Who am I? Refugee adolescents' transformation and negotiation of identities at the cultural borders

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WHO AM I? REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS’ TRANSFORMATION AND NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES AT THE CULTURAL BORDERS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Learning Sciences

by
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Accepted by:
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Dr. Jacquelynn Malloy
ABSTRACT

Many gaps exist in the research on refugee students in general, with the overall portrayal in the literature presenting a school experience in which refugees struggle academically, socially, and emotionally (Roxas, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Lerner, 2012; Lustig, 2004; Smith & Halbert, 2013). Current research discusses social and linguistic struggles frequently, and highlights the need for schools to acknowledge refugees’ backgrounds and draw on their linguistic repertoires to aid their acquisition of the English language (Cummins, 2005; Cummins, et al., 2006; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999). Little has been done to uncover who refugees are as individuals, what literacy skills they possess, and their experiences navigating a new and unfamiliar culture and language. Developing and modifying programs aimed at helping refugee students succeed in school necessitates in-depth understanding of their experiences, their identities, and influences on identity negotiation. No research study has explored the experiences, literacies and identities of refugee students in-depth, and none has used Bhabha’s cultural hybridity theory as a lens to do so.

This study explored the literacies, identities, and navigation of cultural borders of three refugee high school students in the Southeastern region of the United States. It aimed to answer the following research questions: How are these students literate? What identities do they enact as a result of their interaction with and negotiation of cultural borders? What use of hybridity is apparent in their experiences and in their current
identities as individuals? And, how do these students use language as a tool to mediate identity?

Using a case study design, qualitative data was collected during formal and informal interviews with all three boys over the course of one school semester. During this duration, observations were conducted of two of the boys in various contexts, where field notes were taken and analytical memos were recorded. Data was examined using Bhabha’s *cultural hybridity theory*, as well as sociocultural understandings of literacy (Street, 2014; Wilder, 2015) and critical perspectives towards identity (Norton, 1997). Findings illuminated these boys’ literacy skills, identities, and experiences at the cultural borders, including linguistic ones. In doing so, this study also opens up questions for further research focused on refugee students, their identities, and experiences.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“And say, O Lord, increase me in knowledge.” (Quran, 20:114)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Refugee students in the United States are placed in the public-school system upon arrival, and are expected to learn fluent academic English through ESL classes, as well as perform in all other subject areas (Guerrero, 2004; Haneda, 2008). Most schools do not give students ample time to become proficient in English. Research indicates the fluent and correct academic acquisition of a language takes between four and seven years (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Guerrero, 2004), thus indicating the American model for integrating refugees into the school system is flawed. This is one of the reasons many refugees struggle in school and are at risk for failure and dropping out (Roxas & Roy, 2012a; Roxas, 2008). Several studies have documented refugees’ loss of interest and motivation in school (Roxas, 2011; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011). These, and studies focused on the experience of immigrant and other minority populations in schools, indicate several reasons for students’ academic struggle, loss of interest and motivation, and poor performance. Among these reasons are schools’ typical lack of awareness, or intentional ignoring of these students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Manyak, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 2013; Delpit, 2006).

Schools often present and use a primary and academic Discourse (Gee, 2000) stemming largely from the white middle class population of society, thus excluding the language, cultures, and ways of knowing of many groups of people in America (Cummins, 2005; Avineri, et al., 2015; Heath, 1983). With refugees specifically, this is compounded by a lack of school and teacher knowledge regarding refugees’ historical,
cultural, and social backgrounds, as well as the adoption of a deficit perspective towards these students (Roxas & Roy, 2012; Luke & Dooley, 2009; Santoro, 2009). Though refugee students – particularly those in secondary school – have likely attended school for years prior to coming to the United States, and although they possess linguistic abilities and literacies in other languages and with different functionalities\(^1\), schools are often unaware of (or choose to ignore) these individual resources and experiences (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Delpit, 2006; Cummins, 2005; Avineri et al., 2015. Refugees are left feeling undervalued, and their cultures and backgrounds unwelcome (Croce, 2014; Wallitt, 2008; Arnot & Pinson, 2005).

Substantial research has been done on the refugee student experience in the United States, but almost none has focused on their identity formation and transformation. Existing research suggests the process of identity formation is an ongoing and complex feat (Mortland, 1994; Camino, 1994), and not all refugees/minority students are eager to assimilate into American society (Krulfeld & Camino, 1994). Upon entrance into the public-school system, and as new arrivals to the country, refugees find themselves in a situation of liminality, whereby they are made to navigate the new language and culture. In doing so, refugees enter a process referred to by Bhabha (1994) as cultural hybridity (pp. 3), in which they negotiate the bounds of their culture/ways of knowing and the culture/ways of knowing of their new environment. As refugees interact with the environment and come across new things, this cultural hybridity leads to a

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\(^1\) Such as standard conceptualizations of reading and writing in school as literacies, and more complex conceptualization, which views socially-related skills as literacies. For example, the ability of individuals from an Iranian village to read from the Quran, or understand the purpose of and engage with written contracts without actually being able to read and write (Street, 2005)
transformation in their identity. It is a continuous and complex process (Mortland, 1994; Camino, 1994).

Current research has yet to understand the process of cultural hybridity as refugee students experience it, and has neither examined refugees as literate beings, nor truly studied the impact of various factors in school and society on refugees’ identities as students and as literate beings.

This study will employ Bhabha’s (1994) theoretical perspective of cultural hybridity to understand the transformation of refugee identities in American schools and society. It will also analyze data through a Bhabha-informed critical lens, to illuminate refugees as they are positioned in and by the school system and society, and to gain a clearer picture regarding factors that impact refugee identities. The aim is to inform teachers and educators of these findings, and to use them to eliminate – or at the very least, minimize – factors in the school environment that may be negatively impacting refugees’ identities as students and perceptions of their literacies and ability to succeed in school.

**Problem Statement and Research Questions**

Current literature from around the world on refugees provides a general understanding of the struggles many refugee students face in Western schools and society (Roxas, 2008; McBrien, 2005; Lerner, 2012; Lustig, 2004; Smith & Halbert, 2013). Research with minority populations – mostly immigrants and some refugees – also demonstrates the flaws in the ESL model of language learning (Roberts, 1994; Cummins, et al., 2006). In addition, incorporating minority students’ languages, literacies, and
cultures into the school curriculum and environment has been demonstrated to be of benefit to them on multiple levels (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999). However, there remains much to be understood about refugee students, their school experiences, identities, and overall outcomes. Much of the research on refugees based in other countries, and most research on language, literacies, and cultures as relates to school focuses on immigrant populations. Though refugees and immigrants share some commonalities, they also differ in key aspects, thus necessitating research focused exclusively on refugees.

The current literature base for refugee students presents researchers and educators with scattered pieces of the puzzle. There remains much to be understood, including a foundational – and current – understanding of their experiences, identities, and the interplay between the two.

Language, literacy, and culture – the factors of interest to this study – are key aspects of an individual’s identity and ways of knowing (Vygotsky, 1980; Street, 2014; Camino & Krulfeld, 1994). Language is the cornerstone of comprehension and performance in school (Carey & Kim, 2010), and research has documented the struggles minority students face with language, whether it be because of differing dialects and literacy practices (Heath, 1983), or because English is their second language (Guerrero, 2004; Roberts, 1994; Luke & Dooley, 2009; Manyak, 2002). However, little is known about refugees’ school and societal experiences in America in general, or about their identities and their transformation in specific. There is a lack of understanding about refugees’ linguistic and cultural identities. Specifically, the impact of certain factors in
and outside of the school environment – and their interactions with students’ linguistic repertoires, literacy practices, and culture – is yet to be understood.

In the interest of continuous, positive change to refugees’ school experiences and academic outcomes, it is imperative for researchers and educators to recognize and understand both these interactions and their influence on student and literacy identity, and the literacy skills their students possess. Establishing foundational knowledge of this nature will both add to the literature base, and will help educators to better understand their refugee students and the interactions and processes affecting who they are as linguistically-capable, cultured, and knowledgeable students. This dissertation will aim to do just that, by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: How are these students literate?
RQ2: What identities do they enact as a result of their interaction with and negotiation of cultural borders?
RQ3: What use of hybridity is apparent in their experiences and in their current identities as individuals?
RQ4: How do these students use language as a tool to mediate identity?

Outline of the Chapters

Chapter two will provide a thorough literature review of all research which lays the foundation for the proposed study. The review will demonstrate in detail the situation of refugees and the struggles they experience in school, including those caused by cultural and language barriers, as well as stereotyping and discrimination. This will be
followed with a discussion of research on language, literacy, and culture as is relevant to minority students, with most focus given to research done with refugee students. In addition, existing research on the identity of refugees and other minority students will be discussed. In exploring these topics of research, the literature review will indicate the severe lack in literature on refugee students, their experiences in school and society, and their identity formation – specifically as it is affected by differences in language, literacy, and culture. Finally, a theoretical framework will be proposed which considers identity formation to be a process which occurs gradually over a period of time, and influenced by environmental, individual, and contextual factors.

This study proposes a descriptive case study design of two different refugee students, with cross-case comparison, to answer each of the above questions. Chapter three will explain why a descriptive case study is an appropriate design for answering my identified research questions. Background information on the school(s) and participants will be provided, as well as a description of how they will be selected for participation in the study. The process of data analysis as it will occur during the study will be explained, with a focus on the epistemological stance and theoretical framework that will be employed. Chapter four will present the findings of this study. Focus will be given to understanding the two refugee boys in terms of their literacy, experience with cultural borders and hybridity, and their overall identity as individuals. Some comparisons will be made between them and the third participant in this study, particularly in these areas of literacy, borders and hybridity, and their influence on identity transformation. Chapter five will provide a discussion of the findings, and will illuminate aspects of this study’s
findings which align with already-established research. This will be followed by a discussion of the contributions this study’s findings make to the literature, with a focus on what has been learned about refugees in America, their literacies, who they are, and what processes of hybridity they undergo in their interaction with cultural borders. Finally, a discussion will take place regarding this study’s implications for schools, policies, practice, and Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity.
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

The Refugee Situation

There are currently more than twenty-two million refugees in the world, a number both unprecedented and continuously on the rise (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). Since the creation of the United States’ Federal Refugee Resettlement Program in 1980, more than three million refugees have entered the country (Krogstad & Radford, 2017). The country welcomed about eighty-five thousand refugees into its borders in 2016, more than it accepted in the previous year (Connor, 2016). Refugees to the United States come from all regions of the world (United States Department of State, 2016), and almost half of the world’s refugees are children (Hodal, 2016).

The refugee resettlement program is responsible for the resettling of refugees, and its services include the following: temporary cash and medical assistance, case management, access to courses in English as a Second Language, and preparation for jobs and employment (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). School-age refugees are required, under federal law, to be enrolled in public school (United States Departments of Justice, Education, and Health & Human Services, N.D.) Refugee families, or families taking care of unaccompanied minors, are responsible for ensuring kids are enrolled in school. School enrollment is typically thought of as a necessary component to children and youth’s healthy and successful adjustment. According to Smith & Halbert (2013), it “provides a platform for refugee youth to improve their language acquisition and social skills, in addition to encountering society’s norms, cultural customs and values. This
facilitates their participation in their new community and country” (pp.1). Despite this belief, research suggests the refugee experience in public schools does not always guarantee academic, social, and mental success and well-being.

The Education of Refugee Students

The “educational resettlement of refugee children” (Lerner, 2012) is a complex situation comprised of many factors that, together, shape and define the educational experience and outcomes of refugees (McBrien, 2005). These factors include school policies, culture shock and a range of mental, emotional, and academic challenges that they face upon arrival to their host country and as they enter school. To begin with, many of these youth have experienced a disruption in their education, and have either been out-of-school for several years, or have been educated by the schooling available to them in refugee camps (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006). Many refugees have experienced trauma of some sort, including the loss of family members, and thus may suffer from various psychological issues that persist in their new lives (Roxas, 2008; Leavey, et al., 2004). As minority students in American schools, because they look and speak differently, many refugees are faced with bullying, stereotyping, and/or discrimination (Lustig, 2004; Smith & Halbert, 2013; McBrien, 2005).

Several studies make apparent the various impactful struggles they face in their schooling experience (McBrien, 2005; Roxas, 2008; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Lerner, 2012; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Roxas & Roy, 2012; Roxas, 2010; Roxas, 2011). Because education is an experience which provides stability and can help refugees heal emotionally, learning about the refugee experience – holistically – is imperative. This
type of understanding provides insight into factors impeding refugee success in school. It serves as a cornerstone for recommendations and interventions aimed at improving the experience for refugees, thus driving them towards academic success.

As part of a longitudinal study on the settlement and well-being of one hundred and twenty refugee youth in Australia, Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett (2010) examined the psychosocial factors key to settling in for this population. For these youth, ages twelve to eighteen, the most important factor in their settlement and well-being was a sense of belonging. Bullying and discrimination were two factors detracting from developing this positive sense of belonging. The findings from this study suggest a need to focus on the perceptions, attitudes, and behavior of peers and teachers towards refugee students. Negativity in this regard, in harming well-being, can compromise academic engagement and performance.

In an intrinsic case study (Smith and Halbert, 2013) exploring the interactions of five North African refugees’ experiences with their peers in Australian schools, two key findings emerged. The students quickly noted the differences between their cultures and the Australian culture; for example, the refugees noted how interactions between boys and girls differed from the same interactions in their home countries. Discrimination was cited by all five participants as a very real occurrence for them, by virtue of them looking and being non-Australian. Struggles with the Australian English dialect impeded the refugees’ ability to learn about and fit in with their peers. These experiences echo general findings in the literature of refugee experiences in school being wrought with struggle (Smith and Halbert, 2013).
A study on recently-arrived Sudanese refugees to Australia reported students complaining about fighting and instances of bullying, mentioning how some students’ unhappiness led them to drop out of school (Cassity & Gow, 2005). McBrien’s review of the literature on refugees serves as further evidence for the widespread bullying and discrimination against refugee students in American schools. Clearly, this is a problem, and unless refugees have a strong support system and belong to a community of similar people, the experiencing of discrimination and bullying – a serious struggle in school – no doubt has an effect on refugees’ self-conceptions, identity, and interest in school.

Aside from being and looking different, language and cultural gaps, lack of resources for appropriate ESL classes, and deficit views of students are all factors contributing to refugees’ sense of rejection and isolation in school (Roxas & Roy, 2012). Ultimately, because of their past and present struggles, and because they lack the appropriate support system for success, many refugees drop out of school or do not graduate (Schroeter and James, 2015). Teachers’ lack of understanding and awareness of their students’ backgrounds, experiences, and ways of knowing also factor into the hindrances to refugees’ sense of belonging, well-being, and identity, and contribute to refugee students’ marginalization (Wallitt, 2008; Athaneses, 1998; Bal, 2014; Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010).

By employing narrative inquiry to contrast refugee student experiences with a new teacher’s ability to meet refugees’ needs, Kovinthan (2016) found gaps in her knowledge – as a teacher – of refugee students, their experiences, and ways to support them. Her study is critical to recognizing the obstacles to refugee success, academically,
and in terms of well-being and positive identity development. Kovinthan states that teachers play a crucial role in students’ sense of well-being, making it necessary for them to be aware of the vast divide between home and school, culturally, linguistically, and otherwise. Highlighting teacher shortcomings and working to correct them, particularly in relation to their perspectives of refugee students and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and repertoires, is invaluable. Kovinthan’s study demonstrates the importance of helping teachers to reflect on their attitudes and stereotypes, and allowing them to realize their shortcomings in meeting their refugee students’ needs.

In another attempt to highlight teacher perspectives, attitudes, and strategies to help refugee students, Roxas (2011) found several common themes among teachers of refugee students in an under-funded school. Most of them attempted to avoid refugees, and knew little or nothing about their backgrounds and prior experiences. Some of them also brushed off poor academic performance, and did not take standard precautions – such as contacting parents – to help the students, effectively rendering them invisible. They also misinterpreted refugees’ lack of engagement in class as a sign of laziness and disinterest in school. In fact, their lack of engagement was often due to both difficulty comprehending and understanding content, and tiredness caused by their excessive responsibility at home. Despite their status as English language learners with disrupted education, the refugee students were presented with the same content as their non-refugee counterparts. As an example, they were expected to listen to and participate in discussion about Beowulf. The disconnect between language proficiency and class content, as well
as teachers’ disinterest in supporting them, undoubtedly affected the students’ self-esteem, interest in school, and identity as students.

Knowing the students, recognizing their language struggles, and appreciating their linguistic repertoires and literacy abilities would have helped the teachers to interpret student behavior and performance correctly, and to provide them with the appropriate supports to help their performance and well-being. This is in contrast to teachers’ unconscious use of what Roxas (2010) refers as cultural scripts, which are “the different images and messages manifested in our relations with others, in books and other media, and in institutional procedures and public policy that influence how we think, feel, and act in the world (pp. 66).

In a subsequent study, Roxas (2011) interviewed three teachers of refugee students in a public school to learn about the obstacles to providing refugees with needed supports, and to understand teacher use of cultural scripts (pp. 67) towards the students. His findings tell of a teacher who created a safe space for refugees to mingle, socialize, and get homework done – all in a setting away from their non-refugee peers. Another of the teachers helped refugees by grading them much less harshly than their peers in an effort to ensure passing grades and continuation onto the next grade level. Both strategies, though well-meaning in nature, were harmful. The first strategy further marginalized the refugees and took time away from opportunity to socialize with non-refugee peers. The second strategy was based on a narrow conceptualization of success, one which considered achievement of the American Dream to be the ultimate marker of success. Protecting students, and setting lower expectations for them can damage their
identity as individuals, as refugees, and as students. Though on the surface they may appear to be doing well, the strategies used by these teachers were based on narrow and preconceived notions of refugees, and did not take into consideration efforts to truly empower, educate, and engage students in school.

Roxas and Roy (2012) conducted a critical case study of one recently-arrived Somali Bantu refugee student, which used observations and interviews to explore the “intersectionality of factors” (pp. 470) which shaped his schooling experience. The story of this student tells of a student who, despite having a well-educated father and performing well initially, lost motivation in school and witnessed his performance slipping gradually until he was at risk of failure. His difficulties with English – as a mainstreamed English language learner – made comprehension in class, and completion of homework assignments very difficult for him. Teachers did not provide extra supports for him, and wrote off his poor performance and lack of completion of assignments as expected behavior from a refugee. They also misinterpreted his behavior in class, due to their lack of knowledge about his background and family situation.

In a longitudinal study of a group of Somali Bantu refugee students in a city known for welcoming refugees, Roxas (2008) reports of the many struggles faced by the students and their families. These include teachers’ inability to meet student needs, due to a lack of knowledge about them, as well as student difficulty in understanding academic content because of their limited English proficiency and poor English skills. The school, underfunded, had limited resources for its students, and was unable to provide the refugees with the necessary amount of ESL instruction and support they
needed. Because of cultural and linguistic differences, the school’s teachers also sometimes failed to recognize how intent refugees’ families were on their children’s success in school. They were unaware of families’ deliberate attempts to network with other families, and to find community resources to help themselves and help their children learn English and do well in school and in society.

What’s most noteworthy about research by Roxas is its setting and context. The refugees studied in Roxas’ research live in an area full of Somali Bantu refugees. This automatically provides new arrivals with a community and a sense of belonging, both of which are important to identity, well-being, and by extension, school engagement and performance. Community, a beneficial factor in refugee resettlement, is afforded only to refugees who are fortunate enough to be resettled in refugee-friendly cities with others of similar backgrounds. Even though it is an advantageous situation, the context within which these refugees experienced school was not enough to ensure their academic success and prevent their very real struggles with school.

It can thus be extrapolated that the school environment, with many factors at play, is a key player in the emotional, social, and academic well-being – and by extension, the identity development – of refugee youth. Hence, it becomes even more necessary to illuminate the refugee student experience, and to focus on specific factors – such as language and literacy – which may be contributing to their struggles and impeding their well-being and success.

The above studies on refugee students present several common themes in their school experiences. Most notable of these themes is finding language and culture to be
blatant factors affecting students’ experiences. Additionally, the research mentioned 
repeatedly demonstrates teachers’ lack of knowledge and preparation for teaching refugee 
students and knowing who they are as individuals. Aside from struggling in school for 
various reasons, refugee students are often marginalized and are often invisible, with 
inadequate attention given to their needs.

Though these articles present what is a clear yet general picture of the refugee 
student experience, there remain several missing pieces of the puzzle. The existing 
literature base has yet to explore the role specific factors in school and society, as well as 
various experiences have on students’ identity development. For instance, though 
language is known to be of issue for refugee students, little is known about their language 
and literacy practices as compared to those of the school. More specifically, researchers 
have not yet identified how refugees are literate, or how they use language(s) as a tool to 
navigate these differences – and similarities – and have not elucidated how their 
navigation influences the identity development of this vulnerable population.

**Language, Literacy, and Culture**

To gain a complete picture of the refugee student experience, as it exists in the 
literature, it is important to look at refugee experiences with language. Language, and the 
struggles refugees face with its acquisition, may be the most important factor to their 
academic success. Poor language proficiency and comprehension mean poor 
performance by default of incomplete understanding of and inability to engage with 
material. Upon arrival to the United States, most refugees speak little or no English, and 
are immediately placed in a school setting where students are expected to acquire English
quickly (Harklau, 1994). Because they are not yet fluent in academic English, because the school system holds what can be considered unrealistic standards for language acquisition (Guerrero, 2004; Harklau, 1994), and because “language is learned through experience and use” (Brooks, 2017) – essentially, participation in discourse – stereotypes about and deficit perspectives towards refugees are strengthened by their struggles – and perhaps poor performance – in class (Johnson, 2014).

Teachers misinterpret language and literacy struggles as deficits in intelligence, despite evidence suggesting reading and writing abilities are unrelated to mental ability (Scribner & Cole, 1978); many refugee students find themselves in special education or low track classes as a result (McBrien, 2005; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Compounding the language struggle is culturally irrelevant content, unrealistic expectations for acquisition of English, linguistic imperialism (Luke & Dooley, 2009, pp.3), and rejection of all dialects that depart from standard English.

ESL classes were designed as a method for integrating English language learners into mainstream society and culture, and seen as a successful strategy for teaching English. They have, however been implicated in causing or exacerbating the negative attitudes and perceptions educators have towards students enrolled in them. Dismissal or ignoring of students’ cultural and linguistic capital on the part of teachers and the system is a direct result of the linguistic imperialism spoken of by Luke & Dooley (2009). The positioning of other languages and cultures as less than factors heavily into the perspectives of deficiency and low intelligence teachers garner towards language learners. The cultural irrelevance of ESL classes, and the failure of teachers to draw on
students’ resources to teach them English contributes to the placement of ELLs in low-track classes, and to the low expectations teachers set for them in other classes (Luke & Dooley, 2009).

Most research on ESL classes looks generally at its successes, effects on students, and flaws in their approach to teaching English and perspectives on other languages. Little ESL research focuses on refugee experiences in acquiring English, and none examines the impact of the ESL model – specifically its approach to students’ languages, literacies, and resources – on students’ identities. Most of what is known about refugees and English acquisition is the struggles they face in comprehending lectures and assignment content in other classes (Krashen, 2012; Wilkinson, 2002; Roxas & Roy, 2012), the discrimination they face as a result of – among other things – their poor English (Keddie, 2012) and the impact of their struggle on motivation to learn and succeed (Roxas & Roy, 2012; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Carey & Kim, 2010; Luke & Dooley, 2009). Existing research does confirm researchers’ arguments for a shift in perspective and approach to teaching English to minority students.

One study of Chinese immigrant students’ transition from ESL to mainstream classes found that their native language was ignored and unutilized in their language instruction (Harklau, 1994). The ESL curriculum was constantly changing, and all levels – from beginner to advanced – were built on the same model. Hence, students often found the class to be boring and easy. They were gradually transitioned into a schedule of all mainstream classes, in which teachers interacted with them on rare occasion, and participation was unnecessary. The pace of lecture and level of language used was often
unsuitable for the immigrants. Most of the language practice they received was written, and the quality of practice and learning experience differed by class. Many teachers ignored students’ grammatical and writing errors on assignments, thus failing to help them improve their writing skills. Some written assignments required thought and synthesis, but many were simple copying of text. Because the Chinese students had little opportunity to practice conversational English and to interact in class with their peers, most paid little attention in class. Because language can be seen as participation in discourse, this lack of opportunity to engage with American discourse affected their performance.

Many of the students, likely because of their weak English proficiency, were mainstreamed into low-track classes because teachers thought it would be easier for them. Teachers’ negative perceptions, over-reliance on lecture and under-reliance on student engagement, and student difficulty in comprehending what was said in class all affected the Chinese students’ engagement and performance in class. This study did not look at their well-being or identity. However, based on other research, it can be surmised that their experiences with ESL and mainstream classes left an impact (Harklau, 1994).

Because school curriculum is built around an essentially Americentric Discourse (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Delpit, 2006; Heath, 1983) refugees must also be given the opportunity to understand it, to engage with it, and to make sense of it in relation to their own. Harklau’s study demonstrates an educational model, common to many public schools, which does not allow minority students this opportunity. As mentioned
previously, how students perceive attitudes towards their culture and language affects their learning experience and identity development (Cummins, et al., 2006).

Language is complete understanding of and participation in *discourse* and *Discourse* of a society. An ESL experience which recognizes differences in language, literacy, and *Discourses*, and which employs culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014), is one which would provide more fruitful learning experiences. It would also protect students against identity transformations which internalize a message of their heritage, language, and ways of knowing as being unimportant and valueless (Bal, 2014; Bash & Phillips, 2006). Shifting the ESL model to one based on the above-mentioned research would give refugee students an opportunity to hybridize *Discourses* and to resolve any identity conflicts they may experience as students in a healthy manner.

Research done with mostly immigrant populations has concluded with suggestions calling for revisions to be made to the current ESL model. These include arguments that using students’ heritage language, culture, and ways of knowing – in other words, making content relevant and relatable by drawing on students’ *Discourse(s)* – would lead to better acquisition of the English language (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Haneda, 2008; Auerbach, 1989; Stewart, 2015). The school system is one which has at its foundation language proficiency, and where academic success is predicated by this proficiency. True efforts at helping all students achieve and succeed necessitate an incorporation of this literature and these recommendations into schools’ philosophies and approaches to teaching in general. Research examining the refugee ESL experience, its
ability to teach refugees the English they need to succeed, and the impact of this experience – particularly in terms of how it positions the students’ language(s), literacy practices, and culture – on their identity does not yet exist. Because ESL classes are the formal relied-upon source for refugees’ language acquisition, and because research points to language as a huge barrier to refugee students due to expectations, it is imperative to understand the holistic impact of language learning on students.

