Liberian Youth Speak: Life histories of young former refugees and their interactions with the Canadian school system

by

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Abstract

This study explores the interactions of four Liberian youth with the public education system in Ontario since their arrival as refugees. Using life histories developed with each participant, I have sought to understand and engage with the ways that these students negotiate their social and personal identities within the context of the majority discourses and practices of education in Ontario. By foregrounding the experiences and voices of the participants, it becomes possible to critically analyze the power relations that exist both to limit and empower these youth as they navigate their social and educational contexts. It becomes clear in the life histories that society’s dominant discourses of normalcy work to ignore or make irrelevant the complex identities that these youth inhabit and exhibit in their daily lives. However, they creatively exercise their individual agency to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities they feel are available to them in Canada.
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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Summary and background

This study consists of a qualitative examination of the discourses of a group of young people about their interactions with the Canadian educational system. The young people participating in this study are current or recently graduated high school students who have migrated to Canada as refugees from Liberia, and I specifically investigate how they negotiate the process of their identity construction through the lens of their experiences in schools in Canada. Life histories have been developed with specific focus placed on the discourse of the participants regarding their interactions with the schools as racialized speakers of minority languages.

Since beginning graduate studies, I have taken classes and written papers on topics related to my interest in languages and in identity studies, as well as the ways that the public education system interacts with linguistically diverse students. I have focused on issues of marginality and migration as they pertain to students in Ontario’s schools, and I have also begun to examine the colonial legacy of schooling contrasted with the perspectives of post-colonialism on modern educational practices and policies. My personal interactions and relationships with a number of people who have come to Canada as immigrants and refugees provided opportunities to engage the theoretical knowledge gained from my studies with the practical experiences and wisdom that they shared with me. This intersection of theory with lived experience sparked in me a desire to look more closely at the interactions that a particular group of people have had with the school system, and the way these interactions have impacted the way identity is negotiated in
their relationships with their schooling. To this end I have undertaken a research study with the aim of providing insight and possibly discovering answers to the following question:

- How do Liberian youth negotiate their personal and social identities in the context of the Canadian public education system?

I initially met people who had migrated to Canada as refugees from Liberia a couple of years before I began my graduate studies. In the context of friendships I developed and also work that I was doing in the area of refugee resettlement in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, I began to engage some adults and young people from the Liberian community, mostly around and through the sport of soccer. I was invited to help coach an after school team with a young Liberian man, and together we started working several times a week with teenage boys who had arrived in Hamilton as refugees from over a dozen different countries, including Liberia. Through the medium of soccer, I got to know these boys very well, and became engaged in aspects of their lives outside of sports, including their educational, social, and family lives. It became very obvious to me that these boys navigated their social, family, and academic lives in very complex ways. Difficulties that many of them were having in school were related to difficulties that many of them faced in the larger society that tended to stereotype them in particular ways. Their family relationships were intertwined with their social relationships within their own national or ethnic community (i.e. Liberian, Kru, Grebo) as well as with others from the diverse communities that they came into contact with on the soccer field, in school, at work, or in public life. This complex negotiation of identities became evident to me as an essential part of everyday life for youth such as those I was coaching.

As I learned about the ways that these young people's lives were impacted by these many factors, and as I progressed through my Bachelor of Education program, I began to
recognize the essential role that the school system played in this construction of complex identities and the ways it impacts the lives of refugee children and youth. My particular interests in languages, identity and migration placed me in a position to see that the manner in which the Ontario public school system assesses, labels, places, teaches, evaluates and graduates English language learners has the potential to be profoundly influential in the lives of refugee students, such as those from Liberia. This influence can be very positive, as English language students are relatively successful at achieving academic competence when compared to immigrant students in other countries around the world. The potential for negative influences on the self-perception of students and possible ‘othering’ of students who do not fit the norm of Canadian school children was also evident to me.

Beyond the issues of language learning and integration, experiences and perceptions of racism were communicated to me by many of the young people I knew. I found myself trying to understand and reconcile these experiences and perceptions with the discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism that are supposedly essential to Canadian society and social interactions. Documents on equity and inclusive education were prominently displayed on school board and ministry websites, and readily available in schools and pre-service teacher training resources. However, personal experiences of students I was interacting with and experiences I myself had and was witness to, indicated that there were gaps between the theories of inclusive education for all and the practice as experienced by racialized students of Liberian background.

Finally, as a soccer coach of a team of players who all came to Canada as refugees, I was provided with a glimpse into the identities that these young people proclaimed and disclaimed, and the social positioning that these young people negotiated on a daily basis. On the playing field, discrimination from opposing players (Canadian born) and referees
was often clearly evident, but it was also very interesting to see the players choose to represent themselves in particular ways at different times. Sometimes they wanted to raise a cheer before the game, “1…2…3…IMMIGRANTS!” , while other times they would ask that their history of migration would not be attached to them as players or as a team. While waiting for a set of team jerseys to arrive, I clearly remember one player remarking, “Without the jerseys, we really look like a refugee team.” Similarly, at school students were representing themselves differently to other people, depending on the circumstances. With the limited knowledge that some teachers had of the students’ place of origin, some Liberian children would rather not explain their history for fear that they would be labeled as from ‘the war place’. It became increasingly obvious to me that their history of migration from Liberia, and also their interactions as migrants with Canadian society both played very important roles in how these youth saw themselves and saw their place in Canadian society.

The anecdotal contexts that I have mentioned here were enough to pique my interest and engage me in the beginning of a quest to understand the issues involved. As I searched the academic literature, it became obvious to me that there are a multitude of texts and articles written on the subjects of identity, migration, schooling, or English language education. In fact the broad range of topics and contexts covered by this massive amount of literature provided a challenge for me as a researcher to discover the specific. It soon became apparent to me, though, that the particular case of Liberian youth and their negotiation of identity in the context of Canada’s schools was a topic that drew from many areas of the literature in unique ways, as I will discuss below.

The complexities of identity and schooling are enough to make any research study such as the one discussed here seem overly ambitious. The particular participants and topics that this study engages with are the contexts of migration, language politics, refugee issues,
racialization and racism, post-colonialism and multiculturalism. This convergence of multiple contexts and identities make this study a complex and difficult one to undertake, but it also provides a unique combination of factors that are crucially relevant to the current educational context in Ontario.

1.2 Gap in the research

On the topic of Liberian refugees and migration, studies have focused specifically on the contexts of Liberian refugee camps in other parts of Africa (Crisp, 2003; Chelpi den Hamer, 2008; and Porter, Hampshire, Kyei, Adjaloo, Rapoo, Patrick, 2008) with very little research done in post-conflict Liberia itself. In the United States, the earlier migration of Liberians to North America in the early 1990’s and the higher numbers of Liberians who have settled there has provided the basis for a small handful of studies that look at issues of resettlement (Schmidt, 2009 and Kohler, 2007). Perhaps most relevant of these studies to the present one that I am proposing is an ethnography that was undertaken by Okom in 2008 with a handful of Liberian high school students in a public high school. Okom’s work looked at the effects of the migration of these students from their homes to the Midwest United States, and concluded that the cultural negotiations that they were forced to undertake in the new environment constituted the development of an “uprooted” aspect to their identity (Okom, 2008). This study provides an important access point to the complex negotiations of identities that Liberian youth in diaspora go through. However, the context of an American public high school is vastly different from the context of Canadian public schools in Ontario, and the limited focus of Okom’s study on the migration of students falls short of identifying ways that the educational system contributes to the identity formation of these youth.
As is evident here, the literature that deals specifically with Liberian migrants is very scarce and reveals the need for research located in the Canadian context. The migration of Liberians into Canada over the past several years has resulted in a diasporic community that has become part of the Canadian social fabric, but is not recognized by educators and others as an important or relevant community of people that is present in many Canadian cities (and schools).

The rationale for this particular project can be found in the gap in research done with Liberian students and adults in Canada because of the relevance it has to the lives of thousands of people who have settled here (many of whom have become Canadian citizens) and attend public schools across the country. Research such as what I have tried to undertake in this study will contribute valuable information to educators, policy makers, and others who engage with Liberian youth in educational settings by giving insight into the ways that these youth understand and relate their interactions with the schools in Canada. Beyond this, such a project is the first study in the North American context to ask Liberian youth to provide their insights into the academic discourse on inclusive education and identity studies. As is discussed below, the unique perspectives and knowledge of youth such as these must be an essential and valued part of discussions about education to allow for a more equitable educational environment for all the children and youth in Canada’s schools.

Finally, it is valuable to note that the convergence of themes that are part of the findings and analysis of this study will provide insights to situations outside of that which is specifically studied here. By understanding the ways migration, language issues, schooling, social location and identity interact together in the lives of these participants, we may be able to better understand more broadly how, for example, language instruction of migrant
students produces or limits particular identity negotiations and positions. Knowledge may be gained about how African students in general negotiate their school experiences in Canada, and we may learn about the effects that the Canadian educational system has on racialized students, whether they come from Liberia or not.

With the goal of fulfilling the need for research such as this, the study that I am discussing engaged four Liberian youth in a qualitative research project to develop life histories that focus on the issues of identity formation, migration, and schooling. Through three in-depth interviews with each participant, I recorded the ways that they recall their experiences of schooling in Liberia prior to the outbreak of the wars, outside of Liberia in a refugee camp, and after their migration to Canada. I paid specific attention to the ways that their personal and social identities have been formed and negotiated by their interactions with elements of the school system, such as curriculum, teaching, social context, and languages of instruction.
Chapter Two – Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study is based on a sociological perspective that emphasizes the interactions of social environments and individuals as an important factor in the social spaces, identity locations, and potential actions that are available to people. In this sense, educational institutions and actors in educational spaces play a role in how students and youth are able to conceptualize themselves and their roles in school and society at large.

2.1 Critical Research

In the educational setting, a critical perspective of teaching and schooling seeks to understand the ways power works in the relationships between students, teachers, administrators, parents, school boards and government. A critical pedagogy, then, seeks to recognize and call-out the power relations in schools that subordinate particular groups while maintaining the dominance and hegemony of others. Critically engaging the system and institution of education requires that coercive relations of power (Cummins, 2001) are brought to light and challenged by alternative discourses and possibilities for change. In the words of Phipps and Guilherme (2004),

Critical Pedagogy requires that we detach ourselves from the order of things as they are and that we speak critically unto power. It requires refusing the language of the dominant, the functionalist, the positivist; the ways of essentialising and of simply making our own practice serve the goal of implementing things in ways which serve the smooth running of a safe system, but which never enable change or the questioning of power (p. 2).

It is imperative in this study that schooling and elements of education such as teaching practices, curricula, standardized testing, methods of discipline, are recognized as fluid and socially constructed by actors with particular aims and goals in education. One
must ask the following questions in a critical study: ‘who is served by this method of language instruction? What purpose is achieved? How does this curriculum maintain or challenge dominant socially accepted ideas of difference? Whose values are being expounded in this textbook? Why?’ This work of a critical research study accomplishes what Promislow (2005) calls for in educational research,

By exposing social structures for what they are (i.e., subjective and constructed realities) and exploring how they shape our lives, by naming inequalities and injustices, we bring into question the hegemony of existing realities and open possibilities for choice and change (p. 42).

These possibilities for ‘choice and change’ are made available through critical research that offers ways of moving forward to teachers, students, and all the actors in the educational sphere. When students’ voices are given prominence in educational discussions on identity and inclusion alongside the voices of educators and policy makers, then everyone benefits from the opportunity to move forward and fix problems in the system that may have gone unnoticed or unexamined. This process can happen in the classroom as well as in the staff room and board room. As Phipps and Guilherme (2004) recognize, “the empowerment of both teachers and students happens through the practice of critical reflection and critical dialogue and the recognition of difference and dissent and is expressed through the validation of their voices” (p. 4).

The work of critical pedagogy and critical research cannot, then, be an objective investigation into an area that remains unaltered by the research process itself. Critically examining the dominant realities in education requires a stance on the part of the researcher that embraces the centrality of contextual influences on interpretation rather than attempting to ignore contextual specificities that is frequently characteristic of the positivistic attempt to embrace ‘objectivity’. While this may seem contrary to the classical
understanding of research, critical pedagogy is based on the understanding that there is no interaction between researcher and participant that leaves both parties untouched by the other. By embracing the contextually rooted nature of research interpretation, critical pedagogy demands that the researcher recognizes the potential for their work to be used as a tool for maintenance of an oppressive system or alternatively as a tool of critique and empowerment for change (Locke, 2004; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). In the words of Phipps and Guilherme (2004), “Critical pedagogy means addressing radical concerns, the abuses of power in intercultural contexts, in the acquisition of languages and in their circulation. And this work is never just neutral” (p. 1)

2.2 Postcolonial Thought

In the context of this particular study, special attention must be paid to the historical role that education has played in the interactions between colonial nations and people of Liberian background. The coercive exercise of power in education can be very clearly seen in the colonial legacy of schooling, and it is helpful here to recognize the value of postcolonial thought to an understanding of the place of African migrant students in Canadian schools.

Education has been used in a broader global context as a force for colonization of the ‘oriental’ (Said, 1979) subject, both outside of North America and within the continent in the context of first peoples and immigrants. Sintos Coloma, Means, and Kim (2009) recognize the:

...centrality of education in imperialism since education has served as a ‘massive cannon in the artillery of empire... [through] a domination by consent [that] is achieved through what is taught to the colonized, how it is taught, and the subsequent emplacement of the educated subject as part of the continuing imperial apparatus’ (p. 10).
While some may argue that the era of imperialistic education has passed, the challenges that African migrant youth often face when entering the public (government mandated) educational system stem from an attempt to orient the immigrant student towards particular objectives that are defined by the dominant values and goals of educational policy makers. The options are limited, for example, for those students who wish to forego the adoption of mainstream Canadian values, or the replacement of their first language, or the representation of themselves as particular bodies belonging to the ‘visible minorities’ of society.

Postcolonial thought refuses to ignore the poignant history of imperialism in education, and recognizes both its influences stemming from the past and its current embodiments. With a critical lens, it is absolutely essential that I examine the interactions that Liberian migrant youth have with the current public education setting in light of the historical interactions of the dominant colonial legacy of education with the subaltern. Additionally, insight can be gained into the ways these youth engage with schooling and navigate their own identities by scrutinizing the current discourse and practice of education for colonial prejudices.

Throughout the research process, it was imperative that I maintain a critical approach that denounces and refuses the traditional path of colonial research about the other that Said (1979) named as Orientalism: “orientalism...is...a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (p. 12). Instead, it is my goal here to follow the lead of scholars who have reconceptualized research and made clear the necessary conditions of the research that I undertook. In the words of Kincheloe and McLaren (2005),
“a critical theory reconceptualized by post-structuralism and feminism promotes a politics of difference that refuses to pathologize or exoticize the Other.” (p. 314).

The very act of categorizing and naming the people whom I interviewed can become an act of name-calling, whereby I am shaping the participants in the mold I wish them to fit. Mosselson (2010), in her research, faced a similar dilemma when she was upset by the manner and responses of one of her participants. “Now I needed to ask: what was I making Amalia? Was she resisting the idea that she was ‘just a refugee’ as much as I was resisting the idea that I was ‘just naïve?” (p. 488). This name-calling is what Allen (2007) describes in her work with immigrant students in Québec schools. Name calling is, “the labeling or positioning of people in relationship to a particular social norm” (p. 166), and is contrasted with the concept of name claiming, whereby people position themselves differently than they are named by others and claim social agency. My goal in this project was to set aside from myself the privilege of naming and categorizing the individuals whose life histories are told, and through the interview process, to allow them to claim for themselves the titles, labels or identifying terms with which they wanted to be referred. In this study I have attempted to pursue an alternative method to the Orientalism and name-calling that has been present in so much research to date.

2.3 Power Relations

With the historical backdrop of colonialism in education as a guide, it is important to ask how I, as a member of the dominant ethnic group, should proceed with a study to examine these realities in the lives of racialized and marginalized students? I am a member of the dominant group, and the majority discourse suggests that I am exercising power over the ‘powerless’ through a research investigation. However, a more in-depth investigation
of the workings of power in relationships provides insights into ways that researchers and educators can avoid contributing to the neo-colonial oppression of people such as Liberian youth.

Michel Foucault’s writings on the issue of power were many in number, and through them he developed an understanding of power that was different from what many people understood. In his words, “there is no such entity as power... Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action” (in Rabinow and Rose, 2003, p. 137). In this way, “his work is very critical of the notion that power is something which a group of people or an institution possesses” (Mills, 2002, p. 33). On the other hand, power exists in relations between people and is exercised in the context of institutions such as schools or government. This understanding of power allows Foucault to ask the questions of how power relations are exercised and how power is used in these relations for particular ends. Foucault believes this to be an important shift in the understanding of power and possibilities of analyses,

To approach the theme of power by an analysis of ‘how’ is therefore to introduce several critical shifts in relation to the supposition of a fundamental power. It is to give oneself as the object of analysis power relations and not power itself (emphasis original, in Rabinow and Rose, 2003, p. 137)

These power relations are not only present in the dynamics of relations such as the oppressor to the oppressed or the master to the servant, but in fact these relations of power are present in every human interaction. As Mills (2004) summarizes, “thus, relations between parents and children, lovers, employers and employees – in short, all relations between people – are relations of power. In each interaction power is negotiated and one’s position in a hierarchy is established” (p. 49).
What is the exercise of power in these relations? How is it enacted and carried out?

According to Foucault, the exercise of power in relations between people results in the limiting of options or choices that an individual has:

It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions (in Rabinow and Rose, 2003, p. 138).

As evident in Foucault’s description above, the exercise of power in human relations involves a complex negotiation of options for action and choice among the participants. By exercising power over someone, one limits their potential actions, but at the same time creates possibilities for alternative actions and choices. In this way, then, power is productive as well as oppressive. It involves the oppression of one individual’s actions but also their resistance to that oppression at the same time. Power is a negotiation and interplay between two parties that limits choices and actions, but also produces potential resistances and alternative actions. In this way, “[Foucault’s] analysis of power has set in motion an entirely new way of examining power relations in society, focusing more on resistance than simple passive oppression” (Mills, 2002, p. 52).

An alternative way of describing these power relations and their potential to be either constrictive or productive is found in Cummins’ work (2001). While power in a relationship can be a coercive force used to limit the options and actions of others, the interactions between people can also produce meaningful results that are beneficial for both parties involved, a process that Cummins’ describes as a collaborative creation of power (Cummins, 2001). The exercise of power in this sense is not zero-sum act whereby all of the existing power in a relationship is exercised and as a result one party is empowered and another is oppressed. Rather, people who have something to offer each
other can generate power through mutual collaboration, resulting in the empowerment of both parties. Defined by Cummins (2001), “participants in the relationship are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in her or his identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation” (emphasis original, p. 16). It is this cumulative creation of power in a relationship that refuses to reproduce societal imbalances that I as a researcher hoped to embody in my interactions with the research participants.

2.4 Dominant Discourses and Hegemony

A useful and important concept to integrate into this study of identity interactions and power relations is the idea of hegemony in relation to dominance and minoritization. When the dominant discourses of a society come to be recognized as the de facto reality and are taken for granted as reality, then any alternative discourses or critiques of the hegemonic norm are seen as unnatural, and unwelcome. In fact, it is not only the dominant majority groups that adopt the hegemonic discourse, but it may be acknowledged as either true or inevitable by members of minority groups\(^1\). Blackledge (2002) describes this understanding of hegemony:

The term **hegemony** has come to mean the taken-for-granted, almost invisible discourse practices of symbolic domination. Hegemony is about domination as well as about integration. That is, it is about the process of the dominant group exerting power over society as a whole, but it is also about making alliances and achieving consent from subordinate groups. (p. 70)

\(^1\) Minority groups in this sense refer to groups that are subjugated by the exercise of power of a dominant group, discourse, and ideology.
The dominance of a particular discourse occurs in society when a group assumes the authority and power to influence the cultural institutions that produce knowledge, such as the educational system. When we analyze this production of hegemonic discourses by a dominant majority, Apple (1990) argues:

We can now begin to get a more thorough understanding of how institutions of cultural preservation and distribution like schools create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to over mechanisms of domination. (p. 3)

Within a multicultural Canadian society, some may argue that the dominant discourse is one of tolerance and appreciation for others, because of the adoption of the official policy of multiculturalism. While this specific concept is discussed and analyzed as a framework for this study below, here it is important to recognize that the Canadian majority is still represented by a dominance of traditional ‘white’ settlers over other groups. Whiteness remains the taken-for-granted perception of normalcy in Canada, and governs the interactions of societal institutions with ‘others’. By beginning with a recognition of this reality of whiteness and dominant group hegemony, we are able to begin the necessarily critical work that this study aims to engage with. As explained by Knight (2008):

When doing critical work on race and racism, it is imperative that we expose whiteness and the strategies/practices that sustain and reproduce its normalcy and centrality in with Other differences are calculated and organized. (p.83)

This critical discussion of hegemony and the influence it exerts on members of a society allows us to examine the interactions of this project’s participants with the educational system in an important way. Members of minority groups that are ‘othered’ by the majority dominant discourses are able to act in relation to how they are positioned by society. In some cases, as referred to by Apple and Blackledge above, the subordinate groups engage with the dominant discourse by adopting it themselves and enforcing the
hegemony of the majority by internalizing its discourses about normalcy. Alternatively, members of both the majority and the minority are able to express agency through a refusal to accept the dominant ideology. In terms of individual identity, Sarkar and Allen (2007) recognize that identity construction in such a context is, “...a process whereby individuals (with varying degrees of agency) are in constant dialogue with the discourses in which they are embedded” (p. 120). This dialogue can at different times and in varying ways reaffirm the discourse of the majority, or challenge it by presenting and adopting alternative discourses regarding individuals and groups who are members of the minority.

The hegemonic discourses of the majority, while at play in the lives of the participants in this study, allow room for the youth to act in their particular social context, and exercise their individual agency (Allen, 2007), which Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) have described as:

The realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only know about or give intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposefully and reflectively... with one another... to remake the world in which they live. (p.42)

For the purposes of this study, an understanding and application of the concept of hegemony and dominant discourses allows an analysis of the participants' life histories that reflects on the agency of the participants, and the manners in which they adopt or accept the dominant discourse of the majority around them.
Chapter Three - Literature Review

To engage with the issues at hand in this research project, I have chosen to review the literature related to particular relevant topics. Vast amounts could be written about each of these topics, because of their complexity and because of the extent of the academic literature that is available. I have chosen to focus on the general contexts of refugee resettlement, identity, otherness, and school and diversity for this research project, and have gone into depth in particularly relevant cases that relate to the specific life histories of the youth in this project.

