugee situation, which includes the following research activities:

- One-on-one interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Photo journal

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant____________________________________________

Signature of Participant______________________________________________

Date ___________________________
    Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. One-on-one interviews

2. Focus group discussions

3. Photo journal

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent__________________________

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent__________________________

Date ___________________________
    Day/month/year
Certificate of Participation

This certificate is awarded to

Student Name

for their successful participation as a

Co-Researcher

in the research project

Exploring the Impact of Learner Identity on Learning Trajectories Towards Post-Secondary Education for Students in a Protracted Refugee Situation

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Faculty of Education

Date Signed
2nd September 2019

<signature redacted>

Lead Researcher
To whom it may concern

This letter confirms <name> participation in the research project, “Exploring the Impact of Learner Identity on Learning Trajectories Towards Post-Secondary Education for Students in a Protracted Refugee Situation,” as a co-researcher. The purpose of the research was to take a student-centred approach to the issue of access to higher education for students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia. The project adopted a participatory methodology that allowed the students involved to contribute to design, data collection and analysis.

During the project, <name> engaged in the following activities:

- Discussion workshops about theories of learner identity, ethical considerations relating to research and research methodology.
- Education mapping to follow their education trajectory.
- Two one-to-one interviews to explore experiences of education in their life.
- Creating a narrative of their learning journey following the interview.
- Storyboard of their everyday experience in education.
- Reflective writing exercise regarding their hopes for education in the future.
- Two focus groups to explore themes centred around their education past, present and future with other co-researchers.

Throughout the research <name> has learned about the process of research in the social sciences and the importance of ethics and informed consent. Together with other co-researchers they helped to develop a rights framework for participation in the research and contributed to the design and scope of the research. In addition, through the focus groups they assisted to analyse the results and draw conclusions related the outcomes of each of the individual interviews and practised skills in reflective practice.

I would like to thank <name> for their excellent contribution to this research project. In future they will be in a strong position to assist with other research projects and make informed choices about their participation and use of personal data.

Yours faithfully,

<signature redacted>     <signature redacted>
Appendix 4 – Sample Session Presentation

Session presentation used for the second focus group with RLC2:

Focus Group 2

PRESENT EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Focus Group 1

Aims:
To discuss the themes that emerged from the first set of interviews – analysis.

Your role:
You are co-researchers – you will contribute to the understandings we develop about your past experiences of education.
Rules of working in a group

Respect each other’s point of view
- you don’t have to agree
- be polite and respect boundaries

Time management
- don’t take too much or too little time for one idea

Everyone should contribute
- your point of view is important
- don’t take over the discussion

Stay focussed
- discuss only matters that relate to the topic

Encourage each other
- ask questions and show interest
- recognise each other’s contribution

Be honest and know your limit
- say if you are uncomfortable

Theme 1 – My ‘role’ at school

‘I am the funny one’
‘I am the chatty one’
‘I am the one people go to for help’

‘I know my role at the school and other people recognise me in this way.’
Theme 2 – Being an educated person

‘It is important for me to go to school and become an educated person. If I am not then I won’t be able to be successful in life.’

Theme 3 – Finding a way to university

‘I can’t study what I really want to but I will use the resources I have to study anything I can at university.’
Theme 4 – Age and learning

‘I have to finish school before I am too old. If I don’t, I will have to quit school and get a job.’

Theme 5 – Friendships

How important are friendships to your life at school?
- Someone to help you learn?
- Makes school more fun?
- School is a place to make more friends?