Guerrero (2004) discusses the influences on students’ rate of language acquisition, pointing to age, proficiency in first language, and similarity between the first and second languages as important considerations. An additional factor is the socioemotional adjustment English language learners must go through as they begin school. The psychological and emotional baggage, as well as effect of the new environment on their well-being, can hinder learning and progress with language. In fact, research suggests that refugees with frequently disrupted education have a harder time acquiring a second language, by default of their experience (Hudson & Casey, 2016). Academic English proficiency takes up to seven years to acquire (Harklau, 1994), even without disrupted education, because ELLs do not automatically have the necessary understanding of the language to connect English words and sentences to their existing linguistic repertoire. Compounding this is the fact that academic English is decontextualized, and often culturally unfamiliar to minority populations (Guerrero, 2004). This research serves as further support for the idea that language is a huge barrier for refugee students.
Cummins (2005) has also pointed to teachers’ and schools’ dismissing of students’ heritage languages as harmful to second language acquisition and to the students’ well-being and self-perceptions. In most cases, schools devalue non-English languages, labeling them – perhaps implicitly – as “other” and less valuable. South Carolina’s – and twenty-four other states – English only laws are a clear example of this dismissal, and one which brings with it many implications. The use of second languages to facilitate acquisition of English becomes impossible – despite its proven success – and harms students’ academic performance (Roberts, 1994; Johnson, 2014). English only policies also affect students non-academically, both by sending them a message of their heritage’s lack of value, and by suggesting they develop a student and literacy identity centered around an English, American persona (Guerrero, 2004; Cummins et al., 2006; Luke & Dooley, 2009; Avineri, et al., 2015).

In his exploration of Arizona’s anti-bilingual education law, Johnson (2014) found the one-year complete English immersion program for non-English speakers resulted in poor academic performance and low standardized test scores for its participants. Opting out of strategies which make use of heritage language competencies to teach English stunts the development of literacy skills in both languages. Choosing to effectively ban non-English languages from the American classroom stems from schools’ focus on standardized test scores, in which performance is based on adequate proficiency and skills in English. The problem with these approaches to language learning and minority students’ heritage is not only their effect on performance, but also on how teachers write off their students’ abilities – perhaps invisible to them – and set low
expectations for them. When heritage languages (Cummins, 2005), Discourses (Gee, 2015), and cultural and linguistic backgrounds are ignored, and when English is touted as the only acceptable language, teachers and students enter a continuous cycle whereby performance affects expectations, and expectations affect skill level and performance. What inevitably occurs is students internalize negative messages about their language, culture, and literacy abilities, as well as messages about the superiority of the English language and American culture. How these messages affect refugee students’ identity development, and by extension, school engagement and performance, is yet to be known.

The negative impact of English-only policies, and of neglecting student culture and linguistic repertoires relates to the difference in school and minority population Discourses, or ways of being (Gee, 2015). Gee points to Freire’s argument that one must understand the social and cultural landscape of someone before knowing what they are saying, be it verbally or in written form. Bridging the gap between different Discourses and discourses successfully requires the understanding and appreciation of students’ cultures and linguistic repertoires. Possessing this knowledge about students illuminates for teachers the types of strategies and content that would enhance language acquisition – and learning in general – for refugee students. This is relevant not only because refugee students speak a different language, but also because the Discourse of school likely conflicts with the identity, values, and ways with words which define refugees’ primary Discourse (Gee, 2015). Learning and the use of language and Discourse are mediated by and grounded in our social and cultural backgrounds (Johnson, 2014). This indicates an
urgent need for schools to change their approach to and perspective of refugee students, as will be discussed later on.

Awareness of this knowledge about language acquisition, linguistic repertoires, and identity is vital to a correct understanding of refugee students, their intelligence, and what may initially be poor performance in class. It may also help prevent a vicious cycle of poor performance, set into motion and continued by teachers’ negative perceptions and deficit perspectives of refugees. There is no doubt of the negative repercussions to a refugee’s self-worth and identity which result from teachers’ lack of understanding about the process of language acquisition and the factors which may impede it. Hence, recognizing teacher perceptions and approaches to refugees and their language abilities is an important step towards understanding the role of language and literacy – and the contention between those of the school and those of the refugee – in students’ identity and school engagement and performance.

Cummins, et al., in an article discussing strategies to help English Language Learners (ELL) learn, contended two things: 1) that “ELL students’ cultural knowledge and language abilities are important resources in enabling academic engagement,” and 2) “ELL students will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning.” Their argument is based on a sociocultural understanding of learning – which will inform this study – arguing that learning is predicated on previous understandings and experiences. For example, one suggestion is teaching language in a manner that allows for transfer of concepts and skills
from students’ L1\(^2\) to English. Drawing on students’ L1 helps with the flow of ideas, and with real understanding of class content. The authors also discuss the benefit to identity development of classroom environments and practices which recognize and capitalize on students’ backgrounds. Classes with diverse populations, including ESL courses, would benefit from using an approach which capitalizes on students’ linguistic repertoires and competencies (Cummins et al., 2006), thus making it easier for students to overcome the barrier language is as a result of expectations in school.

Some research has been done specifically on refugee language and literacy, with findings echoing criticisms of and conclusions on language learning and experiences of minorities (Hudson & Casey, 2016). One study points to schools’ failure to capitalize on the home languages, cultural capital, and linguistic skills of refugees (Hope, 2011). Another qualitative, year-long study examined “the linguistic and cultural intersections” (pp. 61) of Somali Bantu refugee students in Texas (Roy, 2015). Findings indicated the students and their families worked to adopt the language and literacy practices of the region for work purposes, and surviving in school and society. Families were keen on passing on their native literacy practices and histories to their children, citing the importance of allowing their heritage to live on in their children. Overall, the students adapted to their new environment by acquiring the new languages – English and Spanish – and incorporating them into their identities. Their situation was helped greatly by the presence of community, and an ESL teacher who made great strides to know her students and their families, and to incorporate their knowledge base and culture into class content.

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\(^2\) First language
However, the students were isolated from their non-refugee peers for most of the day, and were denied opportunities to use their home languages in mainstream classes. This reality prevented the utilization of cited benefits that derive from using refugees’ first languages and cultural and linguistic resources (Roberts, 1994; Manyak, 2002; Haneda, 2008; Omerbasic, 2015).

In yet another study of a literacy transition program for eleven Sudanese refugee students in Australia, the authors reported several interesting findings. The refugees in their study were experiencing stress caused by resettlement and culture shock two years after arrival in the country. Many of the students – because of disrupted schooling – lacked what are considered basic and essential skills to be acquired during childhood. Students engaged more with multi-modal texts than with print-based ones. The authors concluded that language acquisition is a slow process for students with disrupted education and low levels of literacy. They also pointed to the need for schools to address the gaps which “result from disrupted schooling: gaps in cognitive skills, concepts of literacy, undeveloped or culturally distant understandings about the world” (Cranitch, 2010). This article further supports the need to acknowledge and utilize students’ knowledge bases, ways of knowing, and literacy practices. Doing so will help to combat language as a barrier to refugees’ performance and school and more importantly, will encourage their use of language and discourse in school, thus helping to improve their performance.

In support of Cummins et al.’s argument, and other research on language and literacy of minorities, many researchers have provided evidence of minority’s literacy
skills and the use of sociocultural understandings to inform the teaching of students (Moll, 2005; Moje et al., 2004; Purcell-Gates, 2013; Moje & Lewis, 2006; Gutierrez, 2008). Considerable research has documented the fact that all students, regardless of background and English ability, and despite potential differences in their culturally-informed ways of knowing (Vygotsky, 1980), possess literacies and skills.

Moje et al. (2004) studied the intersection of Discourses, literacy practices, and knowledge bases of Latino youth and the Discourses and funds used in their science classrooms. They found that the students possessed a great amount of knowledge which could be used to inform their class content, and make it more relatable. In addition, the researchers found that students’ literacies in various areas could support and enhance the literacy practices used in their science class. Their community’s focus on activism and social change could have been utilized in science projects and curricula focused on real-life issues. An examination of their social lives uncovered how the youth were literate in community and pop culture, and that they possess useful literacy practices in this regard.

The authors noted students’ failure to share relevant literacy practices in their science class, likely because of a disconnect between their knowledge and the context of curriculum content. The youth demonstrated skill at navigating different community discourses, but did not use their fluency in the classroom. What Moje et al. conclude is a need for educators to be aware of and draw on students’ knowledge base and literacies, and suggest curriculum content focus on teaching students not only concepts, but also about different Discourses and developing the literacy skills needed to navigate them.
In an effort to understand social and linguistic marginalization in schools, Purcell-Gates (2013) studied the home literacy practices of migrant farmworkers, and looked for overlap between these practices and ones used in school. Her findings indicated families’ heavy reliance on various literacy practices, all of which were tied to social interaction. She also found a disconnect between the literacy practices of home and school, with teachers using a Western-centric approach to educate children. This led to a failure to recognize the children’s wealth of resources and literacy practices, and made the students and their ways of being feel unwelcome and unvalued.

Quadros and Saroub (2016) studied the literacy practices of three Karen refugee women. They found the women engaging in literacy practices reflective of their schooling experiences in their home country and refugee camps. For example, they relied on memorization to learn vocabulary and the answers to a test about the constitution. Thus, their understanding of the language, and of the content they were studying, was greatly limited. The women engaged in literacy practices together, and supported one another in their quest to learn English. They also developed computer literacy to meet educational and entertainment needs. Quadros and Saroub’s article is evidence that refugees do possess literacy skills, and suggests their ability to adopt new ones to meet various needs.

In a set of responses to Hart & Risley’s infamous “The early catastrophe,” Avineri et al. (2015) argue for the need to recognize the wealth of knowledge and literacy practices present in minority, non-White, non-middle class communities. They provide evidence of such resources, and point to research suggesting the benefit of utilizing
students’ funds and literacy practices. Avineri et al.’s overall argument cautions against the imposition of certain dominant standards, norms, and ways of being and knowing on typically-marginalized groups who possess different resources and ways of knowing.

Conclusions from these studies suggest the great benefit of recognizing and using this wealth of knowledge to enhance school experiences and learning. Because language is participation in discourse and because language can serve as a barrier to many ELLs’ good performance in schools, failing to capitalize on these resources can impede students’ learning experiences and outcomes (Stewart, 2015). Curriculum content devoid of relevance and relatability to refugees, and built on the foundation of a culture, Discourse, and a biased conceptualization of literacy and skills will – as the evidence suggests – yield less fruitful learning outcomes for minority students. Thus, educators would do well to become aware of their students’ literacy practices, ways of knowing, and Discourses. Becoming aware of these aspects of a refugee brings teachers one step closer towards improving students’ school experience (Stewart, 2015), and alleviating the potentially negative impact the school experience – particularly in terms of language and literacy – has on their well-being and identity as students.

The current conceptualization of refugee student literacies is underdeveloped. Specifically, there is yet to be an effort to examine what literacies refugees do possess, and how they are recognized and used – or ignored and dismissed – in the school setting. Moreover, researchers have yet to explore the tension between refugees’ literacy practices and linguistic repertoires, and those used and taught by and in American schools. The research cited above provides evidence to suggest minority students are
impacted emotionally and academically by school environments and practices which fail to recognize cultural and linguistic aspects of their background. It also demonstrates the benefits of capitalizing on these resources that minority students possess. The research does not, however, provide a clear picture of how disparities in language, literacies, and cultures affect refugees’ identities as students and as members of a particular ethnic and linguistic group. The answer to these questions is context-dependent, and is based on the refugees in question. Impactful change in refugees’ school experiences and academic outcomes is predicated on a holistic understanding of their experience. Illuminating how the disconnect between the schools’ and refugees’ language, literacy practices, and culture impacts refugees’ identities as students and as individuals is a crucial step towards this change, and necessitates an exploration of existing literature on refugee identity.

Identity

Language, culture, and ways of knowing feed off and shape one another (Vygotsky, 1980). They are also key players in the shaping of identity. Culture influences how we view the world and our ways of knowing, while language shapes our thinking and understanding and mediates our identity (Vygotsky, 1989). Our interpretations of the experiences we face, and how these experiences affect our thinking and perceptions are all molded by the culture(s) and language(s) that we are a part of. It follows, then, that a continuous interplay exists between our language, culture, and identity – with identity perceived as an ever-shifting thing.

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3 In terms of the process they undergo internally
Identity has been defined in slightly different ways by different individuals, depending on their worldview and purpose for defining the term. James Gee (2000) highlights the commonality across all conceptualizations: It is, in very simple terms, who we are, and what “kind of person” (Gee, pp. 1) we seem to be. On a more complex level, James Gee suggests four perspectives on identity: nature-identity, institution-identity, discourse-identity, and affinity-identity. These four perspectives are inter-related, and differ only in the way they shape our understanding of how identity is functioning in a person. Nature-identity refers to categorizations we belong to by virtue of nature. This perspective on identity is ascribed to us not by values and opinions, but by forces outside of anyone’s control. That nature-based characteristics are used to categorize us into identities is the result of the human decision to make something of these characteristics.

An identity in which one is defined by an institution of some sort is institution identity. It is an identity given to us by some authority. For example, refugees are defined as such by the United Nations, and upon enrollment in school, are labeled as “students” by school authorities, and thus, by society at large. Institution identities are either welcomed or pushed away, depending on the meaning they carry with them. When refugees, as ELLs, are considered poor students, for example, they may either seek to disassociate from this identifying label, or to live up to its definition.

Discourse identity is an individual trait one possesses, and is given weight through the discourse and dialogue of others. For example, someone who is usually friendly and cheerful is identified by others as an always-happy person. People use a characteristic they pick up on in someone to define who that person is. The danger in this
identity is the mislabeling based on incorrect interpretations in discourse. A depressed and traumatized refugee may be categorized as an uninterested and unmotivated student simply because of teachers’ negative dialogue between themselves.

_Affinity identity_, the category of most relevance to this study, relates to a group someone ascribes to, and to actions done by the individual because of their belonging to this group. For example, someone is identified as Muslim by virtue of their subscription to Islam, and because of their engagement in religious practices and ways of life defined by the religion. An affinity identity does not require members of a group to be geographically close, or to be alike in other matters. It requires only that they participate in the group’s practices, beliefs, or ways of being.

Gee’s conceptualization of identity allows for a closer look at the forces that define us, and makes it possible to understand the factors at play in the shaping of identity over time and across experiences. The sociocultural perspective on identity views identity as complex, dynamic and ever-changing (Norton, 1997; Mortland, 1994; Camino, 1994). Gee’s definition of _affinity identity_ is pertinent to this study for this reason, and will be used in conjunction with Bhabha’s theory of hybridity to make sense of the interplay between refugee language and literacy experiences and their identity.

Several researchers have examined the relationship between language, literacy, and identity, and language experiences in school and identity. Some have focused on refugee experiences in their host country and the ultimate result they have on refugee identity. Below is a brief discussion of findings.
Norton (1997) asserted how we define our identity is influenced – and restricted – by power and privilege. Our positioning in society, and the power this position wields us, affects what we can do and who we think we can be, thus shaping our identity. Many sociocultural language researchers consider power to be at the center of “discourse, disparity, and difference” (pp 3). With language learners, power and discourse influence the identities they can take on in the classroom and in their community. Most interesting in this article is the author’s focus on key concepts of identity as shared by several researchers: identity is complex and dynamic; identity influences and is influenced by language; and the identity of language learners is undoubtedly related to classroom practice (Norton, 1997).

Yoon (2012) added to this by conceptualizing identity formation as “an ongoing process that involves interpretation and reinterpretation of our own experiences as we live through them” (pp.27). She also suggested the classroom as a place where this interpretation and reconstruction takes place, with students as active agents (Guerreo & Tinkler, 2010), and pointed to the use of cultural materials and resources which are available in the process. Norton’s and Yoon’s arguments serve as greater impetus to study the relationship between refugees’ school experiences with language and literacy and their identity formation.

In an ethnographic and action research study on identity, Macpherson (2005) examines the identity struggles of Tibetan refugee women, with consideration of five patterns of negotiations. Specifically, the focus was on their negotiation between two languages and cultures as the women took one class in Tibetan Buddhism, and one in
secular English. One woman learned to negotiate between the two, using each in its appropriate context. Two other women rejected the English language and culture, and held on more tightly to their cultural views and language. Macpherson suggested findings as evidence of cultural negotiations as involving more than language, culture, and identity. Instead, she suggested the negotiation includes the possibility of distancing oneself from any identities prescribed by culture, language, and past and current experiences.

Bash and Phillips (2006) studied the identity formation – and its fluidity – of refugee children in the context of their school experiences. Their focus was on the dynamic resulting from relationships operating in the context of power at all levels of society. In their examination of a group of Kosovan adolescents in London, they found the youth to be dissociating themselves from their Kosovan identity, unless pushed to talk about it. Instead, the identity they embodied and spoke of, which defined their ways of being, was an English one. Their shift in identity was so great to the extent that they spoke to one another in Black vernacular to present to the public an image of some sort of belonging. Bash and Phillips used their findings as evidence of youth as being active agents in their identity formation, suggesting educators give refugees space to negotiate their identities on their own, and to serve as facilitators in the process.

Stille (2015) used data from a multilingual, multicultural school in Canada to look at how the English-dominant context affected “bilingual students’ access to and investment in literacy learning” (pp. 483) In a classroom environment where students were encouraged to share their experiences and stories of their home countries, Stille
found her and the other teachers interpreting students’ stories through “monolingual, monocultural assumptions and educational practices” (pp. 494). She suggests this is problematic, because the power dynamic in the classroom and the privilege given to English and Western culture narrows the possibilities of how language learners identify themselves and what their identity looks like. Essentially, this means monolingual and monocultural assumptions – as well as school perspectives on different languages and cultures – affects how students view themselves and others, and thus, how they choose to identify. This is likely a feature common to ESL and mainstream classes across America, and can be resolved by a broadening of teacher perspectives and a recognition of the unequal power dynamic in the school system.

In an experiential study of fifteen Bosnian female refugee students in New York, Mosselson (2006) looked at the deliberate ways in which refugees balanced their new and ethnic identities in the process of understanding themselves in relation to their context. Her interpretations were based on the idea that refugee identity would be better understood through a consideration of their attitudes towards their home country and their community in the U.S. Findings indicated the influence of these attitudes on refugees’ conceptualizations of self and of the future. The author also suggested the girls use of academic achievement as a way to hide their emotional struggles (including PTSD), and to connect with their peers and teachers. The girls in this study were frustrated by and uncomfortable with teachers’ and peers’ uneasy attitudes towards them, and focused on academics in an effort to change perspectives towards them.
Mosselson cited a consistent finding in research which states that refugees who are not held back by their school – for reasons relating to language proficiency or deficit perspectives, for example – are among the highest-achieving students in their host countries. This is true across several refugee-accepting nations. It points to a dire need to understand the school dynamics which push refugees to either achieve or slip between the cracks, and to uncover the process by which refugees adopt high-achieving or low-achieving student identities. Finding and capitalizing on factors in school and community which propel refugees towards achievement, and which make them resilient against negative impact to their identities is an important step in research which this study aimed to take.

Bal (2014) conducted a collective case study of Ahiska Turkish refugee students at a mostly-minority student school to understand their figured worlds of difference. Five students between the ages of nine and thirteen, and who had been in the U.S. for less than three years were selected. The author found the students were positioned in the school as English language learners and “racialized learners” (pp.278), both of which had a harmful effect on the students. Differences in behavior and linguistically were interpreted as deficits on the part of the refugees, and for some, resulted in special education placement. School and educator perceptions of these differences placed the blame for academic struggle on the students themselves.

Their low English proficiency and linguistic differences were framed as evidence the students were lacking knowledge. These deficit perspectives, and the school’s positioning of the refugees’ cultures and aspiring identities as “other” both mediated the
students’ evolving identities. In addition, the students’ racial identities were defined as an in-between, whereby they were considered “White” but possessed neither the privilege nor the cultural and linguistic background to claim complete Whiteness. What Bal suggests is the identities of these refugee students, despite being in a mostly-minority school, were shaped by the context which positioned them negatively. His study provides evidence Cummins’ argument claiming that school contexts which do not value or incorporate minority students’ cultures and languages in a respectful manner have a negative impact on the students (Stille, 2016).

Finally, an Australian study looked at the psychosocial factors which help refugees with positive well-being. Ninety-seven refugees were studied in their first three years in Melbourne. The authors found sense of belonging to be the most important factor in adjustment and well-being. More specifically, social status and experiences with discrimination and bullying had the most impact on refugees’ well-being. The refugees in the study belonged to a larger ethnic community, which served as a source of support during adjustment. Findings from this study point to the importance of a positive school environment to refugees’ positive adjustment and well-being, both of which influence academic engagement and performance (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010).

It should be noted the overall research looking at refugees and identity is scarce. The above studies provide evidence of the benefit to identity development of positive supports and environments. They also point to the active role of students, teachers, and peers in the identity formation of refugee and other minority students – particularly
because identity is a complex and ever-changing construct. More importantly, what these studies highlight is the complexity of identity; refugees are unique in their experiences, backgrounds, and in who they are and who they become. Recognizing the heterogeneity which exists among refugee students is important to understanding them and to knowing how best to approach their education. Creating spaces – built upon these concepts – for refugees to negotiate their identities, and to make sense of the cultural, linguistic, and literacy differences they experience can help them in their negotiation of identity, sense of belonging, and well-being (Camino, 1994; Nykiel-Herbert; Gutierrez).

Despite all that is learned from the literature on refugees and identity, none of the existing research has examined the specific impact of language, literacy, and the navigation of cultural borders – specifically linguistic ones – on refugee identity formation and transformation. Researchers have yet to identify how positioning of language and literacy, and how dominant literacy practices in schools affect refugees’ conceptions of themselves, their knowledge base, and their sense of well-being. Exploring this area of research through Bhabha’s theory of hybridity is of paramount importance. It would lead to the development of a well-rounded understanding of the refugee experience, by helping to isolate specific experiences and factors in school and society which may significantly impact the identity of refugee students.

**Cultural Hybridity Theory**

Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of cultural hybridity suggests identity is in a continuous state of negotiation and transformation (2008). His conceptualization of identity is argued through the position of colonizer and the colonized, and lies in the
meeting of cultures. Essentially, when an individual encounters a different culture or way of being, he or she enters into a process of *hybridity*, whereby a negotiation takes place between what the individual knows and the difference he has encountered. It is at the border of these two cultures that the individual’s process of cultural hybridity is completed. According to Bhabha (1994), the process of cultural hybridity is one which requires an acknowledgement that the human race – in attempting to understand one another and their social world – can and should be able to accommodate their identities and meanings of the world to fit their experiences and interactions (pp. 17-18).

His conceptualization of cultural hybridity is one which conceives of culture as what can be found “at the edge of contact between civilizations,” in a space where individuals – in a state of liminality – are shaping their identities (Bhabha, 1990). It pays close attention to the disparities existing at the crossroads of cultures and ways of being and knowing, and to the dissonance that results. It is interesting to note how Bhabha believes Western society approaches diverse cultures and identities – something which no doubt shapes the process of hybridity.

He references society’s “endorsement of cultural diversity” (pp. 208) as an act which claims openness to, acceptability of, and respect for other cultures. However, he states that this welcoming attitude is predicated by society’s establishment of a dominant norm and culture. This prescription measures other cultures on the basis of their ability to fit within the dominant norm and culture. To the extent that overlap exists, different cultures are accepted. Norms and cultures which depart from the dominant definition of acceptability are, in one way or another, sent a message of being the “other,” unaccepted
ways of being. It is in these differences, and the tensions resulting from the imposition of
dominant views on “other” cultures, that the process of cultural hybridity takes place.
The meeting of cultures in itself, according to Bhabha, leads to hybridity. It follows then,
that the prescribed nature of acceptable norms and cultures in Western society (Delpit,
2006) is an added and essential role in the process of hybridity of refugees in the West.

This conceptualization of identity formation and cultural hybridity, one which
acknowledges the dissonance and negotiation which occur upon interaction with the
unfamiliar, is an appropriate lens through which to consider the identity formation and
evolution of refugee students. Using Bhabha’s theory, this study hopes to illuminate the
process by which refugee identities begin to transform, by elucidating the marked
difference between dominant and other thus understanding the role of these tensions in
refugee identity. This framework will bring attention to those factors which play a salient
role in the process of re-creating identity and meaning and, consequently, affect refugees’
behavior and performance as students.

**Summary**

What this literature review has made clear is the underdeveloped nature of
research on refugee school experiences, particularly in the United States. Few research
studies exist on their overall experience, and even fewer can be found which discuss their
literacies, experiences in school and society, and identity formation and development.
Though there is enough data to provide a comprehensible picture of refugee school
experiences, there are many gaps to be filled if researchers and educators are interested in
taking action towards the improvement and enhancement of the refugee school
experience and learning outcomes. Among these gaps is the need to understand how and why their identity is transformed at the cultural borders – including an examination of the most salient factors in their experience at the borders: language and literacy. With language and literacy at the core of comprehension, engaging with others, and becoming proficient in academic content and social interaction, it follows that researchers must look at the relationship between dominant language and literacies, and those of refugee students. This starts with uncovering the literacies possessed by refugee students, and ends with an exploration of their experiences in various contexts, inquiry into their perspectives, and an understanding of the gradual process of hybridity their identities undergo.

Based on the literature review, and identified gaps in the literature, this dissertation’s aim is to understand refugees’ cultural hybridity experiences by focusing on the meeting place between refugees’ language, literacy, and culture, and those used and advocated by society. In observing and analyzing refugee experiences through the cultural hybridity lens, the researcher hopes to elucidate the influence of language, literacy, and culture on their identity transformation. Of importance to note is this study’s focus on the limiting view and acceptability of other cultures, as defined by Bhabha (1994). As the process of cultural hybridity is understood, so too will an understanding of the positioning of refugees’ language and culture in American schools and society be formed. Uncovering the dynamic between the dominant culture and minority individuals provides a more complete perspective on the refugee student experience, and more clearly explains the process of hybridity and its product.
Using Bhabha’s theory to do so is premised on sociocultural understandings of learning, suggesting knowledge, skills, and identities are acquired through social interaction (Manyak, 2002). These theories will help to answer the questions of this dissertation study clearly and in a manner that does justice to the refugee experience. It is worthy to note that this lens has not yet been used to study the refugee student experience, thus making it an even greater and more useful addition to the literature.

This dissertation study, in developing the above-mentioned understandings, will provide educators with a clear illustration of the context-and individual-dependent factors and interactions which are impacting students’ self-perceptions, motivation and engagement in school, behavior in different contexts, and overall identity.

Limitations of the study include its context-dependent nature, thus making it difficult to generalize findings to refugees in different parts of the country and with different background experiences and current school contexts. The study is also not longitudinal. Though findings will be valuable and will provide necessary understanding of the issue in question, the time frame for data collection will limit the depth of knowledge produced from the data, and will not capture the transformation of refugee identities over the course of their school career. My perspectives towards refugees and my beliefs about what their education should look like produce a bias which may unintentionally affect my interpretation of observations in the school.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study addressed a much-needed area of research on refugee education, by exploring the student and literacy identities of refugees using Bhabha’s hybridity theory. Illuminating the process of hybridity – specifically, how language, literacy and culture shape students – provides an in-depth understanding of refugee identity. This study will elucidate factors related to language, literacy, and culture which affect students’ identities, and in doing so, will provide educators with knowledge that can be utilized to better the school experience, well-being, and outcomes of refugee students.

This chapter will explain the research design employed in this study the role of the researcher in the study, as well as beliefs and biases the researcher holds which will affect interpretation of data. This will be followed by a detailed outline of the research methods, including site and participants, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, the contributions of this study to the literature and to educators will be revisited.