3.1 Refugee Resettlement

It is helpful at this point to begin a brief description of the process of refugee resettlement that someone will undertake to migrate to Canada, and also to examine the literature around this issue as it relates to this research project.

While a wide variety of circumstances could lead to a person fleeing from their home, for the process of international resettlement a refugee is someone who fits a very specific set of criteria. For example, hundreds of thousands of Liberian nationals were living in certain areas of neighbouring countries that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or the government of the country had designated as places for Liberians fleeing violence and persecution in their own country. These places are informally, and often formally, called refugee camps because the people living there are seeking refuge. However, the majority of people who would be living in these camps over
the next several years (decades in some places) are seeking opportunities for a better life, but they would not fit the technical definition of who a refugee is according to the international governments that seek to provide support and eventual citizenship in their country to foreign refugees. For these purposes, a refugee is a person who has a “well-founded fear of being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, www.unhcr.org). Canada’s federal government coordinates with the UNHCR to determine which people living in refugee camps are eligible to be resettled in Canada, and according to the government’s priorities and available resources, selects a number of refugees who will be granted permanent resident status to live in Canada.

Even when the conflict in Liberia was over after 2003, the Canadian government recognized that many Liberians living in other countries would have a very difficult time returning to Liberia and beginning a life again, and for humanitarian reasons selected many families to come and resettle in Canada where the infrastructure to provide supports was better suited than it was in war-torn Liberia.

Many of the Liberian people who came to Canada as refugees would have faced severe economic, emotional, or physical challenges if they had returned to Liberia. However, the reality of their background experiences in refugee camps cannot be left behind when they board the plane to leave West Africa, and they face many significant challenges upon migrating to Canada. Because they often left their former home with none of their personal belongings, many people who at this point can be called permanent residents of Canada or former refugees, depend on government assistance when they first
arrive. This situation may reflect negatively on former refugees, in their own minds or in the minds of others, and they often struggle because of the association of the refugee experience with poverty. As a consequence as stated by Hatoss and Sheely (2009):

Refugees often suffer from low socio-economic status and the feeling of inequality which can lead to their marginalization, and insecure identity and image. Under such circumstances, refugees wish to exit the refugee identity. (p. 127)

An examination of the academic literature demonstrates that former resettled refugees also exist more at the margins of their new host country (Vickers and McCarthy, 2010; Quaicoe, 2006; Sweeney, 2008), partly as an expression of the common discourse on refugee issues that is adopted by society (one only has to ask someone what words come to mind when they hear about “refugees”). As described by Hardgrove (2009), this extends to the academic field as well:

A significant proportion of the research undertaken with people who have been displaced because of war has focused on mental health outcomes and implications for psychological functioning... This academic focus on negative outcomes tends to represent refugees, especially those in camps, as being immobilized victims of psychological trauma who are helplessly waiting for assistance from the outside world (pp. 483-484).

While many people, such as members of the Liberian community that this project is concerned with, do face challenges and difficulties upon their arrival in Canadian society, a purely negative understanding of the refugee experience does not value the complexity of each person’s background and personal identity. For this reason, it is very valuable to engage with the participants’ personal and social identities as complex realities that represent who they are as a result of their pasts but also as they are actors demonstrating agency in their daily lives.
3.2 Identity

For the purposes of this study I examine identity as being socially constructed and fluid in the lives of individuals and groups, shifting with and against the currents of social pressures, opportunities and limitations. In the words of Bucholtz and Hall (2010), “identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (p. 23). The ways that youth find themselves related to and represented or labeled in society and school influences how they claim and deny certain identities and shift in accordance with how they see themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. Gérin-Lajoie (2005) further describes this identity construction stating, “in fact, the identity process is always in movement, constructing and reconstructing oneself” (p. 912). She continues, “how individuals position themselves in terms of what groups they belong to will depend upon the structural power relations in which they evolve” (p. 912).

As the public education system interacts with a widely diverse student population, educators must choose how they interact with the multiplicity of identities that their students take on in the classroom and in relation to their education. Unfortunately, diversity in Canadian schools is often treated as a celebration of cultural artifacts (Knight, 2008) and students such as those from Liberian backgrounds are left with few options to express and share their differences within the school system. Their options are then limited and often identity choices can be made in reaction to the ways that educators and the curriculum, even society in general, interacts with them. In this way, identities can shift and become means of identifying oneself in opposition to how one is portrayed by others. As Hall (2006) states,
Since identity shifts according to how the subject is addressed or represented, identification is not automatic, but can be won or lost. It has become politicized. This is sometimes described as a shift from a politics of (class) identity to a politics of difference (emphasis original, p. 253).

In this context, teachers and staff may devalue the linguistic, ethnic and cultural identities that Liberian students inherit, and the results may be profoundly negative.

“Th[e] devaluing of identity played out in the interactions between educators and students convinces many students that academic effort is futile. They resist further devaluation of their identities by mentally withdrawing from participation in the life of the school” (Cummins, 2001, p. 3).

For the purposes of this study, it is also important to examine the ways that the individual identity of any single research participant interacts with the group identity of being ‘Liberian’, or claiming membership in a particular tribal group that is found within the borders of the nation state of Liberia. This group identity is complex, because it “does not exist separately from [them] who possess it, except as an abstract concept” (Joseph, 2010, p. 12), yet is often the label that distinguishes these particular students from all others in the classroom.

While there are aspects of identity construction and formation that are not addressed in this study, such as sexuality, ableism, gender etc., I have chosen to focus specifically on ethnicity and race, language, and cultural identity in the context of migration. The intersection of these characteristics focuses the study and allows for more depth in each of these areas, and as alternative characteristics of each participant’s sense of self and sense of belonging come to light in the data, they will be including in the analysis where applicable.

3.2.1 Ethnic and Racial Identity

In the Canadian social context, race and racism are very unpopular topics for conversation. Rather than speaking of different races and the interactions between and
among them, it is common in Canada for members of the dominant groups to claim that race plays no part in their interactions with people who are not from the dominant groups. This adoption of colour-blindness in social discourse denies the possibility that oppression, discrimination, or power plays any role in the interactions between people in Canadian society. It is assumed that one merely has to look beyond the skin of a person and not let colour influence how you see someone for racism to be defeated. As Bell (2003) says, “The appeal of color-blind ideology is rooted in the desire to avoid being or appearing racist, based on the assumption that seeing race means being racist” (p. 15). An alternative conceptualization that exists in Canadian society then is the adoption of democratic racism, which is an ideology that allows the maintenance of racist beliefs or attitudes despite society’s adoption of democratic values of inclusion (Henry and Tator, 2006).

While it may be controversial and unpopular in Canadian society to talk about “race”, “racism”, or “racial identity”, I believe that it is important in the context of this study to understand the reality of the role that race and racism play in the lives of the participating youth. The youth that I am working with are represented in their social and educational context as black, and a denial of the importance of this representation can lead researchers to overlook an essential aspect of these youths’ identities. As Li (1999) finds, sociologists can unwittingly mitigate racial oppression by denying the reality of ‘race’ since the absence of essential elements of ‘race’ does not prevent its being used as grounds of oppression; and whether sociologists use the notion of ‘race’ in their discourse or not does not reduce the fact that racial oppression exists and that ‘race’ remains a social fact in people’s lives (p. 9).

Especially within the context of my position as a white researcher, and the reality that diversity in Canada is often defined by having an appearance that is not white, the “fact of blackness” (Fanon, 1991) greatly affects how some youth identify themselves and relate to the society around them. In Shadd’s (2001) discussion of blackness in Canada, she
vividly describes her experiences and says, “I want to illustrate just how psychologically taxing it can be to be “Black” and “Canadian” in typical everyday encounters. For those of us living in large urban centres, there are constant reminders that we are not regarded as truly “Canadian” (p. 11). This will definitely have an impact on the interactions of black youth with the educational system that maintains the dominant norms and ideology of a society that sees black students as being other than what is normal, powerful, successful, and important.

Beyond the concept of race, it is especially salient in the context of Liberian refugees to recognize how ethnicity and what Brubaker (2004) calls “groupism” (p. 8) are represented in the context of the conflict and civil wars that caused the migration of hundreds of thousands of Liberians. It is a common practice to represent the wars that occurred over 14 years in Liberia as ethnic conflicts, based on the “tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basis constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 8). Brubaker’s analysis allows us to understand that while group affiliation played an obvious role in the wars in Liberia, violence was not perpetrated by or against all the individuals of a particular ethnic community, and not everyone from any particular group was involved in the violence of the war.

Violence becomes “ethnic” (or “racial” or “nationalist”) through the meanings attributed to it by perpetrators, victims, politicians, officials, journalists, researchers, relief workers, and others. Such acts of framing and narrative encoding do not simply interpret the violence; they constitute it as ethnic (emphasis original, Brubaker, 2004, p. 16).

Further, as an overview of the literature reveals, “what is represented as ethnic conflict or ethnic war...may have as much or more to do with thuggery, warlordship, opportunistic looting, and black-market profiteering than with ethnicity” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 19). This is
the case in the conflicts of Liberia and Sierra-Leone, which were so often centered on the production and exportation of diamonds for the economic benefit of particular groups that named themselves with ethnic labels but did not represent in any real way the individual members of that ethnic group.

While I pursued an investigation of the ethnic and racial identities of Liberian students, it was vital that I be mindful of the way that cultural, and in fact national identity affects the choices, associations and affiliations that the participants in this study may have made.

3.2.2 National Identity

Following the work of Benedict Anderson (2006), who describes a nation as an “imagined community” rather than a stable and definable constant, it is important in the context of this study to understand how nationality is imagined and understood in the minds of displaced youth and the educators who interact with them in school.²

In the dominant Canadian discourse, nationality is understood as a single characteristic representing the place of birth of an individual. However, for members of Canadian society who are viewed as being different from the norm, being born in Canada does not fulfill the qualifications necessary for having a Canadian nationality, as the all too

² I was able to experience a very fascinating and completely unintended glimpse into the complexities surrounding national identification of refugee youth when the members of the youth soccer team I coached were invited to tell me which national flag they would like to have sewn onto their jerseys for an international trip the team was making to England (ironically and wonderfully, to represent Canadian youth soccer). While several of the youth confidently chose the country of their birth (i.e. Mexico, Afghanistan, Colombia) others decided to display the flag of a country they spent some time living in but were not born in, or the country that their parents were from but which they themselves have never seen. Twin brothers wore different flags (Sudan and Uganda), Liberian boys wore the flag of Ghana, a boy born in South Africa wore the flag of his mother’s country of Zimbabwe, and two boys born in Somalia wore the flag of Ethiopia. This example is a powerful demonstration of how national identities are complex notions that are rarely reducible to a single, unified identification within the context of migration and displacement
often asked question of “where are you really from?” (Shadd, 2001) demonstrates. In this context, so called ‘minorities’ are forced to represent their national identity as the nationality of their parents or ancestors who came to Canada from elsewhere. Students who enter Canadian schools are then asked to tell their classmates, teachers, administrators etc. where they are from and represent themselves as a member of a particular national community. The issues with this conceptualization of national identity in Canadian discourse are pointed out by Ship (2001):

This pervasive tendency to view identity – ethnic, “racial”, religious, class, or gender, for that matter – in singular, homogenizing, static, and totalizing terms is, in part, the legacy of outmoded categories and ways of classifying peoples that inhere from a historically specific Eurocentric perspective and experience whereby a single social signifier becomes the indelible mark of “otherness”, of different if not inferiority (p. 21).

Displaced youth who engage with this discourse regarding their origins, their national identity, their “otherness”, must choose to represent themselves in a way that is acceptable by the dominant society, but yet true to their own conceptions of themselves. It is helpful here to understand national identity and the nation of origin as the imagined communities of Anderson, or as Hall (2006) puts it, a “symbolic community”:

A nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – a system of cultural representation. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture. A nation is a symbolic community (emphasis original, p. 254).

The identification by youth with a particular national community represents an important aspect of how they see themselves, or how they want others to perceive their membership in a symbolic community. The particular relevance of this notion to the present study is in the ways that I as a researcher characterize the youth that I interact with. Even labeling students as being “Liberian” is a way of simplifying a complex notion of
national identity, and may be an unwelcome naming for some participants.3 Following Hall’s (2006) notions again, I as a researcher must consider how:

National identities do not subsume all other forms of difference into themselves and are not free of the play of power, internal divisions, and contradictions, cross-cutting allegiance and difference. So when we come to consider whether national identities are being dislocated, we must bear in mind the way national cultures help to “stitch-up” differences into one identity (p. 258).

3.2.3 Language and Identity

I have noted above that language plays an important part in the social and cultural identity of Liberian peoples, both presently and historically. I have investigated in this study the roles that languages have played in the life histories of the participating youth, specifically in reference to their educational experiences before and after migrating to Canada. The relationships between languages and identity have been researched in a variety of contexts in North America and elsewhere (Day, 2002). What is clear from this research is that language is an integral and inseparable aspect of a person’s identity and their expression of that identity. The choices they make in language use reflect a great deal about how they are responding to the influences around them. As Gérin-Lajoie (2005) states, “language practices are significantly influenced by the social reality in which they take place” (p. 912). This social reality for Liberian youth in Canadian schools is a complex one that is worth examining in detail, particularly in relation to this research study.

Aside from the various languages that Liberians may speak when they arrive, they all speak Liberian English as well, providing a complex multilingual background that is foreign to most Canadian educators. Because Liberian English is often viewed as a broken

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3 I recall a conversation with one youth who was born in Liberia, and told me that he tells people he’s from China, or Mexico, or England, just because he wants to confuse them and not reveal his Liberian background.
form of English (Sierra Leonean Krio and Ghanaian English are viewed the same way), students who enter the classroom are labeled as being deficient in English, and must enter the program to study English as a Second Language. This demonstrates Allen’s (2007) concept of name-calling that I discussed above, which is “the labeling or positioning of people in relationship to a particular social norm” (p. 166). By labeling Liberian students as being deficient in English, Canadian educators are negating their vast linguistic repertoire and thereby refusing to acknowledge the importance of languages to the identity of these students. This importance is highlighted by May (2000) here:

In theory, language may well be just one of many markers of identity. In practice, it is often much more than that. Indeed, this...is demonstrated by the fact that one’s individual and social identities, and their complex interconnections, are inevitably mediated in and through language (p. 373).

Liberian students are often silenced in their own education because their particular accent and way of speaking English is viewed as deficient and in need of correction before they can gain access to the mainstream classroom. The effect of this is a denial of the potential for action and agency on the part of the students. As explained by Peirce (1995),

It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners an opportunity to speak (p.13).

It is often to the surprise of ESL teachers that Liberian students demonstrate very high levels of literacy in English reading and writing while still being streamed into ESL classes because of their perceived lack of English ability. However, through the policies and practices of language education, and the way Canadian English is portrayed, “in all of these texts, whether explicitly stated or not, ...for these children we have made routine the notion in policy or practice that the language of their parents is not good enough to be used in school” (Ruiz, 2010, p. 166).
It is common, in cases such as that of Liberian youth, for bilingual or multilingual youth to constantly be in a state of moving back and forth between languages and assigning particular types of language uses to particular domains of their lives. This movement has been identified by Gérin-Lajoie (2005) as *mouvance* in her study of Francophone youth in Ontario, and is a very pertinent identity marker and representation of the constructions of self that youth are partaking in.

The phenomenon of *mouvance*, or this back and forth process experienced by people in society, will influence, at the individual level, their identity path... due to the fact that it calls individuals to position themselves in regards to their social and linguistic practices (emphasis original, p. 903).

### 3.2.4 Migration and Identity

Following the discussion related to the ways that language, ethnicity, race, nationality and culture are important to a study of identity, I will touch briefly here on a theme that is prevalent throughout the life histories of the youth who have participated in this study. Because of their experiences of migration from Liberia, often to another country in West Africa, and then to Canada, these students’ formation and negotiation of identities in relation to language, race etc. are profoundly different from the negotiation of identities that is undertaken by youth who have not had the same experience of migration.

The impact of migration (especially refugee migration) will extend to all aspects of a person’s sense of self. In a study with young people on the Liberian refugee camp in Buduburam, Ghana (where several of the families living in Hamilton came from), Hampshire et al. (2008) demonstrate how the identity of a person in relation to other members of their community can be profoundly affected by refugee migration.
Experiences of conflict and exile may lead to the shifting of generational categories and boundaries. ‘Youth’ and ‘adolescence’ are ambiguous, culturally contingent categories. Often, ‘young people’ are defined by what they are not (i.e. neither children nor fully adults) rather than what they are... Youth can thus be seen as a liminal state – a negotiable period of initiation into adulthood (p. 26).

When these youth left Africa and migrated to Canada as refugees, the dimension of western ideologies about Africans and about refugees added to the pressures and influences on these youths’ senses of self. Ibrahim (2008) reflected upon his own experience migrating to America and provides this applicable and useful summary of the situations that youth such as those from Liberia may interact with on a daily basis.

When it comes to the African body in North America...it is caught between two systems of signifying practices... First, in Africa, I am tall, Sudanese, basketball player, academic, having different cultural, linguistic, tribal and ethnic lineages. Here...my blackness is outside the shadow of other North American whiteness. However, second, as a refugee in North America, my perception of self is altered in direct response to the social processes of racism and the historical representation of blackness whereby the antecedent signifiers become secondary to my blackness, and I retranslate my being: I become black (p. 242).

Therefore, following in the footsteps of the literature mentioned in this chapter, the purpose of this study has been to examine how identities are constructed and negotiated in interactions with the Canadian school system, within the particular context of these young students’ migration into that system from Liberia as refugees.

3.3 Otherness

In Canadian society there is a particular dominant discourse of normalcy and whiteness which positions particular groups and people in positions of privilege over other people and groups. As discussed above, this norm of whiteness allows for diversity to be represented by anything or anyone that is not part of the dominant culture. In the same manner, difference can be conceived of as anything that does not share the ‘normal’
majority characteristics, and as such provides a basis for labeling something as different or diverse.

As Jacquet (2008) describes, “difference is taken as a process of constructions of meanings embedded in the interplay of power and identity, where groups intersect on the basis of their subordination” (p. 62). The subordination of groups that are classified as ‘different’ is characterized by Castles and Davidson (2000) as being part of “the process of minority formation... through which a dominant group uses its power to impose certain social positions on subordinate groups” (p. 69).

With these understandings of difference and minority formation, it is useful to examine how the majority, dominant group interacts with the different and minority groups. In the context of this research project, the minority group of Liberian youth represent the difference when contrasted with the norm of white, Canadian-English speaking and Canadian born students that are studying beside Liberian youth in the public education system. With this contrast, a delineation emerges between who is the ‘other’ and who is not. The ‘otherness’ of the minority groups is defined as being different, or other from the dominant norm that, precisely because it is the norm, does not need to be clearly recognized or labeled. This notion of otherness has been useful in studies of diversity because it has “stressed the “us” and “them” dichotomy, in which the majority group is the norm and the minority group is relegated to the margin” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2011, p. 180).

Despite the multicultural ideologies of valuing diversity and inclusion, because of the prevalence and dominance of whiteness in Canadian society, individuals and groups who do not fit the categories of whiteness are often marginalized because of their difference. The very fact that their skin is dark, or that their hair grows a particular way, or
that they speak Canadian English with an accent, or that they celebrate holidays that are not traditionally recognized in by the mainstream in Canada, any of these things can mark them as the ‘other’ in the eyes of mainstream society. Oftentimes these characteristics allow the labeling of particular people into groups (i.e. Middle Eastern) that ignores the diversity and differences among the individuals in that group, but is permissible because the important thing for the majority is that they are not like ‘us’. In this way, the majority group can engage in discourses about the other without having to engage intimately with the complexities and diversity of individual and group identities. As Connelly (2008) argues:

Differences within what in dominant logic constitutes “ethnocultural groups” are elided in terms of abstracted generalities. The categorization of students in fixed and knowable terms finds its expression in the assertion of school authority to engage what Coco Fusco has referred to as “managing the other” (p. 169).

Here the value of minoritization and othering becomes clear for the dominant group, whereby they are able to manage and conceptualize the diverse and complex identities of people who fit outside the norm without having to engage in meaningful dialogue or discourse with them. In this way, their dominance remains unchallenged through the maintenance of hegemonic discourse that subjugates others and privileges the continued dominance of the norm.

3.4 Schooling, Diversity, and Multicultural Education

With the adoption of a policy of multiculturalism as a Canadian Act of parliament, the inclusion of immigrants in society became a value and concern of educators throughout the country, and especially in Ontario, where the majority of immigrants lived. The resulting educational changes recognized the importance of meeting the needs of students who did not make up the majority norm of Canadian society, but rather than recognizing
the value of diversity and difference, “...the emphasis was on newcomer students’ assimilation to the majority society” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008, p. 109).

The concept of multiculturalism itself was initially established to recognize the diversity of all people who were living in the nation, but as Knight (2008) states, “Over the years... multiculturalism has increasingly come to symbolize ‘others’” (p.88) who differed from the majority, dominant, white, English speaking population. While this shift was not a change in the official definition of multiculturalism or what makes up a multicultural society, it represented the understanding of the mainstream population that recognized Canada as a place where members of the dominant majority welcomed others to take up space and positions in their society. In the words of Li, (1999), “as a normative concept held by Canadians, the term ‘multiculturalism’ stands for an amorphous version of Canadian pluralism” (p. 149) that stands in contrast to the perceived American ideal of assimilation. In this way, multicultural festivals or multicultural curriculum is defined in the minds of the majority of Canadians as having a visible representation of someone or something that is not typically “Canadian” but has its roots elsewhere, or in a minority setting within Canada. The visibility of people with skin that is not white, and with cultural artifacts that are not mainstream Canadian, connects the majority to an understanding of itself as being open, accepting, and tolerant of others. This is the underlying theme of traditional multicultural education that seeks to celebrate differences in the student body with food, festivals, and fashion (Harper, 1997, Gérin-Lajoie, 2008).

The turn that is necessary for a critical multiculturalism to be possible requires an analysis of the power and dominant discourses that are at work in a multicultural educational framework. We must begin discerning how a celebration of diversity works to reinforce the dominance of that which is not seen to be diverse, namely, the white majority.
Rather than ignoring the dominant majority, a critical discussion of multiculturalism seeks to engage the places of power where others are subjugated and minoritized because of their place outside the majority. In the words of Gérin-Lajoie (2008), “contrary to multicultural education, where tolerance and accommodation are at the centre of its philosophy, critical multicultural education is concerned with justice and equity” (p. 112). With this project, in a critical examination of the interactions of youth with the dominant educational practices in Canada, it is vital that we conceptualize a critical multiculturalism that “challenges the traditional and cultural hegemony” (Henry & Tator, 1999, p.98) of the schools.

