

From Southern Sudan to Adelaide:
Learning Journeys of Refugee Secondary Students

Judith Sainsbury Thomas

BA (Melb); Grad Dip Teaching (Sec) (TCAE); M.Litt (UNE); M.ED (TESOL) (Deakin)

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the understanding of a small group of South Sudanese refugee students in Adelaide secondary schools by examining their learning, both in their homeland context in southern Sudan prior to its independence and in their mainstream schooling and life experiences in the Adelaide context.

School leaders and teachers in Australia have generally known little about the Dinka speaking refugees' family and community interaction, cultural background, home languages and learning experiences against the backdrop of almost constant war in southern Sudan. Similarly, their formal classroom learning experiences, feelings and attitudes, aspirations and challenges in the new learning context of English speaking schools in Adelaide have very rarely been explored in personal terms. This qualitative study focussed on the significant research gap in understanding the cultural and survival issues facing the South Sudanese secondary refugee students, commencing in war-torn southern Sudan and moving into the complexities of adapting to life and learning opportunities in the new safe locale and formal schooling environment of Adelaide in South Australia.

The aims of the research were to investigate the prior learning experiences and perspectives of the South Sudanese refugee students in southern Sudan and compare and contrast these with their life and mainstream schooling experiences in Adelaide. Open-ended interviews in English were used to allow the twenty-one South Sudanese participants, nineteen secondary students and two teachers, to talk about their learning journey in as natural a manner as possible. The qualitative theories of humanistic sociology and symbolic interactionism were used to develop a theoretical framework, linking social relations and the learning of cultural meanings, for analysing the interviews in the two main contexts of their lives. The first highlighted the participants' close relationships and everyday interactions with members of their family and community, church and school in southern Sudan. What the participants learned through these personal relationships was analysed thematically according to the cultural meanings or values, related to areas such as family life, moral, religious, linguistic, educational, sense of identity and aspirations. These early learning experiences were set alongside their relationships and learning in the new (second) context of schools in Adelaide where they related in a much more formal way to teachers and fellow students, in order to gain new

educational and linguistic meanings through the school curriculum. The participants provided evidence of their adaptation through their ongoing relations with their South Sudanese family and community, alongside their participation in the expected patterns of school life, and mainstream Australian values in the third context of overlapping cultural experiences in Adelaide. These dual influences shaped their sense of personal identity and aspirations for the future.

Through their learning in Australian schools, these participants had gained literacy in English which grounded the equivalent achievement in Dinka for many, enabling their successful completion of Year 12, with a number going on to university studies. The study concludes by drawing out the significant findings of these implications to further support the South Sudanese refugees and help teachers and administrators understand the refugee students in their schools. While most developed a successful intellectual identity as a student, these young refugees from South Sudan appeared to strengthen and maintain the sense of their home identity, based in part on their visibility, and many expressed their desire, once their academic and professional studies were complete, ‘to go back home’ and give service.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Judith Sainsbury Thomas.