Review of Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to understand the literate life of refugee students outside of school, and to gain insight into their perspectives on the way they are perceived and positioned by school and society. A close look was taken at the literate lives of these students, and how they both use and interact with language, literacy, and culture when navigating cultural borders. Additionally, an exploration of a Syrian refugee’s life – based in a larger Southeast city – and experiences in school and society was conducted during this case study. The purpose of these virtual interviews was to
contrast the experiences of ethnically-different refugee students, and to use the experiences of the Syrian student to inform understanding of data from the Burmese students.

Rich, thick descriptions integral to conducting case study research would allow the reader to understand these relationships clearly, and to make sense of the refugee student experience and identity formation. The research questions for this dissertation were as follows:

1. How are these students literate?
2. What identities do they enact as a result of their interaction with and negotiation of cultural borders?
3. What use of hybridity is apparent in their experiences and in their current identities as individuals?
4. How do these students use language as a tool to mediate identity?

**Key Terms**

Several key terms were used throughout this study to clarify the cases being studied, the phenomena of interest, and the theoretical framework employed. For the purposes of this study, an individual was considered a *refugee* if he or she met the definition set by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): someone “who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or they cannot return home or are afraid to do so” (UNHCR, 2017). A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are
afraid to do so” (UNHCR, 2017). The boys who took part in this study all met the criteria and were selected on this basis.

With this study’s focus on literacies and refugees’ literate identities, another term which was highlighted was literacy/literacies. For the purposes of understanding these refugees’ literate identities, a sociocultural perspective of literacies was adopted, whereby literacy is defined as “social practice reflecting norms of power, language, and discourse, which determine how and with whom students construct knowledge and identify” (Wilder, 2015). A social perspective was also considered, which states “academic literacies are situated within contexts of specific settings and social relationships” (Edwards, 2012). For the purposes of this dissertation, the more complex social and sociocultural understandings of the term serve as the basis for understanding of literacy. Literacies are seen as practices individuals engage with and which make use of language to mediate contexts, interactions, and activities in which individuals engage. They also refer to skills – involving language – which individuals possess, such as the ability to navigate a social media site or to use a tool, such as Google Translate, to learn something new.

With this study’s focus on cultural borders and hybridity resulting from states of liminality, culture also played a key role in defining and understanding refugees, their identities, and the cultural borders they encountered. Here, culture was understood as the aggregate of several definitions made by various individuals: Kroeber & Kluckholn’s definition (1952) was the most specific and encompassing (1952):
Something which consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (p. 181).

This perspective of culture was supplemented by definitions compiled in Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht, & Lindsley’s discussion of culture (2006) where culture is seen as “a learned system of beliefs, feelings, and rules for living around which a group of people organize their lives, a way of life of a particular society”; “everything that people collectively do, think, make, and say,” and “the socially transmitted knowledge and behavior shared by some group of people” (p. 14).

Identity was also at the forefront of this study, with the researcher looking to understand refugees’ literate and holistic identities in her attempt to find and make sense of cultural borders they navigate(d) since coming to the United States. Gee’s conceptions of identity were used in combination with a critical perspective on identity. Gee (2000) conceptualizes identity as dependent on time, place, and context. To him, identity is “being recognized as a certain “kind of person” in a given context…” (p. 1). Norton’s definition states identity as “…how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future.” Both definitions are similar. For the purposes of this
dissertation, Gee’s *affinity identity* and Norton’s critical perspective of were used to guide the refugees’ understanding of the boys’ identities.

The final key term used in this study, *cultural hybridity*, refers to the theory employed by the researcher to understand the identities and identity shifts of the boys she focused on. As explained by Moje et al. (2004), Bhabha views hybridity as the process by which people make use of a multitude of resources or their own knowledge base to understand and interpret the world around them. The theory of cultural hybridity focuses on the state of liminality individuals find themselves in – when meeting and interacting with new cultures, ideas, etc – to determine how the state of in-between (Bhabha, 1994) both helps and limits literate, social, and cultural identity development.

**Methodology**

The literature on immigrant and other minority populations suggests their schooling experience is sensitive in nature. Specifically, many factors – such as rhetoric towards non-English languages and dialects other than standard English, as well as attitudes towards non-White individuals – can affect students’ sense of belonging, motivation to succeed, well-being, and academic outcomes (Schroeter & James, 2015; Keddie, 2011; Smith & Halbert, 2013; Roxas, 2008; Delpit, 2006; Haneda, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Research on refugees, particularly as it pertains to language, literacy, and identity, demonstrates a large gap in the research base. Not only is the refugee student experience under-researched in the United States, but a focus on language and literacy practices, as well as on identity, is scarce if at all present. The
literature review also points to the importance of educators’ understanding of refugee students’ experiences in this country, and their influence on identity formation.

This research study employed a case study design. Case study design sets itself apart from other qualitative research because of its focus on describing and analyzing a “bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19), where the case is “…a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). A descriptive case study design (Merriam, 1998), defined as a case which results in “…rich ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (p.29), and which “include[s] as many variables as possible and portray[s] their interaction” (p. 30) was used in this study. It was employed to allow the researcher to explore in great depth the backgrounds of these students (language, culture, literacy practices). It also helped to uncover these refugees’ literacies, holistic identities, and instances of hybridity and navigation of cultural borders they have undergone. Rich, thick descriptions (p. 29) from this case study were used to illustrate the cultural borders the boys have come across since coming to America, the process of hybridity refugee students underwent and are undergoing in their identities, and the role of language, literacy, and cultures in this process.

This study’s interest in exploring topics and answering questions which are either scarce or non-existent in the literature makes a descriptive case study the most appropriate design. Merriam (1998) lists several aspects that make a case study descriptive. Of relevance to this study is a descriptive case study’s ability to “illustrate the complexities of a situation” (p. 30). By its very nature, this type of case study provides detail about the case of interest, making it easier to determine the myriad of
factors which contribute to it. Descriptive case studies, because they include a great amount of detailed data, allow the researcher to look back on what was collected and to reflect upon the process of data collection and observations noted. Because descriptive case studies take place over time, they also make clear the role of time in the phenomenon of interest. For example, how refugees perceive their school experience may change as they spend more time in the school system. This change can be seen with a descriptive case study design. Finally, descriptive case studies include “vivid material…from a wide variety of sources” (pp. 31), making it possible for the researcher to piece together as clear and as holistic a picture of the phenomenon of interest as possible. With these aspects in mind, the researcher concluded a descriptive case study would be the most appropriate design to answer the identified research questions.

This study’s interest was in illuminating refugee students for who they are holistically; who are they as refugees, students, and literate individuals. Its focus was also on exploring the relationships between school and individual language, literacy, and culture in terms of how they differ. Specifically, how are students’ language, literacies, and culture positioned in relation to those used by teachers and in the curriculum, and how are they positioned by teachers, students, curriculum? How are they positioned by the students themselves? What tensions and transformations in their identity exist as a result of their positioning? It was in these relationships, and in understanding students’ experiences from their perspective that the study illuminated the process of hybridity in refugees’ identity development. Because of this study’s focus on understanding the
“how” and “why” (Yin, 1994, p. 9), a descriptive case study was most appropriate for this study.

Certain criteria must be met for something to be chosen as a case in a descriptive case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). According to Stake (1995), a case should be able to “maximize what we can learn” (pp. 4). He also states that a case should be chosen with the intent of understanding that one specific case, not solely to compare it to other cases. Finally, because it is qualitative research, a descriptive case study places “emphasis on interpretation” (Stake, 1995, pp. 8). This study, with its focus on refugee identities and navigation of cultural borders, relied on researcher interpretation to answer researcher questions clearly and through the chosen theoretical lens.

Merriam (1998) also discusses criteria for selecting case study research design, one of which is “describing the context and population of the study.” In addition, she emphasizes that cases are selected for their “uniqueness” (pp.33). She adds that case study design should be selected “because of the nature of the research problem…” and if the researcher is interested in examining “complex social units” (pp.41). Because this study was interested in context surrounding refugees and their identities, and was exploring phenomenon unique to the literature – which would “…help elucidate the upper and lower levels of experience” (pp. 33), a case study was deemed appropriate.

The case for this study was defined as one academic semester of student experience in school and other contexts, with interest mostly in the student perspective on experiences with school and in society, specifically in terms of language, literacy, and culture. Attention was focused on uncovering the influence of these factors on students’
identity through a sociocultural lens which takes into account student and family background, and which understands the complex relationships which affect both learning and identity. The aim was to ensure refugees’ voices are heard, and that the interpretation of data was as close to their version of the truth and to what is happening in these relationships. For this reason, multiple methods and data sources (Glesne, 2016; Yin, 2015) were used to gain a holistic and accurate picture in attempting to answer the research questions.

The study’s cases were both bounded by the same criteria. They were bounded by time, with data collection set to one academic semester. The decision to limit this study to one semester was driven by the fact that this research topic will yield a great amount of invaluable information, regardless of how long data collection proceeds. To make data analysis and interpretation manageable, and to avoid loss of data in the process, data collection was limited to one semester. In addition, a lot takes place in the period of one school semester, meaning that a clear enough understanding of this study’s focus of interest will be gained in that time period.

The cases were also bounded by the type of student being studied and researcher access to contexts to observe them in. Both students were new or recently-arrived high-school refugees with limited English proficiency – introduced below – which means the cases were bound by linguistic borders, because the researcher was not fluent in their home language(s). In addition, the researcher did not have access to their school, and followed the line of inquiry with other contexts because of her interest in their literacies and identities outside of school. This meant either following them to places they told her
about or choosing to take them places that might be of interest to them. These bounding criteria were set to ensure as clear as possible an understanding of refugees’ experiences and the influence of certain factors on their identities. The longer refugees have been living in the United States and enrolled in public school, the more their identity will have shifted, and the more likely it is that they have either adapted, accommodated, or assimilated into American culture and society. Choosing new or recently-arrived refugees made it easier to elucidate the relationships at play in their identity development. The focus on Burmese students was for two reasons: not all refugees are the same, suggesting a need to focus on one type of refugee to ensure clear and understandable answers in this study. In addition, their experiences as Burmese refugees in one city were contrasted with the experiences of a Syrian refugee in a much larger city in the Southeastern United States4.

Finally, both cases were bounded by the topic of this research study. This study looked at language, literacies, and culture of refugees as compared to those prevalent in their school and surrounding environment, with specific interest in the effect of these experiences on the hybridity process of identity development in these refugees. These were specific points of focus, indicating clearly-bounded cases.

One Arab refugee student, Adnan, was interviewed twice during this study. This student did not serve as a case study for the purposes of this dissertation. His participation in this study served as a source of data triangulation. Because the primary cases in this study were brothers in the same school and context(s), bringing the third refugee into the

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4 See below
study helped to corroborate data and serve as a point of comparison. Where the brothers, Tariq and Salman reported certain experiences or demonstrated certain behaviors, the researcher asked the Arab boy about similar situations. This way, she could understand what similarities – and differences – exist between different refugees in different contexts. In addition, conversations with him added depth to the knowledge she had gleaned about the two brothers’ school experiences and the behaviors she observed of them in different contexts.

During the two interviews with Adnan, the focus was initially on understanding his family history and background, and then shifted to an interest in his experiences in school. As with the Burmese students, language, literacy, and culture were the focal factors of interest in the Syrian refugee school experience. Data from these interviews were contrasted with data from interviews with the Burmese refugees, and were used to help inform understanding of data collected from the Burmese students.

**Selection of Participants**

Participants for this case study were two high-school refugee students who, at the time data collection commenced, were entering their third year of life in this country, were enrolled in public school, and were taking English as a Second Language (ESL) classes as part of their coursework. The refugees of focus in this study were Rohingya Burmese and were brothers. Selection of both was based on convenience. Because it is difficult to locate refugee students in this region, with much reliance on word-of-mouth and connections to find refugee families, convenience sampling was used to locate refugees who fit this study’s criteria. Purposive criterion sampling, which comes with the
“assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61) was used to select a participant from a large Southeastern city for interviews. Access to families is easier to gain and is done through the resettling agency in that city. Therefore, specific requests were made for middle or high-school refugees who have been in the United States for one year or less. An additional request was for one of the students to be female. The resettling agency pointed the researcher to two families, both of which were contacted for this study. One – with no girls fitting the age criteria – responded, thus eliminating the possibility of interviewing a female refugee student.

Refugee families were contacted prior to the start of the Fall 2017 semester. They were introduced to the study’s aims and were asked for their interest in participating. Word-of-mouth and contacts within both Muslim communities in this study were used to identify both families whose children participated. The refugee resettling organization in the study’s main location was contacted for information about new or recently-arrived refugee families. This attempt yielded no fruitful outcomes. Final inclusion of participants depended on families who were eventually identified and on consent from families and students.

The students and families involved in this study depended entirely on convenience. Those who were identified and who were willing to take part were selected for participation.
Data Collection

Glesne (2016) and Yin (2015) guided data collection in this study. Consent, a necessary part of gaining access to participants was obtained from participating students and their parents prior to the start of data collection. At the time consent was obtained, an informal conversation was carried out with the Burmese family so that the researcher and participants could learn more about each other. This conversation also helped to “develop rapport” (Glesne, 2016, pp. 139) After this, an in-depth semi-structured interview was scheduled with the Burmese family. Based on what was gleaned about the family dynamics during initial contact, no extended present family members were identified, and thus, no other family members were asked to take part in the in-depth interviews. This interview consisted of questions that asked about the family’s cultural, religious, and historical background, as well as the family dynamic. Questions also looked at their status as refugees, reasons behind the status, and experiences before and after they became refugees. The family was asked about their educational values and thoughts on education in the U.S., as well as on job and life prospects for their children.

The two refugees identified as case studies for this dissertation were asked not to be present during these interviews, to avoid responses from influencing their own interviews with the researcher. Follow-up conversations with the mother were used to triangulate understanding of the literacies and identities of the boys, as well as to gain a firmer understanding of the family’s background and past experiences. In initial interviews with the boys, questions included asking them to talk about themselves, to
discuss their thoughts on American culture, and, among other things, to explain their social media use.

Though it was anticipated the refugee family may have connections to the community, the researcher found the family to be relatively isolated from most of the community. Both the mother and her boys explained they had no social connections aside from some other Burmese families – also refugees – in the area. They did not attend community events, did not attend the local mosque regularly, and had no real relationship with anyone in the community aside from their fellow Burmese – also isolated from the community – and the one Muslim woman who visited them occasionally. The only consistent tie the boys and their family had to the community was the weekly Sunday school. The researcher discovered that the two boys were planning on attending the community’s weekly Sunday school, thus providing impetus for the researcher – who was following the line of inquiry – to attend their classes on a bi-weekly basis. This was done to gain insight into their experiences in an alternate school setting, and to understand their navigation of and identity within a context housed within a community sharing the boys’ religion. Attendance provided greater insight into this community and into factors which may serve as supports for refugee students and their identities.

During the same visit, or on a different date at the start of the study – after interviewing the family – a formal, semi-structured interview was conducted with the two boys in their home. The purpose of this interview was to gain an initial understanding of the refugees’ perspectives on their schooling experience, specifically in relation to language and literacy policies and practices, and their sense of being made to feel
welcome and valued in school. Because this was the initial interview, in the interest of ensuring a context in which they would feel comfortable answering questions, and to gauge the best dynamic for subsequent meetings, both boys were interviewed at the same time.

Prior to commencing data collection, the researcher attempted to gain district approval for access to the public school attended by the boys with the goal of observing them in several of their classes. Access was denied, resulting in a modification to the study. This included both observation of their Sunday school classes and the selection of different contexts to which the researcher took or followed – and then proceeded to observe – the two boys.

Choice of context depended on either places the boys were being taken to or places the researcher decided to suggest to them as potential destinations. An example of choice of destination was a picnic the boys and their family had been invited to by a group of White individuals who had been helping out the family since their arrival in America. When the researcher heard about the picnic, she asked the family if she could tag along, and they agreed. Close observation of the boys took place in contexts such as this one and was followed immediately by a “follow-up” analytic memo, in which the researcher made a note of any key observations and important thoughts. These observations supplemented data collected from interviews and meetings, thus allowing for “thick description” (Glesne, 2016, p. 152; Yin, 2015, p.41) and a more enriched understanding of the phenomena of interest.
After the initial, formal interview with the two students, more informal meetings took place on a weekly basis in their home. These interviews served several purposes. They allowed the researcher an opportunity to learn more about the boys’ overall school experiences, struggles they faced academically or otherwise, and incidents or interactions which illuminated their positioning within the school, in the eyes of others, and from their perspective.

The decision to combine weekly meetings with weekly observations, as well as the decision to focus on two refugee boys and supplement data with the third, were both to ensure triangulation of data (Glesne, 2016). Using observations and meetings together helped to “deepen interpretations and understanding” (p. 45) and helped uncover the complexity of the boys’ identities and hybridities. Introducing the third refugee, Adnan, into the study served as a method of triangulation because it served as a point of comparison for data collected from the two boys. With the formal interviews and informal meetings, the researcher used previously-established guidelines to formulate open-ended questions and to select probing methods which would help to expand upon responses from the participants. Questions were modified as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to follow the line of inquiry and to ensure points of inquiry were phrased in a manner which would be understood by the participants.

Conversations with the boys were also useful in allowing for follow-up questions about weekend observations at Sunday school and other contexts that had been selected for the study. Specific attention was given to piecing together as clear as possible a picture of the students’ school experiences as refugees, language learners, and teenage
boys, thus providing some insight into a context which remained otherwise out-of-reach. Collecting data of the boys at Sunday school and in different contexts began initially with an interest in observing everything and gradually – once the contexts were understood – turned to a focus on their interactions with others and use of language in navigating their contexts. During the first cycle of data coding and analysis, the researcher noted any observations in these settings which were worth pursuing, either through further observation or questions for the boys.

This process led to a slight and temporary change in data collection. For one month and in accordance with the flexibility needed for this type of data collection, the researcher cut back on informal meetings with the boys and met with them on a bi-weekly basis instead of weekly. Based on how meetings had been unfolding in the first few weeks of data collection, the researcher had come to believe spacing out meetings would be best for collection of useful data. Taking a week between meetings to focus more on collected data and to use it to inform subsequent meetings would help make meetings with the boys more fruitful and informative. However, by the end of one month of meeting bi-weekly, and in following the line of inquiry the researcher came to realize the advantages of meeting with the boys on a weekly basis. Mere interaction with the boys at closer dates helped them open up more in their responses. In addition, in coding previous data, the researcher came to realize much of the information she had thought – during meetings – to be unimportant was useful to her overall understanding of the boys and their experiences. Finally, it offered the advantage of allowing her to ask follow-up
questions within days of observing them at Sunday school or in a different context, instead of waiting more than a week to do so.

Throughout the entire data collection period and afterwards – during data analysis – the researcher engaged in reflexivity (Glesne, p. 145; Yin, p. 153), a process which involves “reflecting upon and asking questions of research interactions. To maximize usefulness of data and to ensure a continued positive relationship with the boys in this study, the researcher continuously reflected upon weekly sessions, observations, and conversations. In doing so, she determined points of interaction which did not work well, were not understood correctly, or would have been better avoided. An example of this was at the start of the study, when the researcher noted she would have to ask shorter and more simple questions of the boys to build up to the point she was interested in. Another instance of this was when the researcher noted she may have said something in a way which could be construed as trying to push an opinion on the participants. In this situation, she became more careful about her wording when she spoke to the boys. Reflexivity served a useful purpose in this study and helped to streamline the process and ensure interactions led to useful data collection.

Data collection commenced with the start of the 2017-2018 academic school year, and proceeded until schools closed for Winter break.

Data Sources

Data collection began with an initial semi-formal interview with Tariq and Salman’s mother, followed by an initial, semi-formal interview with the boys. These interviews were then proceeded by weekly informal meetings with the brothers. Weekly
meetings consisted of a series of open-ended questions and topics brought up by the researcher to learn more about their everyday school experiences, positioning in and out of school, and navigation of school and society using language and literacy. Question and topic formulation were based on previous conversations and observations. Initial interviews and weekly meetings, lasting about one hour each, were voice recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A total of eleven transcripts of conversations with the boys were documented, as well as one interview with their mother. Two interviews were conducted with Adnan, both of which were also voice recorded and transcribed.

In addition to these interviews, the researcher conducted a total of fourteen observations of Tariq and Salman in various settings. Eight of these took place in the local Sunday school which they attend, and the rest took place in settings such as the local Art museum, a picnic they were invited to, and an outing to a local food and music-based event in the downtown area. Field notes consisted of observations regarding Tariq and Salman’s behavior with and around others, interaction with strangers and – in the case of Sunday school – teachers and peers, and use of language to navigate their context. The researcher also voice-recorded analytic memos after observations if and when she felt the need to expand upon something significant she had made a note of during observation, as well as to compile her thoughts on what was observed.

Together, interviews, meetings, and observations allowed the researcher to develop an understanding of these boys’ experiences, hybridity processes, identity transformation, and use of language. These specifics about data sources can be found in the appendix.
Data Analysis

Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed for this study, meaning collection of data was informed initially by the researcher’s current understanding of the phenomenon of interest, and then by collected data. As data was collected, the researcher looked for concepts or ideas which stood out, and used reading of the data to inform what was looked for and focused on in subsequent data collection sessions. This meant that the focus of weekly discussions shifted, depending on what was identified as noteworthy and interesting to pursue or explore.

Data displays were used to organize data. Both diagrams and text-based organization helped to make sense of data, and to look for patterns and themes which emerged (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013). Displays were created separately but placed side-by-side for each case’s observations and interviews. This was to allow for comparison of findings from observations with those from meetings and conversations, and to make connections or note differences across the two. Data displays also helped with analysis of data during and after coding, allowing the researcher to identify major themes and noteworthy findings.

Because this study was focused on specific phenomena, including cultural borders, hybridity, and identity, *a priori coding* was used (Saldana, p. 71-71), meaning codes were created before coding cycles took place. All four questions were exploratory in nature but were based in research-backed ideas about literacy, identity, and hybridity. Creating codes beforehand allowed the researcher to focus on the topics of interest when coding and analyzing data.
In creating data displays and analyzing data initially, coding strategies from Saldana (2016) which best supported thorough data analysis without allowing the data to lose its meaning, and which ensured refugees’ voices were not lost in interpretation and presentation of findings were selected. Coding strategies from Saldana’s elemental methods (p. 66), considered to be “foundation methods” were selected upon examination of initial – and subsequent – data collected. This was done based on determination of the best strategy for highlighting important findings which would answer the research questions, as well as the coding method which would allow for “new discoveries, insights, and connections” (Saldana, p. 51) to be made about participants. Thus, descriptive coding was used for the first round of coding. Because this strategy is appropriate for almost any qualitative study and is useful for describing and understanding data – a necessary component to answering this study’s questions – it was selected as the best method for the first round of coding.

Codes were created to fit the research questions and phenomena of interest, such as cultural border, positioning, literacy, and identity. The codes used for the first round of coding can be found in the Appendix. These specific codes were created to help the researcher understand the phenomena of interest as holistically and in as much detail as possible.

The second round of coding employed the focused coding method, which “searches for the most frequent or significant Initial Codes…” (p. 155). The researcher was interested in organizing data by research question, and thus coded excerpts from interviews, meetings, and observations using the questions from the study. Excerpts of
data which contributed to answering a question were coded as, for example, *research question one*. A third round of coding was initiated to ensure coding from the first two rounds fit well and that no important piece of data was left out from coding.

Though the researcher noted initial data displays and analysis may indicate that changes need to be made to the coding procedures used to answer each of the three questions, this was not necessary. Data display creation, coding, and analysis was done throughout the study, and continued upon completion of data collection. At this point, a more holistic examination of all data collected, and all established analyses was made, and major themes and findings were identified.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, cross-case comparisons (Stake, 1995) were made between the two students’ experiences, perspectives, and researcher-identified instances of cultural hybridity as identified through interviews and observations. Themes found in both students’ data were compared, as were stark differences in experiences, perspectives, and evidence of identity development. In addition, situations which demonstrated students’ conceptualizations of themselves – a scenario where they act based on who they are – were noted and compared between the two refugees. This cross-case comparison was used to inform subsequent data collection and to compare the two boys in their personalities and identities as students and as literate individuals. A final cross-case comparison was made once all data analysis was complete. Data collected from the two Burmese boys was used to inform interview questions used in conversation with the Tampa-based Syrian refugee. His responses were coded in the
same manner as was the data from the two boys, and cross-case comparisons were made both during analysis and as findings were solidified.

The final comparison, presented below, will provide readers and educators with a succinct and descriptive picture of two refugee individuals, and to draw connections and highlight differences between the two.

**Limitations**

This study included several limitations. To begin with, because it consisted of two case studies – both from Burma – in specific contexts, findings are not generalizable to the entire refugee student population in the United States. Though this was intentional for beliefs related to the context-dependent nature of the refugee experience and identity, it is important to keep in mind. In addition, inability to access Tariq and Salman’s school context is a major limitation to understanding individual refugees’ school experiences, their use of language in that context, and their interaction with and navigation of cultural borders as students. Moving forward, it is imperative that research on refugee literacy and identity negotiation includes schools as one context of exploration. This means finding ways for school districts to accept and find value in the type of research being conducted and its specific points of inquiry. It is quite possible that in this study’s situation, the school district was not willing to allow for the reality of the refugee school experience to be uncovered because of the potential for findings to portray the district and individual schools negatively.

Another noteworthy limitation was the language barrier between the researcher and the Burmese boys. Without doubt, having to speak to them in their third – and least
fluent – language affected the types of answers, and their depth, that Tariq and Salman were able to give the researcher. Both function successfully in English and thus, this study was extremely enlightening and informative. However, the researcher’s inability to speak to the boys in their mother tongue served as an impediment to developing a more in-depth and complete understanding of their experiences in and out of school, their use of language to navigate contexts, their interactions at the cultural borders, and their identity negotiations. Because of this impediment, the researcher exercised extra caution when coding and analyzing data, and when piecing together information in an attempt to answer research questions. Despite taking these precautions, the researcher is confident that the level of insight into Adnan’s experiences is the direct result of her ability to speak his mother tongue. It is likely that speaking to Tariq and Salman in their mother tongue – albeit through a translator – would yield more fruitful insights into the topics of interest. This particular limitation must be taken into serious consideration when thinking about and conducting future research in this area.

**An Introduction to Tariq and Salman**

“They live a very simple life and I think part of her wishes they didn’t have to come here. [H] told me about her friend in NY who told her there are many Burmese Rohingya there and that she and her family should go there.” (Transcript 8-26-17)

The Ahmads are a Burmese family who came to the United States in the late summer of two thousand and fifteen. The father, Ali, and the mother, Hafsa, have five children: Tariq (fifteen), Salman (fourteen), Zainab (eight), and twin girls Aisha and Aaliyah, who turned one year old halfway through this study. Both Ali and Hafsa are Burmese Muslims, but Ali also holds membership in the Rohingya ethnic group. Hafsa
migrated to Malaysia for work purposes. She met and married Ali – who worked in electric wiring – soon after she arrived and, thus, did not take a job. She gave birth to her first three children in Malaysia. The twins were born in the United States. Tariq, Salman, and Zainab were brought up in the Malaysia school system, meaning that while their family spoke Burmese at home, they were quickly becoming fluent in another language at school.