How do you feel about learning in a multicultural environment?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Exploratory Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J: Let's begin with your time at primary school when you were in Yemen. So, what do you remember about being at primary school?</td>
<td>Simple kind of memory about primary school that could be shared by many people. <strong>Suggests a fairly universal experience of starting school.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: I don't remember too much thing, but I just remember when I was in grade one and, I think grade one, the first time I went to the school in Yemen, er, I was so happy. In the end of the day I lose my sister, I didn't find my sister, and I start crying and crying [laugh]. I think half an hour I was crying. That's all what I remember.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: My school was so big, and the class, the class is so big, and I think you'll find in the class 70 students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J: How did the students sit in the class?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: In the class? Er, mostly they have table, I think, a table like this is will sit two... The class was too big, it was 2, 2, 2, 2, 2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separating genders</td>
<td>J: <strong>So</strong> did girls and boys sit together in the class?</td>
<td><strong>Too far</strong> — <strong>suggests a long distance away.</strong> The way this has been used throughout suggests it means 'very far' rather than desiring for it to be closer, however seems to emphasise the separation of the genders here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: No, no. Even in the school, the school is for girls, and we have another school, it is too far from the boys, yeah. That school is for the boys and our school is just for girls. And the private school, private school is mostly girls.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>J: OK, and did you think about anything about boys and girls being separated, or was that, did that just feel normal?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questioning gender paradigm | R: Yeah, sometimes I ask myself, “Why they separate us?” They were just, er, that is haram, that’s it. I don’t know why. Er, after that time, it’s not, like, about, like, haram, or that stuff, they are scared of the girls and the boys to be together, [incomprehensible]. Until now, our traditional, our culture doesn’t allow to the boys to talk to the girls or that stuff, anything.

J: OK, so how do you feel about that situation?

R: I feel like, I don’t know that I feel that time, I just feel like, what, I feel like it’s not fair. The boy can do whatever he want, the girl, like. When I was in the high school, most of the girls in my class, they were, they were married. Why? They will just say, tell me, that’s our culture.

J: So, they were already married?

R: Yeah, they will say, “That is our future,” or they will just say, “My father wants that,” or “My mama said.”

J: So, they get married, but they still continue to come to school?

R: Some of them, yes, and some of the, they just leave the school.

J: OK, so did, were you ever in that kind of position where you had to consider getting married? |

| Unquestionably following the religious ideal, however she questions this in her mind. Suggesting it is not about following the religion. Scared – quite a strong descriptor, suggests a lack of trust and influence over what would happen if boys and girls mixed. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender inequality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling suppressed by the gender norms in society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Not a personal choice, like they want to. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family pressure</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow their family’s wishes. Suggests a lack of personal control of major personal life decisions and the future direction of their lives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of agency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Societal norms interrupt schooling – marriage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Open mind         | R: My family were open mind. They will just say to me, do, finish your high school, and that’s it.  
|                  | J: OK, so what did you think about your friends that got married?  
|                  | R: I feel bad, really, feel bad. It was, before they got married, I would just say to them, “Think again, this is for your future. The marriage is not your future. Man isn’t the future. Marriage isn’t the future.” They thought that thing like you have to do it. [incomprehensible] It’s OK, it’s alright.  
|                  | J: OK, so you think that they weren’t, maybe they didn’t have the same attitude towards education that you have?  
|                  | R: Maybe, yes.  
|                  | J: Can you think of a reason why?  
|                  | R: Maybe...I don’t know. Seriously.  
|                  | J: OK, so in the class, when you were in the class, what kind of student would you say that you were?  
|                  | R: Me? Er, in high school?  
|                  | J: Yeah, let’s say high school.  
| Challenging cultural expectations | **Open mind – normal societal values are close minded.**  
|                  | Family buck the trend – value education over marriage.  
| Different mindset to friends | Different perspective on marriage to her friends.  
|                  | Trying to convince her friends to think differently – perhaps because she has a voice in her family, she thinks that they might be able to convince them otherwise, but perhaps they are happy to get married.  
|                  | Not able to understand her friend’s perspective on education. |
| Different mindset to friends | R: I was somehow crazy, but at the same time I was doing hard work, yeah, and I was different from the other students... so different. Er, I don’t know.  
J: What made you different?  
R: Maybe my culture, because I am Yemeni and Somali. My grandma from Somalia and I came out a bit black... and they are white, so I am different from them, both the colour and how they think. Erm, they think just inside the box and I think outside of the box.  
J: OK, can give an example of how they think inside the box?  
R: Hmm, they will just say, erm, I will study and finish high school and get married, give children, that’s it. That’s our life. But me, I guess no, once I finish high school I will study, I want to see the world, I want to visit a lot of countries. I have a lot of dreams, and they don’t.  
J: So, what, what do you think is different about your life that gives you this idea to go and see the world and experience things in a different way to what they kind of want?  
R: I don’t know. Maybe because... I’m not sure. I know I like to be successful person. Maybe I was watching motivational video of successful people.  
J: On YouTube? | Feels different to the other students around her and feels this is a big difference.  
Skin colour is a physical marker of difference in culture.  
Maybe the break from being pure Yemeni gives her a space to be different.  
She wants to achieve things not aligned with the Yemeni culture after finishing school.  
It seems it is generally important to finish school for girls, but there is no expectation for them to use the education in work or other endeavours.  
Influenced by online content. |
| Racial difference |  |
| Difference provides flexibility |  |
| Value education |  |
| Aspirations push boundaries |  |
| Influenced by online content |  |
Rebecca’s Narrative