3.4.1 Diversity in Education

Many people around the world hold Canada in high esteem as a refugee receiving country and a safe destination for people from many countries. It is regarded, both externally and by Canadians themselves, as a diverse country that welcomes people from all parts of the world and values what they contribute to the fabric of society. Perhaps the greatest contribution to this view of Canada is its adoption of the policy of multiculturalism by the federal government. Multiculturalism as a political policy became a means for defining Canada as a country that recognizes the equality of all citizens, regardless of heritage, culture, background, or place of birth. The practice of multiculturalism is much more difficult to define than the policy, and as such many Canadians may struggle to identify what exactly multiculturalism means or does (Li, 1999). In the international political arena, however, Canada uses its multicultural policy to position itself actively as more “enlightened” than other nations who it views as less successful in managing diversity.
While federal policy in Canada manages immigration and settlement of refugees, the education of people in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction (with the exception of on-reserve first peoples, whose education is the responsibility of the federal government). Provincial education ministries set the curriculum for schools, mandate province-wide standardized testing, and are responsible for setting the educational direction for the school boards within their jurisdiction. The individual school boards then implement the funding allocated by the province, and carry out the policy decisions of the Ministry of Education in their respective schools.

A brief examination of the interactions between these three levels of governance in the education system can provide a helpful glimpse into the complexities of the arrangement and their potential implications for students such as Liberian youth. I have chosen to highlight here the ways that federal, provincial and local school board policies interact around the issue of language for non-official language speakers (i.e. Liberian English).

3.4.2 Examining Diversity – Language issues in education

Because three different levels of decision-making influence the implementation of educational policies, there is a number of voices speaking to issues surrounding minority languages, education, and language rights. Without clearly addressing the diverse needs of students who do not speak English, these national, provincial, and school board policies target the issues in the way a scatter bomb dropped at a target randomly hits a wide area without specifically focusing on what is intended.

The two official languages of Canada, French and English, have been recognized by the government and by educators as being the primary means of communication in the
public sphere, and are the de facto languages of educational institutions throughout the majority of the country. Article 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the 1982 Act (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982) note that in provinces where English or French is the “linguistic minority population” (Article 23), students whose parents have been educated in a minority official language are entitled to the right to public education in that language. No mention is made in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of First Nations languages or the languages of immigrants, and linguistic minorities are only defined as one of either English or French. This situation reflects what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, p. 231) refers to as Canada’s “invisibilisation” of languages, which involves, “treating dominant languages separately while lumping dominated languages together, or mentioning them as some kind of afterthought but without enumerating them”. The official national discourse around language in Canada therefore makes invisible every person who speaks a language other than English or French.

Aside from First Nations languages, a discussion of which is outside the reach of this research project, non-official languages and their role in education are briefly engaged with at the policy level of the Ontario Ministry of Education. There exists one particular provincial policy document (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD programs and services, policies and procedures for Ontario elementary and secondary schools, kindergarten to grade 12, 2007) which lays out the requirements of school boards with regards to providing support for English language learners and would provide a very interesting and revealing subject of a detailed analysis, but for the purposes of this review only a few brief comments will be made. The cover of this document includes a picture of a tree filled with the word “English” translating into 73 different languages, and yet there is no mention in the entire document about the previous languages that students speak when they enter English school. Every student who does not speak and understand English
adequately enough to enter the mainstream classroom is labeled as an “English Language Learner” and the use of his or her own language in the learning of English is ignored. Aside from this, the impact that education in English has on the use and development of a student’s own language is not even mentioned, let alone given due attention. Again, this very important document that sets the procedures for the education of thousands of students in Ontario contributes to the invisibilisation of languages other than English.

Unfortunately the current version of this “Policies and Procedures” document was printed and adopted after another ministry document, “Many Roots, Many Voices, Supporting English language learners in every classroom: A practical guide for Ontario educators” was adopted by the Ministry of Education in 2005 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). “Many Roots, Many Voices” does include three pages regarding the use of students’ first languages in the classroom, but this was not deemed important enough to include in the policy document that came out two years after. As Garcia et al (2006) note, “claiming that one wants the children to maintain their language and develop it further sounds hollow if the school system is not prepared to organize education that makes this possible.” (p. 21)

School boards in Ontario have chosen to implement the above mentioned guidelines of the provincial ministry in a variety of ways according to the diversity of their student population and their chosen priorities. A large school board in the Hamilton area has a student population of over 250,000, with more than half of all the students having a home language that is other than English (according to the school board’s annual report), while some school boards have a very small relative population of students that the Ministry of Education labels as English language learners. This board has disseminated a video titled, “Your Home Language: Foundation for Success” and made it available to schools and online, but another local school board, which serves just under 50,000 students in an area very
near Hamilton does not mention education for students who speak languages other than English in any of their available publications or policies despite serving students “from 38 different countries speaking 40 different languages” (according to their school board website).

In this convoluted environment surrounding educational policy and procedure, there are few clear messages to educators regarding the impact of language loss on students, families, and educators. In this context, teachers are left with two options; they can promote language shift from a student’s home language to English, or they can counter the dominant and historical trends and work to help students maintain their own language. This choice is not clear-cut for educators, however, because English language education is still viewed in all realms of decision making as the foundation for the attainment of educational goals in the mainstream classroom rather than as one element of a child's educational, cognitive, and social development. “The education of ELLs has... a skewed focus on cognitive-linguistic aspects of language development at the expense of the role of language in the students social and emotional development” (Haneda, 2009, p. 233). The reality facing teachers, then, is very difficult as Tollefson (1995) notes,

> Given the dominance of this ends-means approach, teachers are faced with a dilemma: Either they can impose the externally defined mandate, ignoring or suppressing student-determined needs, topics, and issues (in which case they become agents of the dominant ideology), or they can respond to student initiatives (in which case they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing and may face funding consequences) (p. 15).

The role that language plays in the construction and negotiation of one's identity is vital, especially in the context of migration. Teachers and educators bear the responsibility of implementing the provincial and school board policies of language and inclusion in the classroom setting. However, it is very difficult to explain and mandate the specific actions a teacher may take to make all their students develop a sense of belonging and identify
positively with their educational environment. Educators therefore face an immense challenge in the diverse classrooms of today’s public schools.

Beyond the presence of Liberian background youth in the schools, Canada’s classroom populations are increasingly comprised of students who were born outside of this country, representing a diversity of cultures, ethnicities and experiences. The Ontario ministry of education has accordingly put forward policies of inclusion and equity that mandate how the schools are to educate all the students present. Founded in the national ideology of multiculturalism, these policies claim to represent the need for all students to be respected, valued and equitably served with no room for discrimination. However, as Gérin-Lajoie (2008) states:

> When discussion takes place among school personnel, it is more about finding solutions to make all students fit into the prescribed model developed by school administrators and policy makers than about finding solutions to accomplish the type of inclusion beneficial to students from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Student diversity continues to be interpreted as an individual experience, disconnected from the larger social context (p. 10).

In this context, while it is notably positive that the Ministry of Education seeks to mandate inclusion and equity through policy and supplemental documents made available to educators, the reality is that students are expected to integrate and conform to the dominant and traditional methods of learning and education rather than contribute alternatives.

The official discourse, grounded in a version of multicultural education that still promotes the celebration of difference, “understanding and respect” for students from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, remains the reference point for most teachers and principals. This discourse continues, nevertheless, to ignore social justice or equity issues (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008, p. 112).

One telling aspect of the Canadian educational system that represents the dominant ideal of student integration into the norm, is the statistics related to the teachers who lead the students in the classrooms. As surveyed and reported by Blais and Ouedraogo (2008),
10% of school teachers reported belonging to a visible minority in Ontario and 86% reported having been born in Canada (p. 46). These statistics stand in stark contrast to reports from several boards of education that list a student population that have between 40-60% of students from so called ‘minority’ populations.

Therefore, in spite of a wonderfully rich diversity in Canada’s national population, and the identification of Canadians as being welcoming, inclusive and respectful of others, the dominance of discriminatory rhetoric and ideology persists. Diversity is spoken of in Canada’s educational system as a representation of groups that are not the ‘norm’, and therefore can be characterized as ‘visible’ minorities Knight’s (2008) analysis of teachers’ discourse on diversity in schools shows that, “the majority [of teachers] spoke of ethnocultural diversity in terms of non-white groups” (p. 87). Students from Liberia would add to the diversity of a classroom in the eyes of many teachers, but a student who looks white would not, whatever their social or economic status, educational background, ability, sexuality etc., may be.

If the notion of diversity stands for “the others”, what is it held up against?...The core or the “we”, which these multiple and different others are positioned against, is often described in cultural or linguistic terms and in relation to the discourse of the two “founding” nations. This national mythology, and the individuals who are associated with it, are not defined along cultural, linguistic, or religious lines, but defined by the body and skin colour and represent the European/North American physical origin (Knight, 2008, p. 88).

In her study of students’ language maintenance Promislow (2005) finds that “according to ... research participants, educators simply do not know what true multiculturalism is” (p. 32). In such a context, educators face real difficulties in implementing meaningful educational practices and policies that may work towards inclusion but are often hindered by a lack of awareness of the surrounding issues.
While I have presented here a particular view of the diversity discourse and ideology of Ontario classrooms surrounding the one issue of languages, I do not wish to give the reader the impression that the situation is dire and without opportunity for growth. Rather, with the dominant discourse of government and school board representing a particular view of how the schools and society embrace diversity and difference, I have sought to provide a representation that allows us to see the potential difficulties and struggles that Liberian-background youth may face when they engage the school system as ‘outsiders’ and ‘diverse’ students in a nominally inclusive but functionally complicated environment. The findings of this research project may help to shed light on the implications of this complexity for youth who have migrated to Canada from marginalized communities and speak non-official languages.
Chapter Four – Methodology

The methodological choices for this project were influenced by a variety of factors, but the most fundamental is the decision to pursue a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is common throughout sociology, and my reasons for choosing a purely qualitative study (as opposed to using data solely from research surveys or statistics) are based on the theoretical framework of critical research and identity studies. Potentially the study could have benefited from gathering statistical data from all of the Liberian diaspora community in Hamilton regarding their interactions with the school system, for example. However, these possible benefits must be weighed against the ways that such data could be misunderstood, misconstrued, or misinterpreted by an ‘outsider’ researcher such as myself when looking at the results. Such a quantitative survey or study would deny the participants the opportunity to interact with the questions and provide nuanced answers based on their own personal experiences and thoughts. This study’s focus on the negotiation of identities in social and personal spheres required that I engage with the subtleties of the participants’ experiences and the subjectivity of their responses. This is especially salient in a critical research study that hopes to understand potentially oppressive practices in education. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) state, “In the avoidance of human subjectivity, quantitative assessment and theoretical commentaries can so easily service powerful constituencies within the social and economic order” (p. 8).

To this end, I have chosen to adopt a qualitative research methodology that is grounded in a critical research framework. A critical framework sets up the research
process with the goal of acknowledging and potentially exposing the systems of oppression that work in society to the benefit of some and the grave detriment of others. In the words of Collins (2003), “critically oriented research in practice is politically engaged” (p. 68). For this study, the politics of education and social inclusion of marginalized communities is central to the research question and practice, and must be a central consideration that I make in the analysis of the findings. More specifically, curriculum choices that are made in schools can be analyzed based on the responses that participants make about their interactions with the curriculum, or currently held ‘best-practice’ models can be challenged when marginalized students share their experiences of entering the school system as a migrant outsider. Further, qualifications for streaming into language learning classes may be examined, policy assumptions about learning goals may be questioned, and disciplinary procedures couched in the terms of student-centeredness may be rethought. To this end, Collins (2003) provides a useful summary of the goals of critical research,

The task for a critically informed research in practice, in this regard, is to challenge the taken-for-granted (often unstated) assumptions of the legitimizing discourse, illuminate its ideological underpinnings (typically denied), and describe the harmful consequences of educational policies it sustains (p. 78-79).

Beyond informing the goals of research, a critical approach to research acknowledges the power that is inherently at play in the research process, particularly between the university based researcher and the potential participant. It is imperative that a critical researcher be self-reflexive and continually question the ways that their position as researcher may be reconstructing the relationship with participants along societal roles of ‘educated’ and ‘un-educated’ or ‘expert’ and ‘student’. Through the methodology that I have selected for this project, the participants take the role of expert in the subject of their own lives, and the researcher becomes the student who is being educated by the participant on the subjects at hand. Further steps were taken to allow the participants to guide the
interactions according to what they desired to share, and the researcher needed to be sensitive to the ways that their social positioning interacted with that of the participants.

4.1 Life History

The life history research approach consists of engaging participants in open-ended in-depth interviews about their life experiences, often centred around a particular theme chosen by the researcher. While the narratives that the participants share with the researcher are the primary data of a study, they alone do not represent a life history. A life history is created by contextualizing the narratives of the participants in the social, political and historical situations surrounding the events and experiences that they describe (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Atkinson, 2001).

As Kouritzin (1999) notes, life histories differ from life stories, biographies, or even case studies because of the analysis that is applied to the data once the method of collecting the data (through life history interviews and accompanying ‘text’ analysis) is completed. When life history is seen as “self-evident, able to speak for itself, [it] privileges the collection of the data over its analysis ... and failing to distinguish research from journalism” (p. 4). This study has contextualized the life stories of the participants in the settings of the Liberian conflicts, refugee migrations, and the Canadian social and educational context.

It is important to note here several factors that must be taken into consideration by the life history researcher throughout this process, 1) issues of narration, 2) issues of truthfulness, and 3) issues of representation.

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4 Text in this instance refers to the historical and textual information and documents that provide contextual information and data about situations and events mentioned by the participants in their life history interviews.
4.1.1 Issues of Narration

In a life story interview, the researcher is providing space and opportunity for the participants to engage their own perceptions, perspectives and experiences about particular circumstances. As a result, instead of condensing themselves into responses on a survey or answering specific questions designed by the researcher, the participant engages in the process of creating a narrative and story about themselves. This narrative creation does more than provide the researcher with valuable data, by providing a unique opportunity for the participants to represent themselves as they wish with all the complexities and contradictions that occur in storytelling. As Atkinson (1998) states:

We become fully aware, fully conscious, of our own lives through the process of putting them together in story form. It is through story that we gain context and recognize meaning. Reclaiming story is part of our birthright. Telling our stories enables us to be heard, recognized, and acknowledged by others. Telling a life story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear (p. 7).

Thomas King (2003) goes further and claims, “the truth about stories is that’s all we are” (p. 92). The life history interview therefore provides a context that is unparalleled in research for participants to express themselves and process their life experiences in an open environment.

The research participant is not the only person who is engaging in this process of creation in the life history interview, though, because the researcher plays a vital role through their guidance and setting of the context of the interview, and at times asking questions for more detail or clarification. Therefore,

In a life story interview, the interviewee is a storyteller, the narrator of the story of his or her own life; the interviewer is a guide, or director, in this process. The two together are collaborators, composing and constructing a story the teller can be pleased with (Atkinson, 1998, p. 126).
Acknowledging the subjective nature of the creation of a narrative in a life history interview is an essential step for myself as a researcher. However, this does not negate the production of a credible life story to be a subject of analysis for research. When asking someone to tell their life story a researcher is purposefully deviating from the quest for objective ‘facts’ and embarking on a quest for subjective perceptions of realities and experiences. This removes the requirement of ‘objectivity’ in research, and allows a deeper analysis of the personal. For these reasons, Kouritzin (1999) states that, “It is not the events themselves that are of greatest importance, but the participants’ understanding of the events and their later impact on, or resolution in, the participants’ lives” (p. 4). Valuable insights and analyses can be gleaned from the narratives that people tell and create, based on their subjectivity in relation to social realities. Munro explains the validity of these narrations in academic research in this context: ‘the current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength’ (quoted in Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p. 15).

4.1.2 Issues of Truthfulness

The subjective nature of storytelling and memory provide validity to the experiences and perceptions of participants in a life history study, but objections can be raised against the contradictions either within a story or with a narrative and alternative accounts of the same situations or contexts. What if a participant misrepresents themselves or others in their story? What if a person remembers historical events incorrectly? These questions are important to consider for a researcher, but they do not
devalue the participants' narratives as a research text. “Life history work is interested in the way people do narrate their lives, not in the way they should” (emphasis original, Goodson and Sikes, 1999, p. 16), and as such, the perceptions of events and experiences that someone relates in their life story are themselves valid as texts to be analyzed. Atkinson argues that the traditional benchmarks for accuracy and truthfulness (internal and external consistency) are actually subjective measures of correctness that not only fail to provide the objective evaluation that they claim to, but are also irrelevant to an analysis of people’s expressions of their lived experiences (Promislow, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, the stories that are developed in life story interviews are created by the narrator and the researcher together, and exist as representations of the storyteller in their own words. In representing their life to the researcher, participants must not be tied to revealing one particular truthful or accurate perception of life. In the words of Kouritzin (1999),

Always living in the midst of a yet-to-be-completed story in which we will live out the consequences of our multiple selves and ideal selves, always with a view to the audience(s) and their multiple selves, we not only cannot expect one “truth” to be represented, we should be suspicious if we happen to find one (p. 5).

Finally, while the truthfulness and validity of a particular story is often found in its correlation to other accounts of the same experiences or events, a life story in the words of a participant may provide the researcher with a counter-narrative to the widely accepted ‘truths’ about how things ‘really’ happened. In this way, “life history data disrupts the normal assumptions of what is ‘known’ by intellectuals in general, and sociologists in particular. Conducted successfully, the life history forces a confrontation with other people’s subjective perceptions” (Goodson and Sikes, 1999, p. 7). In a critical research
study, life stories allow the researcher to engage alternate truths that may oppose the dominant discourse of the day.

4.1.3 Issues of Representation

When a person’s story is recorded and used as a text for analysis in academic research, it is important to take note of the representation that the researcher is doing of another person’s story. Life history allows room for the narration of alternative perspectives and perceptions of the dominant discourse in society, and as such the researcher has an opportunity to represent the participant’s point of view in productive ways. This is a strength of life history research, as Kouritzin (1999) argues, “therein lies the historical and anthropological sense of life history research: rewriting history to include the marginal and individual points of view instead of only ‘the vantage point of those who have had charge of running – or attempting to run – other people’s lives’” (p. 9-10).

The researcher plays the vital role in the expression of the alternative discourse that the participants may express, and as such the discourse that becomes evident in the narrative is shaped by the researcher as well.

A life history research approach stresses the centrality of the researcher to the research endeavor as the instrument of inquiry, and regards the research itself as embedded in the context of the researcher’s life history, perspectives and assumptions as well as in the relationships formed with the research participants (Promislow, 2005, p. 45).

Ultimately, in the process of refining the life story for inclusion into an academic document, and the ensuing analysis of the findings, the researcher runs the risk of misrepresenting the narrative of the participant. As Atkinson says, “a life history interview is a highly personal encounter; an analysis of a life story is highly subjective” (quoted in Promislow, 2005, p. 134). In this analysis the voice of the participant may be drowned out by the assumptions of the researcher, causing a misrepresentation of the original narrative.
It is vital that the researcher continually returns to the data and critically analyzes how their own position and perspectives are affecting their analysis of the text.

One further obstacle facing a life history researcher is the contextualization of a life story into the historical, social, and political context that surrounds the events of the narrative. Goodson and Sikes (1999) express a warning about this process, “Moving from life story to life history involves a move to account for historical context – a dangerous move, for it offers the researcher considerable ‘colonizing’ power to ‘locate’ the life story with all its inevitable selections, shifts, and silences” (p. 17). Here researchers must recognize the power that is in their hands as they surround a particular person’s life story with their own choices of events and situations to provide a context. Care must be taken to ensure that the context provided does not diminish the position of the participant as the expert of their life story, or negate the perspective that they adopted in the narration of their own story.

4.1.4 The Life History Interview

The above issues of narration, truthfulness, and representation are important for the life history researcher to hold in the forefront of his mind throughout the interview process. The unique nature of a life history interview, compared with ethnographic or other qualitative interviews, also requires an approach to interviewing that foregrounds the experience of the participant with minimal ongoing input from the researcher, aside from questions for clarification or to introduce topics. It is vitally important that the participant feels comfortable in sharing their own words and experiences in ways that are not governed by a desire to give the researcher what he or she wants. Atkinson (2001)
describes the life history interview as both an “art” and a “science” because of the complex ways that individuals tell their own personal stories and how these stories are received and engaged by the researcher (p. 130). The science of life history interviewing lies in the preparation of the researcher and the discussion of the topics that are important to cover for the research itself. The art of the interview is found in the dynamic way that the researcher reacts to the story-teller’s words and follows the various pathways or side trails they may take you on while asking open-ended but in depth questions that guide the participant towards the topics you had agreed to discuss during that particular interview.

4.2 Specifics of the Study

As outlined briefly in Chapter One, this study allowed for the development of the life histories of four young Liberian high school students in Canada. The participants in this study were all members of the Liberian diasporic community in Hamilton, which is unofficially represented by the Liberian-Canadian Association of Hamilton and Niagara. This association is made up of a board of directors and represented by an elected president, and is responsible for representing the Liberian community to various organizations, holding community meetings, planning events, and working with various members of the community whenever the need arises. While this research project did not specifically require interaction with the board or leadership of the Liberian-Canadian Association, I sought to engage the leadership about this project because of my position as an outsider to the community, and as a student-researcher from a well-recognized Canadian university. To this end I contacted the president of the Association and sent him an information letter about the project, asking if I might be able to share the goals and methods of this project with the board of the Association prior to beginning my research.
The president of the Association was very positive about the study and invited me to attend a board meeting, where I presented the project to the members who were in attendance. This meeting achieved my goals of informing the leadership of the community of my intentions to learn about the lives of youth in their community, and to present a critical approach to the analysis of their life histories within the contexts of schooling and identity. I was also very careful to emphasize the confidentiality of the information that the participants would provide and to acknowledge that a research study such as this cannot achieve any change within the educational system, though it would give an opportunity for youth in the Liberian community to share their stories and be heard outside of their personal social contexts. The Association board members provided their encouragement to me to pursue this project and acknowledged that they would be willing to inform any members of the Liberian community who may ask them about my interactions with youth that they as board members were informed of the research study and were excited about the opportunity for their youth to speak.

4.2.1 Participant recruitment and interviewing

For this study I was searching for participants who were between the ages of 18 (the age of majority) and 25, who had attended secondary school in Canada for at least two years after migrating from West Africa as refugees. I sought to find four participants who represented different genders, varying linguistic and ethnic identities within Liberia (i.e. from more than one “tribe”), and who had lived in different countries before migrating to Canada (i.e. not all from the same refugee camp outside of Liberia).
To recruit participants for this study, I asked the members of the board of the Liberian Association to contact me if they have any potential participants that I could discuss the project with. I also spoke with key contact people within the Liberian community that I knew well about potential participants. One member of the community contacted four potential participants who represented varying backgrounds, and asked the youth to contact me at their convenience. I also contacted two members of the Liberian community that I knew personally and considered as potential participants.