Because the Ahmad family is Rohingya, they had limited educational access and opportunity in Malaysia. Burmese Rohingya have been denied citizenship from their country since the early eighties. When Ali came to Malaysia he was undocumented, and was not granted Malaysian citizenship, which meant the rest of his family suffered repercussions. Until he received what his sons referred to as a “card” from the United Nations, Ali remained vigilant at his workplace to avoid arrest for being undocumented and at times, when caught in a messy situation, would pay to avoid arrest.

Undocumented children, like Tariq, Salman, and Zainab, cannot officially attend public schools in Malaysia. According to Hafsa and her sons, they were only allowed to attend school until they reached a certain level, level six, at which point their education would be cut off. No doubt related to their membership in the Rohingya ethnic group, the barrier to complete education in Malaysia led them to apply for refugee status with the United Nations. Unlike what was expected, the Ahmad family’s status as refugees in this country was unrelated to violence, war, or conflict of any kind in Burma.
At the time that the researcher made initial contact with the Ahmad family, Tariq and Salman were beginning their third year of education in the American public-school system. Their mother, Hafsa, was friendly and welcoming during her first conversation with the researcher. Though she was eager to answer questions and engage in conversation, her English was what may be referred to as “broken.” What was impressive was her resolve to communicate her thoughts and feelings despite both her inability to speak in complete, coherent sentences and her struggle to use the appropriate words.

Below is an excerpt of the initial conversation with Hafsa:

Me: Okay, okay. How did you find America? What did you think of it when you came first?
Hafsa: Maybe no happy.
Me: No happy.
Hafsa: Yeah. Maybe first time, no English, maybe no people see. Only Christian come, talking talking, I don’t know maybe no understand. No here, learn English. I talking, learn English here.
Me: So that you can
Hafsa: Maybe I talk friend, Christian, here English, Hafsa like to go learn.
Me: To make your life easier?
Hafsa: Yeah, easier, then one week two time.
Me: Two times, okay. Umm, so when you were in Malaysia you knew people? You were happy in Malaysia?
Hafsa: Yeah, happy. Many many Muslim
Me: Many Muslims
Hafsa: Many Rohingya

Conversations with Hafsa continued in this manner, though sometimes responses were shorter. She illustrated what could perhaps be described as the negotiation and navigation she and her family engaged in upon contact with the cultural borders present in their American experience. Her responses indicated the motherly instinct driving her individual hybridity, which kept Hafsa worried and thinking about aspects of American life which her sons perhaps chose to navigate differently. One thing she made very clear was her desire for ties to a Muslim community and the positive feeling that comes with being surrounded by others of the same religion and ethnicity. America, and the city they were relocated to prevented her and her children from such an experience. Although she always had a smile on her face as she spoke, it was clear – more than two years into their arrival – that Hafsa was struggling to accept major cultural borders her family had to navigate, and had a longing desire for all that is familiar to her as a Burmese Muslim woman.

Worth noting is what was observed about the family’s financial and socioeconomic situations during this initial – and subsequent – conversations. The seven-person family lives in an apartment too small for their number in a very decent area; the apartment complex appears to be well-maintained and is very close to several different churches. Due to the extremely limited space in the apartment, the dining area and living room are used to store various items ranging from food boxes to baby car seats and toys. With each visit, the researcher noted that the number of items stored in these two rooms
was increasing. As such, the apartment was relatively messy and cluttered. The family owns a car which was donated to them by someone in the local Muslim community. Ali was still learning how to drive when data collection commenced; most people in Malaysia (according to the family) walk or use mopeds and public transportation to get around.

Hafsa explained that Ali worked on a chicken farm five or six days a week and took a bus to get to and from work. This job seemed a downgrade from his previous occupation in Malaysia, where he worked with electrical wiring. Hafsa asked for a ride to the grocery store on several occasions, during which she used WIC coupons to purchase baby formula and other food items for her family. It seemed the boys both had limited wardrobes which consisted of at least some donated items. This was clear from the ill fit of some of the clothes they wore throughout the semester, as well as from the frequent repetition of certain outfits they owned.

One discovery about the Ahmad family – of some surprise to the researcher – was their nonexistent family ties. Hafsa told me she was one of three, but did not know where her siblings were. She also told me her mother passed away in the early two thousands. Tariq and Salim both stated they did not know any family aside from their parents and siblings. The Ahmad family, as they described it, lived in a familial silo, with no connection to any relatives other than each other. This meant they were on their own as minorities in Malaysia, and as refugees in the United States. Such a reality flew in the face of researcher-held stereotypes about refugee families and their various sources of support as they navigated life as minorities and refugees in two different worlds.
Upon hearing about this study’s aim of using findings to understand refugees and to help refugees in American public schools, Hafsa appeared to be excited about her sons’ participation. She quickly consented to their participation and welcomed the researcher to come back within a few days to meet Tariq and Salman.

Both Tariq and Salman were shy and timid when the researcher returned to the Ahmad family’s home and introduced herself. Hafsa was asked if she would mind sitting elsewhere with her daughters. This was a precaution to help prevent her presence from influencing her sons’ responses to various questions. She agreed, but did not seem too happy about this. Before leaving the room, she had an exchange with Tariq which concluded with him agreeing to sit down on the couch next to Salman. He appeared to need some coaxing to sit for the initial meeting. This particular exchange was an introduction into Tariq’s personality and social self, as will be discussed later on.

Tariq and Salman’s body language indicated their shyness with unfamiliar individuals. They did not maintain eye contact for long, did not seem too eager to be involved in the conversation – though they did not seem unhappy or uncomfortable – and gave short responses to all initial questions. Tariq especially kept his head down for most of the conversation. The researcher had to probe quite a bit to get satisfying responses, especially since the purpose of the initial meeting was to develop a background story about the boys, their family, and their transition to life in America. Despite this, they were both willing to respond and to engage in conversation – as limited as their words were. Salman was more eager to respond and volunteer answers than was Tariq; this pattern continued for the most part throughout the semester of data collection.
The initial meeting with Tariq and Salman brought the researcher to an important realization. Because she could only communicate with them in their third – and least fluent – language, future questions would have to be phrased in simple, easy-to-understand language, and that probing would likely be necessary in many cases. The researcher also realized it would not always be easy to understand what either Tariq or Salman was saying; their use of English, though good enough for conversation, was not always understandable and sometimes necessitated follow-up questioning to make sense of their response. This was by no fault of their own, considering they are both still working towards complete proficiency in English and it takes several years to acquire a language completely. Examples of their use of English will be given in subsequent sections.

Despite these realizations during this first meeting with the boys, the semester of interaction proved to be fruitful and quite intriguing in some respects. Below is a compilation of findings related to their literacies, experiences with cultural borders and hybridity, and identities. Each of the boys will be discussed separately, then will be compared to each other and to Adnan, the Syrian refugee from Tampa.

An Introduction to Adnan

After many attempts of contacting Radiant Hands, the organization responsible for resettling refugees in Tampa, I finally got a response that put me in touch with two Syrian refugee families who have kids in high school. The Radiant Hands individual who responded to my requests gave me phone numbers for the fathers of both families. It’s my guess their numbers are the ones on file for all official documentation.

I texted both fathers with a brief introduction, since the person I had been in contact with told me she spoke with the families, got their consent for participation, and were eager to
speak to me and help out with whatever I needed. Adnan’s father (Mohammad) responded later that evening, giving me the okay to call them the next evening to talk to Adnan.

I called Mr. Muhammad at the agreed upon time. He was very nice and polite, confirming I wanted to speak to his high school age son and telling me he was at work. He then told me he would send me his wife’s phone number, because she was at home, and I could ask her to speak to Adnan.

When I called the wife, she was also very cordial and welcoming. She asked me to give her a minute to ask her son if he would be okay with talking to me, telling me he had not been informed that I would be calling. I waited for a short period. When she came back, she told me she had Adnan with her and that I could talk to him.

Adnan is a very polite and friendly boy with very clear ambitions for himself. He is serious, though he claims he likes to joke with his family at home. Adnan is what can be described as a practicing Muslim, and a very proud Syrian. He is intelligent and seeks to expand his knowledge as much as he can, and is curious to learn about various topics, including Psychology. Adnan is clearly resilient, as is demonstrated in his discussions on life in America, his school experiences, and the situation which drove him and his family from Syria. The researcher spoke to him twice during this study, and found him and his thoughts very interesting to listen to.

**Personal Standpoint and Ethical Considerations**

In a qualitative research study, it is important practice for the researcher to become aware of – and make clear to others – those beliefs and values which may influence their reading of the data, and their interpretation of results (Merriam, 1998). I am a firm believer in this practice for all types of research. Not only does it help me, as a researcher, become more conscious of my biases, but it makes it easier for me and my
readers to make sense of my viewpoint. It also makes it easier for me to try to keep my personal views to myself as I collect and analyze data, so as not to compromise the integrity of my findings. More importantly, awareness of my biases will help me to take greater care not to lose my participant’s voices during data analysis and presentation of findings.

My personal views on several matters related to this study no doubt influenced my understanding of findings. As an Arab daughter of immigrants, both of whom were forced to leave our home country, Syria, at a young age, I undoubtedly have sympathetic views towards refugees – whether they hail from Syria or elsewhere. My moral and ethical standpoint on refugees, minority students, and the educational opportunities afforded to both is no doubt informed by my own background and heritage. This could serve as a strength in a study that is focused on illuminating for others who refugees are, and what in their school experience is influencing their identity as students, and by consequence, their engagement and motivation in school. However, my standpoint could also inadvertently bias my results, unless I was consciously and consistently aware of my personal perspective on these topics.

My epistemological perspective, constructivist in nature, and my subscription to sociological theories of learning and perspectives which tie together language, literacy and culture both undoubtedly shaped my interpretation of observation and interview data. Because I subscribe to these ideas, it automatically became my goal to make sure that my study and its findings were reflective of student and family voices. At the same time, I was now more aware of the need to acknowledge my epistemological and theoretical
viewpoints when commenting on and interpreting school policies, teacher practices, and the overall school environment as they relate to refugees.

Finally, as someone who has never formally taught in a public school, I recognize that my understanding of policies and practices may differ from a teacher’s understanding. I find it important for my readers to know this about me, because it can offer a fresh perspective on schools, and may make it easier for me to step back and look at the picture without bias as a public-school teacher.

For the purposes of this study, my role was that of observer as participant (Glesne, p.65), where, because it served “a formulated research purpose” (Merriam, 1998, p. 95) and was “planned deliberately” (p. 96) I used observation “as a research tool” (p. 95). In the observation contexts, I had some interaction with my participants but did not play an active role in their educational setting. Throughout the process, I made a note of thoughts, questions, and concerns which came to mind during data collection and analysis. They are compiled below.

**Reflections**

I found myself having to make deliberate efforts to remain conscious of this standpoint throughout the study, data analysis, and writing of findings. Doing so made it easier to maintain awareness of thoughts about data from the study which were influenced by the researcher’s opinions regarding refugees, their education, and their positioning in the United States.

Though I’ve been exposed to coding prior to embarking on my own coding process, I continuously faced frustrations and doubts as I thought about and coded my
data. Going through my transcripts as I wrote them out and trying to code initially for valuable pieces of information was a daunting task until I became more familiar with the task, and until I wrapped my head completely around my codes and what each stood for. And though it did not take long after beginning the coding process for me to “remember” what each code meant, I continued to express struggles I felt when I coded transcripts and field notes. It was not until my second round of coding that I felt at ease with the coding process. This was not due to the creation of poor coding categories or my inability to find what was important within my data. Instead, it was due to my continuous questioning of how best to code for pieces of information so that they would not be lost in the sea of data I was collecting. It was due to my continuous thinking about hybridity and borders, and how best to identify, from within my data, instances or examples of either in a manner that would truly allow me to answer my research questions. Because some of my codes are inter-related, I exercised extra caution when choosing the most suitable label for each piece of data.

Along the same lines, in the first month and a half of data collection I felt myself becoming frustrated by my weekly meetings and observations with the boys, and wondering whether each of these interactions was producing anything of value in terms of my research questions and goals. I had not entered into this study thinking all of my interactions would present very clear and very useful understandings of the boys, their identities, and cultural borders and hybridity. Quickly, though, I came to realize that “getting into their heads” as it were would be a much more arduous task than I had anticipated. More importantly, it dawned upon me that I was holding several
preconceived notions about these boys’ school experiences, positioning, and hybridity – all of which were shaped by my examination of current literature – and that I would have to step away from these notions in an effort to understand them as two, unique individuals who might not fit the image of a stereotypical refugee student in America.

These thoughts together, and my inability to find as much beneficial information in my collected data as I had hoped, led me to the decision that meeting with them on a bi-weekly basis would be sufficient for getting the data I would need to answer my research questions. It also seemed to me a good way to spend more time with my data between sessions, with the goal of coming up with questions and topics for subsequent meetings which would better help me understand the boys, their identities, and their experiences without picking up on a lot of unnecessary information.

One month into this decision, I came to see the value of weekly face-to-face, personal interactions. I also began to realize the data I had been collecting, and the boys’ responses to my questions were, if analyzed carefully, actually quite useful to piecing together a narrative about their experiences and who they are as individuals. As such, I continued to meet them on a weekly basis until the conclusion of my data collection period.

Throughout the semester of data collection, I experienced many frustrations with the boys and their responses to my inquiries and probing attempts. In many instances, even when questions necessitated in-depth, and perhaps even lengthy, responses, I was met with short, to-the-point answers which failed to provide me the insight I was looking for. This was especially the case when we discussed their experiences and interactions at
school, or when I was looking for insight into their opinions and feelings about certain matters. For example, my questions about their day at school or their opinions about their school, teachers, and peers were usually met with one or two-word responses. It is extremely difficult to weave together a coherent picture about an individual’s experiences and identity, particularly in the context of cultural borders and hybridity, when in-depth responses and insight are missing.

My frustration with this became more pronounced after I spoke to A in Tampa and found him much more responsive to my questions, and more willing to speak at length about different topics I touched upon.

I found myself continuously wondering whether my questioning tactics, phrasing of questions, and approach to asking questions were part of the problem. Therefore, I engaged in a lot of probing tactics and simplifying or rephrasing questions in a way that would ensure both boys understood what I was asking. In some cases, this meant removing some of the complexity in a question as it initially stood, and breaking it down into a series of smaller, simpler questions leading up to the topic of inquiry. For example, finding out about their positioning at school turned into questions about how their teachers treated them, what negative interactions they had with them, and questions such as “do they treat you differently from other students” and expanding on the idea of difference.

Despite these frustrations and what at times felt like set-backs, I usually walked away from our meetings with the sense that I had gained some valuable insight into something about the boys and their experiences. I continued to remind myself that these
boys defy the stereotyped image in my head of the refugee student. I also had to remain constantly aware of both my interpretations about what I was learning and my thoughts about how their experience “should be,” to help make sure my data analysis and presentation of findings were guided more by my theoretical framework than by my thoughts and opinions.

Even with this in mind, I found myself offering my opinion on different situations or sharing my own experiences with the boys in an effort to humanize myself and allow them to see similarities between us. Though their reactions were usually negligible or non-existent, I persisted in doing this with the hope it would build more rapport and encourage them to open up more.

At several points during the study, I found myself bouncing between believing the boys were being straightforward with me and wondering whether they truly were. I will explore this in greater detail during the discussion on their identities.

This study, from start to finish, has challenged my notions of what it means to be an adolescent refugee student in America, and has broadened my perspective. I have come to appreciate the research process for what it is. In addition, as the lead researcher of this dissertation, I have come to understand the power researchers hold as data collectors, analyzers, and narrators of others’ stories. My hope, with this realization, is that I will do justice to the two brothers and the third boy whose stories I will tell, and that my narrative of these three individuals is one which truly fulfills the goals I set out on this study with.
Contributions

This study provided new, greatly-needed perspectives on the refugee school experience and identity development. More specifically, it illuminated for educators the language and literacy practices of two refugee students – a sorely lacking subject in the literature. It also attempted to uncover the interplay between school and society language and literacy practices, and those of the two students. The aim was to illuminate the experiences of two individual refugees, and to provide insight into their positioning, their identities, the hybridity they undergo at the cultural borders, and their use of language throughout this process of hybridity. The reasoning behind a focus on language and literacy came in their core role in academic engagement and achievement, as well as in social engagement and interaction at the societal level. Comprehension of, engagement with, and proficiency in the school curriculum necessitates strength in language and literacy practices as taught and used by the school system. In addition, navigation of cultural borders involves and is influenced by language and literacy practices, thus making it imperative for educators to understand refugees’ use of such powerful tools as they negotiate cultural borders.

In addition, research on refugee student experiences is lacking, and no research has yet explored the process of hybridity refugee student identities undergo as a result of their experiences in school and society – and language and literacy factors in particular. Illuminating this process and determining how students perceive language and literacy – both their own and those of the dominant culture – within the context of school and society was a crucial step towards a holistic understanding of refugees. It was also a first
step towards improving their experiences and academic outcomes, and to create interventions or approaches to teaching aimed at minimizing the negative impact of the school experience on refugees’ identities, well-being, and academic outcomes.

There is much to be learned about refugee students in the United States. This dissertation study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of refugees, to better understand the process of identity development they undergo, and to illuminate the role language and literacy play in identity transformation and hybridity. Findings contributed to the literature base, and can be used by educators and future research to inform practice, intervention design, and further research. By conducting this study in the Southeastern United States, the hope was to also illuminate for schools in the region the humanity and complexity of refugees, and to demonstrate their capabilities and wealth of resources they possess as individuals. This helps to change the deficit perspective on refugees, and to develop a more welcoming attitude towards and interest in them.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

Literacy

It has been established by various researchers that literacy is a very broad umbrella under which a great variety of skills fall. Because the public-school system and society in general focus heavily on the standard skills of reading and writing in English, it is possible for the more nuanced literacy skills of minority students to go unnoticed. One of the research questions this study aimed to answer was “How are these students literate?” Here, literacy was defined as looking beyond the narrow, academic definition of standard English reading and writing and artificially-set standards for what is considered acceptable English (Guerrero, 2004; Luke & Dooley, 2009). A sociocultural perspective of literacy was employed to uncover the boys’ literacy practices as shaped by “norms of power, language and discourse” (Wilder, 2015), to understand their literacy skills in the settings and contexts in which they were used and to do so without the often-imposed notion of English superiority over other languages.

Tariq. I rang the doorbell when I arrived for our weekly meeting and was greeted by Hafsa and her daughter. They welcomed me with a smile. I walked in saying “Assalamu Alaikum,” peace be onto you. This is the traditional greeting between Muslims. Tariq and Salman were sitting on the ground eating rice with their hands. They ignored my greeting; Tariq did not turn around to see who had come in and did not acknowledge my presence until he had finished eating, washing his plate, and drinking water.
Me: So with your friends at lunch, do you also not talk? Or do you talk with them?

Tariq: Yeah

Me: You do talk?

Tariq: Yes

Me: So you’re not afraid they won’t understand you?

Tariq: No. They know me

(In a later conversation)

Tariq: They talking and I can’t answer them. I, they don’t understand.
Nobody understand me.

Me: Nobody understands you? The students or the teachers or all of them?

Tariq: All

Me: All of them? So you tried and they don’t understand?

Tariq: Yes, but just ESL class

Language is the cornerstone of a great many literacy skills. Using language for communication is one literacy skill key to functioning in American society. Especially in a high school setting, where human interaction features prominently, speaking and understanding in the dominant language are both important to successful interaction, the development of social relationships, academic success, and ultimately, one’s self-conception as a literate being (Cummins, et al., 2006; Stewart, 2015). The above excerpts
offer some insight into Tariq’s communication abilities and literacies and suggest something about his positioning as a literate individual in American society.

**Struggles with English.** One thing about Tariq that quickly became apparent during interactions was the difficulty he faced in expressing himself on many occasions. In some cases, he would stumble over his words as he engaged in conversation with the researcher and struggled to put together a coherent sentence. We see this in the following exchange:

Me: What are you guys doing now in Art?

Tariq: Uhh 3D

Me: 3D? On a computer?

Tariq: No, uh, write

Me: Oh! You’re making a… What are you making?

Tariq: Umm, what’s called? Mmmm, make like, like. I don’t know how to say, but need to explain, like…

In other cases, he would either think for a minute or begin to respond before saying “I don’t know” or “I don’t know how to say.” Tariq is more difficult to understand than is Salman, and lacks confidence in his English-speaking abilities, no doubt something which is influenced by set ideals about what “good” English is (Street, 2014). He demonstrates much greater confidence when speaking to his brother and mother in Burmese or Malay, and does so very adeptly.

Tariq’s ability to understand native English speakers is also limited. This was noted in multiple interactions, whereby he would either give a blank stare when a
question was asked of him or would give a response unrelated to the stated question. He also admitted this as being a barrier to his understanding of content at school, especially with his World Geography class:

Tariq: Yes. And new, new lesson. New lesson, that’s why. It’s new subject, because that’s why I got bad grade.

Me: Because it’s all…

Tariq: (interrupting) New, and it’s fast

(Later in the conversation)

Me: Okay, so 2 or 3 times a week. How about the other class that you got uhh, World Geography

Tariq: World Geography

Me: You got a C in that. Did you have tests and quizzes in that too?

Tariq: Yes

Me: A lot?

Tariq: A lot

Me: Were they hard?

Tariq: Mmm yes hard because I don’t understand

Me: Because you don’t understand

Tariq: Vocabulary

**Language positioning.** In his discussion of literacy, Street (2014) states that “the language of the teacher and text positions the subject and locates them in a socially and authoritatively-constructed space” (p. 120) As a student and an English language learner,
Tariq is positioned as lacking by default of speaking and comprehending at a level below the language used in this class. Even though he can speak, read, write, and understand English, the language used by his teacher and in the curriculum is difficult for him. This impacts his grade severely – he was a straight-A student last year, but has earned C’s and D’s this year – and puts him in danger of being construed as an unintelligent or lazy student by his teachers. Though Sunday school is a very different educational context, and grades do not carry implications as heavy as in high school, Tariq has been facing a similar situation in his classes since being moved to a more age-appropriate level. In the Sunday school context Tariq struggles to keep up with the teacher as he talks as well as with the pace of content presentation. On more than one occasion, Tariq was asked to read in class. In the process – and by no fault of his own – he stumbled frequently across words which a fluent reader of his age would typically be able to read smoothly.

Situations such as these, where he struggles to understand, keep up, and read age-appropriate passages undoubtedly affect his literate identity as an English speaker. They also affect his self-confidence, something which is seen when he admits his English language abilities are the reason he avoids most social interaction and voluntary participation in class. The researcher noted this on many occasions when he stumbled to piece together coherent responses or admitted keeping quiet during class such as in the following exchange:

Me: Do you ask in class or you wait until after class?
Salman: after class
Me: After class. Okay. Why not during class?
Tariq: Because teacher is teaching, he, she cannot help that time
Me: Can’t help while she’s teaching. Are there other students that ask questions in class? No one asks questions?
Tariq: Sometimes
Me: Sometimes. So you can, but you don’t
Tariq: Yes
(In a later conversation)
Me: Why are you sad?
Tariq: I don’t know how to explain
Me: You don’t know how to explain. Try. He can help you
Tariq: Mmm I don’t know how to say

**ESL & English practice.** That on the surface his struggles in both school contexts make him appear to be lacking as a literate individual – and affect his self-conception as a literate individual – is based on dominant views and ignores other literacy skills he possesses which might not be made apparent in school contexts or everyday interactions. These struggles are also not atypical for English language learners. As mentioned in the literature review, it takes four to seven years to become completely fluent in a new language (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006), and this does not take into consideration any flaws which may exist in the approaches used to teach the language (Roberts, 1994; Cummins, et al., 2006; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). Tariq (and Salman) is in his third year of school in America, meaning that he has yet to enter the range of years within which it is estimated that he will become fluent in understanding, speaking, reading, and
writing English. He is also in an ESL system which is very technical in its teaching of English, and does not focus on practical uses of language, particularly the non-academic type. This type of decontextualized English teaching, which, according to the literature, is found in many schools across the nation (Harklau, 1994; Luke & Dooley, 2009; Haneda, 2008) is detached from the myriad of uses of English which students and individuals come up against or engage with (Kirkland, 2013) in school and society. It also fails to account for literacy skills English language learners already possess, and does not capitalize on their home languages as a tool for learning a second language (Guerrero, 2004; Cummins, 2005).

Compounding Tariq’s English language learning experience is the lack of English use in the Ahmad family home and his limited interaction with English speakers outside of his high school. Tariq does not practice using his English much outside of school, both because he does not usually take part in activities outside of school, and because he does not usually speak to others voluntarily when in different contexts. Therefore, the only consistent practice of English Tariq is exposed to comes from his listening to teachers and class participation, and in any conversations he has with individuals in high school or Sunday school. His participation in the high school context usually occurs in ESL class, where course content involves a lot of speaking and writing. He has told the researcher he does not volunteer to participate and waits until after class to ask questions, indicating he shies away from speaking up. In the Sunday school context, his verbal interactions are usually limited to those he has with his brother and their Burmese friend. He speaks minimally in class and when asked to participate gives short responses.
Tariq does not have access to social contexts which would help him to become more fluent in conversational English, nor is he placed in situations where he must make use of various English literacy skills. He is, however, taught implicitly in school about the significance academic success – predicated on fluency in the English language – has in American society’s definitions of success (Guerrero, 2004; Cummins et al., 2006; Avineri, et al., 2015), as evidenced by the excerpt below:

Me: No, you won’t go to jail. Do you think something, do you think it’s better to finish school or for a person to say I don’t want to finish? Here, in America.

Tariq: I think finish school

Me: Finish school. Why?

Tariq: If uh, just, if finish school, uh, like graduate, graduate, I can get better job.

Me: Better job. If you graduate. From high school?

Tariq: No, like college

Me: College. So it’s important to finish high school and then college so you can have a better job?

When taking these factors, contexts, and implicit messages into consideration, it is no surprise Tariq stumbles often when speaking, that he recognizes his speaking and understanding skills are not up-to-par with standard norms and expectations, or that he believes he must continue improving his English. Despite a somewhat bleak on-the-
surface judgment of his literacy, Tariq is a very literate individual, perhaps in ways more complex than other more academically-advanced students in his cohort.

**Multiliteracies.** Tariq, like other teenagers, is technologically-fluent. He is familiar with Facebook and Instagram, though he professes he does not have much interest in either and does not use them. He also frequents YouTube to access music, and sometimes to watch informational videos. This is an instance which demonstrates Tariq’s literacy skills, in that he makes use of language to navigate a tool he is using to achieve some aim. One activity he engages in for fun is playing games; Tariq plays *Clash Royale* and *Clash of Clans*, both of which require a sophisticated understanding of rules and gaming strategy to be played well. Below is an excerpt from a session during which he attempted to explain *Clash Royale* to the researcher:

Me: Oh okay. So if, explain the game to me. I don’t know the game

Tariq: Okay. If this thing is legendary.

Tariq: Like this thing, this thing, this thing, legendary, and like this is rare.

Me: It’s rare? Okay.

Tariq: And this is common. This is epic *pointing at two different cards*

Me: Okay. Are these cards?

Salman: Yes, card

Tariq: It’s card. Everything is card.

Me: And what do you do with the cards?
Tariq: Do. Is this is two is, this is one [person]. in this thing. Like two people, like Salman and me. Like this *presses something*

Me: So you can play by yourself or you can play with someone?

Tariq: Mm, I can match, ummm, someone in who play

Me: Someone who’s already playing, you can play with them

Me: Okay.