Before coming to Malaysia Rebecca studied at a girls’ school in Yemen until grade 12. During her time at this school, she questioned the need to separate genders in her mind and the purpose of beating students as a punishment. This shows that she is critical about the world around her. She also speculated about some alternative to beating as a punishment, which she thought would be more appropriate, however these ideas remained as thoughts. She describes herself as ‘crazy’ and her friends as ‘too crazy’, which seems to refer to the erratic way in which they would skip classes to avoid punishment. Although Rebecca considers that she shares some understanding with these friends, which is the basis for their friendship, she considers that she was a bit more sensible because she would skip class less often and would also ensure that she copied the notes afterwards. This shows she has a responsible attitude towards progressing with study, even if she sometimes plays truant.

Addition - One of her 'crazy' friends is now a single mother in Yemen - consequence of this 'crazy' attitude. Rebecca was less crazy because she is more serious about education.

Rebecca feels that her aspirations differ from those around her. She intends to finish her education, travel the world and become a businesswoman. She feels that the other girls in her school do not have these aspirations and instead imagine getting married in the future, which may involve abandoning their education, which is the local custom. Rebecca objects to the notion that she needs a man to have a secure future and feels frustrated that other people have a limited mindset. As a consequence, she feels that she is different to the others, especially because there is a big difference in cultural values between Yemen and Somalia. However, these differences don’t prevent her from making friends and navigating school life. When the war began in Yemen, she felt that there was more pressure to subscribe to the custom of marrying young and relying on a man for protection because the situation was uncertain, and it may be a way of ensuring a more secure future. However, she holds on to her ambition to first become happy in herself and marriage is only if she finds the right partner.

Rebecca values “out-of-the-box” thinking. She understands this in terms of not blindly following cultural expectations, having an ability to creatively problem solve, and being willing to realise your dreams rather than just having them. She considers her alternative views about gender norms and her aspirations for the future are examples of her own out-of-the-box thinking and has an affinity for other people who she identifies as out-of-the-box thinkers. She considers that watching motivational videos online has contributed to her mindset and also the example set by her cousin. She saw her cousin creatively solving problems and noticed that he would often be consulted by family members when they had issues. She also witnessed the influence he had on her sister when they were married and how her sister’s mindset changed to be more open. She aspires to think openly. She feels her family in general
are quite open-minded, but not as much as she is. When she was about 19, her family suggested marrying a cousin in Canada. This suggestion in some ways satisfied the cultural expectation, however respected her stated wish to travel and have some independence. When she refused, they respected her wishes and now leave her to do as she wants.

Rebecca values education as a tool for achieving the kind of future she aspires to. During her journey through Jordan then Indonesia on the way to Malaysia she was frustrated by the lack of opportunities and low quality of life. When she isn’t pursuing some form of education, she feels like she isn’t moving forward towards her goals and that her life is being wasted. In Malaysia, she was dissatisfied with the education that was on offer. At first, she was frustrated that she had to repeat grades and learn things she had already completed, but in English. Although she felt she was improving her English, she didn’t feel she was progressing fast enough towards her goals and only saw limited value in the education she was receiving. She feels she would be able to overcome some of these obstacles and get access to university if she could get her high school certificate and has been making contact with people in Yemen to send these. However, due to the war this has been a long process and she doesn’t have the certificate yet.