The first three youth who contacted me were provided with the information about the research study and given time to consider their participation before deciding to agree or not. However, despite my insistence that they take time to consider their participation, all three of them agreed immediately after reading the information letter and signed the consent form to participate. These three participants represented two different ethnic and linguistic groups, had lived in three different countries outside of Liberia prior to migrating to Canada, and had attended four different educational institutions in Canada after landing. Two of these youth had met me previously in an educational and in a social environment, and the third was introduced to me for the first time when I spoke with him about the project. With one more participant required to fulfill the four spots in the project, I consulted with key adult members of the Liberian community and was contacted by the final participant, who also agreed to take part in the project immediately after reading the information letter. This youth was from another ethnic group within Liberia, and had unique experiences from the other three participants. Altogether the group of four consisted of two young women and two young men of different ages, varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, who had lived in four different refugee camps, and had attended different educational institutions since arriving in Canada between 2 and 6 years prior to
the study. Limiting the study to four participants allowed me to engage in the necessary depth with each of the students that a life history approach demands. This also provided me with the opportunity to hear from different youth several different stories that could be analyzed against and with each other, but also did not overwhelm my capacities as a researcher to engage each participant meaningfully.

Each of the selected participants was asked to participate in three interviews, each focused on one of the following topics:

- Early life and education in Liberia and in a refugee context (pre-migration to Canada)
- Migration to Canada and schooling in Canada
- Negotiation of linguistic identities, and ethnic and racial identities

The first interview engaged the participants around their early childhood and family life. While this may be a delicate subject for some people who have come through conflict, I was careful to allow the participants to determine the depth to which we discussed this aspect of their life stories. In this section I had hoped to gain an understanding of the linguistic background of the youth, experiences they had as children that have shaped their identities, and how they look back on their childhood from the perspective of language, culture and identity. Also included in the first interview was an examination of the participants’ initial interactions with schooling in Liberia or in another African country where they lived prior to coming to Canada. Data about where, when, and how they engaged in formal education was useful to establish their initial interactions with schooling that may have affected their interactions with the public schools in Canada.
The second interview with each participant was focused on the process by which they each migrated to Canada and became settled in Ontario. I asked each of them to explain the first times they entered the public school system, and to give detailed experiences and thoughts about the process of migration and how they negotiated their own sense of belonging as refugees, both throughout the process of coming to Canada and as they became permanent residents living in a new context.

In the third and final interview each participant was asked to share her or his experiences with languages, in particular in relation to schooling in Canada. We discussed the process of language assessment in the schools and how they were placed in particular classes or contexts based on their perceived levels of literacy and fluency in Canadian English. I also asked the youth about how they perceive languages and the roles that languages play in identity. Each participant was asked how they identify themselves within the context of their home languages, Liberian English, other languages they may have learned and used, and Canadian English (and French as they have engaged with French classes in school). Additionally, we discussed the roles that languages play in their daily lives, in the home, in the school, and in larger society.

The second part of this interview was focused on culture, ethnicity, and racialization, and how the participants understand these issues, and I sought to understand the role these issues play in their own personal lives. We discussed how issues of race or ethnicity may have been relevant to their school lives, and how they perceive themselves in the particular context that they find themselves in. Any experiences of discrimination were important to engage with in this interview, but I did not assume that every student has perceived this issue to be an important and relevant one to their specific experiences. While I personally anticipated that all participants will have some experiences and thoughts
to share, I was prepared to redirect the content of the interview towards following up previous discussions if the participant related to me through their answers that they have not had any issues with culture, ethnicity or racialization, which did in and of itself provide helpful and important data for analysis. At the end of the final interview, I provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on the interview process and their participation in the study. My goal was to develop a more critical understanding of myself as a researcher, the research process in general, and the way that these particular youth view and analyze the interactions and processes that we undertook together. Opportunity was also be made for the youth to express how their own sense of self may have shifted through the research process.

Each of the three individual interviews was recorded and transcribed for the purposes of analysis and the development of life histories for each participant. They lasted for approximately forty-five minutes to one and a half hours in length each, and were conducted over a month and a half time period, with approximately one week between subsequent interviews with each participant.

4.2.2 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data that was gathered during the participant interviews was initially conducted through preliminary coding with the aid of qualitative data analysis computer software\(^5\). The initial coding was performed with the purpose of “identify[ing] themes, patterns, events, and actions that are of interest to the researcher and that provide a means of organizing data sets” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 32),

\(^5\) The software used for this project was NVivo9
and followed topics listed in the interview guidelines and unanticipated concepts and insights were noted. Initial coding revealed themes in the data and began to simplify the complexities of the participants’ life histories into unifying, or at times divergent, themes between the discourses of the different participants. However, as Atkinson (1996) recognizes,

...coding can be conceptualized as data complication... It can be used to expand, transform, and reconceptualize data, opening up more diverse analytical possibilities... The general analytic approach here is not to simplify the data, but to open them up in order to interrogate them further, to try to identify and speculate about further features (pp. 29-30)

In this sense the initial coding of the data allowed for a deeper investigation of the participants’ discourses beyond the descriptions of past events, experiences, thoughts and feelings that was on the surface of the interview transcripts. This stage of analysis became a step towards recognizing the underlying expressions of power and hegemony in social relations and institutions, and the beliefs and conceptualizations of the participants and others, which impact the interactions of the participants with the world around them.

To engage with the data after coding, I examined the transcripts and the coded data repeatedly and at length, and looked for internal consistencies, the actual meaning of words used, frequency, extensiveness and intensity of the comments, and specificity of the response (Krueger, 1994).

This step constituted the means by which I moved from viewing the data to an interrogation and interpretation of the data, a movement that is not free of my influence, because as Denzin (2004) clearly states, “in the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself” (p. 447). Therefore, in the analytic stage of
interrogating the data, it was important that I keep the words of the participants in the foreground of my analysis, but then also that I choose to take the position of a critical researcher seeking to “reveal reflexively those structures of oppression as they operate in the worlds of lived experience” (Denzin, 2004, 461). The lived experiences of the participants revealed particular aspects of their interactions with the education system and with Canadian society that became clearer to me as I struggled with the coded data and tried to make sense of it. As mentioned above regarding issues of narration, representation, and truthfulness, the life history interview does not reveal to the researcher an unbiased and permanent view of the truth of any particular situation. However, the narration of life histories “may generate multiple perspectives, interpretations, and analyses” (Willis, Jost, and Nilakanta, 2007, p. 295) that reveal a complexity to the real world situations that are being described and analyzed.

A critical analysis of the data forced me to make choices about what to include and what to exclude from the presentation and discussion in this work, a difficult choice for any researcher to make. As a result, the themes and findings that are listed below have been chosen to represent the data that has been gleaned from the multiple interviews and from the contextual settings of the lives of the participants. While some studies may reach beyond themselves for generalizable concepts and themes, the themes and findings of this project emphasized the internal generalizability of the findings within the setting or the group that was studied (Maxwell, 2005). In this sense, the findings of the analysis are relevant and accurate to the discourses and contextual analysis of the participants’ life stories, and may not particularly apply to other contexts and settings, but will allow us to investigate them in a new light.
4.3 Reflexivity and Self Analysis

The methodological considerations that I have had to seriously consider go beyond the issue of which tools I used for gathering and analyzing my data, particularly because of my social position as a white, Canadian-born graduate student in relation to those I have conducted research with, who are part of a racialized refugee community. Following in the tradition of Foucault, “every instance of production of knowledge, every instance when someone seems to be speaking on behalf of someone else, no matter how good their intentions are, needs to be interrogated” (Mills, 2002, p. 78). I did, therefore, hope to embark on this journey of research and investigation with the purpose of providing meaningful and critical analyses of the issues at hand, and participate in an attempt to “confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society” (Kinzeloe and McLaren, 2005, p. 305). In the words of Nina Asher (2009), “Our task includes resisting reapplication in the colonizing forces of being othered and participating in othering. It includes recognizing that each one of us is ‘at the interstices’ of race, gender, culture, class, and nation in context-specific ways” (p. 74).

While previously I have explained the content and method of my proposed study, I think it is important here to comment on how it is important to understand and be aware of the relations of power that are present in a process such as this. As Kinzeloe and McLaren state (2005), “mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression” (p. 304). In order to not be complicit in this reproduction of oppression, it is vital that take a critical approach to my own role, my research, and my analysis.
Mosselson’s (2010) study with Bosnian refugee women provided a helpful tool for me as I engaged with the research participants because “the inherent power dynamic in our relationship would always play a role” (p. 482). Following an examination of those power dynamics, Mosselson (2010) describes becoming distressed in the process of doing her research because of the fact that despite her best efforts to include the authentic voice of her participants and remove herself from influencing that voice, she is intimately represented and implicated in every aspect of the research process. In her words, decisions in research are ultimately, “my decision, my design, my questions, and ultimately, my interpretations and analysis of the participants’ voices.” (emphasis original, p. 483). Mosselson attempts to reconcile these realities with an approach that seeks to be accurate and honest in relation to what the participants communicated to her. She resolves this dilemma by adopting what she calls a critical approach. These terms are often cited by researchers of many different types and towards goals as various as there are types of researchers, but in following what Mosselson is referring to as critical, I seek to adopt a critical approach to my research in this study. Here I borrow from Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) who state “inquiry that aspires to the name ‘critical’ must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society” (p. 305).

In this regard, it is very important that I sought in my research to understand the difficulties and issues that the participants face in their negotiation of identity within the school context, and use this process as a means of addressing those issues.
Chapter Five – Liberian Context

My desire to investigate the complex issues surrounding Liberian youth and schooling has led me to propose the research question that I stated in the introduction. However, I have yet to explain the reason for choosing to focus on Liberian families and students living in Canada. In order to explain this more fully it is helpful to provide a brief glimpse at the national and historical background of people who come from Liberia to Canada as refugees. This allows me to demonstrate the unique circumstances that Liberian students and their families find themselves in as they engage the educational system in their new country of residence, and provide important information that affected methodological choices throughout the course of this research study. Additionally, the information provided in this chapter places the participants’ life stories in a historical and social context for their particular experiences. The goal here is to provide the necessary information to situate each life story within the political and social structures that influenced their lives in particular ways, and move this research from merely telling stories to contextualizing participant experience in meaningful and informative ways. To this end I will discuss the Liberian historical context and the general migration of Liberian refugees including their movement to Canada.

5.1 Liberian Historical Context

The history of the peoples who live in the territory of what is now the nation-state of Liberia goes back much further than what can be recounted here, but I will begin with a brief summary of the linguistic and cultural diversity that existed in the period prior to the
19th century colonization of the region led by the American Colonization Society. I will then provide an introduction to the period of the republic of Liberia prior to the 1980 coup d’état led by indigenous army units, followed by the civil way that lasted from 1989-2003 and engulfed the entire country at several different times. This civil war produced the conditions that led to refugee camps being set up in several neighbouring countries, where the resettled Liberians who came to Canada have come from.

The people who lived in the region of West Africa that became Liberia prior to contact with non-Africans had come to the area in three waves of migration. As a result, the 16 indigenous groups that inhabited the area spoke different languages that could be grouped into three language families. Of these 16 tribes, the Grebo, Kru and Dei tribes were among those who lived on the coast and became the first to interact with slave traders from Europe and North America. Inter-tribal relations shifted and changed dramatically over the 15th-18th centuries as groups fought to control or avoid involvement in trade with outsiders. Levitt (2005) describes this context in the following way,

Because native Liberians were immersed in interethnic deadly conflict over control of the Human Trade and the commodity trade, territory, and political legitimacy, it is highly unlikely that they would have engaged in friendly relations with anyone who was not a slaver, trader, or military ally (p. 44).

While the above situation was happening on the West coast of Africa, in the United States there was a growing movement against the enslavement of black people. Freed slaves and black people who were born to freed slaves were becoming part of the society, and the importation of slaves was abolished. Many white people were glad that former slaves and freeborn blacks were living in America, and leaders such as Thomas Jefferson were writing statements like, “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free” (in Reef, 2002, p. 11). However, there was a general
unease that free black people might instigate those still living in slavery to revolt, and questions were being asked about what should be done with people of the black race. Jefferson himself believed that the inferiority of the black race meant that they should be sent away, “beyond the reach of mixture” (in Reef, 2002, p. 11). The American Colonization Society was therefore set up to achieve this goal, as well as to facilitate the civilization and evangelization of the savage, heathen Africans through the presence of settled Christian Americanized blacks in Africa.

Over a period of 25 years from 1821 to 1847, ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean and brought freed blacks from America to the coast of what is now Liberia, and established a settlement there that they named after the president of the United States, John Monroe (the settlement was named Monrovia). Though high hopes were placed on the African-Americans who were to be a beacon of light to the “dark continent”, control of the settlement and every aspect of the colonists’ lives was held by the agents of the American Colonization Society (ACS), who were always white Americans appointed to lead the blacks. “The ACS viewed the emigrants as children incapable of self-government and self-sustainment and the indigenous Africans as uncivilized heathens” (Levitt, 2005, p. 39).

As expected, the indigenous tribes that were living in the area of the settlement became suspicious of their intentions when land and supplies were taken from them by military force. Several times, one or many of the tribes fought against the colonists, and were it not for the support of the American and British Navy and Marines, the goals of the ACS may never have been realized. However, over a period of two decades, the military influence of the colonists in Monrovia was spread throughout the territory of the 16 indigenous tribes, and the nation of Liberia was created as a republic in 1847, with power
centralized in the capital city of Monrovia and in the hands of the colonists, who were called Americo-Liberians.

As was the case in India under the rule of the British, the aim of the early colonists and the Americo-Liberian governments was to, “mould their [the indigenous Africans] minds by negating their native values and knowledge and substituting them with European [and American] values that were accepted as superior” (Annamalai, 2005, p. 21). To this end, English was established as the language of the new republic, and the country was modeled after the United States in systems of governance, education, and economics (the Liberian flag that was adopted consists of red and white stripes, with a single white star on a blue background in the top left hand corner). While power was centrally located in Monrovia, access to decisions making and positions in the new government was by and large limited to Americo-Liberians by the fact that none of the 16 indigenous languages were permissible in the administration. Foreshadowing the colonial processes that would occur throughout Africa in the mid-1900’s, “the chosen ‘national’ language comes to be associated with modernity and progress, while the remaining minority languages become associated with tradition and obsolescence” (May, 2000, p.370).

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, and most of the 20th century as well, the indigenous people of Liberia who made up 95% of the population were continually under the political and economic control of the Americo-Liberians, who made up less than 5% of the population. In this era and continuing till the present time, all formal education in the country was provided exclusively in English, with optional courses in some of the larger and more significant tribal languages, including Vai (one of the only two African languages to have developed an indigenous script). The few books that contained any of the indigenous languages were grammar books and dictionaries that had been written by
missionaries who sought to have the people learn to read their own language so they could have access to the written Bible.

This domination of the indigenous people by the elite was widely resented, and in 1980 an army sergeant named Samuel K. Doe who came from the Krahn tribe of southeastern Liberia led a coup d'état that overthrew the Americo-Liberian government of then President William Tolbert Jr. Doe assumed the presidency of the country in 1986 after reinstating the constitution that initially had been suspended during the coup, and proceeded to elevate members of his own Krahn tribe to nearly all the major positions in the military and the government. This became a major source of tension, especially with some people from the neighbouring Gio and Mano tribes, who felt that Doe’s reign was simply a continuation of the domination and exploitation that had existed under the previous Ameri-co-Liberian governments. This and other factors led to the beginning of the 14-year civil war that engulfed Liberia in 1989.

Drawing on the resentment of certain groups towards the Krahn dominance of the military and government, an armed rebel force entered Liberia from neighbouring Côte D’Ivoire in 1989 to fight against the Doe regime. The rebels were led by Libyan-trained and American-educated Charles Taylor, and quickly gained support from members of the Gio and Mano tribes who had been repressed by the Krahn-led military. Fighting spread throughout the country, and mostly involved the rebels of Charles Taylor (the National Patriotic Front for Liberia, NPFL) against the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). However, other groups formed around ideologies and shared interests of different tribes, and over the next three years the Independent National Patriotic Front for Liberia (INPFL), Liberian Peace Council (LPC), Lofa Defense Force (LDF), Mandingo United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO-K) and Krahn United Liberation Movement of Liberia for
Democracy (ULIMO-J) all began fighting in different regions of the country. Doe was caught and executed by rebels of the INPFL in 1991, and Taylor’s forces took over control of the government in Monrovia soon after.

Taylor was elected as president in the national elections of 1995, but the civil war in neighbouring Sierra Leone kept tensions high. Conflicts continued, especially in the north and west of the country where diamonds were smuggled out of Sierra Leone and weapons were traded with the Taylor sponsored rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The fighting became especially brutal during the last couple of years of Taylor’s reign as president when new rebel groups entered Liberia from the north and west (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, LURD) and from the south and east (Movement for Democracy in Liberia, MODEL) in 1999. During these last years, the use of children as soldiers by all sides, and the atrocities committed against civilians were documented as especially high, and inter-ethnic group violence based on tribal affiliation was very evident. Finally, in 2003 the UN and several West African states brokered a peace deal between the rebel and government forces, and Charles Taylor stepped down as President of Liberia and he is currently on trial for war crimes perpetrated against the people of Sierra Leone.

During the war, which at different times encompassed every region of the country, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their home regions, moving throughout the country and back again. While ethnic and tribal identifiers played major roles in particular rebel groups, and actions against sections of the civilian population (i.e. Taylor’s NPFL targeted Krahn civilians in the early part of the civil war, and the LDF targeted Gio and Mano civilians), eventually members of all the indigenous groups as well as the Americo-Liberians were involved in the conflict and displaced from their homes.
The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) estimates that in 2004, over 340,000 Liberians were living outside of Liberia as refugees, and over 800,000 were displaced within Liberia, a country who’s total population is just under 4 million (www.unhrc.org). Many of the first refugees who fled Taylor’s rebel forces in 1989 and 1990 were from the Krahn ethnic group, and several thousand were resettled in the United States. By the end of the war in 2003, however, members of every ethnic group and from every social class were among the displaced, living in cities and refugee camps in Cote D’Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ghana.

After the peace deal was signed near the end of 2003, conflict ended in Liberia, and general national elections were held in 2005. The daughter of a Kru/German father and a Gola mother, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the elections and became the first female head of state for any African country. One of the first issues facing the new government was the repatriation of Liberian refugees who were living abroad, and while from 2004-2007 over 100,000 refugees returned home to Liberia and over 300,000 internally displaced persons were resettled in their home regions of Liberia, thousands of Liberians remained in neighbouring countries, contending that Liberia lacked the infrastructure and economic strength to support their return. Therefore, in 2006, 47,000 Liberians remained in Cote D’Ivoire, 46,000 were in Sierra Leone, and 75,000 were in Ghana.

The role that ethnic identity and tribal affiliation played in the lives of Liberians was dramatically altered because of the civil war, but strong group ties are still evident in the current state of nation building, as evidenced by the most recent national election that pitted several “ethnic” group candidates against each other, and highlighted a debate among presidential candidates about the roles of ethnicity versus nationality in defining one’s Liberian identity.
5.2 Resettlement of Liberians in Canada

Canada began resettling refugees from Liberia’s civil war in 1990, and between then and 2006, 1400 government sponsored refugees were selected for resettlement in Canada. Other Liberians came as privately sponsored refugees and as asylum seekers, and the population of Liberians living in Canada today is near 2000.

The process by which families and individuals are selected for resettlement in Canada is a controversial and complex one. Most often, the UNHCR accepts applications from refugee family groups that are living in UNHCR camps outside of Liberia, and upon review these families are forwarded to the Canadian consulate for further processing and applications. Families and individuals that are approved by the government for resettlement are then flown to Canada and resettled initially in an urban centre such as Toronto or Hamilton that has the appropriate community organizations to support their resettlement. While it is the intent of the Canadian government to keep families together for resettlement, the nature of the conflict in Liberia, and the complexities surrounding tribal and ethnic identification have all led to a break up of many family units. As a result, children may be placed on an application with parents that are not their own or some family members may be left behind in the camps while others move across the ocean.

A brief glimpse of the diversity of people who are living now in Hamilton as resettled Liberian refugees reveals the complexity of the process and the potential challenges that face the resettled community. For example, of the 200 Liberians that were initially settled in Hamilton, several dozen have moved west in Canada in search of employment and only about 140 Liberians remain in the city. Of this group, over 10 different tribal groups are represented, and there are several families with children or siblings living together that are from biologically different families. Three young people
who are working to complete high school are living together in social housing while their respective mothers are living in the United States since they were resettled separately from their children. The community has members who have come from camps in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Cote D’Ivoire, and several of the children who are living in Canada never lived outside of a refugee camp nor set foot in Liberia before being resettled in Canada. Some of the people living here are illiterate and had help from friends and neighbours in completing their resettlement application in the refugee camp. Many of the children attended some level of schooling in the country that was hosting the refugee camp, and they often speak regional languages (Krio, Ivorian French, Fanti, Ghanaian English, Twi) as well as the Liberian English of their parents, while many adults and some children have retained their tribal language from Liberia as well.

Many Liberians face economic and social hardships after being resettled, but the community in this area also demonstrates strength, resilience, and success in gaining meaningful education and employment. They are all part of the diverse community of resettled Liberians in the Hamilton area.
Chapter Six – Life Histories

Each of the four life histories below has been divided into sections related to different periods of the participants’ lives that are relevant to this research project: early life in Liberia, refugee experience (in West Africa), migration to Canada, and life in Canada.

6.1 Daniel’s Life Story

6.1.1 Early Life in Liberia

Daniel was born in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, just before the outbreak of hostilities at the beginning of the Liberian civil war. He was the youngest child of a large family, and both of his parents were from the same region of northern Liberia. Daniel’s mother and father did not stay together throughout his childhood.

They [my parents] were born in Lofa, my mom was born in Lofa, and actually I don’t know about my dad, because I have never seen my dad yet. Yeah, I never seen my dad... since I was born I haven’t seen my born dad... First I remember I was living with my mom, and my mom travelled to the States, and she left me with my aunt, yeah, and my aunt, I lived with my aunt... Yeah, um, she went there because my first, my mom first born, he was in the States, and he sent for my mom to go there because that was his mom and he want for his mom to be around him. When she went there and she know that she had her family, her little son being away, which is me, and all the daughter, so she tried to make life and do, because in the States there’s a program, immigration that would help people to travel, people, make me come abroad.