Tariq: This my team. This other team. This is king. This two is king and this is prince, princess

Though his explanations are not all coherent or do not flow smoothly, his explanations do give a general understanding of the game and of what he is doing, and show he is an intelligent individual. Both his ability to explain and his actual playing of Clash Royale and Clash of Clans are evidence of his literacy skills. Not only does he comprehend well, but he is capable of learning on his own as he did with both games. Though this may seem to be a simple skill which is not given much thought, it is important to highlight when demonstrating the intelligence and capabilities of refugee students. This is especially true because their struggles with English may artificially mask their abilities or paint a picture of someone who faces difficulty understanding and grasping concepts.

Tariq, not surprisingly, uses Malay as the default language in his games, in Google, and for all other online activities. For instance, when he and Salman were showing the researcher songs they listen to on YouTube, the researcher noted that YouTube was in Malay. Though he speaks Burmese, Tariq is more fluent in Malay and
falls back on it when trying to understand something or to translate English words or sentences. For instance, when using Google Translate for anything related to school, he (and Salman) translates into Malay. Malay serves as a tool for Tariq to navigate the English language and mediates his understanding.

There is no doubt Tariq is a very literate individual and possesses literacy skills which are not apparent to someone, such as a teacher, who does not know him well and does not engage him in real conversation. The relationship he holds with English, as described above, is a demonstration of how he uses the language to mediate his identity. What Tariq perceives as his strengths and weaknesses in English mediate the enactment of his identity, such as when he maintains a shy personality around most people or when he stays quiet in class, even if he has a question.

His literacy abilities as an individual who is defined by labels – set by society – which carry negative connotations related to language and ability are a clear demonstration of why educators must learn about their students from a holistic standpoint. Doing so would uncover for educators not only their students’ backgrounds and experiences, but also their abilities and skills they possess, thus dissolving negative stereotypes which may operate initially when educators interact with new “refugees” or “English Language Learners.”

Salman. Salman grabbed a sleeve of Oreos from the kitchen as we began our conversation in their living room. He snacked on the cookies as we talked and finished the entire sleeve as the three of us discussed various topics. As we wrapped up our
Salman got up from the couch, smiling. He looked at me as he walked over to the kitchen and said “Now I’m going to eat lunch.”

Me: But did you understand most of what he was saying, would you say, or was there a lot…
Salman: Yes, I understand
Me: Most of it?
Salman: Yes, I understand
Me: For sure
Salman: Yes

(In a later conversation)
Me: Okay. Do you listen when they talk or you find it hard to listen?
Salman: I can’t. Hard listen.
Me: It’s hard to listen. Do you follow when they read?
Salman: Uh, well, if they like, little faster, we can’t. We don’t know where to line.

**Struggles with English.** Like Tariq, Salman demonstrates a literate identity which finds itself between demonstrating adequacy in using the language in question and struggling to navigate contexts shaped by this language. Unlike his brother, when discussing language, Salman usually presents a confident front, in which he is a fluent English speaker who does not shy away from conversing with others or participating in class. More often than not, he speaks with a tone which asserts his ability to understand and navigate the English language. His confidence is not unfounded. Salman does speak
more fluently and coherently than does Tariq, and usually has an easier time understanding what others say to him. He does not respond to inquiries by saying “I don’t know” or “I don’t know how to say” the way Tariq does. This relates to both his fluency in speaking English and his self-confidence when it comes to speaking in a language aside from his mother tongue.

Like Tariq, Salman entered public school in America as an English Language Learner who was immediately placed in ESL classes taught in the same manner as Tariq’s ESL classes. Unlike Tariq, however, Salman describes himself as more willing to participate in school and initiate conversation with others. He is also less studious than his brother, and does not admit to trouble understanding his teachers or subject content. Part of this relates to Salman having a better grasp on the English language, and part of it relates to the identity he likes to present himself as having. He considers himself to be a fluent English speaker who comprehends relatively well and does not push himself the extra mile to overcome difficulties he faces in understanding or performing well in school. In terms of who he is as a literate individual, Salman exudes much more confidence than Tariq, and this is seen in responses to questions about his schooling experiences, where, for example, he denies facing difficulty in understanding class content and blames quarter grades on his failure to complete assignments or blames the teacher.

Despite the self-confidence he usually demonstrates as an English literate individual, Salman also shies away from talking to people he does not know, something which was seen consistently at Sunday school, when he and Tariq would stand off to the
side and would not initiate conversation with others. When asked about this, Salman gave
responses such as the following:

Me: Is it because the boys at Sunday school are Arab?
Salman: No
Me: No. You just…
Me: What if they were at your school? What if they also went to
Wade Hampton High? Would you talk to them?
Salman: Yes.
Me: You would? But not in Sunday school.
Salman: I don’t know
Me: Are you shy? Is that, are you shy to go by yourself?
Salman: No
Me: You’re not.
Salman: I don’t want to.
Me: But you don’t want to.
Salman: Want to be alone.

Though he is more comfortable with English – to the extent that he speaks to
other English-speaking gamers in Roblox and enjoys music in English, Salman’s actual
fluency does affect who he sees himself as and how he behaves in various contexts. As
with Tariq, the difficulties he does have with understanding and speaking English are by
no fault of his own. However, in a context where English is the dominant language,
where it shapes narratives, and where one’s ability to be a “fluent” English speaker
decides whether and how they are silenced in society and school (Kirkland, 2013), there is no doubt Salman’s self-conception as a literate individual is impacted. In his case, though he speaks of having friends at school with whom he converses regularly, his behavior around others in Sunday school and in other contexts (such as at a picnic with White Americans and at a carnival in the local Muslim community) suggests he is perhaps shy about his English fluency and prefers not to engage in conversations which may leave him feeling awkward or lacking.

**ESL experience.** What is interesting about Salman is he repeatedly states his interest in ESL class and how he enjoys learning vocabulary, something his more-studious, more visibly hardworking brother does not show. Salman’s choice of ESL as his favorite class goes back to his literate identity: confident about his English but aware of his shortcomings. Just as he shies away from interactions with others in various contexts to avoid feeling inadequate as an English speaker, he feels most comfortable in a class in which he is only one of many other English Language Learners. In this context, he is not different and his English is not lacking. It is a safe space for him to speak, understand, and write English without fear of judgment from native English speakers. His ESL class – and Tariq’s – is essentially the only space in which he truly practices his English fluency and thus is an opportunity for him to shape his English literate identity into something will eventually be more comfortable with sharing.

Though this may be one positive aspect of school for Salman’s English literacy, it is also something which educators should be aware and perhaps even critical of. Considering the model used to teach English in most ESL classes, including Salman’s,
and the fact that other students may be like Salman and Tariq – not practicing English outside of school – there is something to say about the type of literacy English Language Learners are acquiring through their ESL courses, and more to say about what they are not learning in these contexts. Salman may be comfortable in his ESL class and may enjoy it because it helps him to learn basics of English.

On its own, however, this class is not enough to teach English Language Learners like Salman the linguistic skill and fluency they need to know to fit the profile of a “literate” individual in America (Street, 2014; Kirkland, 2013; Avineri, et al., 2015). Salman may graduate from high school with a large vocabulary and a strong grasp on English grammar, but he will not have developed the skills necessary to hold a conversation as fluently and coherently as two native English speakers who are well-versed in the American discourse. More importantly, he will not have learned enough about American Discourse to truly comprehend what is said to and around him, or what he reads in and out of school. At face value, and without recognition of their complex literacy abilities, English literacy gaps such as these may be construed as deficits innate within boys like Salman and Tariq, and may be used to judge them as lacking and unintelligent. It may be quick judgments like these which push Salman to shy away from others, and which encourage him to present himself as one who understands, does not struggle academically, and has friends at school.

Salman’s interest in ESL and learning English, as well as the image he portrays of himself are all, in part, related to the linguistic imperialism exuded by the dominant English language and its native speakers (Luke & Dooley, 2009). His literate self is best
described with the following quote: “…this sense of always looking at oneself through…” (Kirkland, p. 93). Salman is a very literate and intelligent individual, as is clearly demonstrated in the paragraphs that follow. However, he has embodied notions of English as the superior language (Cummins, 2005; Gee, 2015), and is aware of how societal definitions of literacy shape preconceived notions and judgments held by others about him as an English speaker. Below is an illustration of Salman’s attempt at adopting American discourse, a direct result of his conceptualization of American English:

Salman: What? Friend speak, speak like speak, like “Hey.” I do that. shake, wassup, yeah, yeah like that

Me: So you started doing that by yourself?

Salman: Yeah, friend

Me: With your friends?

Salman: Yes. Everyday

Me: Is this your friends from ESL?

Salman: No. Friends

Me: Okay, how did you make these friends?

Salman: Uhh, well it’s from class. for class

Multiliteracies. One area Salman enjoys talking about and in which he is very skilled is gaming and social media. Salman is fluent in Roblox and very familiar with the games Tariq plays. Below is an excerpt of Salman beginning to explain the game he plays frequently in Roblox:

Me: So in Roblox there are different games?
Salman: Yes, there are different
Me: And this is the one you like to play?
Me: Assassin
Salman: they play knife, throw, kill
Salman: I got hmmm,
Me: Okay. These are all your knives?
Salman: This…knife is hard to get
Me: Okay, so when you play you can pick what knife to use?
Salman: No, no, no, no. No, you need to wait to wait, wait, wait, in fifth,
like five month to get this knife
Me: How do, how do you get it, though? You have to play really
well to get it?
Salman: Yes, everyday
Me: Okay

It is clear Salman is in his element when playing this game, and that he is skilled
at Assassin. He explained to the researcher how the game is played as he was engaging
with it, which demonstrates his literacy abilities both with games and with
comprehension and language use. His love for this game runs so deep that at the very
beginning of one session, when the researcher was waiting for Tariq to finish washing up
after eating, Salman took out his iPad and began playing. He continued to sneak some
moves during the meeting at points when Tariq and the researcher were having a
conversation. Of interest is how savvy he is at scoring points in the game; he takes it
seriously to the extent that he lies to other gamers to get things (i.e. knives) from them. Salman clearly knows how to navigate the gaming world – an indication of intelligence and learning ability – not only as an Assassin gamer, but also with other games he and his brother play.

Salman’s literacy extends beyond the skills discussed above. YouTube is another area of fluency for this young student. He uses YouTube to find songs he enjoys listening to and, more interestingly, to learn. Much of what he has learned about the games he plays comes from YouTube videos, as does much of what he knows about music. He also watches YouTube videos for leisure, for example, ones of “YouTubers” filming themselves as they talk about a specific topic. Salman’s use of YouTube is a clear demonstration of literacy skills he possesses, and his use of these skills to achieve a greater aim, be it to learn something new or to find something enjoyable.

Google Translate is a literacy tool Salman relies on when navigating English language contexts. He frequently references his use of the tool and, like Tariq, translates English into Malay when using it. Despite being more fluent in Malay than in English, Salman converses with other gamers (usually to achieve something as he plays), listens to English music, and speaks of initiating conversations – albeit short ones – with other students at his school. Though his speaking fluency may not be up-to-par with a native English speaker as demonstrated in the above excerpts – and which may be labeled as a deficit – Salman successfully makes use of the most recent addition to his linguistic repertoire and uses it to navigate various contexts which necessitate its use. Essentially,
English is a tool which Salman demonstrates skill at using when navigating these contexts.

In addition to the above contexts, Salman also participates in various classes at school to earn incentives offered by teachers, such as extra points or candy. That he does so is further evidence of his literate identity being influenced by two conflicting narratives he holds of himself: one, as a confident English speaker and two, as a non-native English speaker who is aware of his shortcomings with the English language. Depending on the context, he either makes use of English when he feels the need to or shies away from its use. The latter is the case in Sunday school. Here, he avoids interacting with other students at Sunday school and usually does not volunteer to read in class, in contradiction to his reported behavior at high school and likely due to his teacher’s consistent correction of his word pronunciation. In one Sunday school observation, the following notes were made: Asks Salman to read. He starts reading, stumbles on the word “deception,” and the teacher corrects his pronunciation and then asks him what deception means. Salman doesn’t answer so the teacher tries to explain what it means by giving an example. (except he doesn’t really define it). Teacher then asks Salman to continue reading. Corrects his pronunciation of “amusement,” “mutual,” “revelry”

It is apparent Salman’s literate identity is still undergoing transformation, and that this is the result of pervasive implicit messages regarding the English language, its superiority to other languages, and standards of what is considered “good enough” English (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Cummins, 2005; Gee, 2015). Though Salman may be
conflicted and may be judged as lacking in literacy, he is in fact quite literate and possesses many skills.

**Tariq and Salman’s Shared Literate Identities.** Perhaps where Tariq’s (and Salman’s) most sophisticated literacy abilities lay is in the skills which are not immediately apparent in interacting with them. Though they may not be considered completely fluent in all, the boys are trilingual and can function in Burmese, Malay, and English. Malay is more their home language than is Burmese. Like others who grow up in one country but hail from another, the boys are more fluent in the language of the country they live in than they are in their mother tongue. Tariq and Salman grew up in Malaysia, attended Malaysian schools, and had friends who spoke Malay. Though they are Burmese and knew other Burmese families in Malaysia, their use of the language has been limited to conversations with their parents. Such is the case with children of immigrants in America, for example. They are taught one language at home, but grow up in an English-speaking school and society and thus become stronger and more fluent in English.

What’s fascinating about Tariq and Salman is they have gone through this process twice and are extremely capable of navigating various situations and experiences with three languages. Essentially, the boys have three languages as tools with which to mediate their experiences. Despite the amount of growth they have yet to demonstrate in the English language, Tariq and Salman are much more skilled at language than they appear to be as a result of what may be referred to as their “deficits” in English. They demonstrate the ability to switch between the languages depending on the context,
making use of each as needed. For example, they speak to their parents in Burmese, use Malay to make sense of English they struggle with, and navigate the English language to make it through their classes. Below is an excerpt from a conversation with them both about their use of different languages:

Me: And do you speak Burmese or Malaysian at home?
Tariq: Both
Salman: Both
Tariq: I speak Malaysia and I speak my mom Burmese
Salman: And baby, English. Like if….
Me: Really?! You talk to babies in English?
Salman: And they speak “Ahhh” like that. Laughs
Me: What about your older sister? What do you talk to her
Salman: If, if she have friend with, we speak Malay. If she don’t have, like she walk alone, we speak Burmese

This excerpt is yet another demonstration of both Tariq and Salman’s current fluency in speaking English and is evidence of why their literacy abilities and sophisticated skills with language may not be apparent to teachers and peers. English is the dominant language in American society and schools, and carries great power (Kirkland, 2013; Luke & Dooley, 2009), thus making it the yardstick by which students’ intelligence and abilities are measured (Avineri, et al., 2015). It is also the language
which currently claims worldwide linguistic imperialism, compounding any already-negative or deficit views a teacher or fellow student may adopt towards refugees or English Language Learners like Tariq and Salman and marginalizing their home languages (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Avineri, et al., 2015). For these reasons, it serves as a barrier to Tariq and Salman’s academic success and to their openness to social interaction and helps to explain their literate identities as understood by the researcher.

Tariq and Salman are extremely literate individuals, despite what on the surface – and in alignment with stereotypes about refugees and English Language Learners – may appear to be individual deficits. The boys successfully acquired a third language as middle and high-school students and are confident they will become even more fluent in English as they progress through the rest of high school. They make use of any of three languages depending on the context and situation, and skillfully switch between languages on-demand. An example of this is side conversations they would have with each other – in Burmese or Malay – during meetings with the researcher, or their use of their home language(s) with each other to make sense of their surroundings. Salman and Tariq spoke to one another at great length when with the researcher in different contexts, such as downtown, at an Art museum, at the local library. They used conversation in the language they are most comfortable with to navigate their surroundings. It is apparent that linguistically, they are very skilled and their background in languages has shaped them into complex and sophisticated literate beings.

Quite impressive and owing to their identification as practicing Muslims is Tariq and Salman’s ability to read Arabic. The Quran, Islam’s holy book, is in Arabic.
Practicing Muslims read and memorize chapters from the Quran, which usually necessitates an ability to read in Arabic. Both Tariq and Salman know how to read Quran and have some chapters from the Quran memorized. Though they cannot speak conversational Arabic and do not understand it, they possess a religious literacy central to Islam: Quran. It is important to note their religious literacy, because it demonstrates the linguistic abilities of any individual, something which may be hidden behind labels such as “refugee” or “English Language Learner.” They are also literate in various aspects of Islam in terms of core tenets central to a Muslim’s life. However, their literacy and practice in this regard is, as they suggest below, limited:

Me: You follow the rules of Islam?
Salman: Uhh, not, not
Me: Not really?
Salman: Uhh
Tariq: Just two, just two thing. Like, like, mmm, hijrah and zakat
Me: You do zakat?
Tariq: Zakat
Me: And what? What was the other one?
Salman: And hijrah
Me: Hijrah? What’s hijrah?
Tariq: Oh, oh
Salman: Pray!
Me: You pray?
Tariq: Not pray. Go to…
Me: Go to Makkah?
Salman: No. somewhere in Islam
Me: Okay. So that’s all that’s important in Islam for you?
Tariq: Yes, but I, I, we don’t do that

Social literacy. Finally, adding to the various areas in which both boys are literate is their social literacy as it pertains to American culture and society. Though they do not interact much with others outside of high school and Sunday school, their interactions with American peers and with other White Americans have helped them become relatively fluent in certain aspects of American culture and Discourse. They are familiar with Halloween and have been taught, for example, about jack-o-lanterns and placing them outside the door to welcome trick-or-treaters. Though they do not speak in the most fluent manner, both have used American phrases in conversation with the researcher, such as “I’m good” and “Like seriously?” Both also associate the local University with football, an indication of their local social knowledge. Salman and Tariq are also aware of the place alcohol – forbidden for Muslims to consume – holds in American society, with some of their literacy in this social practice coming from their experiences in Malaysia. Here, however, they have learned alcohol consumption is not limited to drunk individuals in the streets and is, in fact, common and normal in American society.

On a more complex level, Salman and Tariq are very familiar with the abstract concept of freedom as it relates to American society. Freedom is not a concept taught explicitly in schools and, according to both boys, not discussed openly by peers, teachers,
or the individuals who help their family out. And yet, Salman demonstrates some belief in the idea of American freedom, and mentions it several times when probed about his response:

- Me: So, people you don’t know, so it doesn’t matter
- Salman: Mmm. It’s just freedom.
- Me: Freedom? What does that mean to you?
- Salman: Free country
- Me: What does that mean?
- Salman: We can do what we want
- Me: Do you believe that?
- Salman: Mmm, Maybe. I don’t know

(In a later conversation)
- Me: Salman last time we talked about, you said that in America you can do what you want because it’s freedom over here
- Salman: Yeah
- Me: Where did you get this idea from?
- Salman: Martin Luther
- Me: Martin Luther King Jr.
- Salman: Yes
- Me: So he, what did he say
- Salman: Say freedom
- Me: And you like that idea?
Salman: Yes

These conversations are both indicators of Salman’s willingness to adopt American values as his own, and to understand them as more ideal than they are in present society. Because he is still grasping the abstract concept of freedom and has not seen its fruition – or lack of – in all aspects of society, he uses it above to explain his opinions and thoughts. The second portion of the excerpt specifically shows the idea of freedom appealed to Salman when he first encountered it, but that he does not understand it in its entirety.

Another aspect of social literacy both have shown an awareness and understanding of is the path set by society as necessary for a successful career and future. The boys’ parents are not educated, and their father, though in a better position in Malaysia, did not work a white-collar job there. Their social circle consisted of individuals who aspired to career paths such as policemen and fire fighters. Despite these being the realities they came from and currently live, both boys – especially Tariq – are now interested in furthering their education beyond high school. They also believe earning a college degree will allow them to do better for themselves in life. Beliefs about education and professional degrees are not unique to American society, but they are a type of social literacy not all classes of individuals think about and adopt as an option for themselves. Tariq and Salman do think about going to college and doing better for themselves than what they grew up around in Malaysia.

In getting to know Tariq and Salman, conversing with them and observing them in different contexts, the researcher came to the realization that the boys are both very
literate individuals, in multiple and complex ways. Taking the time to hear their story and learn about their experiences is essential to going beyond what may be initial assumptions of Tariq and Salman as limited in literacy ability and skill. Who they are as literate individuals is important to recognizing the skills, intelligence, and abilities they possess, and is helpful in thinking about how to approach them as students.

**Adnan.** Adnan is a Syrian refugee who is in his second year of school in America. He is currently in eleventh grade. The researcher spoke with him on the phone twice at length, and learned a little bit about his literate self. Like Salman and Tariq, Adnan was placed in ESL classes as soon as he began school here. And like the brothers, he arrived in America with a very rudimentary understanding of English:

Adnan: My [English] level in Syria and Jordan was considered high. So I’ve been getting by for the last 3 or 4 years.

Me: So you learned a little bit of English in Jordan?

Adnan: Yes, but the English I learned in Jordan is about ten percent [of what I know], whereas here is about ninety percent of what I’ve learned in English. Or twenty percent and eighty percent. It’s a relatively small amount, but it was basics, things like grammar and words.

It is clear when speaking with Adnan that he is a very intelligent boy and is aware of his surroundings. He professes he has yet to become very fluent in speaking English, and states he is more comfortable speaking in Arabic. Though he hopes to improve his English literacy skills overall, Adnan is determined to maintain Arabic as his main
language. Adnan is currently in the most advanced ESL class in his high school as he explains here: “When I first came they put me in Level 1, but then they tested me to see what level I was at, and they moved me to level 2. And then immediately after, they put me in level 3.”

Though he suggests his English skills are not worthy of being placed in the highest level, his school has judged him as ready to complete the last of the ESL class series. This speaks to his self-awareness as a literate individual and his orientation for linguistic detail, especially in terms of the academic experiences he is exposed to. Adnan presents language learning as being comprised of separate components: academic and non-academic, and acknowledges in the following quote he is not fluent in all aspects of the language: “Academically, as in reading and writing, of course. But speaking and listening, I’m not so great at.”

Though he admits he is bothered when others do not understand him, Adnan blames himself for shortcomings he demonstrates in understanding others and speaking with them and believes his lack of practice outside of school is the reason for these shortcomings. He also does not allow the potential for not being understood to deter him from speaking in class or asking questions when necessary. He views these situations as growth opportunities and his accent as an invalid reason to stay silent. Adnan’s overall attitude towards English is an indication that English linguistic imperialism and English superiority – which permeate multiple societies – do not necessarily lead English language learners to believe that until they are deemed by society as being fluent in the language, they are lacking. Adnan sees himself as a capable literate individual, and
suggests the way and type of English he is taught at school is not all-encompassing of what he needs to know as an English speaker in America:

Me: Yes, okay. Okay, what else. The way they teach you English, you talked a little bit about this, but, in your opinion, do you think there’s a better way for them to teach you English?

Adnan: A better way for them to teach us English. So, they teach us, as I told you, things like words and grammar, the essentials in language. But there’s something they forget. Pronunciation. This is one of the most important things. The issue of pronunciation, how you’re supposed to talk, you know? How the sound is going to come out, how, like casual talking, they don’t focus on it at all.

These things are essentials…

Me: Okay

Adnan: The other thing is here they have these things, like sayings that, for example, no one knows but the Americans….When they talk here, for example, they have idioms. I think it’s idioms. So for example, “out of blue,” that’s different than it is regularly. This is something I can’t understand except from school or from students, so it’s things like these that would be better taught to us. Like, not a complete knowledge of this, but they [should] give us the things…it’ll save us a lot of trouble.
As a literate individual, Adnan has developed an awareness of American Discourse and recognizes he will not be completely fluent in American English until he learns things about English not taught in standard ESL or other high school classes. Since coming to America, he has been watching American movies and has stopped watching Arabic ones. He explicitly states this is unrelated to his coming to America but suggests it’s one way for him to strengthen his grasp of conversational English.

Adnan is literate in his religion, Islam, more so than Salman and Tariq. Like both of them, he reads Quran, though it is easier for him because Arabic is his native language. He also expresses a great interest in books and reading about various topics online, as exhibited in the following quote:

“I read maybe ten pages and I didn’t understand a single word from them. You have to focus really well to understand. But for me, reading is the most important thing to life. Reading and learning. You can learn, but that’s different from reading. Reading is the best thing. You find a lot of books on a lot of different topics. Whatever you want, whatever you have interest in, you can find it.

As Street states so poignantly, literacy skills possessed by others are not valued by the Western view of literacy. Because of this, Salman, Tariq, and Adnan clearly recognize the importance of English for survival and success in American school and society. Though Adnan is labeled in the same way Salman and Tariq are labeled – as an English Language Learner – he seems less affected in character and attitude by what is touted by the dominant group (Street, 2014) as the most acceptable literacy. He takes a pragmatic approach to standard English literacy and recognizes American Discourse is
something to be learned. Because the researcher did not have as many conversations with Adnan as with Salman and Tariq, she did not learn as much about multimodal literacy skills he possesses, aside from playing games of strategy on the computer. However, in speaking with Adnan, it became clear he is literate in two languages and is aware of the different types of literacies which exist and which he believes are important to know.

As with Salman and Tariq, discussions with Adnan make apparent the complexity of refugee students’ literate identities and skills they possess which may not be visible to those interacting with them on an impersonal basis. This pushes the argument that teachers would best be served in their teaching of refugee students by learning about them as literate individuals and avoiding the general marginalization of other languages which occurs in schools.

Cultural Borders and Hybridity – Tariq

Throughout this study’s data collection period, Tariq revealed multiple cultural borders he has come up against both at school and in society. Below is a discussion of these various instances, and an exploration of the hybridity processes Tariq underwent and is undergoing as he navigates different cultural borders. The first borders Tariq had to navigate once he began school in America were the food and the language, as seen below:

Tariq: Lunch…in school?
Me: Yeah
Tariq: I don’t eat
Me: You don’t eat. Nothing? Why?
Tariq: Because, because sometimes no halal
Me: No halal

(In a later conversation)
Me: Would you like it if they always understood?
Tariq: Yes
Me: Yeah?
Tariq: Yes
Me: Why?
Tariq: Uhh I can talk a lot
Me: ’cuz you can talk a lot

The above two excerpts from conversations with Tariq are examples of the cultural borders he has come up against since coming to America. It is clear, as Bhabha states, that the mere contact of one civilization – or in this case, individual – with another leads to a state of liminality in which one’s identity is shaped and transformed (2008). What becomes more apparent in discussions with both Tariq and Salman is the different types of borders and different aspects of American culture which they encounter and as a result of which they find themselves undergoing a process of hybridity. Their negotiations at the borders are clear examples of what Bhabha refers to when he says: “The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (p.3).
**Negotiating the food landscape.** The first cultural border Tariq negotiated in his school setting and American society relates to food. In the first excerpt above, he speaks of not eating lunch at school because the food is not *halal*. Some Muslims interpret a verse from the Quran about meat to mean they can only eat meat slaughtered in the Islamic way, which is to invoke the name of God before slaughter and to kill with one, clean cut, thus minimizing pain to the animal. Muslims who believe this way do not eat food outside of their homes unless they are sure the meat has been slaughtered the *halal* way. The Ahmad family is one such family. Because they adhere to this school of thought, they found most food in American not to be permissible to them. Tariq has negotiated this cultural border by staying away from all food at his school, regardless of whether or not it contains meat. *Halal* food is the first of several interactions with borders Tariq reveals to the researcher and gives a slight indication of the general manner in which he navigates cultural borders: by simply staying away or writing them off as different and as something that just is.