At times Rebecca has almost given up on education due to the difficulties, frustrations and disappointment she has felt in trying to complete high school and go to university. However, she has managed to hold on to some hope and motivation to continue. She feels this motivation comes from inside herself and not through the support of family and friends. She has demonstrated an ability to reflect on what options are available to her and try to use these to progress along her desired educational trajectory. For example, although she doesn’t feel the education at her school is particularly helpful, she finds the programmes and trainings focussing on soft skills and vocational studies, such as business, useful for her. This is because she is learning new content rather than repeating things she has already learned in English, and she can meet people from different backgrounds and experience new things. She can get some certificates that she hopes will help her get to university. These courses have also influenced her aspirations, igniting her desire to become a businesswoman, so have been useful in shaping her educational trajectory as well as helping her move towards her goals.
<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1 - Managing relationships at the school</strong></td>
<td>She was like, er, [click], you are just here for me, you will do whatever I want. If sometimes I have programme or that stuff, the school is allowed us to go to that program to leave the job, because important our education is first. Whatever I got she, just look very angry, any reason to, er, to report me. I just leave that job. After, I think, after [laugh] three or four months also she left the job. It is good if you have good teacher to, er, to, she can understand you and you can understand her. So, the first I think the first five months, I was with the teacher and she can, she was very good with me and she was understand me if I’m late, if I’m sick, if I didn’t do something, if I am in programme, she will just give me her time. It’s fine, girl, I’m here. ...they have to respect themselves like each other and everyone to do her or his job at that time, yeah. Er, no one, no one is higher than the other, just same.</td>
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<td><strong>Mutual respect for beneficial mentor relationship</strong></td>
<td>[TA] It is good if you have good teacher to, er, to, she can understand you and you can understand her. I think she was having some issues with the attitude. Yeah...because when you work with someone, you have to respect that face but she didn’t. J: Has he ever given you bad advice? R: Hmm,... No. Sometimes he is negative [laugh]... But I know when he is negative and why he is negative. I don’t know, like, everyone has own opinion of me, yeah. I don’t see their mind to know their thoughts...but we are close to each other, so, I know him. Because sometimes friends uh, they just have to support you and to be with you, but even he, he don’t want to, for me to prove that. He knows me, I’m really good. So-.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Closeness and mutual understanding with peers</strong></td>
<td>Support from peers in education He’s always like, he is the one to support me in my class whenever I didn’t put my homework or that stuff, he’ll just shout at me just write it now. Yeah, he will support me. And any new ideas, any crazy ideas, I just share with him. If he didn’t, yeah, he’s always there. J: How do you, do you make any plan or any effort to try to be better at Science? R: Yeah, I’m trying now to do some plans with, er, with him to, because the exams is near and I have to work hard. I have to work hard, more hard.</td>
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<td><strong>Support from peers in education</strong></td>
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<td>Balancing friendships with focusing during class</td>
<td>Not most of the time because when I sit with him [laugh] I just tell him, I tell him what’s happening, I want advice sometimes and also he shares with me his problems and we don’t focus. So, he always don’t sit with me. He sits my seat. I can’t do his work, I can’t do his exams, but I’m not interested in Science. I’m interested in Business and Maths. So, he respects that, he respects that. And we are friends, but when it comes to education about Science, he doesn’t like me. I thought, that, all, some of my classmates are serious, but when I sit with them, we just talk...we just talk [laugh]. Yeah, that’s why I just, I try to keep away from him and other students.</td>
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<td>Agency in approaching problems in professional relationships</td>
<td>Whenever the girls ask where’s our money. They just skip the question. Or they will ask us the questions And, er, I don’t know, but until now we didn’t get our money. And they sold, they sold a lot of our books. And I feel like we are cheated, so cheated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploitation due to refugee status</td>
<td>Whenever the girls ask where’s our money. They just skip the question. Or they will ask us the questions And, er, I don’t know, but until now we didn’t get our money. And they sold, they sold a lot of our books. And I feel like we are cheated, so cheated.</td>
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<td>Subordinated to needs of volunteers</td>
<td>So uh, it was I think was talking in the class and she told, er, *** that we talk Arabic, the students not serious, they talk, she told a lot of things, and she put us in big problem. Even like, now every time we just say something, they call her, this, er, you did that things, you cannot talk, and you are a bad student. They forget everything. They just remember that teacher, and every time like now, they are just focusing, and they are just like, looking for small mistake to call our parents or kick us out of the school. Just that volunteer.</td>
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<td>Lack of agency in working with volunteers</td>
<td>Like, they forget everything, everything we did, we, they forget every project we attend how was good. They forget everything. They just remember that teacher, and every time like now, they are just focusing, and they are just like, looking for small mistake to call our parents or kick us out of the school. If I complain, they will, they will, how can I say this? Just they will tell us um, she gives you her time, her energy, she came from far away just to teach you, and so, why complain. At the end, no one will listen to us. J: Okay, so do you think that means that you don’t really have any voice, any, any say about your education here? R: Sometimes, yes. Yeah, it’s uh, it’s really hurting me until now like [sigh], it’s so bad feelings. I, I will never forget that experience.</td>
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J: So, but do you think, has there ever been a time when you’ve either complained about something and it’s led to a positive change or perhaps you’ve given an idea or opinion that the school has said, oh that’s a good idea and tried to do something about it?
R: No.