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6 The participants' names and particular identifying information has been changed to protect confidentiality
As Daniel relates below, the language of his parents and aunt was a part of his childhood, but he never used it to express himself when he was young. His linguistic repertoire was limited to Liberian English, the main language of the capital city, Monrovia.

Yeah, my mom, always she speak Gbandi, but I don’t, I understand a little bit but I don’t even speak it, I understand it just sometimes when she speak it, yeah. My sisters, they all speak it, I don’t speak it. Only me, yeah, don’t speak it, in my whole family only me don’t speak it. They speak it to me and I understand a little bit, but sometimes when I try to reply, like, I don’t say it proper, yeah. Yeah, I got my cousins, I got my sisters, we were all living with my aunt, because at that time we were young, they couldn’t take care of, they couldn’t take care of themselves, so we had to live with our aunt. Yeah she speak, she speak the same language as my mom. Yeah, [my cousins and sisters,] we speak English. When they try to talk to me they speak English because they know that I can’t understand so they know they have to speak English, Liberian English. As people call it, “broken English.”

Memories of Liberia were difficult to recall because Daniel was very young when he left. He did remember going to school and helping his aunt work a little bit to help pay for the school fees.

Um... [about school in Liberia] I only remember my school uniform was khaki and white, yeah, and there’s a song that my school used to sing. That song is always in my mind, before we enter in class we sing the school song, and before we enter in class everybody would sing this song. Yeah, because I was young, I can’t remember anything aside from the song, because I used to love the song... I can’t remember any of my teachers right now, I don’t even know their name, I don’t even know their face, even if they sit beside me right now I wouldn’t know who I’m sitting beside... I was in grade 1, grade 2, yeah, in Monrovia, yeah. Grade 1, grade 1, grade 2, grade 3.

Um, I remember sometimes, I used to help my auntie to go sell stuff, yeah, if I doesn’t have anything to do on the weekend, and sometimes I would see that the money we have for tuition, I gotta help her push so she can pay my school fee and pay for
food... My aunt because she used to work, you know, have like a job, sell things, and my mom used to have a little bit of money she got, and my brother in the states, they send that money because of the school and food and stuff.

The war in Liberia erupted when Daniel was very young, and he didn’t share any memories of how it affected his early life, except that he knew his older brother was conscripted as a child soldier. This is a fate that his family didn’t want for Daniel himself, and was one of the motivating factors for them to flee from Liberia as refugees.

Actually, he [my brother] didn’t really want to be a fighter, but he was forced to do it. Yeah, because some kid, they were forced to, sometimes they force you to fight, you don’t want to fight but they force you to fight. If you don’t do it, they going to kill you and kill your parent in front of you. So you going to be a youngster of 14 or 15 and they going to take you from your parents, say, “He going to fight”. And what is your mom going to do? She just going to grab, “Please, please”, they kick her, she going to make them mad and they going to take a gun and shoot her...

### 6.1.2 Refugee Experience

Daniel was young when his family left Liberia, and he was approaching the age where many young boys were taken from their families by the various warring groups and forced into conflict. By fleeing Liberia his family hoped he could avoid the difficulties that his older brother faced.

One of the things that made me leave, we left Liberia because of the war, the war. For my whole family, we left Liberia. Yeah because of the war, and my bro, my brother, he used to, before he used to fight the war, he felt that some people were hunting [him] and he wasn't safe, and, yeah... she [my aunt] just told me, she said, “Oh, we got to leave the country, we gotta leave, and your mom already filed in the program for you guys to travel abroad, you guys gotta leave and go to Ghana”, because the program was going in Ghana and start the program to travel... Probably I would be like 11 or 12, yeah, we went, no I went, I went to Ghana 1999.
When asked to describe the journey to Ghana and his initial impressions of the refugee camp, Daniel provided a very insightful description of the context he found himself in as a young boy.

Yeah, we, we, because my family was a lot, we were a lot of people, so we decide, my mom decide we rent a big bus for all, we took a bus and we reached to the border, and we crossed the border and we went to Cote d’Ivoire, Ivory Coast. Then the bus had to go back, and we took the big bus from Ivory Coast to Ghana, with my aunt and my brothers and sisters, and my step dad... When we went to Ghana, the first time, because we didn’t know anybody in Ghana, at first when we got to Ghana we arrive, I remember when we arrive at night time, and we went at the police station, and they keep us in the police station for a night time, we slept there, and the whole day they helped us to find a place we could be until we find our place, so we were there for 2 or 3 days. Some people around, Liberians, because we explain our condition, we were just coming and we don’t know anybody, “At least can you help us to get a place for two or three days until we can rent our own place?”. Some were helpful, they did that for us, and when we arrive we call our mom in the states and our brother, we told them we arrive, and by all means they sent us money and we find our own place to stay.

I remember life on the refugee camp when we went there first, things were kind of difficult because we don’t know the people, we don’t know the system. The people around, sometimes you don’t know them and you don’t know places where you can go, shopping, where you can buy food, it was kind of hard for us.

Life on the camp was hard too, because I remember sometimes for you to get the water, no light, the current, because sometimes the whole camp was just dark, they turn the light off, and water, to get the water was hard, because the Ghana people have to bring water onto the camp and people have to buy it and put like a big container and like a big place they built.

School, that’s hard too, for all the people. Because some people, some kid, they doesn’t have, their parents doesn’t have school fees and they just doing nothing,
sometimes they don’t go to school for two years, you just on the camp doing nothing. That’s kind of very, very hard, I feel, I feel bad for some people. I feel bad, yeah. I feel really bad but some friends I know, “Oh why you aren’t going to school?” “Oh my parents don't have school fees, I just got to work”, you know, it’s not like, in Canada you can probably just get a job, stuff like that, you wanna pay your school fees, but no job, where will you get a job? You can’t get a job...

Though many Ghanaians speak English in their everyday lives, there are many languages that are used by various groups in Ghana, and Liberian refugees in the refugee camp would often interact with local Ghanaians to purchase goods and sometimes for work. Daniel’s linguistic experiences were mostly limited to Liberian English despite being surrounded by several other languages, but on the refugee camp he felt very connected to someone else who would share the tribal language of his family.

Uh, the Ghana languages I didn’t study because I didn’t go to Ghana school. Yeah. They used to speak the Ghana language, but I don’t really take it, I don’t know, because it feels like to me that it wasn’t that important. I don’t know, you used it if you wanted to go, when we used to go into the city to go shopping, if you meet up with somebody who doesn’t speak English, then we gotta speak, but most of them we used to meet up when shopping, when we buy from them, they speak English. But you got a few Liberian that learn the language, they speak it well, but for me, I don’t really pay attention to learn it... Yeah [with] my mother [I] would speak Gbandi, yeah...and [to some people we would ask] well, like, you Gbandi? Yeah, because everyone they talk, you can tell the accent, the way they talk, we Liberian, but every tribe you know how they talk, their accent and the way they react, you know that other person is [from our tribe] when they talking, yeah. Yeah, when we see them, we got to, when we see them, you feel like you’re one, yeah, so you go to them, that person is Gbandi, so you start going around them, when they see you that’s from the same county.

One of the biggest parts of Daniel’s life during his refugee experience was the sport of soccer. He talked about how he would play daily games of soccer on the camp field, and
joined the camp youth team to compete against Ghanaian teams locally. When I asked Daniel about integrating into school life on the refugee camp, he spoke about how soccer was a vehicle to making connections with other students and feeling included. Interestingly, a similar theme came up in Daniel’s discussion of integrating into the schools in Canada, as is seen later in his story.

When I got there, I was there about 2 or 3 months before I started school... on the Liberian camp. Yeah, they had a few schools on the Liberian camp... Oh, it was a UN school, yeah, but most you could see was there, most was Liberians at the school. Yeah, the teachers that were there were Liberians, yeah, Liberians. Those that were there for a very long time... The first time I went there I didn’t know anybody... Because when I went there for the first three months, because I was a soccer player, so through that and people used to see me, and say, “Oh that was the kid that was playing on the park, that other kid that was playing”, that’s how I started making friends, people started making friends with me because they used to like the way that I played soccer and stuff, yeah. As times go by, I started making a lot of friends, know more people, and I begin to love Ghana, begin to have fun more.

For me, I tell people, if I don’t play a professional soccer, what soccer did for me in Ghana, it made me happy. Because through soccer I met a lot of people to know, I know a lot of people through soccer, and through soccer I got a scholarship for my high school... Yeah, through soccer I got a scholarship. So soccer helped me a lot of the camp, make me know a lot of friends, a lot of people, make me feel like I was a superstar. Yeah, so I just loved soccer, up to now I still love soccer, yeah.

I got it [the scholarship] really because, we were playing, like, because sometimes when we were playing for the school team and before I could play for the school team I used to come to school and I would go and they saw me start coming to school, and they asked, “What is the situation that you doesn’t come to school?” I said, “Oh yeah, right now, sometimes my parents doesn’t have school fee for me, that’s the reason why I don’t come to school”, and they were like, “Oh then, we have
to put you on the scholarship because you are a good kid and you come to school and your grades are good and we need to help you”.

Describing his school life at the refugee camp, Daniel spoke at length about his interactions with teachers, and a major theme of his reflections was the payment of school fees. The impact of having to pay fees when income is limited in a refugee situation was felt constantly in his schooling experience because he was worried about being kept out of school when money wasn’t available. This was alleviated for him when he received the scholarship, but that was after several years of struggle.

School was like, it was difficult because sometimes you were in school, you weren’t paying attention, they gonna come up, “hey you, Daniel”, they gonna call your name, “Daniel”, for example the people name, you gotta get up, why? Because your parents didn’t pay your school fees. Yeah, and you gonna go home. You got to understand because your mom, you know she want you to be in school, but she don’t have, if she doesn’t have the money, you can’t be in school. So then you just gonna be in school, the principal gonna come and call your name, “go home, go home”. “Why?” “Because you didn’t pay your school fees”. So then you gonna be out of school for like three weeks, four weeks, and you miss that lesson, and a lot of notes you already miss. And when you come back, you gotta ask your friends then what you missed, and they help you, try to explain it to you.

One of the highlights of Daniel’s schooling in Ghana (aside from soccer) was his participation on the school Quizzing team, where he was able to represent the school in an academic competition against other schools in the area.

Well, um, Quizzing Team. Like a Quizzing team... Yeah, I was on the Quiz team... Yeah, I was on the Quiz team... Um, I remember, I was on the Grade 7 Quizzing Team, and the soccer team... Um, we used to quiz against other schools, yeah, seventh grade to seventh grade, eighth grade to eighth grade, sometimes twelfth grade to twelfth grade would quiz against the
school. Because the school I was in was, I think the second biggest school in Ghana, on the Liberian camp, yeah, the second biggest school.

The competition used to be, that's where you used to see some people, have fun, see some kids, smart, smart kids answering questions, like you were like, wow, like they're getting some questions, and you really learn from it too... I learned, because one of the things that I used to like from the beginning of the quiz how you used to introduce yourself, you going to be like, for the, you’d be like, “Oh, my name is Daniel, for the sake of the convenience, you can refer to me as Mighty Math Hero”, because you love the math, and you get some problem of math, then everybody will clap just like that, that’s one of the things I used to like.

Oh, they [my mom and aunt] used to like that. Most people they love their kid to be on the quizzing team. It makes them proud, yeah, yeah quizzing team is very, very, in Africa when you’re on the quizzing team, you got respect too, yeah.

Talking about his experience of the difficulties about schooling on the refugee camp, Daniel returned to the familiar theme of paying school fees when money was short.

A difficult thing about school? When you don’t have the school fees, it’s very, very difficult when you don’t have the school fees. Some people, it used to hurt, like, what they used to do, they middle of the term, they going to come for school fees, when you’re getting into exams, if you don’t pay your school fees, they’re going to kick you out. The term you take, if you don’t pay your school fees its just wasted time. They kick you out for the exam, and you aren’t going to take the exam. If you’re lucky, the teacher is going to say, come take it. The other kid I’m not going to tell to come take the exam. For me, the school fees, its very important, you gotta pay your school fees. If you don’t pay your school fees they are going to kick you out soon. And that hurt me when they kick you out during exam time. Midterm exams...

When you were kicked out of school, you got three weeks, yeah, in three week time most teachers start getting, if you know we’re going to get in the final midterm exam in the three week time, teachers are going to start reviewing their note, just review, and probably to tell you say, homework, those that miss homework, I’m going to
help you, I’m going to put the review in the three week time. And they not going to give no note, they are only going to review, they’re going to review all the thing, they’re going to tell you about what the test is going to come for, what you should study, yeah. So sometimes when they kick you out during that time you’re just going to know that you have to book home and you study, when you get home, maybe your mom know that, before that three week time she going to get money, so she just say, oh keep reading your notes and you can do it.

6.1.3 Migration to Canada

After arriving on the refugee camp in Ghana, Daniel’s family began the process of applying to the American government for resettlement there, because his oldest brother and his mother were already living in the United States. He discussed how everyone went for the initial interviews, and then the medical test, before being accepted by the American resettlement program. While most of the members of Daniel’s larger family migrated to the United States, Daniel described how the events of September 11, 2001 caused his pending migration to be cancelled.

First we were on the program to travel to America, yeah... We were all on the program to travel to America, the stuff that happen during... September 11, so they transferred our documents, most people were transferred to Canada. Yeah, they transferred our documents to Canada.

We find out like, after September 11, I think like a year, yeah... [We were] just waiting and waiting and waiting. Because we know that stuff was going on, so we were like, probably they’re going to close the program, oh, its going to take long, we were just waiting and waiting, and we received, they told us, we received a mail... So we went there [to the office] and they say, “Oh, you guys can’t go to America, but there’s a program, that already American government try for you to Canada, so just wait for a few months or a few years, your name is going to come up and you’re going to go for a new interview again, yes”... It was, it was all kind of frustrating, because we went that far, we all the way in that long process, we are just waiting for
our name to come up, and we have to go back again to square one, its kind of very frustrating, yeah

The second round of interviews for Daniel and the members of his family who were left in the refugee camp was much like the first for him, because he was always present with an adult member of his family and his role was mostly to be present. Daniel describes the process like this.

Before, when we get there, the first interview, it wasn't, we didn't just get the first interview, it takes, I think one and half or a couple, like two years, one or two years, I don't know. Then our name was up because they are going to put your name on the board, when you see your name, then you have to go for an interview, for three weeks then they're going to call you for an interview, you and your family ... My whole family at that time, my brother, my sister, my other brother was in America.

Yeah, the first interview was on the camp... They going to ask you first, interview, they're going to ask you for your name, your age, and if you are little they are going to ask you how, they are going to ask you that persons name and age. The first interview is not hard, but the second interview is like, what you are going to tell them, your life story, yeah.

Uh yeah, I was kinda nervous the first time, I was kinda nervous. I was kinda nervous, the first time I was under my [step] dad so, for the second part they didn’t call me in, they called me and my [step] dad, I’m just going to sit beside him, and he going to explain the stories. And they going to ask you a question, uh, a question too, and they're going to trick you. And if you don’t know tell them I don't know, that's what my step dad, I ask him, that’s what he told me. If they ask me a question I don't know, I tell them ask my step dad, maybe he will know. Yeah

And then they are going to put your name up for medical, yeah for medical treatment. And that’s where they going to treat you to see if you get any disease, anything in your body, if you get anything... after that then all you're going to do is just wait for your name to come up to leave.
After being approved for permanent residence in Canada, Daniel's family members who were still in the camp (and not in America) went through an orientation about Canada and how to integrate into Canadian society. Even though he was looking forward to migrating to Canada, the important thing wasn't the location for Daniel, it was just to move forward with a new opportunity.

Yeah, orientation is just all part of it, so, medical, stuff, yeah, orientation, yeah, orientation its all part of it... They wanted to tell us about the life where we're going to come, the life that we're going to live. That we have to save money and how to get a house when you come, just come to school, focus on school and stuff, yeah, they tell you that, they tell you more about, they tell a little bit about Canada yeah, first thing in the orientation, we talk about Canada. And they talk about the food and culture too, language, yeah

When they first tell me, I was like, I don't care, I just want to travel, it sounds like a good country, and I heard about it that it's a good country, so I'm going to go there and behave myself and do well. My parents want me to do well, I'm not going to mind other people, because they are going to tell you, people, they are going to tell you and say kids from here, in Africa, they go there and doing some bad stuff, they going to tell you for sure that not everybody from Africa that go there do good, somebody from here they are doing bad stuff, they are not good, so, don't go there and follow them, focus on your school, listen to your parents... yeah.

The day finally arrived for Daniel to leave the refugee camp and fly to Canada. The journey took him, his step-dad, his sister, and his sister's baby to Toronto via Europe, and Daniel describes the trip and the subsequent first days in Canada here.

Yeah, when my name came up I was so happy that day, it was April 12, 2006, I got to travel, and my name came up that day, the first day... I remember when I getting in the plane, I stood up, I was the last person to enter in the plane so I stood in front, I stood right at the door and started looking, just looking all over like Africa, and in
my heart I think when I going to come back, and my dad was like, let's go, lets go, get in quick, so then I just came in.

First we fly, we took the plane from Ghana, and a lot of people was in there, and we had to pick passengers to Nigeria, and from Nigeria we went straight to Germany. From Germany, straight to Canada... I was so scared, I was so scared, yeah... We landed in Toronto, I don’t know, I think we came, we reached in the evening, I don’t know, I can’t remember the time. We reached Toronto, they ask us where we are from, we get our documents, stuff... Yeah, we reached Toronto airport, and we was there, so we don't know what to do,

When we first came we don't know what to do we just standing there, and we just standing outside, and someone came with a car and they said, “Oh, you [Daniel’s] family?” We said, “Yes”. They said “Ok, lets go in the car”. What are we going to say? So we go, they brought us straight to Hamilton, and they took us in the hotel, and the next day another group, a set of people came and I think it was with [a settlement agency], and stuff, they came and they took us to the embassy, I think, the immigration office, yeah, we went there for our paper, we took our papers, they took our pictures, they gave us a number, social insurance number, and they give us a phone number just in case anything, and after like 2 or 3 days they said you guys need to open a bank account for money for food stuff, housing stuff, and we were in the hotel for I think 7 days, we were in the hotel, they were all paying for the hotel, paying for food yeah...

[We waited] 7 days and then they put money in the bank and [an agency] helped us look for an apartment, so we looked for an apartment and we rent a two-bedroom apartment, me and my dad were in one, and my sister and her little baby were in one.

6.1.4 Life in Canada

When Daniel arrived, it was springtime in Canada, and he was registered by the local settlement agency in a high school where he attended the final two months of the school year before the summer break. A major theme of this period for Daniel was loneliness, but
again soccer became a vehicle for integration and inclusion, as it had been earlier in his life in the refugee camp.

For me, I feel good because then I got a place that I know I can sleep and stuff. After a couple of weeks I started missing Africa, I couldn't go nowhere, I didn't know no one, just staying at home, you don't know anybody, you don't know the place where you going to go, a couple of months you start missing Africa. I used to call my friend, I'm like, “Wow man”, I wish too I was could just be in and out, of course this country is a good place that is going to develop my life, but I just kinda you can't just kinda get new friends and you don't know anybody, so I started missing my friends, and the main thing that used to make me mad, I was home for like 3 or 4 months, I never used to play soccer, only go to my park, and kick my ball, I didn't know anybody. Like back home I always playing soccer, everyday, that's what we do... As time goes by I heard some Liberian kids were there they said, “Oh, Daniel do you want to play for a team, because [the settlement agency] used to have a soccer tournament every summer time, like you start playing”, we start playing and stuff like that.

When I came, yeah, I went to school, I went to school when I came, yeah, I think, was it two or three weeks, they found us in school, [High School 1], yeah, I went to school, I didn't know nobody, the only person I knew in the school was [a fellow Liberian] because he said he used to know me, and I used to hang out with [him], and his little brother, and a few other Liberian kids were there, I just used to see them, but we wasn't close.

Daniel related his early experiences with Canadian English after he arrived, and in the following story he explained how even the local settlement agency (which had vast experience with newcomers and also with Liberians who had migrated before Daniel) did not understand how to relate to him with his knowledge of English.

When I came first about English? Yeah, yeah, when I came first, and they told me, they said they need someone to interpret what I'm going to say, and, they bring a Liberian lady, and I found out she was here before me, and I was going to [an
agency] for an appointment, so they brought her and she was going to interpret everything I say, and she was going to say it. So when they went there, they start asking me, and I say it, the lady was like, “Why they even bring me?” ... She was only sitting there, she just sitting there.

Daniel attended school after his first two weeks in Canada, and there were many differences he mentioned between schooling here and schooling back home. Aside from the fact that students were never beaten here (a theme that came up often in his interviews), Daniel talked about homework and student attitudes towards teachers as things that surprised him.

Oh yeah, I remember because I think in Africa we used to go to school 7:45, yeah, and I got up at 7:45 I went to school and the school started at 8:30... 7:45 and I was just looking like all around, I can’t see nobody, I was so lucky I saw, yeah, it was just one teacher and I asked, “Is there no school today?” He said, “No, where are you from?” I said I just came, he said, “Oh, school start at 8:30 am”, so I sit and wait for 8:30, that’s my first mistake I think, that I remember in Canada, yep.

Here its different because they give you homework, a lot of homework, and teacher explain, of course they explain and they make it look simple to you, and sometimes you watch movie about what they’re telling you about. ...

I remember like, when I came from my other class, I saw some kid just walking out, she was talking, I think she was talking with the teacher and they was kinda arguing, and I was like wow, in Africa you don’t argue with the teacher, they will beat you, and she just took her stuff and walked out, so I was like, wow, disrespect.

Integration into the school community was difficult for Daniel initially because in his own words he was very shy and reserved. He was afraid that his manner of speaking English might cause him to be the subject of ridicule, and he was embarrassed about his background experiences of living as a refugee with very few material resources.
The first two months I didn’t get no credit, and I just did ESL and get used to the system... It was alright for me, but it was just sometime, if I had something to say I was just kinda shy to ask the teacher because I don’t think she can understand me and I don’t want people to be looking at me when I’m speaking, so maybe I should think she will be mean to me, I don't know, so I just sit and I don't know anybody, nobody that I knew was in my class. I used to see other Africans but I don't know them, we don’t speak the same, yeah

Yeah, I tell them I’m a Liberian and I was born in Liberia, but I moved to Ghana because of war in my country, I move to Ghana and I have to come here because to make my life better and stuff, they say wow. They tell me, how’d you come here, how hard the process is, you know, its too long, I don’t want to say it, its too long. Sometimes I am like, I'll tell you later, but sometimes they won’t ask and I don’t tell them again because I don't want to keep going, keep telling people about my life story

Oh, uh, I don’t know, Ms. B, my teacher, she’s a lady, I told her my story because she was good, because that was my first, that was I think my ESLDO teacher, she was my lady, the first person that I ever told my story too, so I opened up because she was kinda good, because, the way I used to see her, she was kinda caring, because most of the people that was in my class were immigrants and she really loved kids, and I was like, she’s probably good, she’s good, the way I see her showing love to other people, helping them, making them, so she was good, and she wanted to know about me, and she, every time I came she said, “Daniel, when are you going to tell me?” So I just opened up and told her my story, she said, “Wow, that’s really interesting” and she felt so bad too, yeah. That’s the first person I opened up and told my story too.