**Art.** Another cultural border Tariq came across after moving to America, and with which he has dealt with eagerly, is art. When asked about the class he enjoys most, Tariq has consistently stated “art,” and speaks of using free time at home to draw from his imagination. He did not know art, so-to-speak, in Malaysia. When he took his first Art class in eighth grade, and when he walked by some paintings in the downtown area, he found it to be something which peaked his interest. Art is perhaps not a completely foreign border to Malaysian or Burmese culture, but Tariq did not have exposure to it,
possibly because of his family’s socioeconomic status. His hybridity when it comes to art, a big part of various cultures, has been to accept, embrace, and try his hand at it.

**Navigating the English language.** One major cultural border any immigrant or refugee comes up against immediately upon arrival to America, and which will be discussed in more detail as it pertains to both Tariq and Salman, is language. Language, the cornerstone of civilization and of human communication and interaction, serves as possibly the largest cultural border when civilizations meet. For both Tariq and Salman, it is a huge point from which to draw the hybridity they undergo. In discussing this border with the researcher, however, Tariq has spoken of aspects beyond what are obvious components of the linguistic border as a completely different language with different words. At one point in a conversation about language, Tariq spoke of the difference between English and Malay in linguistic structure and complexity of vocabulary:

Tariq: Here have, need to good grammar

Me: You need to have good grammar

Salman: Oh yes. Good grammar

Me: You don’t have to have good grammar in Malaysia?

Tariq: Umm, we, in Malaysia doesn’t have grammar

Me: There’s no grammar?

Tariq: In, in Malaysia is like every, it’s like straight, every word, we not have grammar. Like here is like, what’s called…here called football. Football. In Malaysia they call ball and foot.
He does not articulate the structural and word differences very clearly. However, his comments on the two languages are an indication of his literate awareness and of the fact that English was and continues to be a sizable border both he and his brother are navigating consistently in their life here. Though he stated they both knew very basic English when they moved to America, it is clear the foundation they had was not enough for them to be familiar with and quickly-fluent in the English language. He himself has noted an improvement in his understanding and fluency since coming here, as he states here: “I different before and after. Before I came America and now understand more.” In this exchange, he clarified he sees himself as different in terms of his English abilities. Navigating language borders is not uncommon among newcomers to America, and linguistic hybridity – acquiring the new language and perhaps using it in conjunction with one’s mother tongue – is one which Tariq (and Salman) demonstrate is a process. It requires practice, interaction with the local Discourse and discourse, and time.

The clearest evidence of hybridity which Tariq shows, which is more pronounced in him than in Salman, and which results from interaction with the linguistic border is his shy personality. The second excerpt at the start of this section is one indication of shyness resulting from this hybridity. During the researcher’s first conversation with Hafsa, she spoke of one of her sons being excessively shy ever since coming to America. Discussions with both boys have made it clear Tariq is excessively shy as a result of his perceived fluency in English, evidenced below and in previous excerpts:

Tariq:   Naw, doesn’t matter.
Me:   It doesn’t matter to you?
Tariq: Yeah
Me: None of it matters to you?
Tariq: Yeah
Me: Well then how come you don’t talk to these boys?
Tariq: Just, I don’t, mmm, I’m shy

(In a later conversation)
Tariq: Umm Malaysia is no, because I know…can, can talk
Me: You can talk. So you…
Tariq: Yeah, I can. I can, I don’t know. I can speak.
Me: Okay, so you’re shy with everyone here?
Tariq: No

Tariq admits nothing holds him back from interacting with others at Sunday school except his shyness. He also claims in the second excerpt above that he did not mind speaking to others in Malaysia because language was not an issue for him. There, he could speak without hesitation since he grew up learning the language in Malaysia. Here, though, the situation differs and because of his self-perceived struggles with English, Tariq shies away from initiating conversations with his peers.

**Navigation of difference.** Another interesting aspect of Tariq’s personality and how he navigates cultural borders is the seeming disregard and lack of caring he shows for all which is vastly different from him and the culture(s) he identifies or is familiar with. Hafsa spoke of this briefly regarding both her sons being and feeling different: “Yeah, yeah. they say okay, no problem”
Tariq has also expressed he does not care about things and people different from
him. For instance, alcohol consumption does not bother him as a Muslim. To him, what
other people do does not matter as long as, in this instance, they do not show drunk
behavior in public, something which he used to see in Malaysia. He has even stated that
though they are different from Americans, he does not speak about this difference. In
fact, Tariq says Salman speaks of this difference frequently, but that he does not care:

Tariq: Yes, I just don’t care
Me: You don’t care
Tariq: Yes
Me: So even if you see difference you don’t, it doesn’t bother you, you
don’t think about it
Tariq: Yes
Me: Were you always like this? Even in Malaysia, if you saw
something different?
Tariq: Yes. [I] Just leave it

These are some of the most prominent examples of cultural borders and hybridity
which Tariq has demonstrated. Based on discussions with and observations of Tariq, it
can be extrapolated that Tariq’s interaction with cultural borders and the resulting
hybridity have not led to vast shifts in his identity. As someone coming from a very
different background and society, the navigation of cultural borders he shows results
from the state of liminality he finds himself in at the edge of contact with American
society.
Cultural Borders and Hybridity – Salman

Since coming to America, Salman has encountered the same borders as his brother. However, his choice for how to navigate each of these borders differed in some cases from Tariq’s navigation and hybridity processes. Salman’s negotiation of cultural borders includes a very clear awareness that he is different from the dominant majority in American schools and society, as seen in the following excerpts:

Me: Did you feel different since you were Burmese in Malaysia? Did you feel different?
Salman: Yes
Me: How did you feel different?
Salman: Say
(In a later conversation)
Salman: No. He say why my name hard and where it come from
Me: How did you feel when he said “why is your name hard?”
Salman: Uh, I feel funny
Me: You feel funny?
Salman: Yes, because he don’t know how to spell. He, he, everyday call me Shah
Me: Shah? He calls you Shah?
Salman: Yes
Me: Okay, so you thought it’s funny that he thinks it’s hard?
Salman: Yes
Being different is one border neither he nor Tariq were unfamiliar with when they came to America, as illustrated in the first excerpt above. However, feelings of difference were and continue to be more pronounced for Salman in the United States, as the second excerpt demonstrates. Whereas he was just another East Asian Muslim in Malaysia, here, his name sparked questions among his peers, thus bringing to the forefront the attributes – such as his name – which make him different. For being told explicitly and implicitly that he is different, Salman’s hybridity processes and their end result look somewhat different from Tariq’s, as discussed in the following sections.

Navigating linguistic difference. Like his brother, Salman has faced various borders since coming to America, and has dealt similarly with some of them, as will be discussed below. The above excerpts are snapshots of the differences Salman has had to navigate as a Burmese refugee. Perhaps the largest border Salman has discussed openly is language, though he does not discuss it as much as Tariq. In fact, and as discussed in the previous section on literacy, Salman’s navigation of the linguistic border includes the image he presents of himself when discussing his participation in class and social interactions at school. This ideal image contrasts greatly with his observed behavior at Sunday school and in various contexts, where he is more withdrawn and does not initiate conversations or engage in activity with other English speakers. For example, during one observation, the students were told to stay inside for their break because it was raining outside. The researcher noted that in this time, Tariq and Salman stood in the masjid quietly with their younger Burmese friend and watched the younger kids running around.
Their intentional separation from the rest and decision not to engage with others during break time was not unusual.

During another observation, the boys’ class was told to go outside and play because there was a shortage of teachers that day. Instead of joining the soccer game the rest of the boys had started, both Tariq and Salman stood towards the back of the field by themselves, talking. As with the previous observation, Salman’s behavior here stood in stark contrast with the image he consistently presents of himself at school.

The split between the identity he presents and the identity he enacts in various settings is one clear instance of hybridity which Salman has undergone and which suggests his perspective on the linguistic border he faces. Whereas he shies away from speaking in settings observable to the researcher, he portrays himself as a social and outgoing friend in the setting non-observable to the researcher. From this contrast in behavior, it can be extrapolated that Salman has not navigated the linguistic border as easily as his brother. His negotiation of a different language involves a shift in his identity to one which embraces and enjoys English fluency, but which is not confident enough to use that fluency in all contexts. Where he feels comfortable, he speaks:

Me: You don’t talk to the teacher
Salman: No
Me: But you talk to the students?
Salman: Yes

(In a later conversation)

Me: Okay, so you’re not shy but you don’t want to talk to these boys
Salman: Mhm
Me: Why not?
Salman: I don’t know
Me: Is it because of your English?
Salman: Yes
Me: Because of your English. Do you think they would not understand you?
Salman: Yes
Me: Do you think they would make fun of you?
Salman: No
Me: So if you spoke better English, you would be okay to talk to them?
Salman: Yes

The linguistic hybridity he has undergone is shaped by his comfort level, in that he lets his guard down around people he is comfortable with. The researcher noted this with Salman and Tariq in her conversations with them. The more time passed by during the study and the more interactions they had, the more willing they were to give longer responses and to try to explain themselves in greater detail. Salman did this more than Tariq, possibly because of his ability to speak English with more ease. The social identity he enacts in each situation depends on how much exposure to his personality – through conversation – he can allow without being uncomfortable. In all observations, the researcher noted he kept to himself, speaking only to his brother and – at times – the researcher. He also admitted to this in the above conversation. That he assesses the
situation before letting himself speak openly, or at all, shows the consistent hybridity process Salman is engaged in as he navigates different interactions and social contexts.

**Navigation of being othered.** Another cultural border Salman has come up against which is also related to language can be seen in the second excerpt above. In this conversation, a big portion of Salman’s identity is brought to the forefront as *other* (Bhabha, 2008) and called into question. He has encountered many such experiences and has reacted in each instance by brushing off inquiries about his name and finding humor in Americans’ reactions to his name. To Salman, what people think of his name is not important, and he refuses to change it to accommodate peers who have a hard time saying it. Despite expressing his liking for the English language, Salman navigates questions of his identity as *other* by ignoring them.

In slight contradiction with this demonstration of hybridity, however, is how Salman navigates being a Muslim in a majority non-Muslim country:

Me: So do you hide the fact that you’re a Muslim?
Salman: Yes, but there are some people no.
Me: Why do you hide it?
Salman: What? I don’t want them to know.
Me: Why not?
Salman: Because sometime if we just say that, they don’t want to be friend.

(Later in the conversation)

Me: Do you think that as Salman, being Muslim is an important part of you?
Salman: Oh yes!

Me: Is it a big part of you?

Salman: Yes

Me: You do think that?

Salman: Yes

As Bhabha suggests, there are aspects of other cultures which depart from the norms of the dominant culture and which do not fit within the standards of what is deemed acceptable (2008). Islam is one type of other which in America is often sent the message of being different and, in some cases, not accepted. Salman has picked up on this message as a Muslim in America, and unlike being labeled as other because of his name, this type of othering impacts him on a deeper level. Its impact is to the extent that he chooses to essentially hide his religion unless asked for it. As he tells it, too many people who found out he’s Muslim have followed up this knowledge with questions related to terrorism. To avoid the discomfort and awkwardness which may come with these conversations, and because he does not enjoy having to explain the lack of association between religion and terrorism, Salman chooses to stay quiet on the issue. This despite being proud of his religion and identifying himself as a practicing Muslim reveals the impactful hybridity process his religious identity in America is undergoing. It may well be that Salman’s silence is the result of a conscious choice to exercise his power (Kirkland, 2013) by putting himself in control of the narrative and identity he presents to others.
Perhaps the best way to describe Salman’s negotiation of cultural borders and hybridity in identity is by using the following quote from Homi Bhabha: “…the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity…it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (pp. 64).

Other less serious instances of cultural borders and hybridity which Salman has encountered and navigated by accepting are food and sport. He speaks about pizza like an American, expressing how much he loves this particular food. He also thoroughly enjoys his Gym class at school, especially when they play basketball. Soccer and badminton are the dominating sports in Malaysia, which he played frequently when there. Here in America, however, he plays neither game – likely due to lack of opportunity – and has taken up a liking for basketball. Salman has even learned the names of some major NBA players, such as LeBron James, but does not watch professional basketball.

Navigating cultural difference. With more serious matters related to cultural borders, Salman uses humor to navigate difference. He is more curious about the American people and their culture than is his brother, and, based on various statements he’s made, is more taken by it than Tariq. For instance, he spoke once of people in America being smart because they speak English. In another instance, he brushed off alcohol consumption in public as being okay in the following excerpt:

Me: Did it bother you that you saw it?
Salman: No, it’s okay.
Me: Really?
Salman: Yeah
Me: Why not? Why didn’t it bother you?
Salman: It’s just people
Me: So people you don’t know, it doesn’t matter
Salman: Mmm, it’s just freedom
Me: Freedom? What does that mean to you?
Salman: Free country
Me: What does that mean?
Salman: We can do what we want

It is not strange for Salman (as a Muslim) to navigate alcohol consumption by accepting it as a fact of life some people engage in, and is, in fact, how many Muslims navigate this border which they come across in any society which does not forbid alcohol consumption. What is interesting to note in this excerpt, however, is Salman’s use of the concept of freedom. He has discussed freedom on more than one occasion, as mentioned in the section on literacy. It becomes apparent, in his responses above, that the American concept of freedom – albeit an abstract one – appeals to him. In his navigation of cultural borders, Salman found freedom to be a concept he accepts and which he draws on to explain certain aspects of society, including alcohol consumption. The process of hybridity Salman has undergone as a result of finding himself in a state of liminality is one which appears to accept and embrace differences more readily than does Tariq. Though he will not drink, he uses another cultural border, freedom, to explain his indifference to alcohol consumption. He is more open than Tariq about his interest and
taste in music and has come to enjoy American rap. In addition, he shows more
willingness to learn about and try American things which are new to him, such as when
the Ahmad family was invited to a picnic hosted by a group of White individuals. Here,
Salman was happy. It was clear he was enjoying himself, and he demonstrated initiative
in trying out new things, like ziplining and fishing.

How he navigates cultural borders is sometimes in clear contrast to Tariq’s
navigation. In the same situations mentioned above, for example, Tariq is less willing to
speak openly about the type of music he listens to, and claims he continues to listen to
some songs with Islamic influence and meanings. At the picnic, whereas Salman was
eager and active, Tariq was hesitant and more withdrawn. He did not demonstrate
initiative in trying out new things, and either followed his brother or stood on the side
with his mother and baby sisters.

Cultural Borders and Hybridity – Tariq and Salman

Hybridity due to language. Tariq and Salman are a clear example of unique
hybridity processes each individual undergoes when in a state of liminality (Bhabha,
2008). No two individuals are exactly alike, and how they navigate cultural borders
differs, even if they share some characteristics, such as being refugees, English Language
Learners, or even brothers. It is important to make note of this to avoid painting all
refugee students with the same brush and categorizing them as one when approaching
their educational experience.

Despite their differences, the boys demonstrate similarity in some situations of
cultural border navigation and resulting hybridity. Because they come from the same
background and are undergoing the same experiences as individuals living in America, the borders they have come up against are – in large part – the same. Language, perhaps the largest cultural border they have come up against, has been discussed for both Tariq and Salman. However, it is a border worth considering more deeply because, though they navigate their English fluency and the dominant language landscape slightly differently, they are in some ways also similar.

Even though Salman speaks of being social at school and Tariq speaks of being shy in all contexts, they both have exhibited shyness caused by their (dis)comfort with English and speaking with and in front of others. That their linguistic hybridity exhibits itself as shyness, potentially an instance in which they exercise their agency by staying quiet, stems from perspectives they have adopted about the English language. There is no doubt they are ones which stem from linguistic imperialism and implicit messages about its dominance. Below is an excerpt which illuminates Tariq and Salman’s thoughts on the matter:

Me: They don’t say, but do they make you feel? Do you feel that English is better?
Tariq: Uh maybe
Me: Or more important?
Tariq: Yes
Me: Why??
Tariq: Because English is, umm, every country use English as, they use…if someone move another country, no talk, and we can talk in English, like English important. Like

Me: Okay, so if you know English you can talk to anyone in whatever country you go. So it’s good to know English?

Tariq: Yes

Me: And that’s what you think too?

Salman: Yes

Me: Anything else? Any other reason it’s important for you?

Salman: No

Me: Just that reason, okay. Do you think that you’ll become more valued or more respected or more liked if you speak English?

Tariq: Yes

Me: You do? And why is that? Why would someone like you more or respect you more if you speak English?

Tariq: Mmmm, because. I’m not sure

Me: You’re not sure, but that’s how you feel?

Tariq: Yes

Me: What about you? Do you feel that you would be more liked or more respected if you speak English well?

Salman: Yes, yes

Me: Why
Salman: Because can’t speak, can’t speak English

Me: Mhm. So if you spoke English you would be more liked?

Salman: Yes

Messages of dominance which may implicitly bombard members of society help to explain why, despite holding on to their mother tongue(s), Tariq and Salman feel this way about the English language. What they are taught in school is the importance of English for good grades and for overall success. What they are taught in conversing with native English speakers and in their academic struggles is their relative weakness in the language. For example, interactions with native English speakers – in which he felt he wasn’t understood – have led Tariq to believe his classmates make fun of him when he must present something in class.

Adding to these messages is the model used to teach them English, which presents the language as consisting only of difficult vocabulary and convoluted grammar rules. Questions the boys receive about their names, background, and religion, as well as what may be perceived as derogatory comments in this regard automatically bring to the forefront society’s placement of people like them into the category of other. Another important factor contributing to the boys’ linguistic hybridity is their positioning in school. Though they – especially Tariq – speak of teachers caring about them and helping them when needed, their accounts of school experiences portray a school environment where both are essentially invisible.

Navigating situations of otherness. When asked about their ESL classes, both describe an environment where teachers do not draw on past experiences or knowledge to
enhance their language learning. They have also discussed that none of their teachers ask about their background or status as refugees. When they began school, they were asked – in ESL – to stand up and give their name and country of origin. At one point, the researcher thought to ask how Tariq and Salman would describe themselves as individuals, and their responses suggested the type of information they have grown accustomed to sharing about themselves at school:

Me: Who are you? Everything, not just your name. how would you explain who you are?

Tariq: Like, uhh, I am from Malaysia. And I am people

Me: You are what? *they chuckle* You are human?

Tariq: Yes

Me: Okay, your brother is from Malaysia and he is a human. So if someone says who are you and they want to know what makes you different from him, how do you explain yourself?

Tariq: Umm, uhh, first, first thing is I say my name and second thing where I am from. Mmm, mmm, not anymore say it to

Me: That’s all you would say?

Tariq: Yes

Me: How about you?

Salman: Umm, like, my ESL, my English teacher they say last name, full name, what you from, what you speak, uhh, what you doing at home, what your favorite game.
Me: And this is what you were asked in ESL?
Salman: Yes. If, like, new student come from other country or like, new student from another school
Me: That’s what they ask
Salman: Yeah, because if new student come, my teacher say, time out we have new student, and they say what people, we need to say to new people, say what’s your name, not religion
Me: Yes, they would not ask about religion. Uhh, okay, if you were getting to know someone, how would you describe you? Who are you? What do you do? What do you like to do? What kind of a person are you?
Salman: Oh yes
Me: Things like that
Salman: Uhh my name, I say my name, where I’m from, where I’m born…where I live, where my house address.

Both Tariq and Salman believe all of this to be proof of teachers who care about them, and find it sufficient and caring enough that teachers answer their questions about class content. Such contentment with an environment which does not truly value, understand, or embrace their backgrounds and experiences points to the possibility both of them have internalized society’s positioning of them as other and perhaps even as less valuable (Bhabha, 2008; Kirkland, 2013). Their experience as refugees and English Language Learners in America is not their first experience of being otherized or
implicitly told they are less than others. Malaysia’s treatment of Rohingya Burmese, the Ahmad family included, is one which positions them perhaps more negatively than does America and its implicit messages about people of other backgrounds. It is possible the boys, coming from a background of being devalued, have internalized messages of being less. Thus, they may not find the school environment to be lacking in any way and do not feel they are treated as invisible. Their seeming contentment may also stem from their agency as individuals who are intent on controlling their own narrative, and who choose to do so by remaining silent about their positioning in school and society. It may be that they are exercising their individual power by choosing to control the narrative others see of them.

Internalizing messages of other and of being less than – perhaps even being unimportant – or even of choosing to remain silent about these messages is a type of hybridity which comes from a person of great difference coming up against major cultural borders, such as linguistic and religious ones. It appears both Tariq and Salman, despite claiming they are proud of who they are, have been shaped by messages of difference bombarding them since birth. The messages and situations the boys have faced shape their thoughts on language, society, and their placement within the two. Both Tariq and Salman have absorbed these messages to an extent – albeit unconsciously – and as a result, demonstrate the linguistic hybridity suggested in the above excerpts.

Hybridity in identification. Another instance of hybridity the boys show, not uncommon among people who grow up somewhere different from their country of origin, comes in how they identify where they are from. Tariq and Salman speak Burmese at
home, eat Burmese food, and are essentially raised in a home shaped by Burmese culture. However, since they were both born and raised in Malaysia, they also speak Malay, went to Malaysian schools, and are very familiar with Malaysian culture. Because of their geographical situation, Burmese living in Malaysia, Tariq and Salman were thrown into contact with a cultural border and a situation of hybridity which carries over into their lives in America and has shaped who they are. Below are some excerpts which illustrate this hybridity:

Me: Both?
Salman: Both. Yeah.
Me: Both because why?
Salman: Uh because I born in Malaysia
Me: But? Which part is Burmese?
Salman: Uhh my mom
Me: Who?
Salman: My mom’s parents. Yes.
Me: Your mom? What about your dad?
Salman: Yes

(Later in the conversation)
Me: What do you think about this?
Tariq: I say Malaysia
Me: You say Malaysia also?
Tariq: Yeah
Me: Why do you say Malaysia?
Tariq: Because I grew up in Malaysia
Me: Mhm. Do you feel that you’re Burmese, though? That you’re from Burma?
Tariq: Mmm, ummm, yes.

The experience of growing up somewhere different from one’s country of origin is not strange, and is something many are familiar with. Assuming their families maintain their ethnic and cultural identity at home, as the Ahmad family does, this is a situation which creates a state of liminality for individuals as soon as they are aware of their surroundings. What comes out of this liminality and individuals’ negotiation of difference depends on the person, their family, and the linguistic and cultural context surrounding them. Tariq and Salman’s family has maintained their Burmese heritage despite being out-of-touch with their home country and extended family. Thus, the boys were placed in a situation of difference and interaction with other civilizations (Bhabha, 2008) at the cultural border in all respects of the term. They grew up in a society and culture different from their familys’, and in their individual processes of hybridity, have come to identify themselves as Malaysian and Burmese. In fact, to make it easier on themselves and to avoid having to explain their hybrid background, when asked about themselves, they identify as coming from Malaysia.

Language and identification of origin are perhaps the largest sources of hybridity for Tariq and Salman and in which they share commonality. In addition to these is the way they negotiate the American people as a whole, as a people who are different from
them in many regards. Even though Salman shows he is interested in learning about American culture, and Tariq gives the impression he does not care to learn about the Americans, both use humor to speak about difference.

Navigating borders by using humor. In discussions about Halloween, they have both laughed about the holiday and talked about jack-o-lanterns as something humorous. When talking about how his American peers are different from him, Salman speaks in a humorous tone about the types of socks they wear and their way of dress. Both, but Salman especially, have laughed about the way Americans walk, finding humor in what they regard as a haughty walk. In a discussion about their knowledge of other religions, they acknowledged attending church service in the past, and Salman provided a demonstration – intended to be humorous – of what they saw at church.

Their humor does not carry with it a tone of mockery, and is not malicious in intent. Instead, Tariq and Salman have come to navigate difference – especially things which they would not do or say – by laughing about it. Derogatory treatment, or even simply treatment as other, has not pushed them to renounce their identities as Burmese Rohingya here or in Malaysia. Similarly, they have not navigated other less-serious situations of difference by trying to completely renounce their affinity identities, or by trying to become the image portrayed by the dominant other as acceptable (Bhabha, 2008). How Tariq and Salman navigate cultural borders, big and small, does shape and influence who they are and how they speak of themselves, but does not lead to extreme hybridity whereby they undergo major shifts in identity.
**Cultural Borders and Hybridity – Adnan**

Adnan encountered the same cultural borders Tariq and Salman did when he began school. Possibly because he was speaking in his native tongue during interviews, he was more expressive and descriptive of these borders than were Tariq and Salman. Below he speaks of the major border of a completely different school system and, more interestingly, his exposure to the American *Discourse*:

“I went to school on the first day of school and I was almost/pretty much lost. Completely. Like, I didn’t know anyone at the school, I didn’t know the classes or where the classes were. And I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know anyone.”

“This is in addition to the culture/ways of knowing. You see here, just as we have our culture and ways of speaking, they also have things like that here. Things that you can only know if you live among them. It’s not something you learn from books or from educational opportunities.”

The above two excerpts are demonstrations of the daunting borders Adnan faced upon arrival to the United States. They also show the amount of navigation and adaptation he had to engage in to make sense of his overall surroundings and make it through school successfully.

Adnan has not been in America as long as Tariq and Salman, and his context differs greatly from theirs. While this is their third year here, it is only Adnan’s second, a factor which may explain differences in how he frames and navigates cultural borders and difference. Adnan’s family was relocated to a major city with a large population of refugees from his home country, while Tariq and Salman were relocated to a smaller city.
with a small population of refugees in general. With these contexts in mind, it is important to note individuals may interact the same cultural borders and situations of difference, despite having different surroundings.

Navigating the school system. Just like the brothers, as indicated in the first excerpt above, Adnan’s experience with public school here was a cultural border which he had to navigate, as demonstrated in the above excerpt. And like Tariq and Salman, he adapted quickly and learned how to navigate a completely different system of education, as he told the researcher during one interview: “But I got used to it/adjusted after almost a year. A year after coming here, I got used to the system, the way of life here.”

While Tariq and Salman have reported grades this year which indicate some struggle, Adnan’s report card for the first quarter of eleventh grade – with less exposure to and practice with English and the school system than Tariq and Salman – was exemplary: straight A’s. The researcher asked Adnan about his experience adjusting, and he spoke of it as something that simply was a natural part of being thrown into a different system. This type of navigation which he and the boys have demonstrated in school is a type of hybridity whereby the individual is forced to learn the system to survive. It is an indication of their eagerness to do well in school and their determination to not fall through the cracks during their period of adjustment or afterwards, as is the case with some refugees. because they are all interested in academic success and bright futures, all of them, especially Adnan, chose to navigate the school system by learning its definition of success and how to get there. In the process, he became aware of the vast differences in his ways of knowing and the ways of knowing of American society, as well as the
stark contrast between his discourse and theirs, something which he states explicitly in
the second excerpt at the start of this section.

Navigating linguistic difference. As is the case with any newcomer to a country
with a dominant language different than their own, Adnan was faced with the massive
cultural border of language upon arrival to America. His perspective on this border and
what he thinks of linguistic difference is at once more sophisticated than Tariq and
Salman’s perspectives. Whereas Tariq and Salman speak in terms of vocabulary and
practice, Adnan sees the successful navigation of this border as requiring a deep
knowledge of the language itself, as well as of the local discourse and Discourse. Though
all three consider language as a tool necessary for academic and life success in America,
Adnan construes the linguistic border differently, and in a way which influences his
approach to the English language and his thoughts on language shortcomings.