- Feeling exploited as a refugee student

Because I feel like they are cheater. Er, they let us to write the book. It’s uh, it’s around one part, I wrote this book in 2018 and now we are 2019. Er, and I didn’t get any money from this company. Because we work hard and they promise you something and at the end they don’t do that. That thing. Why? I don’t know...Maybe because I’m refugee or I am at *** school, er, I don’t know. I don’t know. Even I talk to Ms. ***. Until now they didn’t say anything.
J: But why do you think she wants to help in the first place?
R: Take experience. Yeah.
If I complain, they will, they will, how can I say this? Just they will tell us um, she gives you her time, her energy, she came from far away just to teach you, and so, why complain. At the end, no one will listen to us.
. Whenever we ask her something like, she was rude to us. She won’t, she don’t want to answer like, it’s someone forced her to come to here. And no one force her. She just shout, shout, shout all the time, and um, last time, like, was enough, enough from this teacher. We tried to complain but no one, no one like, hear from us. We just keep silent and one day I think, she is not listening, what, to us, if we ask her some questions, she will not answer. She will just give you a look, what the hell?
Even like, now every time we just say something, they call her, this, er, you did that things, you cannot talk, and you are a bad student. Like, they forget everything, everything we did, we, they forget every project we attend how was good. They forget everything. They just remember that teacher...
But the other students, as the level 2, she was doing the same thing to them, the same thing. And, er, they didn’t do anything: they just zip their mouth. Why? Because they are scared from volunteer, from the staff.
- **Demotivated by experience of exploitation**

  **J:** Do you think you will do it again?
  **R:** I don’t think so
  **J:** Why not?
  **R:** Maybe in another country. Maybe I’ll think about it. But here in Malaysia, no. I don’t trust.

  **J:** Okay, so, how do you feel about that? Not being able to say anything about the volunteer quality?
  **R:** It’s bad feeling, to be honest. So bad feelings. I almost to finish the school, I think one month left but, er, as us, her class, we have points, we have points to talk, we can’t discuss, we can’t think like, what we want.

  Because uh, this class, it wasn’t very useful for me, because I feel like the teacher, she is not serious. She just writes some stuff and take some stuff, and that’s it. When I ask, we ask her, like this, she just has short answer, close the conversation, like this.

  Because this one isn’t serious...It’s just class, normal class, yeah. Even the teacher, she just sit there, and she uses her phone.

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**3 - Recognising progress in learning**

- **Overcoming difficult learning task – tangible evidence of learning**

  **J:** So, how do you feel about the having developed those skills?
  **R:** Proud [laugh]. Yeah, I feel proud.

  My book. You can start from this...This is my book by me. I wrote it last year, er, with the company and they sell it around 25 ringgits. Yeah. I took long time to write this book. It wasn’t easy. It was hard experience, but I did it...I am proud of the book, but I am not proud to work with this company.

  Yeah, it was a nice experience for me. The first time I write a book. Yeah, it’s nice experience.

  **J:** So, how did you feel about starting this project, the beginning?
  **R:** Normal. I feel normal. And I was nervous, somehow. How I can write a book, about what?