After his initial months of shyness, Daniel became more connected to people at his school, and he opened up more and shared his outgoing personality with friends and teachers. Instead of feeling that he was ‘the only poor kid in the school’, he began to recognize schooling as an opportunity, no matter what background a student might come
from. He enjoyed studying and integrated well into the academic and social contexts of high school.

Oh, [I got to know] other people, the soccer team, and when I started going around people, yeah, the soccer team, mainly, yeah. Because that’s when I met all the new, new, all the really new people, people from Afghanistan, people from Canada, all people from the different, different countries, yeah, Portuguese, that’s when I started relaxing myself, yeah, I gotta relax, and open up. We used to, after a soccer game we used to go, we go to buffet we bring money together we eat, have fun, as time go by people start getting used to us. Feel good to my teacher then, when I see the way you’re teaching, people are good, I started liking people and stuff, I relax myself... Yeah, everyone else in the whole school [I thought they were rich], because I used to see like, I see people coming, like kid coming to school they all have Porsche, and we used to go shopping at Value Village and stuff, Value Village and Giant Tiger. But that doesn’t need to move me, everything has time, I just got a lifetime to go by, just to step up, so I was like, who cares.

Um, I used to love computer, I used to love math, I used to love computer, but the teacher, I loved computer but I didn’t like the teacher because of the name that he called me, yeah, I loved math because of the teacher, my other favourite teacher, Mr. W. And like, uh, what else, geography... It was fun, you know, they tell you about the country, you learn things too, you learn more about Canada too, and English too again. I don’t really like English, I started hating English in Grade 11, because too much essay you gotta do, essay writing and stuff like that, yeah.

After attending high school initially, Daniel transferred to an adult high school program for his final year of studies because of his age. He graduated from high school and eventually applied to a local community college where he is currently studying.

Um, when I came first I started from ESL, then for the next term was done, then I started doing grade 9 stuff. So I came the school year was already over, so I had to wait, yeah I came in April, so the school year was already over and I had to wait for September before I start, so when I came the first time that whole first months I was
only doing ESL, yeah, so then next... I started grade 9, and then... Yeah, I went to grade 10, then 11, and then grade 12 I went to [Adult High School], because they said I was too old to be in the school, I have to leave... Um, they told me after, because I came here I was 19, 20, 21, 22, I have to leave the school. The principal said you have a certain age that you got to be in high school, so I think now you can't be in the school so they said that, I'm like okay, they said they will give me credit too. Because with [Adult High School] I didn't know, so I asked what can I do, they said okay, there's this adult school, and they told me about it, and I said okay, that would be good, at least I can continue my education, and I went the next, I started at [Adult High School], and all the credit I have, I took it to [Adult High School], yeah, and I begin my grade 12 from there.

I miss [High School 1] when I left there, yeah... I was feeling so bad because when I went to [Adult High School], everybody just doing their work, you don't even talk to anybody, just go and do your work, sometimes you just want to talk, the way we used to have fun... but nothing there [at adult school], its all independent work, everybody's busy doing their work, no fun.

Oh, [at Adult High School] its independent work, they don't write on the board, the teacher is just going to give you the book and you read it, if you can't understand, if you can't understand some things in the book you going to ask her, she going to help you, yeah, that's the [Adult High School]... I was just there for only 1 year, then I was done. 2009 I was done school in 2009.

It felt good [graduating from high school], finally high school is over for me. Yeah, I took 2 years off, I didn't take it off but I didn't know what to do at that time. I didn't know what to do, I had nothing to do, only just soccer, so I realized like in case people, people start telling me, in case you make it professional, and something happened to you, what will you do? So I was like, okay, I started realizing I had to start doing something, first I was going to do police foundations, but I changed my mind, like, no I don't want to police foundations, let me do customs services, yeah. And that's what I do, am doing right now, at College... I started, 2011, 2011, yeah, September, this was my first year.
Daniel became a Canadian citizen four and a half years after migrating to Canada and fulfilling the three-year residence requirement. He took and passed the citizenship test and was smiling all day when he was presented with his citizenship certificate. When I asked him about gaining Canadian citizenship, he related the following story about an experience he had with travelling as a permanent resident prior to becoming a citizen.

I was so happy that I became a Canadian citizen, because the first time, when I was going to England for soccer with my teammate, we reached the airport and I thought for sure I was going to go to England, happy, excited for the England trip. We reached on the airport and they checked my document and everything, we were going through, we were about to go on the plane and they called us back, you can't go, because you are not Canadian citizen, you only have a passport, you need a visa in it, I was like what... We called you guys the embassy and you said we doesn't need a visa in it, why didn't you tell us we need a visa? We were 8 guys they said we can't go, I was feeling so bad, and after that I said no, I have to apply for my Canadian citizenship. When I came back from England....after a few days we tried to get a visa, we went to England. When I came back from England I applied for my Canadian citizenship, and I get it, because if you got citizenship, you can go anywhere because Canada is a more peaceful country, any country going to allow you as a Canadian to enter in, so I was happy that I got my citizenship... I wanted this, I wanted to get citizenship, to go back home. And it make it more, when you travel to any country, its easy because you're a Canadian, so then you have a citizen card and a passport, they don't bother you, they just let you go, because Canadian, they know Canada as a peaceful country, a very friendly country, yeah.

**6.1.5 Summary Remarks**

Daniel’s life story presents a valuable glimpse into both his experiences in the refugee camp and in Canada, but because of his young age when he left Liberia, we learn very little about his context and educational background in that country. His story highlights both the struggle of obtaining an education in a refugee setting, and the
tremendous value that he places on the opportunity to study in Canada, no matter what
challenges he might face integrating into the school system and society.

6.2 Promise’s Life Story

6.2.1 Early Life in Liberia and Guinea

Promise was born in 1990 in an urban centre of Liberia and lived with her mother
for the first two years of her life. Because the country was in the middle of a war, Promise
was given to her aunt by her mother because her aunt had access to more financial
resources through her husband, and she could provide opportunities to Promise that her
own mother could not.

I was two years, and then my mom gave me, I guess it was during the war, right, 1992
war. So my mom, because she had a lot of kids, so she couldn’t handle everyone, so she,
and her big sister doesn’t have too many kids, she only has two kids, and she needs,
because she said, I don’t know, because I’m pretty, she took me, she took me from my mom

Promise’s aunt, who was responsible for taking care of her from when she was two
years old, brought Promise to another member of the family in the neighbouring country of
Guinea when she was seven years old. This was where she had exposure to and learned
several local languages, and also where she first went to school.

So, she [my aunt] took me and carried me to Guinea. Afterwards in Guinea, like, I
was 7 years now, she took her two, I guess [biological children], and she took them,
bring them back to Liberia

Yeah, I was stayed in Guinea, and then she leaved me with another people. So that’s
the people I grew up with, I consider them as my parents... I was living with my
mom's brother and his family, a long time, when I was seven years, until the age of 16

Yeah, there where I learned how to speak Gio... I used to speak French, Mandingo, and Kpelle. I learned Mandingo and Kpelle in Guinea, and French in Guinea too, from the neighbourhood. Yeah, when I went to school when I'm in Guinea... it was English.

Promise went to school in Guinea until Grade 8 and when she described that experience, she talked about how she enjoyed school but did not like when the teachers would use corporal punishment to discipline the students. However, she did say that it helped keep students in line and was useful, but overall made it a difficult experience for her.

I went to school all my life in Guinea. I was in grade 8 in Guinea, and then when I came back to Sierra Leone, I only went to school for one year

[I went to school with] the Guineans. The Liberian people was in the refugee camp, but I wasn’t in the refugee camp, I was in the city of Guinea.

Yeah, in Guinea, if you're going to school, if you get late, the teachers have to beat you, and then, anything you do, they have to punish you if you don't have your school fee, you won't go to school until you pay your school fees. There was no free school in Guinea. You have to pay your school fees each semester, if you don't pay, you never go to school.

I didn't like the way the teacher beat the students. Because they beat the students, they do what they want on every part of their body and nobody going to say anything. It's, the teacher right to do anything. If you complain to your mom, you wasting your time, like, the teacher have the right to discipline you anyhow in school... Every teacher beat me because sometimes I always get late for school... because I don't wake up early. And we have to walk and go to school maybe like half an hour, yeah
Actually, sometimes it [the discipline] was nice because some students being so rude you know, I like the way they discipline the kids and we learn something, because if you don’t discipline the kids, they never learn, so through the discipline, people, people begin to take things serious. Because you won’t pay your school fees, and then you stop going to school. For Canada, because in high school you’re not paying school fees, so if you want you can go to school, if you don’t want, you don’t have to go to school. But if you paying your money, you will pay good attention

Describing her social context and life in Guinea, Promise said that she did not have much social interaction with friends, but would work on the family farm when school was finished. As children they were at times in danger of being kidnapped by soldiers or criminals who were looking to profit from the unrest of Liberia and its surrounding areas in Guinea, but she trusted her family to take care of her.

So after school we just come home, take our book, and study... When we come from school like, we have a farm closer to our house, a swamp, we plant our rice every year. We harvest it during the new year, we make some garden, we plant some potatoes, okra... But, the bad thing in Guinea is um, rural life, yeah, and they kidnap people kids, and sometimes we be indoor all day we don’t get out, because they kidnap people, the Guineans. It didn’t happen to me, but all the time it was on the news every children have to be indoor... Some of them, after they kidnap them, like the other little girl was in school, they kidnap, they kidnap her, and then they cut her private parts because they sell the private parts and get rich out of it, they kill them and take out their eyes out... For me, because I was a little girl, I didn’t care [about the danger], my protection was my uncle and my aunt.

While Promise was living most of her life in Guinea with her uncle and aunt, her other aunt, who was responsible for her, fled Liberia with her family and settled in a refugee camp in Sierra Leone. The family sent for one of the children who was living in Guinea, but Promise was left there until a visiting family member brought her back to Liberia to live with another family in the interior of the country. After living in the
countryside for two years, Promise was brought back to the aunt who was responsible for her, and moved to the refugee camp in Sierra Leone where the rest of her aunt’s family was.

I was in Guinea, [with] the guy they call my brother, he and I was in Guinea. He grew up too in Guinea, but he was with a different person, he couldn’t stay with the people I was staying with, so he went on his own, and then he was there, when he was 18, 19 years old. So when his mom came to pick him up, 2003, I don’t know, yeah, 2003, before that time she was already in Sierra Leone on the camp, so she came to pick him up to go add his name on the resettlement list. So, she didn’t pick me up. [Another family member] came, she was doing some business and somebody direct her for where I was, in Guinea, and then she came, she came for me. So when she came for me, she carried me in the interior county, 2003. I was there [until] 2006, I was doing farm work with different people, like suffering, I didn’t like it...

They have, two, they have one girl and the other boys went on their own, so I used to do all the work, because I was a different person, they don’t care whether I’m suffering or not.... It was hard because we used to plant rice, plant cassava, potatoes, make up a large farm, big farm every year and we have to harvest the rice on our hands, like, cutting the rice, you know, back home it’s so hard... I didn’t go to school because, who, no one is responsible to pay my school fees

So I used to send message to anybody who knew my mom. So one day [someone] was explaining to my mother, “Oh, I picked up Promise from Guinea, this is her two years in the country”, but none of them knew that I was in the country. So my mom get to hear it, she said, “Oh, what you do to Promise? It’s not nice”. And then my aunt, she hear it, she said, “If you not pick up Promise from where she is and bring her back to me, your son is not going to get on the resettlement.”...Yeah, she came, she picked me up from the country.

6.2.2 Refugee Experience

Promise moved to one of the many UN refugee camps in Sierra Leone with her aunt’s family so she could be added to the resettlement list and potentially migrate with the
family out of West Africa. The camp was closed by the UN in 2008 because the conflict in Liberia was over, and the elected president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson, called on the refugees abroad to return home to Liberia.

We live in the refugees camp, a UN camp. It actually was nice, because they used to give us rice, beans, oil, soup, they used to supply us a lot of things, after that they stopped supplying, they said, all the refugees have to go back to their country...

Yeah, 2008, I think 2008 they stopped supplying the refugees because they said they want for everyone...Ellen Johnson told the government of Sierra Leone, no more war in Liberia, so everyone should go back to their country

Recalling her experiences speaking her mother’s tribal language, Promise spoke about how it was used in her family, but also the roles that languages played during the conflict in Liberia. She didn’t experience the conflict personally, but learned about it while in the refugee camp and also since migrating to Canada.

Um, my mom speak Gio to us, because we don’t speak our dad’s language. If I do a bad thing, she want to disgrace me, like she speak Gio, she don’t want for everyone to hear it. Or, if my mom was around, if, like, if I want to tell her something private, then I speak my language.

[Speaking many languages] is a good experience because sometimes during the war, if you’re running away from war, and then if you mention, on certain tribes, they don’t like certain tribes in Liberia, because they are enemies. So you have to pretend like you’re this tribe, and if you know how to speak the tribe, you’ll be safe from there, so that was a good experience from learning other languages.... Yeah, if you were Gio, and they don’t know you’re Gio, they think you’re Mandingo, then they say, “Which language you speak?” And you say, “Gio”, but you pretend like you’re Gio, and then they say, “Okay if you can speak Gio, I’m going to speak Gio to you and then you will repeat me”, and then they speak to you and you don’t know how to say it again, sometimes they kill you.
 Uh, you know, as a little kid, you don’t even know nothing [about the war], what is going on, all you know is you have to eat, yeah, the war was in Monrovia, it was bad, killing people. I don’t know if I have the [video] at home, because one of my friend download it from the computer, and give me the [file], and we used to watch the movie, that was bad. I don’t know, maybe you can get it from on the internet, Liberian war.

Schooling in the Sierra Leone was carried out for Promise in a local school, where she attended for two grades of study. The language of instruction in Sierra Leone is British English (as in Liberia its American English), but the colloquial spoken language is Krio, a language that resembles Liberian English but differs in particular ways that makes them two distinct languages.

Yeah, I went to school, a Sierra Leonean school. They teach us in English, because the Sierra Leoneans speak British… Almost it’s the same thing [as Liberian English], because the Liberian, it’s the same way of learning, but the way the Sierra Leoneans speak, they speak British, they pronounce the English word, but for us, we know our standard, we know our grammar, everything in the English books, but the way we speak, you know, colloquial… Krio is the broken English in Sierra Leone, we just learn it in the neighbourhood.

The school experiences that Promise had in Sierra Leone were positive in many ways, and she described her efforts to be the best student in her classes. However, as in Guinea, paying school fees made it difficult at times to attend school, and when Promise did attend she was bothered again by the corporal punishment that teachers would use on the students. In this particular schooling context, Promise also described the sexual harassment and abuse that was carried out by some teachers towards young girls.

I started in Grade 6 [in Sierra Leone], and when I started in Grade 6, and then I went for my national exam, they call it NPSC, and then after we have to get 300, maybe 275 and then you pass, but when I went, I got 300 and then I pass to Grade 7, to
secondary school... Yeah, everyone, before you go to secondary school, you have to take Grade 6 national exam.

[The teachers] were so hard on us. If you fail, they will beat you like this. If you take a test and you fail you have to take your hand like this, and they beat you. Every time they beat you... Yeah, every, every part of Africa, that's the way they do it.

We have to pay school fees, our parents. For the first time they was having free school, but they close up the free school, and everyone begins to pay school fees. Um, it was like, my dad and mom struggling to get money, pay our school fees, in my heart was, you have to achieve your goal, you have to go to school. Maybe today your parents may pay your school fees, tomorrow they may not pay your school fees.

My favourite subject was, huh...business study... Because, I don’t know, I just liked it and like the teacher, because she was my favourite teacher, she was always teaching me... What made her a good teacher? Because if you’re in, in Africa give you notes, if they teach you one time, that’s all there is for you. But for us, she would teach us over and over, over and over, over and over, if you don’t know it, you have to go and ask her, but some teachers, they don’t do it. You don’t even ask the teacher, “Oh sir can you help me with this?” They won’t do it. Even if the student fail in Africa they will bribe the teacher, young girls bribe the teacher, because the girls they want more grades, like if they fail in some subject, they will go to the teacher, maybe they will date the teacher, or they give the teacher money... If the teacher, if the teacher want you, and you don't accept his love, every time he will fail you. Even if you fail the subject, he won’t even help you, he will put a red mark for you...Most of the teachers are bad teachers, my mom even, um, talked to one of the teacher, he [harassed] to me, my mom was so mad at him, she wanted to send me to the police station and then he apologized... If you study you will get good grades, but if you don’t study, if you get bad grades, the teacher will, maybe they want to have sex with you and then they give you good grades. Sometimes you go work in their farm and then they give you good grades. Yeah, Sierra Leonean school... Sometimes in Liberia they have this, I tell you most of the teachers in Sierra Leone, Guinea, they all the same.
Yeah, I liked going to school. I miss Africa school because we wear a special uniform, on a special, wear a top, shirt of then, and then the skirt, white socks and black shoes, you don't wear any other clothes when you go to school... Because it help you save your clothes, and I don't know, I just like it... The good thing is that they teach, and they know how to teach, you learn a lot of things, yeah. If you in grade 10, it's not a small class, it's a big class, and maybe [there would be a] 29 years old, 30 years old guy in Grade 10, yeah, they teach [all ages]. And we have to clean our compound, our school compound for ourselves. Every morning we have to go to school we have to pick up the paper, clean the compound, clean the grass from around the school.

The other major part of Promise's life in Sierra Leone, aside from school, was working in the family garden or farm, and selling fish at the local markets to help pay for school fees. Her family in the camp encouraged her to learn how to make a profit selling items at the market so that she could become a business owner someday, but Promise had other ambitions about schooling.

Yeah, I go to school every day. After school, I go to sell the fish...Yeah, and we used to sell meat pies, we used to bake doughnut, my mom used to bake the doughnut, fry the doughnut and give it to us, we would go to sell it and bring the money. After that we graduate to fish, because, and then she used to buy the carton of fish, that was my only business. If she buy the carton of fish, like 20,000, and then I sell it for 55,000. So, 35,000 profit... I was trying to learn [the local dialect] because I used to go sell fish in the other villages, so I just have to speak, I just have to sell in their language and they would get me.

They [my family] said we should go to school and learn to do something on our own. Yeah, to move out, if you want to become a business man and know how to do business, yeah, that's why in class my favourite subject was business. Because I wanted to learn, because anytime I go to sell, maybe I lost money, or I misplaced the fish, so I wanted to really learn about business. Like, she, my aunt used to say, I want you to learn business. Like, Aunt, I don't want to become business girl, so why
you forcing me to become business? I want to become a nurse...I want to because I want to build, that's my dream, I want to build a nursing home in Liberia... I started thinking about it when I was, when I, when the Canadian government accepted us, because they said if you come to Canada, everything going to be easy, going to be that, I said fine, I'm going to become a nurse, I'm going to Canada. After high school I will go to university and learn my nursing course. After I'm done my nursing then after I will go back to Liberia, because little kids are dying from sickness, common, common sickness, and they are dying, so I said I am much like my dad. I said, “Yes dad, I want to build a nursing home in Liberia.”

6.2.3 Migration to Canada

After Promise’s family submitted their application for resettlement to the UN, it took over two years to hear back from the Canadian government and begin the interview process. They were actually one of a small number of refugees who were accepted on humanitarian grounds instead of being sent from Sierra Leone back to Liberia, as many thousands of Liberian refugees were.

So it take long time before they call us for the interview. They got there 2002, and I got there 2006, and 2007, nothing. 2008, nothing... Many people, over thousands, most of the people went back, most of the people travel 2006, 2007, 2008, yeah... The UN wanted to empty the camp, because Ellen Johnson told the UN that no more war, but based on the war story, the Canadian, the government helping people not to go back home, they need a safe place, yeah... So Canada, Canada needed 360 people, so we were one of those people, we were 10 family, like 10 in family, so Canada, we were the first people, I think the second person Canada sent for... Based on your story, the Canadian pick which one to come. If your story is so sad, you will come first. If you are a disabled person, you have a lot of kids, they bring you, like she was, her legs hurt, right, and she had raping case, so they sent for us, but we were not the first to come here, some people came before us. I think, more than 4 family here who were from different camp, not just [our camp], but we were the first from [our camp].
If you’re on resettlement its so hard. It going to take long. Some people still waiting in the camp. They still waiting for resettlement. Some people fail, they fail the interview for Australia, some people they send them back because they refuse them, oh. I know that we were so lucky.

Yeah, they called us for interview, but they sent, they don’t just, the Canadian government don’t just talk to us directly, the UNHCR was doing their work, and then they called us for an interview… Okay, we went for the interview. From different, different camps they have four, I think 8 trucks… and then put everyone in one big warehouse, it was in Freetown. The city Freetown. And then they give us mats, bed sheets to lie down there, and then after that, in the morning time you wake up for breakfast, because you’re going to spend a week. Because a lot of people, so they have to call everyone, they have to give you, in the morning time they have breakfast, bread and tea. Then after you have lunch, after you have dinner, you have to go stand in the line for your food… So after the interview, that was the first interview, and the second interview we went for it, yeah, they sent us back to the camp, and then after the second interview was medical. I don’t think, yeah it was medical. Third one, it was orientation.

After our orientation, a lady from Ghana, she was, she was in Ghana, they sent for her to orientate us. She was speaking Canadian English, and I’m like, what’s this lady saying? I can’t even hear her!… Yeah, I said, “What’s she saying?” Everyone begin to laugh, so she orient us, after orientation it took three weeks. We went for our orientation, they teach us how to sing O Canada. (laughs), and then they show, they show us the video, how Canada looks, so, so white! Here are so black. They say if you steal a phone, you have to carry it and bring it to the bank, or report it to the police, or if you don’t report it they going to put you in jail for your lifetime, I say, uh huh, (laughs), don’t waste your spit among people, don’t blow your nose. In Africa they told us all that, don’t spit on the ground because the place is so clean.

They called us, to Freetown, for coming to Canada, say you have to buy a jacket, you have to buy your shoes, you have to buy your pants, a lot of money. But they give you money to do that. They take you for shopping. Because the Canadian
government send money, right, to give it to the people for shopping, but they never give you all, they will give you half. [The rest is] in their pockets.

The flight to Canada was a nerve-wracking experience for Promise, but when she arrived with her family she was hosted by the local settlement agency and felt relaxed to have reached a safe and quiet place.