In his first year of school, Adnan shied away from speaking in public or asking
questions for fear of not being understood. This is similar to Tariq’s linguistic hybridity.
However, unlike Tariq, Adnan’s navigation of the linguistic border did not remain this
way. Now, Adnan speaks openly at school, as he explains below:

“But now, I think that if I were a teacher or one of the students and I heard
someone talk like this, it’s not a problem. Even if he doesn’t have an American
accent, the correct pronunciation of words, and the correct tense, it’s normal/okay.
I’m getting the meaning across to them so that I can get the information I need,
you get what I mean?”
Adnan frames language and his learning of the English language somewhat differently than the brothers do. He recognizes his shortcomings and believes practice and real exposure to the *d/Discourse* are necessary for true fluency. Where he lacks in fluency, or is not up-to-par with native English speakers, Adnan blames himself, and is determined to work on himself to improve:

“You get what I mean? Like I don’t know how to talk to them right, like I don’t blame myself for this. Talking to them *something inaudible* I don’t blame them. Like this stuff, reading, writing, and academic stuff, I don’t have an excuse for this. even speaking, I don’t have an excuse for that, but I see this as more [important].”

That he does not shy away from shortcomings with English – as defined by society – and frames the linguistic border more positively than Tariq and Salman, suggests a different process of hybridity Adnan has undergone. Still, even with the importance he gives the English language, Adnan’s hybridity includes a determination to maintain Arabic as his default language and to remain fluent in it. Such is the case with Tariq and Salman, who, despite not verbalizing their resolve, have shown in their use of the languages their attachment to both Burmese and Malay.

Me: Do you currently prefer to speak in English or in Arabic?

Adnan: No, right now in Arabic. I don’t, like English is only for when it’s necessary. Whereas Arabic is the first language, and will remain so, God willing.
Navigating cultural difference. Another cultural border which Adnan has come up against, and which he navigates differently from Tariq and Salman – possibly due to length of time in America – is the American culture. Adnan was very clear in his stance on the American people, as demonstrated in the following quote and excerpt: “…but the problem is I don’t want to befriend the American people”

Adnan: Yes, of course! The way they dress, the outward appearance, and even when it comes to the girls…

Me: Yes, okay.

Adnan: Even when it comes to the boys, they give too much importance to clothes and they attend too much to themselves and their appearance. I don’t feel like it’s students coming to school…

Adnan comes from a religious Muslim family and, as he tells it, grew up in a conservative environment. That he feels this way is not unexpected for a young, religious Muslim coming from a majority-Muslim country. His responses indicate some culture shock and the choice of navigating the culture by putting distance between himself and those who are different in what he considers to be a negative way. What Adnan thinks about different aspects of American culture, including the way of dress, alcohol, etc. is influenced by his religious views and what Islam tells him is okay or not. While he may become less extreme, so-to-speak, in how he explains and handles difference, it is possible Adnan will continue to negotiate big cultural differences by essentially staying away from them. Essentially, the result of the hybridity he has undergone in coming into contact with American culture is a rejection of what he sees as wrong in America and a
sense of pride in being different, as he states clearly here: “So I expect, with me, I expect it’s a good difference.” When probed about his positive take on this, Adnan clarified he is happy to not be the same.

Tariq, Salman, and Adnan are all examples of the different ways in which a refugee student may choose to navigate the cultural borders they come up against in their experiences. Though they share some similarities in how they navigate borders and in their hybridity, there are also clear differences in the path they choose to take in the process. Hybridity is a complex, ongoing, and very individual process which must be understood as such by educators with a diverse student body, especially one which includes refugees from different countries. The manifestation of encountering a cultural border and the hybridity process may look different for each individual, and must be considered in this regard to avoid any misunderstanding about why refugee students are the way they are. Tariq, Salman, and Adnan have chosen somewhat different paths to take in their process of hybridity, and all demonstrate doing so in a manner which has not severely impacted their identity as individuals.

**Identity**

Though the boys, especially Tariq and Salman, share many experiences in common as refugees to the United States, they remain unique in their identities. More importantly, how various borders and experiences have shaped and are shaping their enacted identities differs individually. Below is a discussion of their unique identities as well as a critical look at the influence of positioning – implicit and explicit – on who they are and who they present themselves to be.
**Tariq.** On the surface, and using descriptors not uncommonly used to introduce someone, Tariq can be described easily and with a few words. He is a Burmese refugee to the United States who has never seen his home country and identifies as coming from Malaysia. A major affinity identity he holds is a religious one. He identifies as Muslim and, though he is aware of the negative perceptions this identification may bring him, does not shy away from it. Tariq’s literate identity is a complex one, and in some aspects is impressive. He speaks three languages, switching between Malay, Burmese and English successfully to navigate different contexts. It does not take much interaction with Tariq to recognize that he is more of a serious individual, but does enjoy humor. He also makes it clear, when talking about school, that he is a hardworking individual who is serious about academic success and securing a bright future for himself.

Tariq is not always confident in himself, both when it comes to speaking in English, and when it comes to sharing his opinions about different matters:

Me: And square, okay. All of those, okay. Did any of your classes, were any of them very interesting, very boring?

Tariq: I don’t know

Me: You don’t know? It doesn’t matter to you?

Tariq: Yes

Me: No? Okay. So what did you think of the library?

Tariq: Umm, I think, okay, but I don’t…I don’t know

Me: Did you like it? Not like it? Umm, find something interesting there?
Tariq: Oh, I liked it.

Despite this, he is determined to keep improving linguistically, and does not usually shy away from admitting struggles he faces with language or in school. He also shows a real love for learning useful information. Though he plays games on his phone and is fluent in social media, he does not identify as being a skilled gamer, nor does he make much use of his digital literacy. One area he truly enjoys and which has become part of his identity as someone living in America is art. He loves to draw in his free time and enjoys looking at the work of others, as observed by the researcher during a trip to the local Art museum. In some ways, he is no different than the average American teenager, something which may not be apparent at first glance or upon first interaction with Tariq, due to the overwhelming influence the labels he has been assigned with – such as refugee and English Language Learner have on how he is perceived.

Even though he is in his third year of school here, Tariq does not show much interest in learning about the American people and their culture:

Me: Do you want to know more about American life?

Tariq: No

Me: No? Why not?

Salman: Because

Me: You can tell me

Tariq: Because short list easy to remember. Long, hard to remember
Me: Hard to remember if it’s a long list. Okay. So you want to know only enough about them that you can remember. So what if they tell you a little bit now and then a little bit later? It’s okay?

Tariq: Okay

He projects a certain air of indifference when it comes to others who are different, and makes clear from his attitude and responses about life in America he is not interested in adopting the American culture as his own. And although he maintains an attitude of distance and contentment with being different, being labeled as *other* – albeit implicitly – has affected who he is and how he identifies, in accordance with the critical perspective on identity. Tariq became more comfortable with the researcher as time passed, making it easier to learn about him as an individual. And though he maintained a certain level of shyness and distance with the researcher, interactions with him brought to the forefront the reality that there is much more to Tariq than meets the eye.

Tariq’s identity and demonstrated instances of navigating cultural borders and hybridity are important to make a note of. They both suggest not all refugees and immigrants are overwhelmed by the dominant culture and messages about superiority to the extent that they feel the need to embody the dominant, and accepted, narrative by embracing a new identity detached from all which makes them “other.”

**Salman.** Salman shares several *affinity* identities with his brother. He is also a Burmese refugee who identifies as coming from Malaysia and identifies as Muslim. Unlike Tariq, however, he does shy away from his Muslim identity in some contexts and situations. Salman also maintains a complex linguistic identity which is not made obvious
unless one interacts with him and makes an effort to know him. He presents as being more confident than Tariq in his linguistic abilities. At the same time, his behavior in some contexts can be interpreted as someone who is not confident in their speaking ability, and perhaps has been affected by implicit messages about language and English linguistic imperialism.

Just as Tariq loves Art and has adopted this into his identity, Salman loves games and considers himself to be skilled at what he plays. His gaming identity is somewhat different than his real-life identity, in that he defies his moral code in games by lying and tricking others to get what he needs to score higher and advance:

Me: You lie?
Salman: Yes
Me: You lie to get knives?
Salman: Yes

(Later in the conversation)

Salman: And sometime we can’t lie, we can’t lie, because some people they don’t give free knife. Because they have money. Already buy money, they don’t need money, and they don’t give.

Me: So you only lie to people who need money
Salman: Yes to keep
Me: But then you don’t give them money. Would you do that in real life?
Salman: No!
The above excerpts show how Salman enacts different identities depending on the context. As a gamer, he does not stick to the moral values which drive his behavior in real society.

Salman also likes music, and shows an affinity for American rap. He can also be described as a funny individual. Salman finds humor in things that are said or done around him, and laughs in response to them more often than does Tariq. He also uses his hands and voice to demonstrate something he is talking about, and does so in a way intended to make others laugh. Salman is less studious than his brother, and conversations with him suggest he is less serious about academic success. And although the career he sees for himself differs greatly from Tariq, who would like to become an engineer, Salman claims he would like to become a chef because “we don’t need, we don’t need English to be chef.” He has embodied values about academic success and doing well for his career and financial situation, but manifests this differently from his brother. Salman gives the impression he is not too confident in his own intelligence, but when probed about it, does give the sense he believes perhaps he is capable of more than he initially thinks:

Salman: Because we don’t need, we don’t need English to be chef
Me: You don’t need English to be a chef
Salman: Yeah, but I need to talk, but not vocabulary, like that
Me: So you find that because it’s hard to become very good at English that you want to choose something that doesn’t need a lot of talking?
Salman: Yeah

Me: Why not think about it as “I can learn English and I can become really good at English and then I can do whatever I want”? 

Salman: Oh, yes. Hmmm

Me: No really. You don’t have to think that way, I’m just..

Salman: I know. I sometimes yes, sometimes no

Salman is more affected by difference than is Tariq. He tells his brother frequently that they are different, and pays more attention to and speaks more about things which are visibly different in the American people. Because of the effect of difference on him, Salman’s identity seems to be more in a state of liminality than Tariq’s. This is demonstrated in the visible conflicts he faces in his religious and linguistic identities. It is also seen in the contrast between the social demeanor he presents as his school identity and the social demeanor he exhibits in other contexts, and in his exclamation that “No, I don’t like people.”

Salman is another example of the complex identity refugees and English language learners possess. The conflicts in his identity, likely not apparent to teachers and peers who do not take the time to really know him, are an indication of how much impact coming into contact with cultural borders can have on one’s identity (Bhabha, 2008). They also suggest individuals do not necessarily navigate and resolve their states of liminality quickly and may in fact take time to make it through the process of hybridity.

**Positioning and Identities.** What should be considered more closely is who both boys are within a critical framework. The critical perspective on identity proposes power
and privilege influence and restrict how we define our identities (Norton, 1997). How we are positioned in society affects what we can do as individuals, which in turn shapes who we see ourselves as. As minorities in Malaysia and English language learners and refugees in the United States, Tariq and Salman both come from backgrounds and face experiences shaped by power and privilege, and which undoubtedly have affected their identities (Norton, 1997; MacPherson, 2005). The linguistic, student, and overall identities they present in different contexts, as discussed above and below, are an illustration of Bhabha’s conceptualization here: “Identity is disturbed and split by difference that so obviously exists between colonized and colonizer” (p. 64)

Tariq, Salman, and their families with their backgrounds and the positioning they have found themselves in both in Malaysia and the United States have influenced their identities heavily. They are cognizant of the factors which made and make them different from the dominant group in society. In some cases this cognizance has shaped the identities they enact in various contexts.

To begin with, because they are Burmese Rohingya, the boys and their family were clearly positioned as less than Malaysians. Malaysia does not officially open its schools to those without legal status, and the Ahmad family did not have legal status until they were deemed refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The family found a loophole around this barrier to education, and yet its existence loomed over them as second-class citizens. It came back as a life-changer for them when Tariq and Salman came close to completing the number of years of school allotted to them as non-Malaysians from a family with no legal status. The boys and their family found a
workaround for a good portion of their schooling, and they were successfully granted refugee status and asylum in the United States. However, the explicit positioning they were forced into as a result of their ethnic background developed in them what the researcher interpreted as complicity in their situation.

Tariq and Salman talk about the barrier to their education in Malaysia very casually and do not show indications of being upset about their treatment in Malaysia. In fact, they express happiness at being in America and the educational opportunity they have been afforded here. Though this can be interpreted as a lack of caring on their part, it is far from that. The boys were afforded little power and privilege in Malaysia, to the extent that they were limited in how much school they could complete if they were to remain there. They accepted this as the reality facing them as Burmese in Malaysia, but were not happy about it. Additionally, both were aware of their father being on high alert at all times to avoid arrest as an undocumented resident in Malaysia. This environment of little power and privilege into which they born – similar to what some minority groups experience in America (Kirkland, 2013) – and in which they grew taught them implicitly and explicitly that they were not valued in Malaysia and their lives did not matter as much as the lives of their Malaysian counterparts.

How they dealt with negative positioning was by accepting it as a reality and deciding not to allow it upset or harm them permanently. They completed year after year of school as good students and, when forced to leave because of the barrier to their education, accepted their new reality and adapted to it. Their recollections of Malaysia are not full of resentment towards their situation there. Their complicity in the matter of
their positioning may be an indication they have, in a sense, admitted defeat regarding how they are viewed by larger society and what value is attached to their presence. It may also be a conscious decision on their part to remain silent in a world mired by stereotypes and positioning which they do not deserve. What the researcher believes is that both acceptance and silence are potential results of positioning which is lacking in power and privilege, and that both Tariq and Salman navigated their position in society in this manner.

Closely related to their status in Malaysia and as refugees is the lack of access they have had – since birth – to a passport, and the sense of officially belonging to any country and its people. As with their educational situation in Malaysia, the boys showed complicity and indifference to their inability to have a passport until pushed by the researcher. This was further indication of Tariq and Salman’s decision to navigate their status and positioning – as defined by society – by choosing to accept it without issue:

Me: Okay so if you don’t have a passport that means you can’t go anywhere?
Salman: Yes
Me: And that doesn’t bother you? How about you?
Tariq: Yes
Me: Why does it bother you?
Tariq: Because I can’t go anywhere. Just, just stay, stay here in home
Me: Do you think it’s not fair that they don’t give you a passport?
Tariq: No, it doesn’t. That’s okay
Me: It’s okay that they don’t give you a passport
Tariq: Yes
Me: So you don’t think there’s something wrong with…
Tariq: Yes, because money. Need money
Me: For a passport
Tariq: Yes

Instead of understanding the lack of fairness behind their inability to travel outside their current country of residence, both boys construe their situation as acceptable. The inability to own a passport and essentially to claim a country as one’s own is a situation which positions Tariq and Salman as less important and less valued than individuals who can and do own a passport. If the boys recognize their situation speaks to the disadvantaged situation and marginalization of their family and other Rohingya, they do not express it. What Tariq chooses to do, as illustrated above, is to ignore the real barriers to their ability to own a passport and to cite money as the main cause for their situation. What this excerpt seems to suggest is both Tariq and Salman learned at some point to dismiss any aspect of their lives which highlights their positioning in society as individuals, as human beings, and as Rohingya. This is a type of hybridity which involves complacency and resignation to the unfairness which surrounds their situation.

**The Refugee Label.** What is most noteworthy about Tariq and Salman is how they quietly distance themselves from the label of *refugee*. It is not something they discussed much with the researcher, but it became clear from their responses that they do
not allow the label to define them, nor do they see themselves through the lens of *refugee*. The boys speak of themselves and their experiences like any other individual, and do not consider themselves victims of any oppressive system or unfair positioning. When asked, they acknowledged they are *refugees*, but seemed to indicate silently they have placed a distance between themselves and the label with which the United Nations and the rest of the world has attached to them. During one conversation, the researcher showed them a video about a refugee camp and asked them questions about it. Neither Tariq nor Salman mentioned they shared refugee status with the individuals discussed in the video, nor did they show any indication of relating to them.

It is possible their non-stereotypical experience as refugees, in that they were not forced to flee from their home country because of life endangerment, shaped their identities as ones which are set apart from other refugees. It is possible Tariq and Salman also refuse to be defined by a label which carries with it what may be considered negative connotations – or, at the very least, lead people to feel sympathy for them and to assume they are fragile individuals. The Ahmad family did not experience refugee camps, and left Malaysia peacefully and easily by getting onto a plane which brought them to America. What they went through as a result of the barriers to education in Malaysia was not a dangerous, life-threatening experience with a transition in the harsh conditions of a refugee camp. Thus, their experiences did not position them as vulnerable victims, possibly traumatized by the journey they had to take to safety.

This may stem in part from their high school’s – and Sunday school’s – inattention to their backgrounds and experiences, and their lack of interaction with others
outside of school. Tariq and Salman are not bombarded with messages shaped by their status as refugees, and are – as they describe it – treated in the same way other students at school are treated. Aside from their teachers knowing of their refugee status, neither their school nor their Sunday school has focused on this label or how it was assigned to them. Additionally, the researcher’s understanding of the family is this: the Ahmad family places such great emphasis on their children finishing school and succeeding beyond that it seems they have shed the label – at least consciously. Tariq and Salman’s parents want them to do well, and secured completion of schooling for their children in America. It may be that in their seriousness about education and their willingness for the boys to do well, they have decided to turn focus away from who they were in Malaysia and who they became in their journey to America. In other words, the parents, with their children following, have not allowed negative experiences or power and privilege to define how they view themselves or to deter them from seeking better futures for themselves.

Identity – Adnan. Adnan was not at the forefront of this study, but much can be said about his identity. Though he comes from a different country, he shares refugee status with Tariq and Salman, as well as the affinity identity of being Muslim. His linguistic identity is also more complex than might be assumed, with him being bilingual in Arabic and English. Adnan is proud of his Syrian and Arab heritage, and is determined to preserve this heritage in America. In speaking to him, the researcher was left with the impression that this young man exudes much self-confidence and is not at all perturbed by being different or labeled as other. On the contrary, Adnan is proud of who he is and finds that being different from the rest is a good thing.
Like Tariq, Adnan is very studious and eager to learn. He is focused on his future and treats school as a step he must excel in on his way to continuing education. He is mature for his age, as the following excerpt shows, and is quite intelligent: “But here, you have to, this is my expectation, that as much as you study, and as advanced as you are academically, you’re going to advance further. There is still something more advanced.”

Here, Adnan demonstrates an understanding of the vastness of knowledge, suggesting the path to becoming a knowledgeable person is a never-ending one. That he mentions a grasp on a concept such as this one at the young age of sixteen is an indication of his maturity and intelligence.

Adnan’s self-confidence can be interpreted as cockiness at times, such as when he discusses the characteristic of wisdom below:

“Like, I can also tell you that I have, my thinking is exceptional. And it’s not out of being self-centered or anything. Like, I stand out from other people, from everyone around me. Like, I’m not like that. It’s not a matter of being intelligent or not, but I think a bit. I don’t like to do something without thinking about it. Not everything I do of course, but I try as much as I can to be wise, right now, in this stage. If you ask me what I want, I want wisdom.”

Though Adnan was present in Syria when conflict and violence ensued, his resilience as a youth has enabled him to move on and to focus on building a better future for himself. One aspect of his identity which shines through everything else and which shapes his thoughts about the future is his Syrian roots, and the affinity he holds for his people and home country. This is in great contrast to Tariq and Salman, who do not show
much interest in visiting their country of origin or previous country of residence, claiming they are happy in America and do not want to go back to Malaysia.

**Religious, school, and English identities.** Adnan also holds tightly to his religious identity, viewing and interpreting everything around him through a religious lens. The way in which he speaks about Islam and being Muslim gives the indication, as with Tariq and Salman, that this is one aspect of his identity which cannot be shaken or removed, no matter how long he lives in a country where he has minority ethnic and religious status. For example, he explains that because he is easily influenced by friends, he stays away from most people because they are different in their values and life goals and he does not want to be – as he puts it – influenced negatively.

This is one indication both of how self-aware Adnan is, and how deeply he thinks about various issues. He is intentionally socially-isolated but makes it clear that he craves true friendship and so seems a bit lonely. He also claims to be critical of everything around him, always pointing out flaws. This may explain his decision to remain isolated from peers whose values and life goals he judges as not being good enough.

Adnan is only in his second year of school in America, and still has much to learn before, according to standards set by school and society, he becomes fluent. Like Tariq and Salman, he is aware of his shortcomings with English, but does not shy away from explaining them as being his fault. He prefers to speak in Arabic but has come to believe he should not avoid asking questions in class or speaking to others because of his struggles with English or the accent he speaks with. To him, language is a tool which
should be used when necessary. This means speaking up in class and at school when he has questions or requires clarification of course content.

Overall, Adnan presents a more confident front than Tariq and Salman, and this may be because of an advantage he held over Tariq and Salman in this study. The researcher is fluent in Adnan’s mother tongue, and he spoke to her in the language he is most comfortable with during their conversations. This was not the case with Tariq and Salman. Setting this aside, Adnan does seem to be more confident in general, as indicated by his responses to different questions and his opinion on matters such as ESL class and friendship in school.

**Comparing Adnan to Tariq and Salman**

Interestingly, Adnan’s interactions at the cultural border appear to have influenced his identity to a lesser degree than Tariq and Salman. He does not give the sense that he is in a state of liminality when speaking about difference and how he navigates it, nor does his linguistic identity show an individual who is conflicted about his use of the English language or whose social behavior is inhibited by confidence in language use. Adnan’s hybridity consists of an individual holding tightly to his identity as a Muslim, Arab, and serious student. Tariq and Salman’s hybridity includes changes in social interaction, and with Salman, an interest in the American people and culture. Whereas Salman – and Tariq to an extent – use humor to make sense of difference, Adnan immediately writes it off simply as what it is, perhaps even viewing it negatively. In addition, Adnan maintains a true affinity for his home country and his people, while
Tariq and Salman seem content with life in America and do not talk about going back to Malaysia or Burma.

All three refugee students have complex identities which cannot be uncovered from simple questions like “What’s your name?” or “Where are you from?” Unlike Tariq and Salman, Adnan grew up in his country of origin and was not subject to the same influences of power and privilege. Like Tariq and Salman, though, Adnan does not allow the label of refugee to define him. He has adapted quickly to his new environment and is focused solely on doing well for himself in school and beyond. And though he and his family fled their home for fear of their lives and experienced the beginnings of the conflict in Syria, Adnan was not subject to direct violence or trauma, and did not experience life in a refugee camp.

In addition, aside from introductions in ESL class, his background and experiences are not mentioned in school. Similar to Tariq and Salman, he is treated like other students in what appears to be an environment which does not explicitly define him by his life circumstances and where teachers do not treat him differently on this basis. This perhaps explains why refugee does not define him, just as it does not define Tariq and Salman. What is more likely the case with Adnan, Tariq, and Salman is their navigation of their discourse identities as refugees by consciously choosing not to be defined by them, and by demonstrating strength and resilience in making the most of their new lives.
CHAPTER 5
Discussion and Implications

The aim of this study was to understand refugees’ experiences at the cultural borders, the hybridity processes they have undergone, and their holistic and literate identities. By observing them in different contexts, spending time with them to learn more about their lives, and hearing about their schooling experiences, this study has illuminated the complexity of the refugee identity, literacy skills they possess, and the uniqueness of their negotiations at the cultural borders. This case study and the cross-case comparisons within it have both affirmed various findings in the current literature on refugee youth and their experiences in school and society, and have brought to light new and enlightening perspectives on the identities of refugee youth, their navigation of cultural borders, and the departure of these boys’ school experiences from those portrayed and discussed in the current research.

Review of Findings

Current literature on refugees in schools portrays an overall negative experience in which many refugees are exposed to bullying and discrimination and face impediments to their academic, social, and mental success and well-being (Smith & Halbert, 2013; Cassity & Gow, 2005; McBrien, 2005; Roxas & Roy, 2012). Teacher lack of awareness and understanding of their students backgrounds, experiences, and ways of knowing is also a common feature among refugee school experiences in the West (Wallitt, 2008; Athaneses, 1998). In addition, it has been reported that a glaring disconnect exists
between refugees’ English language proficiency and course content at school, which positions language as a barrier to their academic and overall success.

**Experiences in School**

Tariq, Salman, and Adnan, who differ in the amount of time they have been in the American public-school system, present school experiences – through their own narratives – which in some ways depart from these key findings in the current literature. Bullying and overt discrimination are not an issue for any of the boys, and their unique stories as refugees do not fit the stereotyped image of traumatized individuals who have endured much hardship and whose lives prior to refugee status have been in severe danger. Thus, the overall portrayal Tariq, Salman, and Adnan present about their school experiences is relatively neutral. They do not face overt negative situations regularly, are not bullied, and are not currently at risk of failure or dropping out, experiences cited frequently in the literature (Lustig, 2004; Smith & Halbert, 2013; McBrien, 2005). Where their experiences converge with each other and with the current literature is in how they are positioned covertly by the school system, and in the implicit messages their school environment sends about their backgrounds, experiences, linguistic skills and identities (Avineri, et al. 2015; Delpit, 2006; Kovinthan, 2016; Roxas, 2011).

As discussed in chapter four, all three boys are treated like any other student at their school. On the surface, this appears to be innocuous and perhaps even good. However, this is an indication of the invisibility Tariq, Salman, & Adnan are granted as refugees, English Language Learners, and foreigners to the United States. In accordance
with what has been found in the literature, treating the boys in this manner suggests the lack of value and attention given to who they are as individuals, the life experiences they have undergone, and the literacy skills which they possess. It also creates contexts which other Tariq, Salman, and Adnan (Bhabha, 2008), sending implicit messages about the value of their heritage, linguistic repertoire(s) and literacy skills which may depart from the heritage, linguistic repertoire, and skills presented in schools. In addition, that their experiences are effectively no different than the experiences of other students – native English speakers and citizens – renders them and their uniqueness invisible. This is compounded by linguistic imperialism which permeates societies across the world, and is cited by researchers on ELLs and refugees as being problematic for their educational experience (Luke & Dooley, 2009; Cummins, 2005).

For Tariq and Salman, the effect of language on their performance has begun – during this academic year – to mirror existing research on refugees, which finds English to be a barrier to academic success and achievement. Though they are both fluent enough in English to navigate their surroundings and to pass their courses, chapter four has clarified previous findings which have found English to be a point of struggle for refugees and ELLs, and which emphasize the need to recognize the number of years required for an individual to become fluent in another language (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Guerrero, 2004). Both Tariq and Salman are struggling with their grades in various subjects, pointing to a lack of recognition – on the part of teachers and the school – of their need for extra support and the language barrier exacerbating their struggles. Their invisibility, coupled with English as a barrier to their academic success is
an experience which mirrors findings from current research. It also strengthens arguments which suggest a need for change in the school system’s approach to refugees, and to ESL models (Roberts, 1994; Cummins, et al., 2006).

Adnan’s good performance in school echoes Mosselson’s findings (2006), which introduce the idea that refugees are among the highest-achieving students in their classes, barring any school-related impediment to their success, such as language proficiency. Adnan is not yet fully proficient in English, as he indicated in chapter four, but his seriousness about school and success compensates for any deficiencies – as defined by society – and makes his story an exception to the stereotyped image of the refugee student.