- **Progress visible through comparison to peers**

  No, I didn’t feel it because I know them, I know this job is so easy. But for, for the other students, it’s so hard. Even they cannot like, control the kids. But I love them, so easy. I enjoy.
### Recognised as an experienced student

Whatever I did in this school, yeah. I feel like somehow proud because I did a lot of things, a lot of things. Even I cannot count what I did here, that even sometimes, er, small kids from grade 6 came to me, or foundation, they just look to me like you did a lot of things. You have to be proud of yourself and that’s it.

J: But why, but why did they feel the need to come and say that to you? Why are they saying it? Why don’t they just think it?

R: Because also, they, they want to be, like, they want to take a lot of experience, so, also they want like, different to just talk about education. They want to take their mind out of the box, think a lot and see a lot of things. That’s why.

This is my English teacher. She sometimes, er, go out of the topic. She teaches us something from her experience, we check website, online, to take some information. Yeah, like, I feel this teacher is not, like, just I will not teach what’s in the book, I’ll teach also out of the book. Like, uh, and we discuss sometimes, like not as teacher and student, we discuss that thing is not right, this thing is fine. Yeah, so, it’s really good.

Because I have a lot of experience. A lot of experience as *** as a *** I have a lot of experience, so, that’s why they think, okay, I’m very good.

### Assumptions challenged by younger students

I took this photo because [click] I think those kids are so smart and, er, they have good future, really good future. Yeah, um, you can see the teacher is here, and, er, she is just writing, she just asked one question. I don’t remember the question exactly, and she didn’t, she kept for the book and, er, this, can you see all these things, and, er…the whiteboard. They wrote by themselves. Every, each student like just came with one word, one word, one word, and you can see, that’s it.

### Experience beyond the curriculum

- **Value of out-of-the-box thinking**
  
  Uh, because as I told you before, out-of-the-box, out-of-the-box, sometimes you have to think out of the box. Okay, in the book there is good information, but out of the box there is amazing information. We have to add it more, yeah.

- **Learning through experiences**
  
  I take some experience. Now I know how can I connect with the kids. How can I understand their, their feeling because it is not easy to understand them.

  Homeroom is, like, just thirty minutes and we will go to the classes and teach. The, those, that kids teach me how to teach. Now I go, wherever I go to teach, I am just straight, just take the marker and I teach.
Yeah, I took around one month and a half to learn and, er, the other teacher, she teach me how to, how to connect with the kids. Yeah, she was so nice.

### Intelligence related to being empathetic

Since from grade 1, she just told me that, “Teacher [click] don’t be sad there is a lot of people love you and they want you to see happy.” Even I don’t, I didn’t tell I am sad. I was smiling and I, she feel something. Yeah, they are so smart.

### 5 - Education in a refugee school

#### Primary students surpass her expectations

I took this photo because [click] I think those kids are so smart and, er, they have good future, really good future. Yeah, um, you can see the teacher is here, and, er, she is just writing, she just asked one question. I don’t remember the question exactly, and she didn’t, she kept for the book and, er, this, can you see all these things, and, er...the whiteboard. They wrote by themselves. Every, each student like just came with one word, one word, one word, and you can see, that’s it.

#### Exam-focus of learning

Yeah, I’m trying now to do some plans with, er, with him to, because the exams is near and I have to work hard. I have to work hard, more hard.

J: So, is it that, is it because you have an exam that you want to be better at Science or do you think it’s just generally important to be better?

R: Just the exam.

J: Okay, you just want to do the exam and get it done and have the good grade?

R: Yeah, [laugh] that’s it.

Yeah, stress because the exam is near and sometimes, we feel like we are not ready and there is a lot of, er, lessons I cannot understand.

### Greater value places on access to broader learning experiences

In this small school is, *** school, like, it’s not a big school that, I think we just have in all school around 130 or 140, it’s small family, but the student who came here he or she take a lot of experience out, but for myself, I have a lot of experience, good experience, bad experience, er, but now I am so happy. Whatever I did in this school, yeah. I feel like somehow proud because I did a lot of things, a lot of things. Even I cannot count what I did here.

### 6 - Learning as a personal responsibility
- **Learning as a personal responsibility**
  I mean my friend cannot take decision of my education...I am the only one who can take decision of my education.