From Freetown, we stopped to Senegal, because the Senegal guys arrive with us, coming from Senegal, and then we stopped to London to pick up some people, but it's not refugees. Senegal, London, Belgium. After Belgium to Toronto. I came in the escalator, I said, “Whoa, somebody help me!” And then the lady was saying, “You’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.”... Yeah, but my mom, when she went to the washroom she got lost in Belgium. To the airport, because she went to the washroom and then she got lost. Everyone checking for her. If I go too to go check for her, I get lost. Everyone was confused, we were late for the flight... Everywhere we stopped they had people waiting for us, it's not UN people, Canadian people come to escort, to wait for us, yeah. We have Canada here, the little flag, Canada, so then the people know we are Canadian so they come and pick us up. Everywhere we come, Canada.

Yeah, and then [in Toronto] they came to pick up, in the bus, to [the settlement agency]. I love that place. You wake up in the morning you eat, don't do any work, just getting fat. (laughs), they will wake you up in the morning, “Promise, breakfast is ready!” “Okay, I'll be downstairs.” “Lunch is ready!” Every time you eat, I was getting fat for a month. Yeah, the newcomers, they came to visit us, bring us food... Because the Chinese too, they bring, well the Chinese people, almost eat the same food, they gave us hot pepper because we need hot pepper, they go get the hot pepper and then we eat. Actually [the agency] was fun.

6.2.4 Life in Canada

After Promise’s family spent time in the settlement agency and became acquainted with Canadian society, they moved into their own apartment and Promise underwent an evaluation at the school board for placement in school.
March...April, at the end of April we get out apartment... Because when the orient us at [the agency], they ask, “Do you want to live with your parents? You can live with your parents, you who are above age.” I was like, do I want to live with my parents? Yes, no, yes, no (laughs.) After I said, “Yes, I want to live with them.” After I live with them, July I went to my sister. I thought she was going to treat me nice, she didn’t treat me nice, I go out on my own, begin to do something for myself.

Like May, June we go to school. Yeah that was the first time... [The settlement agency] only show us the school, we go to register. There’s a lady, she came for me to go register for school, she was like a school counsellor to me. She give me like things, notebooks, clock, calculator. She was my best friend... [She took me] to the education, education office, yeah, but they didn’t give us credit, I don’t know why. They give me some [tests] in grade 12 math, grade 9 math, grade 10 math, but I didn’t see the result. English, I did it. So they put me in Grade 12. [I thought], no, I didn’t do grade 9, grade 10, how will I go to grade 12?... She taught me everything they’re going to do in grade 12, it’s because of your age you’re in grade 12, but when you’re in grade 12 you’re going to do grade 9, grade 10, grade 11, that’s what I will get.

After the evaluation of her academic and linguistic abilities, Promise was placed in the ESL program. She had varying views on this placement, because she understood that she didn’t know the system or how to use Canadian English as others did, but at the same time she knew the English language better than many of her peers, including Canadian-born students who never had to go through the ESL program.

Maybe why they put me in ESL is because I have to be used to the system here, my English back home is different and the peoples system here is different, so that’s why they have to put me in ESL to catch up with other people... what’s the difference of speaking the Canadian and the Canadian doesn’t even know their grammar?” Because in the class, they ask us, “Give us some definitions of word”, and this Canadian say, “How long have you been here?” I say, “Two years”... “Where did you learn English? You know all these words?” I said, “I don’t even have to speak
like you people”. Like, they have to understand too, but they don’t do it… Because they [some Canadian students] don’t even, even a paragraph, a definition, common definitions, they don’t even know how to define the word.

And I spent, today is my two years since in Canada, right, last year I was in ESL. Yeah, I go to ESL, but every time, like, how can someone be in ESL and keep getting award from English, keep repeating the ESL? I get an award from English, but we keep repeating the ESL? So this semester, I said, “I’m not going to ESL”. They kept putting me in ESL, so I said I’m not going to ESL, they have to put me in grade 10 academic.

Promise shared two different stories about schooling and discipline where she got suspended from school, and in both cases she was suspended for actions that she committed after receiving what she perceived as racist remarks from other students. Both times a teacher was present and was aware of the situation, but did not address the discrimination.

Oh, and when I came here, they suspend me from school. This girl, we have gym class, she’s on my team, her name is M. So, she and I were on the same team, [we were arguing]… she call me a name, “A black monkey”…You see the teacher is there, she doesn’t want to say something. So, for me…. I expect the teacher to say something, but she didn’t say anything. The gym teacher, the short lady, she didn’t say anything… She saw it, and everyone was like, “What the heck, the teacher don’t want to say something?” I cool my temper for her to say something, she didn’t say anything, I beat M up, like I mess up her face and everything. So when they carry us to the office, so I told the Principal, the Vice Principal lady, I said, “She called me black monkey”, so they suspend me from school… So they called my parents, I wasn’t there for the meeting but I told my parents she called me black monkey. But I read, if anyone do racist to you they have to take them out of the school. But they didn’t do anything like that, like they only [talk to] my parents, and then they leave it.
For the second time, my science class, the teacher, Mr., I always forget his name. A science teacher, he’s on the second floor, I hate that teacher, seriously... These kids, because I don’t even talk in class! We are doing work, if they need help I will give them help, “Oh can you help me with this?” “Oh sure.” But they always being racist. “We don’t like black, I don’t like black.”... Because I’m the only black in the class, why would they say that, we don’t like black?... The white guys, they say they don’t like black girls. And they know if they say that I will get angry, I will get mad. And then I’ll say, “What’s the point? Having the white skin or the black skin is the same thing. So why are you guys being racist?” They said, “We are not being racist, we are just trying to express our feelings.”... And then it begin, an argument come. So they send me to the office. This teacher love to send us to the office. He knew [what they were saying], he knew!

Despite these experiences, Promise said that she never faced any discrimination, and that life is the same in Canada and in schools for everyone, no matter where they come from or their ethnicity.

They never do that to me [discrimination], never ever... I don't know, I don't know for everyone. [But] there is no difference [between people], everybody is learning the same stuff. Just teach, that's their job [teachers], to teach.

In Promise’s estimation, a good teacher is someone who cares about their students and helps them when they have difficulty. In fact, a good teacher can make the difference between success and failure because of the motivation that they inspire or stifle in their students.

Uh huh, from that class. I failed, I even failed science because I wasn’t concentrating anytime, yeah, he make me to lose my credit... Science looks difficult for me, its not like that difficult, but maybe I’m not focusing on it, that's why its hard for me. I didn’t like the teacher, seriously, that's why I failed science... I don’t like the way he behave, like he is being racist to the students...
All my classes I have now I love the teacher because if they love you, you love them too. Most of the teacher they love us. Um, [to be a good teacher], they have to encourage their students in class how to do their work, helping them if they don’t know it, um, and being nice to them. And teaching a good lesson.

The intersections of identity for Promise are fascinating and complex. As a Liberian who spent most of her life outside of Liberia and now is becoming a Canadian, Promise identifies primarily with the country of her family. The languages that she speaks represent an aspect of that identity, and allow her to communicate freely with people from the same ethnic group that her parents came from.

Liberia is my home, because that’s where my mom and dad came from. Guinea…it’s not my home. Yeah, I’m a Liberian, [and I’m] Gio. Yeah, I speak it [the language] well!... Yeah, if I speak Gio to her [my mother], she’s like laughing because she doesn’t expect me to speak it right… It is important yeah. Because if I go back home maybe…you know, sometimes if you go, they think you are not from the town your mom in, they think you are not biologically born there, so they against you, but if they know you speak the dialect, then they accept you... No, [I won’t speak it to my kids] because its not important for them because they haven’t been in my, if they go back home they will learn for themselves.

Because she has only been in Canada a couple of years, Promise doesn’t qualify yet for Canadian citizenship (it takes three years of permanent residence), but she is looking forward to obtaining citizenship and being able to travel freely. She would like to go back to her country and work eventually to help the country, but she prefers living long term in Canada because of the opportunity that exists here.

Yeah, maybe. I want to go, go see my family, next year maybe, if I become a citizen… Next year is going to make it 3 years, I have to get our citizenship. After school, I will go back home to see my family, just for a visit, (laughs), I don’t what to stay there properly!... You want me to go back home and suffer? No!... Even though there’s
peace in the country, but to get money is hard... In Canada you get the job easy, but back home I don't care, if you finish high school or university or college, it's difficult to get a job. The only time some person get a job is if you're a relative to the governor or, yeah, that's the only time they give you that position as a job.

I love Canada, nice country, I don't know, I just like it. [But] I don't have to stay here, I will travel outside Canada to different country to experience different worlds, to experience some things.

Yeah, I like Canada. You see, the government didn't bring us here to be a slave, right? They bring us here to go to school, to benefit, to do something better in our country. That's why they bring us here. That doesn't mean that if they bring us we are forced to stay in Canada. So if you know you can make your country to prosper, after you get good money to build your country up. The government will be so proud, just for example, if I'm a person who goes to school, and then I'm a doctor, and then I open a clinic all over the villages, and then if I take one big man from here, like, the government, one of the big man from the government to see the country, they would be proud of me, like, they will want to send for other peoples. Even though I accepted to become a Canadian, it doesn't mean I shouldn't help my country.

6.2.5 Summary Remarks

Promise's life story can be very confusing at times, and aspects of it remain difficult to understand after examining her dialogue in detail. However, the diversity of family relationships, background experiences, and times of migration inside, outside, and away from Liberia all point to the incredible complexity of her early life prior to migrating to Canada. Promise overcame a great number of challenges in her educational experiences and she demonstrates a strong ability to navigate complex situations and achieve success in a variety of situations and contexts.
6.3 Willifred’s Life Story

6.3.1 Life in Liberia

Willifred grew up in the capital city region of Liberia and lived with her mother and stepfather for most of the first 12 years of her life. At times she would move back to her father’s household if she wanted to spend time with her siblings. Her family did speak an indigenous Liberian language at home, but because she was living in the capital city, most of Willifred’s linguistic interactions were in Liberian English. She mentioned that her tribal group was viewed negatively by some of the others in the region, so she didn’t claim that aspect of her identity as being important in a typical social context.

I wasn’t born in the county, but my parents are from the country, and I was born in Monrovia in 1988... I lived with my dad like half, and then half with my step-dad, and then [my little sister] was born, 1999... I’m not going to say that I’m Kpelle in Liberia because they are going to think I’m stupid, that’s what they think about Kpelle people in Liberia, they think that, yeah...that’s what they think... Yeah, [I would speak Kpelle] with friends that knows how to speak that, yeah. But not everyone, because I think you know that in Liberia they have like 16, so everyone have their little group, yeah

Because of the time that Willifred was growing up in, and because of her location in the capital city, the Liberian civil wars were a constant part of her experiences. In this context, it often was advantageous to claim a Kpelle identity to avoid mistreatment by different groups.

In Liberia it is, because during the war there they didn’t kill a lot of us, so that’s good...I remember we used to run away from the war, way before we came to Ghana, way before we had to go, so, I can remember one time I think I got lost during the war, and I don’t know how I got back to my parents, I was very little, so I don’t remember much, but I remember we used to have like big loads on our heads,
and just going from place to place just looking for peace. And I used to hear all the
gun shooting and everything, but I didn’t see any dead bodies, yeah, but it was so
bad, bad. And then one time the rebels they took our food, oh yeah, they did! We
were going, and they always check, like the checkpoint on the road before you go
over or cross, they take like, they took we had rice, a little meat, they took
everything! And we were so hungry that day, I still remember that! I still remember
they took everything... But [Kpelle people], they didn’t kill them, they will take
things from you.: Yeah, but they won’t like torture you like most, maybe just like
sometimes if you have connection with the government or something, yeah, but not
usually

Oh yeah, you have to [speak your language]. You have to, just whenever you come
across them, you have to prove yourself. If you don’t, it’s bad. They know because
like they have, maybe they have someone who can interpret, but anyway, if you
don’t speak Kpelle if someone speaks it they will know they are speaking Kpelle,
they can tell... Like, the war, they didn’t really bother Kpelle people a lot, because
they thought that we were stupid, so I was lucky on that part, yeah.

The war also had an impact on Willifred’s schooling while she was living in
Liberia, because there was a constant struggle in the wartime economic difficulties to pay
for school fees.

Alright, it was rough, like same, struggle, war country, and I was in school, but it
wasn’t like constant because, like back home you have to pay for school, like from
elementary school all the way, so like, if you don’t have a job, how can you pay? So
like, sometimes I go to school, and then other times off, so it was like off and on...
Uh, I remember I used to go with my dad, fishing, like on the farm, and then school, it
was regular, and then things started getting really hard, so we had to leave and go.
But it was okay, sometimes no food, but we never go like a day without food, maybe
no food in the morning and then at night we eat, like that... Yes, from selling like just
little stuff, bread, corn bread, and oranges, like fruit, I don’t know if you know
kerosene, like that, just little stuff to survive and pay school fees... [Children who
don't have money for school fees], they go sell. They sell oranges, make little
business, and that’s it, yeah, maybe they will get money to go back to school next year, and they will just off and on and in and out.

Despite the difficulty of having to take breaks from school when the money wasn’t available, Willifred really enjoyed many aspects of schooling in Liberia, especially spelling and language.

Uh, I think I went to school, I remember I started when I was in kindergarten and then, like, it was always, like it wasn’t constant, it was like off and on... If you go late you get whipped (laughs). They always, like if you, if you don’t pass, they whip you, if you don’t go to school on time you get whipped. You have to wear uniform to go to school, and that too... It was all English, and maybe a little French, I used to take French, oh yeah, but I used to get whipped a lot because I didn’t, no, I didn’t know French, I used to get whipped a lot in that. Yeah, the regular spelling was all English, but, like the speaking is different, but everything was in English, yeah.

I used to enjoy the spelling contests, spelling, yeah, because I used to be so smart, and they put us in lines, and then if you get it right you whip your friend, oh yeah, like contest, if they put you in line, and they ask you to spell something, and if you don’t know it they go to the next, and if she spell it, then she’s going to whip me. I used to enjoy that, and then time for math, no, I’m like, I don’t want to go to school because I don’t know it.

The teacher usually had the textbook, and then they teach from it and they write on the board, and you have to copy, and you have to be fast... you have to write and you have to be fast, because as they’re writing, like they have to erase it and then make another, because its not like big. They have to erase write and erase, and you have to be fast, phew, a lot of stress.

I think I used to like the language, English, writing, spelling, I told you about the whipping in the competition! Yeah, I used to like that teacher very much... He explains well, yeah, he explains everything and if you have a problem you go to him after school, he takes like extra time and shows you everything, and if you miss a test he gives you extra time to take it. Some people don’t care, you have to pay
money first, some teachers back home, yeah, but he was nice. I still remember his name.

6.3.2 Refugee Experience

Willifred’s step-father decided in 2000, as the civil war was heating up again, that it would be better for his family to move out of Liberia to a refugee camp and hope for resettlement in a third country. He went ahead of his wife and children, and send for them to come through Cote d’Ivoire to Ghana.

I was very sad, because, I think, I don’t know, I don’t think we left Liberia because of war, I think we left because things were just really hard, so we had to go to Ghana for, I don’t know, better life, but it wasn’t easy, so. Yeah, we left in 2000 from Liberia in Ghana, so it was really hard. And for me to leave my friends back home, my school, yeah, it was sad... But he wanted us to go to Ghana to see if we could travel and stuff, but things were really hard in Liberia, no jobs, no, like food... I think part of it [was the violence], but not like, the whole thing.

It was a long, long, long drive. We went to Ghana, no went from Liberia, to Ivory Coast, and we had a really bad accident on the road, between Ivory Coast and Ghana. Like the bus fell down like in a valley, it was really bad, and my left ear, see, it hit. It was bad, it was bad... It was terrible, like it had, like people with broken legs, arms. No one died, but it was just, bad, yeah... It was scary, up till now, when I get on the bus, like, still, like I still have the fear, so, yeah... And the accident, in Ivory Coast, they couldn't treat us in the hospital because we didn't have any money. They couldn't touch us, and we had like all our stuff, our bags and everything was in the bus when the accident happened, so we couldn't get anything, we came to Ghana with nothing. Not even a bag of clothes or nothing, just, like that. Yeah, but my step-dad was already there with some friends, you know Liberian people, they always come around to help, so it was okay when we got there.

After arriving on the refugee camp in Ghana, Willifred was able to enroll in school on the camp, but school fees again were the limiting factor in her ability to attend school.
She admits that the constant fear of being kicked out or not being able to attend was a very stressful factor in her life, coupled with the general difficulties of refugee life on the camp.

Yeah, they had like a school, they wear blue and white, same uniform, yeah. But it was the same, you had to have money before you can go, it was off and on, it was off and on. Yeah... I don't know, I liked, just friends, and you were learning, but I was always on the edge because I was worried that they were going to kick me out of school because I don't have school fees, but it was okay... Yeah, yeah, it was, in class sitting, thinking, oh my god, they're going to kick me out. I didn't even have the proper uniform and stuff, so it was, it was okay because I have friends. When you are with your friends you forget, and then when you're alone you start to worry.

[After missing school, I would talk] with other classmates, yeah, and you have to ask them. Sometimes they don't even have the right notes because not everyone is so fast, sometimes their work is all mixed up and you have to look for the good ones, and just, its stressful when you miss a class. Yeah, yeah, its stressful

People got sick a lot, because like, the water, no water, its very, very hot in Ghana and then you don't have water, so its just, from the beginning it was okay, because [my mother], she had a sister in the US that used to send her a little money and stuff once in a while. It was okay and then things started getting really rough. Some, like I used to go around selling bread, and I just, yeah, I know how to bake cornbread, and I used to go around selling a little stuff, for water, just to survive. Yeah...just sell cornbread, oranges, and kerosene, and uh, this, uh, like we used to make fish, fish balls, and sell it too, yeah that too. It was okay, it was okay because I had a lot of friends, we had fun together, play too, yeah, it was fun with the friends, yeah.

I think it was more rough in Ghana than Liberia, because, I don't know, like the house, like when it rained, it leaks, and it wasn't like that in Liberia, it was different. Like you have a washroom inside, it was outside, and you didn't have any toilet in the house, you have to go in the bush, and then sometimes the Ghanaians chase you to kill you, so it wasn't the same, it was different... I even got chased, I got chased one time from the bush, yeah, it was bad.
The turning point in Willifred’s educational life was when she became pregnant at the age of 16. Her own words describe the difficult situation she faced as a result of that change.

I was so smart, oh my god, I used to get like this letter from my teacher, it was good, I use to get all 80s and 90s, with smiling face, I still remember, and then after I got my son, I don’t know, like, I wasn’t so good anymore, I don’t know why! I think life was harder, and then I wasn’t focused because I have to think about him, yeah, and I wasn’t so smart anymore. Yeah, but I had so much on my mind, maybe that’s why, stress and everything. It was already hard and then you have a baby on the refugee camp, it was rough, oh my goodness. Sometimes I didn’t even have water for him to take a shower, yeah, it was that hard.

I did [live with my family] for a while, and then my step-dad kicked me out, oh yeah, he kicked me out, it was tough, I was so little, I didn’t even know, I had to go live with my son’s granddad….oh my god, it was terrible. It was bad…no, I used to cry everyday because too much stress, they make you feel like you committed this crime, like, I know its not good when you are young to have a baby, anyway, it was too much...

Oh my god, its like a big crime if you’re in school and you get pregnant, its like you’re the bad one…Everyone, they think you’re like bad because you didn’t take care of yourself, and yeah, so, you can’t stay in school. You could stay in school but too much pressure its not good for the baby, so I had to drop out, and then after I went back…Yeah, I went to school off and on, I even got a little help from that thing, the NGO… Yeah, for my school fees, yeah, they did like, just before I came, they did… That one guy, his name was Daniel, he was from Canada, yeah, that’s how come I know, like, oh Canada. Yeah, he was from here, yeah, his name was Daniel, and he used to help a lot with my son, with the hospital, he used to bring things like food, clothes, for my son, and then also in the hospital they pay for it, he used to help.
6.3.3 Migration to Canada

Willifred’s mother applied to the United States for permanent residence and included Willifred on the application, but after going through the interview process their claim was abandoned because of the events of September 11, 2001. The family then applied to come to Canada, and Willifred was able to include her newborn son on the application because he was born on the day that the completed application was due. She went through the orientation process with the rest of her family and learned for the first time about the country she was migrating to with her son.

Yeah, [my mother applied to the United States], but then the whole September 11 thing happened, and then, we were almost, like we had the orientation and everything, but then it just finished... Yeah, they accepted us, but then the things went just like that, we didn’t hear anything from the states, anything, that’s how the name came up for Canada, so, and then, I was saying no, I want to go to the US! I wanted to, we were already half way through, and then we had to come all over for Canada. But Canada it didn’t take that long, the US took longer.

So, and then when our name came up, that’s when my son was born, the same day! So he was so lucky, that’s the reason he came, otherwise he would have to stay because I was pregnant at that time. So that same day I took his picture and took it to the city, so he was so lucky, yeah, yeah.

I didn’t go [to the Canadian interview] because I was still, I don’t know, Canada was really easy, but the US, all the kids have to be there, and they have to ask the question over and over but Canada I didn’t, I didn’t remember doing the interview, I didn’t do the medical either because I was, I think, 16, yeah. So I didn’t really go, yeah. I went for the orientation, yeah, but I didn’t go for the hard part! It was good, yeah, it was.

[I had never heard of Canada], not until they said we were going to Canada! No, I knew the US and Australia, and other countries, but Canada, no. I was like, Canada? Where is that? I actually wanted to go to the US because I had a lot of friends going
there, and not Canada, so why would I want to go to Canada. But then when I came I was like, oh!

[In the orientation] they talk about the snow, the cities, its so cold, you have to dress warm, and then they say its really hard for childcare, that one they said over and over. And they said it was hard, and it is! Childcare was hard, you don’t find it easily... Oh my god, I was so worried, I didn’t, I thought I wasn’t going to go to school because there’s no one to look after him...

I was worried, for the babysitting, because, oh my god, who’s going to help me so I can go to school... but I didn’t get to go to school a lot, and it was off and on, so I was worried about it, but I was happy about all the other stuff, oh you gonna get this, they give you this, they give you that, and you going to go to school, you don’t have to pay, I was happy about that... I was 16 I think, 16, 17, yeah.

After being accepted by the Canadian government for resettlement, Willifred and her family boarded a plane in Ghana and flew through London to Toronto. They arrived in the cold month of November and were unprepared for the weather, but were greeted by the local settlement agency that helped them find their first place to live in Canada.