While this study has confirmed previous findings about refugees and their school experiences, the relative lack of literature on refugee youth’s identities, navigation of cultural borders, and processes of hybridity makes much of what this study has uncovered new, noteworthy, and extremely relevant to schools in America.

**Hybridity**

Not much research has presented or explored the cultural borders – and resulting hybridity – encountered by refugee youth in America, with none which focus on language as a large border they encounter. This study’s findings on cultural borders are thus new to the literature, and carry great importance for schools and educators.

To begin with, delving into the lives of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan has provided some evidence of the impact the school environment, with many factors at play, has on their identities and processes of hybridity. Though their navigation of the linguistic
border does not involve much overt discussion or positioning of their native tongue(s) and their belonging to *other* groups, discussions with all three boys demonstrate how even subtle positioning and implicit messages shape negotiations at the cultural border and resulting hybridity. This is made most clear with Salman, whose enacted identities differ depending on context, comfort level, and people involved, a dichotomy which demonstrates his unique hybridity as well as the impact positioning, messages, and *othering* can have on one’s identity.

Several other examples presented in chapter four discussing the three boys’ navigation of various cultural borders serve as further indication of the uniqueness of the hybridity process each refugee individual undergoes. This includes the difference between Adnan and the brothers in how they navigate the English language. Adnan does not shy away from speaking up at school and is adamant about his lack of practice as the reason he is not strong enough in English. In other words, he is conscious of his identity as an English speaker but recognizes the reasons he is identified as lacking in fluency and proficiency. Tariq and Salman, on the other hand, have adopted shy personalities in public and around people they are not yet comfortable with. The contrast in their behavior demonstrates difference in how each of them internalized messages about English as best, how they navigated both the linguistic imperialism which permeates schools and society, and the positioning of *other* people and cultures by the dominant, American society.

More serious difference in hybridity was demonstrated in Salman’s proclamation that he hides his religious identity from most, unlike Tariq and Adnan. All three have
experienced the same forces of *othering* and lack of value and attention given to their backgrounds. They are also very aware of the differences between their religion and culture and the general American culture. However, only Salman exhibits hesitation about his religious identity. These examples of difference in hybridity strengthen the argument this study makes about refugees being heterogenous not only in life experience, but also in navigation and negotiation of cultural borders and, as a result, in identity. True individuality in hybridity and in negotiation of cultural borders is a reality which educators must be made aware of, because of its implications for refugee school experiences, as well as programs and supports intended to help them succeed.

**Language and Literacy**

Conversations with Adnan on the topic of language and the acquisition of English serve as a real example supporting arguments made by Cummins (2005), Cummins et al (2006), and Gee (2015) which suggest true language acquisition and fluency necessitates something beyond what is offered by standard ESL models and beyond how schools present themselves as valuing other cultures and languages. Adnan’s input on language learning makes clear the need for refugees and ELLs to truly encounter, engage with, and use American *d/Discourse*, because “language is learned through experience and use” (Brooks, 2017). This is also a suggested finding from conversations with Tariq and Salman, whose speaking fluency is an indication of their insufficient exposure to and practice with American *d/Discourse*. Highlighting suggestions such as these is important, considering the *Discourse* of American schools and society likely conflicts with the identity, values, and ways with words which define refugees’ primary *Discourse*. 
More important to highlight is the complexity of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan’s literate identities, mostly because this is something which educators fail to notice or explore in their refugee students and is crucial to understanding individuals and their skills holistically. As discussed in the previous chapter, all three boys speak more than one language. All of them, especially Tariq and Salman, are skilled at using the appropriate language to navigate their contexts, meaning they can switch between languages as needed. Any on-the-surface lack of proficiency or fluency in English – such as difficulty with coherence when speaking or struggles understanding class content – may mask the literacy abilities Tariq, Salman, and Adnan possess individually. Because of this, it is necessary to recognize the complexity of the literate skills these boys possess – perhaps not immediately apparent when interacting with them – as discussed in detail in chapter four. In particular, it is imperative educators become aware of refugees’ use of language to mediate their identity by using it to navigate various contexts, including, for example, by switching between languages to make sense of their surroundings. That these refugees possess a wealth of linguistic knowledge and skills is another factor affecting implications of this study for schools and educators.

Identity

Perhaps most intriguing about this study’s findings comes in its understanding of three boys’ identities as students and as individuals. Aside from learning about who Tariq, Salman, and Adnan are, this study also provides a critical perspective of their identities. How we define our identity is influenced and restricted by power and privilege (Norton, 1997), and its construction is done through “discourse and representation”
What this study has learned about the three boys has been illuminated by the use of these perspectives, and adds greatly-needed perspective on refugee youth in America.

Tariq presents himself as a shy, studious, and hardworking individual who enjoys drawing in his free time and is eager to learn new and useful things. Salman is also a shy individual, seems to be less studious than his brother, enjoys gaming and is good at it, and presents less of a shy front at school when among his friends and peers. Adnan is an opinionated, serious, and hardworking youth whose current focus in life is on succeeding academically and building a strong future for himself.

Tariq and Salman’s shyness in various contexts and their hesitation to interact with others is a direct result of their internalization of implicit messages which other their heritage, background, language, culture, and religion. As Bhabha states so poignantly, Western society – the dominant other – finds acceptable those cultures which fit within its norms and standards of what is okay and what is not. With messages of linguistic imperialism (Luke & Dooley, 2009) and standard English as best (Cummins, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Avineri et al., 2015) permeating American school and society, the othering of Tariq and Salman affects the identity they enact around others and in different contexts. They do not have a real social life, do not talk much with others, and have pointed to language as a reason for this behavior.

Adnan does not present the same shyness, indicating he has internalized messages of othering to a lesser degree and in a different way. His reasons for not socializing are unrelated to language. However, other contributions to the distinction between him as a
Syrian Muslim refugee in America and greater society – such as difference in lifestyle, dress, and social habits – do affect his behavior and enacted identity. This is seen in his rejection of some aspects of American culture, such as the manner in which males and females dress, and the concept of dating. Instead of construing these differences as indicating something is wrong with him, Adnan’s sense of otherness has strengthened his identity as a Muslim Arab in America, and developed in him pride in who he is and how he stands apart from the general public.

Tariq, Salman, and Adnan’s unique internalization of their positioning as other in society is perhaps the greatest example of how cultural borders, power, and privilege have differing effects on a person’s identity, depending on the individual. They also point to the real consequences power carries, as discussed by Norton (1997) in the following quote: “By extension relations of power can serve to enable or constrain the range of identities that language learners can negotiate in their classrooms and communities”

Existing literature on refugee identity suggests identity negotiation – affected by relations of power – may include separating oneself from cultural, linguistic, and past identities and experiences. None of the boys do this, and all identify with their ethnic and religious identities. This finding is a crucial addition to the understanding of refugee experiences and identity negotiations as being unique to the individual and possibly affecting each person differently. Another example of this is in how Salman – undoubtedly affected by implicitly negative messages about Muslims – publicly distances himself from his religious identity, but Tariq and Adnan do not shy away from their Muslim background.
Because overall research looking at refugees and identity is scarce, this study’s focus on refugee identity and the influence of power, privilege and positioning on the identities they enact adds crucial information to the understanding of refugee youth. In illuminating the heterogeneity of the refugee youth identity and the uniqueness in influence of various societal factors on identity, this study contributes valuable knowledge to educators’ understanding of refugees.

**Implications for Schools**

Findings from this study illuminate the identities and literate identities of three refugee youth, and demonstrate the cultural borders they come up against and have had to navigate. They confirm previous findings in the literature which pertain to refugee school experiences, achievement, and navigation of a different language. In addition, this study presents unique aspects of these boys which do not fit the stereotyped mold presented in most research of refugee youth, their experiences, skills, and identities. Thus, this study carries serious implications for schools in their approach to educating refugee students.

What is most clearly demonstrated in the exploration of each of these boys is the uniqueness of the refugee student, brought to light by the critical perspective used to understand their experiences and identities. Generally-speaking, teachers and schools hold stereotypical views of refugees and ELLs, and thus approach them as one group whose members are all alike in linguistic ability and intelligence (Kovinthan, 2016; McBrien, 2005). In many cases, as with Tariq, Salman, and Adnan, teachers do not take the time to differentiate between their refugee and ELL students, and thus are not made aware of the uniqueness of their backgrounds, experiences and – most importantly –
identities. As discussed in the literature, this is a dangerous mistake which leads educators to take a cookie-cutter approach towards understanding and teaching refugee students. The unique individuality of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan as refugees is a clear example of why the approach taken by schools towards refugee students must be changed. It is one which makes use of Bhabha’s conceptions of the dominant group and others to make sense of refugee students as they are positioned in and by school and society and, through this lens, to bring about the best possible changes.

Approaches towards refugee students. Coming to an awareness of the heterogeneity of refugee students, their backgrounds, skills and identities could begin with the implementation of a formal program focused on truly welcoming refugees into schools. This is something which would go beyond the basic introductions students are asked for on their first day of ESL class, which – as explained by Tariq and Salman – includes giving their name, country of origin, and current residence. Instead, schools should develop a system whereby they reach out to refugee families upon enrollment of the children, bring them into the school, and have the teachers and administration learn about the family and the students. Because language may be an issue during initial interactions and before the students learn English, it is imperative that schools maintain contact with parents and that teachers maintain contact with students throughout the school year. Pairing every few students with one teacher would help build and maintain a positive student-teacher relationship. This would give students a sense of support and a resource they could turn to as they navigate the unfamiliar school setting and system.
Another important change to the school system comes in its overall approach to non-English languages, based on findings from and suggestions made by Cummins (2005), Avineri, et al., (2015), and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) in her discussion of culturally-relevant pedagogy. The American public-school system – particularly in English-only states and in accordance with ideas about linguistic imperialism and the superiority of the dominant American culture – typically brushes students’ other languages aside (Cummins, 2005). Refugee students possess linguistic and literacy skills in their native languages and are likely more literate than teachers judge from students’ performance and participation in class (Avineri, et al., 2015). However, schools’ focus on standard English and on fluency and proficiency in this realm leads to teachers’ failure to recognize and appreciate the linguistic skills and abilities refugee students possess. In addition, the use of culturally-irrelevant pedagogy, and the employment of an ESL model devoid of the student context and background prevents teachers from being able to capitalize on their students’ resources and strengths in an effort to help them succeed and, more importantly, feel valued and validated (Hope, 2011; Purcell-Gates, 2013).

In addition to making changes to their approach to refugee students and how they are taught, schools must also be aware of the tensions in identity and sense of belonging which refugee students face as a result of the borders they come up against in their school and societal experience. For one, teachers must recognize the uniqueness of the refugee identity. They must also understand that who a refugee is may be in flux as a result of the state of liminality they find themselves in at the cultural borders at school and in society. Their shyness in class, for example, should not be interpreted as a lack of intelligence or a
lack of interest in learning. Instead, teachers would best serve their students by taking the time to consider, based on what they have learned about their refugee students, why a particular student – like Tariq – is always quiet in class. Keeping cultural borders and hybridity in mind as they interact with their refugee students will help teachers understand individual behavior, performance in class, and how well they are navigating difference – be it linguistic or cultural – in school.

Making this possible necessitates regular learning opportunities where teachers are taught about the diversity in their student body, and where they gradually acquire skills for approaching, understanding, and teaching refugee students from different backgrounds. One clear curricular change which would help towards this end is the adoption of culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014), a decision which would lead to major changes in how subject matter is taught.

The implications of this study’s findings also provide further support for arguments which state ESL programs and schools overall must begin to recognize and capitalize on students’ home languages (Hope, 2011; Manyak, 2002; Haneda, 2008; Omerbasic, 2015). This involves more than an actual shift in how schools perceive other languages, by, for example, going beyond surface statements which claim value and appreciation for other languages and cultures. Going a step beyond, to truly changing thought processes related to English hegemony worldwide, to appreciating literacy and linguistic skills extend beyond the standards expected of students in schools, and encouraging students to share about their linguistic repertoire and knowledge base would help to change the school environment as it pertains to language(s). Conscious steps such
as these would minimize the strength and impact of implicit messages regarding linguistic imperialism (Luke & Dooley, 2009, pp.3), English as the most accepted linguistic form, and invisibility with which other students’ languages, discourses, and heritage are treated (Delpit, 2006).

A specific example of this comes in how ESL classes are taught and a necessary shift in the standard model if schools are to shift towards a more supportive structure for refugees’ academic success. Conversations with Tariq and Salman and input from Adnan are solid proof of the flaws in the standard ESL model (Roberts, 1994; Cummins, et al., 2006). Though Tariq and Salman are in their third year of public school and have been in ESL classes from the start, they do not always speak fluently and in easy-to-understand sentences. They also make grammatical errors when speaking. This is not an indication of a problem inherent to the boys, but an indication of the failures of the ESL model to teach its students everything they need to become stronger in the English language. By drawing on students’ heritages, native language(s), and linguistic repertoire and literacy skills, ESL teachers will make language learning much more relevant and relatable to their students (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Becker, 2014; Friedrich, Anderson, & Morrison, 2014). Doing this could come in something as simple as allowing students to speak in their native tongue while completing classwork in ESL. Allowing refugee students the opportunity to truly engage with American d/Discourse during ESL classes and in their other courses is an additional change which would also support their language acquisition and strengthen their English skills (Gee, 2000; Gee, 2015; Bigelow, 2011).
Making any programmatic changes in schools to improve the refugee school experience and their outcomes must be premised on an acknowledgment and understanding of this population of students, regardless of where they come from or what experiences they have endured prior to coming to the United States. At the foundation of these changes is a shift in schools’ perceptions of refugee students to ones which understand the heterogeneity of their life experiences and their identities. Furthermore, shifts in perspective must include an understanding of teachers, administration, and approach to curriculum that refugee students encounter cultural borders and are in a constant state of identity negotiation as they navigate these borders and the state of liminality they find themselves in as others in public schools.

Though Tariq, Salman, and Adnan speak about their school experiences matter-of-factly and do not express any concerns with their treatment within the system, they are essentially invisible students at their schools (Roxas, 2011). No extra attention is given to them by teachers, no supports help ensure they overcome academic challenges, and no efforts are made to acknowledge or try to understand their backgrounds, linguistic repertoires, literacy skills, or personal challenges they may face for being different (Wallitt, 2008; Athaneses, 1998; Bal, 2014; Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010). Shifting school perspectives towards refugees would help to change this and to create an environment in which refugee students feel valued, supported, and visible. Not only would this provide an emotional boost to them, but it would also help students like Tariq and Salman when they fail to understand their teachers in class, or when students ask questions – laden with
negative messages of otherness – about their name or religion (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to educating a diverse student body, and certainly no cookie-cutter approach for teaching refugee students. That is what makes this study’s findings crucial to schools’ understandings of and approaches to refugee students. It uncovers the heterogeneity of the refugee student literacy skills, navigation of cultural borders and hybridity, and identities. Schools must understand their individual students before making any serious programmatic changes. Thus, beginning with active efforts to inform educators of these truths, and illuminating for them the context and individual-dependent nature of approaches and programs aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes of refugee students would set schools on a path towards a more supportive environment and more enriching school experience for this population of youth, and this begins with the suggested implementation of programs which actively seek to know new refugee students and their families.

Change is always possible. The American public-school system is extremely diverse, and continues to welcome refugees at a time when the number of refugees has never been this high. Educators must begin to move towards a more supportive environment for refugee students, conducive to their learning, and supportive of their navigation of cultural borders, processes of hybridity, and shifts in identity which result from the positioning society places them in as refugees and non-native English speakers. This begins with an awareness of the uniqueness of each refugee student, and is followed by approaches which are built on this foundational knowledge.
Implications for Cultural Hybridity Theory

“Stereotypes rely upon silence” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 9)

The above quote signifies the reason this study is important and valuable to our understanding of refugee students. It also encapsulates in simple words an obvious and very real barrier towards understanding refugees. Bringing down the barrier of silence using the above recommendations necessitates an approach towards understanding them which understands the dynamics of dominant and other in society, and which recognizes the individual nature of hybridity processes and the navigation which occurs at the cultural borders. The stories of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan highlight the validity of this quote and demonstrate what can be learned from and about individual refugees through genuine attempts at getting to know them.

What has been learned about Tariq, Salman, and Adnan, their contact at the edge of civilization (Bhabha, 2008), and resulting processes of hybridity they have undergone affirms the validity and usability of Bhabha’s cultural hybridity theory. Multiple instances were described in Chapter four which illuminate the cultural borders faced by these refugee boys, and bring to the forefront the states of liminality they found themselves in as a result. More importantly, their navigation of the cultural borders and resulting hybridity have clarified the idea that the entire process which results from interactions at the borders is a unique experience which manifest itself differently for each individual.

Moreover, the exploration of these three boys’ hybridity and resulting findings strengthens Bhabha’s arguments (2008) about the influence of the colonizer or the
dominant group on the colonized or other. Because the dominant group – in this case the American culture and English language – sets a framework for what is considered acceptable both culturally and linguistically, implicit messages are sent to other individuals which contribute to the transformation of identity each minority individual undergoes. This is why, for example, Tariq and Salman speak of becoming more fluent in English leading to others valuing them more. It is also why Adnan navigates cultural differences by outright rejecting them and positioning himself as different.

More intriguing to the understanding of cultural hybridity theory is the unique manner in which Tariq, Salman, and Adnan navigated different borders. Whereas there is currently a clear understanding of cultural hybridity theory’s validity and its application to understanding the identities of others in dominant cultures, not much light has been shed on the unique nature of this theory in its application to the identities of individuals. Within the framework of Bhabha’s theory, this is perhaps the most relevant finding to educators’ and schools’ understandings of and approaches to refugee students.

Current literature which makes use of cultural hybridity theory references Bhabha’s theory for explanatory purposes, such as in a study which examined the cultural and linguistic hybridity of a group of Somali refugee boys (Bigelow, 2011). In this study, the researcher refers to how the participants write and the content of their writing are evidence of the cultural hybridity they have undergone. Other research draws on the theory to support suggestions – backed by findings – which call on a recognition and use of the states of liminality and hybridity refugees experience. This is seen in the above-mentioned study and in an exploration of an emerging bilingual’s use of stories to make
connections between literature she reads at school and her life at home. Her cultural hybridity in this place of in-between is thus uncovered to better understand the stories she chose to tell (Lopez-Robertson & Schramm-Pate, 2012).

The stories of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan strengthen current uses of cultural hybridity theory in the literature, and add depth to an understanding of the influence of cultural borders and hybridity on refugee identity negotiation. By understanding who they are, what their school experiences are like, and how they use language to navigate different contexts, these boys’ narratives demonstrate that using Bhabha’s cultural hybridity theory – with its understanding of dominant groups and others – provides a critical perspective towards understanding who refugee individuals are. Adopting a cultural hybridity lens when seeking to learn about refugees illuminates much about their identities as individuals and about the experiences and factors in various contexts which play a role in identity negotiation. Such a perspective is generally absent from the literature, adding to understandings of the theory, knowledge about refugees, and the theory’s usability towards better, more inclusive and supportive school experiences for this marginalized population of students.

**Future Research**

This study attempted to understand refugees’ cultural hybridity experiences by focusing on the meeting place between refugees’ language, literacy, and culture, and those used and advocated by society. It illuminated the literacy skills refugees possess, as well as their individual navigation of various cultural borders and its influence on identity transformation. Findings from this study informed understandings of refugee students and
illuminated directions for future research at enhancing current knowledge about this marginalized group of individuals. Based on this study’s findings, several new questions arise for continued research. What literacies do younger – or older – refugees possess? What does navigation of cultural borders and hybridity look like for refugees who have fled from more serious conditions than Tariq, Salman, and Adnan, and who have lived in refugee camps? Would school experiences and processes of hybridity look different for refugees with disrupted education? How do other refugees, particularly those who have absolutely no knowledge of English prior to coming to America, use language to mediate their contexts and negotiate their identities? What further insight would observation of refugees in their classrooms bring to our understanding of refugee literacies, navigation of cultural borders, and identity negotiation?

While the stories of Tariq, Salman, and Adnan illuminate much-needed information about refugee individuals and their experiences, there is much more to explore and learn about them. Because literacies, experiences at the borders, and identity negotiation are very individual features and processes, exploring them further using the questions mentioned here would greatly enhance the current understandings in the literature – and in this study – of refugee students.

Findings from this study are invaluable to current knowledge of refugees in America. Conducting observations of refugees of different ages and in the school context would enhance this knowledge, and would allow for more clear understandings of their navigation of cultural borders – particularly linguistic ones – they come up against in the school context. They would also help to inform programs created with the intent of
supporting refugees in their school success. In addition, creating a study focuses solely on uncovering refugees’ literacy skills and practices in-depth would be useful for educators trying to design a curriculum which draws on refugees’ skills, resources, and linguistic repertoires.

Because this is a relatively undiscovered area of research, any study which aims to expand upon this study’s findings or to explore any of the questions above would be useful to understandings of and approaches towards refugees. This study has only scratched the surface of what can be learned about refugee students, their literacies, identities, and navigation of cultural borders. Further exploration of the same contexts for longer periods of time and with the addition of the school context are all expansions of this study which would allow for more clear conclusions to be made about the questions explored here. It raises important questions and is the first step towards improving school experiences for refugee students and towards educating teachers about this heterogeneous body of students.
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Appendix A

Protocol

Initial interview questions for refugee students:

1) Tell me a little bit about yourself

Where are you from? What can you tell me about (insert country name here)?

What do you like to do in your spare time?; What language(s) do you speak?

Which do you feel comfortable speaking in?; What topics/issues/hobbies/activities interest you?

2) Tell me about your family

Parents; Siblings; Extended family; Who is in the U.S. with you; What do they do/study; What role do you see yourself playing in your family; What role do your parents expect you to play?

3) Tell me about your life prior to coming to the United States

Past schooling, friends, social life, hobbies/activities of interest; How did you view yourself in your home country? in terms of as an individual, as a student, as a friend, as a family member

4) Tell me about life in the refugee camps

5) Tell me about school

6) What types of social media do you use? What do you use them for?

7) Do you like to read and/or write?

If yes, what do you like to read and write, and in what language? If no, why not?
8) What challenges have you faced this past week?

(Classwork/homework; Interactions with peers or teachers; Conflict with self about identity, cultural and linguistic differences, struggles to fit in as a student and as individual, etc.)

9) How do you feel your interest in class, in learning, and in doing well have changed in the last week/couple of weeks? Why do you think that is?

10) Is there any teacher, staff member, peer, or friend who supports your efforts as a student and your presence in the school? If yes, what do they do to encourage you to keep going and to succeed?

11) Do you approach your teachers with concerns you have with classwork, issues with peers, or psychological disturbances you may experience at any point?

12) How do you feel about the school’s approach to teaching you English?

13) Tell me about your English speaking and writing skills

14) What are your thoughts on American culture? Your peers?

15) How do you feel about the school’s attitude/approach towards your own language and literacies? Do you feel that it is different from the school’s attitude/approach towards English? How does that make you feel?

16) At some point during the semester, and in a couple of interviews: How do you feel about your language? Your language abilities? Your skills in reading and writing? (in heritage language and in English)

Questions for parents:

1) Tell me about your journey here
2) Tell me about life in your home country

*Employment/work; Kids’ schooling; Social life; Political, religious, or ethnic issues; Reason for leaving home; Thoughts on ever returning*

3) Tell me about your life here

*How long since they arrived; Presence (or lack thereof) of a community for them to be a part of; Kids’ enrollment in school; experience with the school; Challenges with kids since arriving; Employment/work; Language acquisition*

4) Tell me about your child

*Skills; Hobbies/interests (prior to and after coming to America); Role in the family; Struggles he/she has been or is facing since starting school and/or since arriving in the country*

5) What are your views on preserving your language and culture here? Does your child disagree with you? Why do you think that is?

6) How do you feel that American schools compare to (insert country name here) schools/education?

7) How do you feel American culture compares with yours? Do you feel that there are similarities you can identify with? Major differences?

8) Do you feel that your child has changed in any way since you arrived? If yes, how so?

9) Do you feel that your child’s identity is changing? (As a student; child; sibling)

9a) *If yes to “student,” why do you think that is?*
10) What are your thoughts on college education for your child? Future employment?

11) What are your thoughts on educational success for your child in this country?
Appendix B

Coding Terminology

**Literacy:** How they use language (writing, reading, speaking) in: interactions with others; to navigate the physical/social context they’re in; to get the information they need in a particular situation; to understand homework; to make sense of the people/situations around them; to assert themselves, their knowledge, and their abilities; to use digital tools/games. What they are literate/well-versed in *based on the idea of multiliteracies.*

*This is a more culturally-sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another* (*Street*)

**Literacy event:** “*any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes*” (*Heath*)

**Social literacy:** literacy is a social practice embedded in socially-constructed conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. engaging with literacy is always a social act (*Street*). Shaped by social, political, historical, and cultural contexts (ex: Scribner-Cole; Street; Digital literacy; New London Group).

**Hybridity:** The process by which an individual navigates and negotiates the bounds of his/her culture and ways of knowing and the culture and ways of knowing of his/her environment, including actions, body language, or verbal statements which indicate visibly how the individual is navigating and negotiating. The end result of
negotiating/navigating situations, contexts, discourses and literacies at the cultural border, and how they interpret and internalize these experiences.

**Cultural border:** meeting place between 2 cultures; leads to state of liminality. Any event/situation in which someone comes up against/is presented with language, discourse, behavior, activity, food, etc. which differs from their own, and in which they must navigate this difference with their action/reaction reflecting their choice for navigating/negotiating.

**Positioning:** A factor which heavily shapes identity (Norton), this refers to how someone, their language, discourse, culture, and background is defined and placed in relation to the dominant culture, language and discourse. Particular focus is given to situations and conversations with evidence of individuals being defined as “less than” the dominant culture, language, and discourse. How an individual is positioned and the power they gain from this positioning affects what they can do and who they think they can be, thus affecting identity (Norton, 1997).

**Identity:** Who a person is. How a person defines themselves holistically; this definition is a complex, dynamic and ever-changing entity which is influenced by power, privilege, and discourse and involves interpretation and re-interpretation of our own experiences as we live through them. Focus on:

*Affinity identity (Gee)*: evidence (in interviews and observations) of an individual’s affinity for or identification with a particular group. (Ex: demonstrating interest in being able to attend the mosque regularly)
Identity – critical perspective: evidence (in interviews and observations) of a person’s conception of self as it relates to and is affected by power, privilege, and discourse. The conception of “who I am” through a lens which understands how power, privilege, and discourse are affecting this conception. (ex: Being very aware of self as a non-native English speaker and thus waiting until after class to ask teachers questions about the class content, instead of raising hand during class to ask OR individual demonstrating a shy persona because of status as a non-native English speaker and worrying that others will have a hard time understanding them).
Appendix C

Data Sources

1 semi-structured formal interview with mother and transcript

1 semi-structured formal interview with brothers and transcript

10 weekly meetings with Tariq & Salman and transcripts

13 weekly observations of Tariq & Salman and field notes

Locations:

8 at Sunday school – present for all classes

Picnic

Art museum

Local food event

Local library

Event – volunteering to help those in need