...we have points, we have points to talk, we can’t discuss, we can’t think like, what we want.

- **Being serious about learning**
  I feel I am more serious now.

  J: So, do you think that you are a good student?
  R: Me? Yes.

  J: In what ways?
  R: I’m working hard, that’s why.

  Like, my Science teacher, he looked at me, Rebecca, uh, the first time just, like, first few months, he just wants to discuss with me, Rebecca, be serious, Rebecca, you have to read more about Science.

  Because whenever he write, he is interested in science, when he writes anything about science, I just say oh my God [laugh] don’t show me this book, I hate this book and he was telling me, you are not serious, you have to be serious, you have to read more.

  Yeah, the school even changed. The school are more serious now, more than before. Yeah.

  Yeah, er, there is a lot of projects that I have attend and they was useful, they put their energy, their money, their everything just teach us. They were amazing, amazing, er, volunteer. Yeah, even like, they teach how to be leader. Yeah, most of their projects, they teach you how to be leader, some, they are from, no comment from them, and some are just like normal.

  R: No, I didn’t feel, like, that way remember because I was just, I think around seventeen years old and I was young. I don’t remember exactly what happened to me that time, but I came back, the things changed.

  J: So, what changed?
  R: Education, Rebecca, everything.

  Uh, this one is one of my friend. My best friend. He’s serious in his study. He’s always like, he is the one to support me in my class whenever I didn’t put my homework or that stuff, he’ll just shout at me just write it now. Yeah, he will support me. And any new ideas, any crazy ideas, I just share with him. If he didn’t, yeah, he’s always there. That’s why I took this photo, because I feel like this is so important in my education.

- **Prioritising study commitments**
  If sometimes I have programme or that stuff, the school is allowed us to go to that program to leave the job, because important our education is first.
<table>
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<th>7 - School and belonging</th>
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<td><strong>Feeling of belonging to</strong></td>
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<td>the school</td>
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<td><strong>Importance of being in</strong></td>
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| school to daily life | }
Appendix 6 – Final IPA Themes Summary

RLC 1

Theme 1 – Learning and Becoming
- Learning - changing and regaining the sense of self
- Changing perceptions of education
- Becoming an idealised future self
- Educated as an identity
- Education and opportunity

Theme 2 – Family and Community
- Sense of belonging in community
- Social pressure to conform
- Obligation to family
- Refugee identity shaping experience
- Personal religious identity

Theme 3 – Uncertainty and Demotivation
- Demotivation in face of contextual challenges
- Conflict in sense of self and uncertainty
- Sense of a 'gap' between non-refugee peers
- Delay in learning and feeling left behind

Theme 4 – Self in Relation to Learning
- Exposure to new approaches to learning
- Positive learning dispositions
- Reflexivity and exploration in learning and the self
- Learning through experience
- Learning through social interactions
- Learning Soft Skills
- Being serious
- Role Model

Theme 5 – Peer Group Interactions
- Helping and learning from peers
- Importance of mutual understanding and respect
- Identity confirmation and conflict
- Trust and mistrust

Theme 6 – Agency and Recognition in Learning
- Using resources available to progress
• Avoiding contrary or negative recognition
• Learning as a personal responsibility
• Recognition affirming learner identity
• Challenging recognition
• Resilience and persistence

RLC 2

Theme 1 – Recognition and Identity Confirmation
• Mutual respect and understanding
• Separation and conflict of identities
• Dealing with negative recognition
• Positive recognition
• Identifying in group

Theme 2 – Adapting to a New Learning Environment
• Challenging timetable
• Lack of resources limits options
• Prestige of curriculum
• School facilitating social engagement

Theme 3 – Learning as Becoming
• Being an educated person
• Learning as becoming

Theme 4 – Changing Approaches to Education and Learning
• Exposure to new learning styles
• Shifting Learner Identity
• Developing new interests
• Learning as seeking a deeper understanding
• Personal responsibility to overcome difficulties

Theme 5 – Learning and the Future
• Uncertainty about Future
• Changing Trajectories according to Resources Available
• Delay in Learning Challenges ID

Theme 6 – Family and Community
• Challenging Community assumptions about school
• Family Support
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