We stayed so long at the airport, oh my god, in Ghana, because they told, they gave us like a different time, so when we went we had to stay for like, I think it was 12 hours or so, oh my goodness, I was so hungry, because we gave everything, all the money, the food, everything, you cant bring it with you, yeah, we stayed long there... We fly from there to I think it was England, yeah, London I think, I don't remember,

It was in November, the worst, oh yeah, the worst time, and the jacket we had from Ghana was so thin, but we didn’t know, they told us to dress warm but to us, that was warm, so, when we got here, it was no, that wasn’t good enough... It was so cold, so cold, like I don’t know, and then we had to stand in line somewhere I think for the permanent resident thing, and then after we went somewhere, they gave us some coat, boots, some diapers for my son, yeah... And then we came to the hotel in Hamilton, and I turned the heat on so high, and then I was sweating, and then I had to turn it back down again because I didn't want to be cold again.
Arriving in Canada was a blessing for Willifred, but things were difficult for her from the beginning because she was a young mother trying to start high school here. Well my mom, she was pregnant at the time, so she stayed home with my son. I used to go to the church, I used to go there with him before I go to school. And then we found a daycare, and every morning I had to walk, because I didn’t have a bus ticket, yeah, I had to walk, every morning I had to walk, take him to school, go to school, then I come from school, pick up my sister from school, take her home, and then go back for my son, so I, oh my god, it was just, it was a lot of walking, yeah. I think it was in January when I started school], because we came November, so I think it was November, I think it was after Christmas... We all went to one place and then they [the settlement agency] told us about the school and everything, and then we went to the school and look around... Then I did the language test at the school board, I did well, she told me, and I took it and I did well, and then they put me in ESLBO... It was so easy! And I thought I was doing so well, but it was ESL, because it wasn’t hard, so. And then later I learned that it was ESL and its not, its really low, I didn’t really know when I came so, because they don’t really tell you its just ESL, as a second language, I didn’t know it was that low until later... I would just do a little work, and spelling things, like, Gr. 2s, Gr. 1s, oh my god, is this how easy it is here?.. Then I started in ESLCO, CO, yeah, CO and then I went to Gr. 9 I think, I don’t even remember. Yeah, I just learned that, like, and I have to go do Gr. 9 applied or college, so yeah, I was disappointed.

Willifred began her schooling in ESL but felt that her teachers and classmates didn’t know anything about her background or capabilities. ESL was too easy, but when she asked the guidance teacher if she could join an academic English class, she was discouraged from doing it because the teacher said it was too difficult for her.

We had to tell them [our teachers] about Liberia. Yeah, we had to tell them first that we speak English, but you don’t tell them, they don’t know... Oh, we speak English,
but its just different, that’s all, that’s what I always tell them. I wanted to do academic English, but the teacher told me, “I don’t think you can do well in that, I don’t think you will.” And I went and I did well, I did do well in that. I was doing Gr. 10 English, I think it was applied, and I went to do Gr. 11 English, advanced, and then the teacher told me, “I don’t think you can do that, I don’t think you can do well in it, its very, very difficult”, and I was like, “No, I think I want to try”. And she was like, “No, I don’t think you can do well, maybe just do the English for everyday life”, I was like, “No”, and I was so scared, but I was like, you know what, I’m going to do it. So I did it, the academic English, and you know I did well. And its not really hard because they teach you step by step, they give you everything, they give you time to study, they give you everything, you just have to study and focus and you’re going to get the marks.

A major theme of the beginning of Willifred’s school career in Canada was that she felt like an outsider even though she wanted to fit in. She describes thinking that her skin colour and her accent marked her as different. One situation that occurred while she was in high school made this even more apparent to her when a teacher inappropriately talked about her race and compared it to having different colour hair and skin.

I mean, I don’t, I speak English, and I say it in Liberian English, and they don’t understand, and then when I go really slow, yeah, they understood what I said, yeah, so. Sometimes it was fun, but no one ever laughed at me because I don’t speak English well, but they were just, everyone is just going to be quiet and staring at you, like, what (laughs), and then they make you like, you don’t want to talk next time.

Yeah, I did feel different, I did because they don’t really talk to you, and even in the orientation back home they said, oh you can’t talk to anyone, they don’t say hi, or anything, how can anyone live like that?... No, I didn’t want to be different, yeah, I wanted to feel accepted and everything. But here if you’re different, it’s not good. They look at you like, and I don’t like that, so I didn’t want to be different. I wanted to be a student, and that’s it... [I was viewed different because of] my accent, my skin colour, my hair.
An event that happened, my math teacher told me once that, I don't know, he was just like, “Willifred, if you wake up one morning and then you got white skin and blonde hair, will you be so excited?”, that's what he asked me, and I'm like, “No,” I said, “No!” He actually told me that!... Yeah, I don't know, I felt bad though, because he made me feel that I don't like myself, I don't like the skin I'm in, I don't like my hair... I said, “Oh no, I like myself, like, I wouldn't want to be white. Its not that I don't like white people, but I just feel good myself”, so, that's what I told him. He didn't say anything, he didn't say anything after that, The whole class was just looking at him like, oh my goodness... I didn't really take it serious. I was feeling bad but I didn't want to show it to everyone, so I just like, it was just something that happened, and yeah, that's it.

And then another thing happened, in cooking class, I was a little late and the teacher said, “This is not African time, Willifred”. Oh my god, I felt so bad but I didn’t say anything because I was late. It was just right there so I didn’t know what to say, because she doesn’t know African time. Just because I’m late doesn’t mean all African people are always late. Some people are always late, but it doesn’t mean....so I don’t know why she said it. Maybe a lot of Africans are late in that class, maybe that’s why she said that, but I don’t know. Oh yeah, she said, its not African time!

After finishing all the courses she could at a regular high school, Willifred was over age to continue there and had to complete her studies at an adult high school.

I just graduated 2009. In school I didn't finish on time, yeah, I didn't finish on time. Yeah, that [ESL] is one of the delays. I started ESL and then had to do the regular school, so it took a lot of time... And I think I needed one more credit so I went to [adult high school] to finish because I was above the limit for age... Like they already tell you, like you have to be, like 20 or so, you can’t take it after that, and you already know, so, I didn't feel good, I felt bad, I wanted to graduate with my friends there, because I knew a lot of friends, I didn't feel good about it, but I had to do it. I wish I left earlier though, I think it would have been better, because like the adult school, it make you feel like you have responsibilities you have to do, so if you don’t
do it... yeah, but in high school you have friends, you feel young, you want to just waste a lot of time, but in adult school its different. I actually got good grade in adult school than in regular school... And you have like a lot of time [in adult school], they help you if you need help, you put your hands up and they help you, its not like in high school

When Willifred did graduate from adult high school, having completed her last course, she was very proud of her accomplishment, especially because she was unsupported through her schooling experiences after having to move away from her family due to difficulties with her stepfather. After high school she began working and hopes to apply for college soon to continue her education.

Oh, I felt so good [when I graduated] yeah, it was, it was a good thing, I felt like I, like I pushed myself so hard, like all by myself, just, it felt good, I felt.... I don’t know, I was staying by myself in high school and I didn’t have anyone to show my marks to, to talk about school, yeah, so I felt that I did it by myself and I did it, so, it was a good feeling, yeah

While Canada was presented to Willifred and her family as a good place with many opportunities, Willifred said that there are things about Canada that she had to learn the hard way. Jobs are not plentiful and easy to obtain here, and newcomers to this society often don’t have any guidance about how to navigate the systems and achieve their goals. This is also true about schooling, in Willifred’s mind, and she wishes that there was an opportunity for students who are new to Canada to learn the system and set out their goals with someone who will provide them with the knowledge then need to be able to acquire them.

Um, the hardest thing is coming here and not, and leaving everything back home, your friends, your family, like, everything, and start your new life from 0 to whatever, and then here when you come you don’t have anyone like ready to, we did
have people from church, but like, people who are always there, they take you
around, explain things...and know exactly what the things you should do... And
that’s why [the settlement agency] didn’t do well, yeah, they didn’t do well on that at
all, they just send you to school and that’s it. They didn’t tell you anything, they give
you stuff like clothes and things, but they didn’t really support you and give you
direction. Yeah, they didn’t do that... Yeah, even in my high school, they had a
representative there, and he had an office, but he didn’t really talk anything about
school, he always say, “Go in the closet to get some food and clothes”, that’s it... But
even giving them the jacket and something, they are sending them to go get it, you
are not doing it with them, or going with them... They should be more about school,
like give them more direction about school, like what to take, and what grades to
have in order to go to college or university... and you don’t even know, you don’t
even know, like, sometimes you hear from other people, that’s how you know, but
you don’t really know from the teacher or the counselor, no, you have to get that on
your own, yeah... Yeah, you want to learn, but you get frustrated and you stop trying.

Um, I think it’s different when you don’t know, like which direction to take, but in
other ways it’s the same [for immigrants and Canadians], if you are in the same
classes like Canadian I think it’s the same, but if you are not, like, ESL, is different
too. So it’s different in some ways and the same in other ways...But if an immigrant
is given the knowledge and the opportunity, then they have the same, yeah, it’s the
same, they going to do the same, maybe more, sorry (laughs), more ambition and
more experience, and they know the importance because they didn’t have that back
home, so... but, yes, they do lose that, yeah, because you keep trying for something
over and over and over and its not going anywhere, so you just say, oh my god, I
don’t know what to do, people discouraging you...

And moving to another place, you don’t know anyone there, the rent, like you don’t
have money, you have to go on OSAP but its not stable, so its, yeah and you have to
pay it back to, so its hard. It’s a lot... and if you even think about working, you don’t
even have a certificate, so if you’re going to work its going to be minimum pay, so if
you’re going to say I’m going to move here and work and go to school, its going to
take a long time because you have to pay rent, you have to buy food, you have to do
this, you have to do that, yeah its, its going to take a lot of time... And the experience
too, because here they say you have to have Canadian experience, Canadian experience to get a job. How will you get that experience if you don’t give someone a chance! You have to work, even a volunteer isn’t enough, you need work experiences, its not guaranteed. And I think most of these jobs, its all connections these days. Yeah, it’s all connections, who knows you, and that’s it.

They told us, they didn’t say any bad thing about Canada [at orientation in Ghana], the only bad thing was its so cold, its so cold, and they didn’t tell you that oh, you have to look for a job, and if you don’t have this certification you can’t get certain jobs, they just say, oh yeah, Canada is good. They make you feel that if you come here you’re going to get rich, and it’s not like that. I do tell people back home, yeah, but they don’t understand, so I don’t want to waste my energy telling them, and I don’t want to keep telling them my problems, I don’t want to do that... Back home there’s no jobs. At least there’s jobs here, yeah, like if you really look for a job you can get it. Even $10 an hour is better than no job, but back home, there is no job, and you have to pay for everything, or maybe you make a garden, you have to buy stuff, you have to pay for food, you have to pay for school, yeah.

With regards to diversity in Canada, Willifred had a very fascinating viewpoint about the difference between how people might think about others and how they are allowed to act in Canada, because of anti-discrimination laws.

I think there’s a lot of people here from all over, but...because of the rules and the laws, that’s what makes it better, but without the rules and laws, oh my god, there’s going to be chaos. Yeah, that’s what I think, because sometimes like you see how someone look at you, you know exactly what they are thinking, yeah, like, they don’t like you because of what they see on TV or because of your skin colour, or because, someone that looked like you did something to them before, and I don’t think it should be like that. I think you should get to know someone before you can judge them, yeah... People still have discrimination, yeah, not all, but some. Some do have it,
No, they don’t talk about it, because no one wants to look bad, maybe, or I don’t know! I feel that they show you something, like they are all nice, and they are...not all, but, not all... I don’t think they don’t like me, I think they don’t like something about me! Like in this building, they have some people in front of the building that are always looking, and they don’t say hi to you! Like you say hi to them, they don’t say hi, and then they keep looking at you, so why is she looking at me like that, what’s going on? I think if I say hi to you and you say hi back, then I know, but if you don’t say hi to me when I say hi to you and you keep looking at me, so, what do you want? Yeah...but I think Canada is a good country. I think it’s better if you don’t tell me that you don’t like me to your face. Like in the US if they don’t like you they tell you. Even though its rude, they still tell you, but in Canada its not like that, they respect you, even though they don’t like you they give you that respect, no one say I hate you because you’re this and that, that’s what I like about Canada. They have it but they keep it, they try not to bring it out, that’s what I like.

After being here for several years in Canada, Willifred does feel a certain affinity to this country, and she hopes to obtain her citizenship when she is able to afford the fees for the citizenship test and certificate. The idea of citizenship, though, in her mind, is a complex thing because of the reality that even when she becomes a citizen of Canada she will still be a Liberian, which will always remain a vital part of her identity.

I usually say I live in Canada but I’m from Liberia, that’s what I usually say... I don’t know, it doesn’t feel right [to say Canadian], I don’t know, because when I came here I wasn’t young like him [my son], so I’m not used to saying that. No, I’m not Canadian yet... No, I don’t know why, but I don’t feel good saying that. Not that I don’t, I just feel that people who are Canadian should be saying that, that were born here, I don’t know. I don’t feel Canadian... I don’t speak like a Canadian, that’s one reason why, like I’m Canadian, they’re going to look at me like, “What, you’re not Canadian, you don’t speak like Canadian”, so, that’s why I don’t usually say I’m Canadian. But I tell them how long I’ve been here, yeah, I always tell them that. I think its right in that way, even though its after 3 years you can become citizen. Okay, I’m going to say I’m a citizen but I’m not Canadian.
For me, I feel bad, I feel bad if I just say I’m Canadian, because I feel like I’m disowning my own country. I’m Canadian, and then I feel guilty, am I really Canadian? I’m Canadian but I just wasn’t born here, I have a country back home, I can go there and live there and retire there, so. I feel that I’m not telling the truth, that’s why, so. That’s why I always have to explain, like every time I have to explain (laughs). Sometimes people say, You’re English is so good, how long have you been here, six years, oh, I’ve been here 20 years and my English is not good.”

For her own son, who is now attending school here in Canada, Willifred hopes that he will hold onto his Liberian heritage, but emphasizes the importance of fitting in with the majority society through the use of the dominant language, at the expense of aspects of a Liberian identity.

Oh yeah, I actually want him to go there in school, like maybe for a year or so, in Liberia. I want him to know like, how real life is. Like, I want him to know that everything is not like this good, I want him to know like other parts of the world, things that other kids go through, yeah, I want him to know that so he doesn’t take life for granted I guess, yeah

No, I don’t want him to [speak Liberian English], it doesn’t help! Its not going to help, it’s not going to help him anywhere. No, because, I know they’re [Liberians] going to hate him for that, “Oh, he’s speaking Canadian English, Canadian boy”, they always say that, and I don’t care, I don’t. Because Liberian English, they understand other English, so it doesn’t matter what you speak. So its not, they are going to laugh at him, but yeah, I don’t want him to speak Liberian English, its not going to help him. If they don’t understand, like, other English, then I’ll say, oh you have to learn Liberian English, but its not necessary... I would rather that he learns French while he is here, more than in Liberia, so, I want him to learn French. They say if you learn French here you can get a good job, but I don’t know, maybe in Quebec, or Ottawa, or Montréal, yeah, so.
Yeah, he’s Liberian... but he was born in Ghana, so that’s another problem, because I want to say he’s Ghanaian, because he was born in Ghana, but I’m Liberian, his dad is Liberian. I want him to be Liberian, not Ghanaian.

But you know, people here they look at black and white. So if you are white, if no one asks you they are going to think that you are white. So if I’m black, everyone ask me, “So where you are from”, but if you are white, and you speak like Canadian...maybe if you speak a little accent, they are going to ask you where you are from, but if you don’t have any accent, they aren’t going to ask you, but if you are black, even if don’t have an accent, they are still going to ask you where you are from... Yeah, I think so, they even ask my son in school, they want to know... I think they want to know where he’s from, but not in a bad way, they want to know his background. So maybe if he was Canadian its okay, they just want to know.

6.3.5 Summary Remarks

Willifred’s life story highlights the outside life circumstances that can often affect one’s pursuit of education, both in a refugee camp and in the Canadian context. With family challenges and a pregnancy, Willifred had to choose to continue her studies on her own, despite recognizing how difficult it would be. While she feels that she has accomplished her main goals by graduating from high school, she recognizes that some of the challenges she faced may have been addressed if she was able to access better supports both in the education system and in the larger society.
6.4 Junior’s Life Story

6.4.1 Early Life in Liberia

Junior was born in the region of Liberia that is called the ‘interior’, or the ‘countryside’ and consists of all of the country that is not the urban areas on the ocean coast near the capital city of Monrovia. His particular region saw some very devastating fighting during the Liberian conflicts, and was often invaded by Liberian soldiers and those fighting in neighbouring Sierra Leone or Guinea. Because of the intensity of the fighting, Junior was forced to flee his village at an early age and leave behind the culture and linguistic group that made up his community and the primary aspect of his identity.

My parents are from Liberia, they are Gbandi, yeah, from Lofa, we are all from Lofa county... I was born in Lofa, but not in a city, but because I was a kid, I don’t know like, when I was a kid, there was a war. Yeah

Yeah! Actually, I couldn’t, I couldn’t remember anything when we were in Liberia during the war, because we were, I couldn’t like, I couldn’t feel anything, they just take me...yeah. It’s just like because like, we didn’t go to school in Lofa because that was the war... Yeah, actually in Lofa, I didn’t go to school in Lofa. But the community, there we just speak Gbandi, but I never learn how to write it.

Yeah, in my village, Charles Taylor [rebel leader] group was there, because like my grandfather, he is dead, my grandfather he built a big house. Yeah, he was a big man, he was a carpenter. Yeah, he built a big house, he had too much of wives, he put all his wives inside and his children, so when the soldiers came, they resettled there... yeah, they were living in the building now. So in the nighttime, they went to another village to take over, make other soldiers to fight them, so in nighttime we couldn’t sleep, we couldn’t sleep so much gunshot. Making woman up to fight... I think I was six years old, yeah.

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7 Junior spoke sparingly compared to the other participants about particular aspects of his life, and as a result his life story is somewhat shorter than the other participants, but still contains valuable data for the project.
6.4.2 Refugee Experience

When Junior’s family left behind their village and fled from Liberia because of the fighting, they went to neighbouring and nearby Sierra Leone and settled in one of the many refugee camps there. After a few years, however, Junior’s uncle, who was living in Monrovia, sent for his mother to come live near him, and Junior went along with his grandmother to help take care of her in the city. They settled in Monrovia in one of the refugee camps for internally displaced people fleeing the conflict that was engulfing the interior.

Okay. I’m from Liberia. But like, uh, when the war came to Liberia, that sort of damages was there, so actually we tried to move from Liberia to go to Sierra Leone, yeah, we moved to Sierra Leone, my uncle, I stayed with my dad, but my uncle stayed and went to Monrovia. After we were in Sierra Leone for two years, my uncle sent for us, my big brother, my big sister, with my grandmum, we went there and we spent more than, we were there for 6 years.

When I’m a little boy, my uncle came for us. He came for us, to take us, because all the, like, all the, my dad brothers, they were all in Monrovia, like before, when the war was going on, they all came to Monrovia. So when we went to Sierra Leone in the camp, in the refugee camp, so they all sent for their mom, for their mother. They all sent for their mother, and they sent one of their big brothers for him to pick her. So when they came they said they have to put some person on there so they can go with them, so me and my brother, we came first, with my grandmum, so when we came, that’s another, when we came they put us in the refugee camp in Monrovia again. So before like, still like, more than 5 month, 4 month they sent for my sister. My grandma said to my uncle, she told my uncle to send for my big sister, so she sent for my sister, and my sister came. So when my sister came, she was staying in Monrovia in the city, we were in the camp, she was helping my uncle for the business. Yeah, my uncle, he was studying business
So like, me, like, god just, god just does me, when we were in the camp, in Monrovia, in the refugee camp in Monrovia, I have lots of sickness, I couldn’t like, my grandma couldn’t think that I would survive... I was, I was more like ten years, my grandma really suffered for me, and yeah, she used to take me to the hospital, bathe me, yeah. So, sometimes I could feel like fever, you know, all my sickness, just like, when I feel a headache I can know I’m getting sick. I have to get aware of it, because if I don’t make it fast, its going to get worse.

In the camp in Monrovia Junior was able to enroll in school for the first time in his life. He attended a poorly funded school on the camp that was held underneath a tent, and then eventually moved into the city with his uncle where he was able to attend a more formal school.

When I was in the camp [in Monrovia] I went to school, yeah... I can’t remember, that's too far, like, actually, like, in the camp schoolhouse it’s just a shelter, a tent, and that was the school, like, that was it... Yeah that was how the school building looks like in the camp, that’s where we used to go to school, just like, there was no chair, there was no, we just it down on the floor... Yeah, you just sit on the ground, the rough ground. It was so bad. You have to pay school fees there.

When I went with my uncle I was in school. But before like, when we came from the camp, at that time there was no more camp, in Monrovia, so we were in the city now with my uncle... Uh, in Monrovia camp, I was in Grade 2, yeah, when I move in the city with my uncle to live with him, I went to grade 4, in 2004. And then in 2006 we went back in Sierra Leone.

The reason that Junior moved back to Sierra Leone after living with his uncle and grandmother in Monrovia was because his family thought that they might be able to resettte to a third country, like Canada. Most of Junior’s family had stayed in the refugee camp in Sierra Leone when he went to Monrovia with his grandmother, and two of his siblings had serious health concerns that qualified them as higher needs refugees. This made it more likely that Canada would accept them for resettlement on humanitarian
grounds, and Junior needed to be with his family in Sierra Leone during the interview process if they wanted him to join them in migrating to Canada. This process took three years, and during that time Junior attended school and worked with his family to be able to afford school fees and hospital treatments for his siblings.

In 2006 we went back to Sierra Leone, but before that we were in, before that we left in Sierra Leone, I had like 5, 6, brothers, with one sister, but the other, my sister was having heart problem, yeah my sister was having heart problems before we left. She was having heart problems, one where her heart wasn't working, yeah... And like, my other brother, my other brother he was had, I don't know, they call it epilepsy, yeah. He was having epilepsy and he would just faint, like anytime... Yeah, shaking like, spitting, yeah, like, he suffer from that for a while, like, almost like for more than three years.

My brother died with that epilepsy, but he suffered from that sickness for a while, he get too much, he suffered, he get too much like sore on his skin, too much of pain, so outside it was suffering for him. Because we used to take care of him, wash him, sometimes when he suffered we have to bathe him. So when he suffer so much, finally, God has take him, but like, he just died and it didn't even take a month till my older sister died too.

I was in [the refugee camp], it was a big camp in Sierra Leone... I live with my...because when we went back to Sierra Leone, there was no mother, there was no father. My father was in Liberia, my mother was taking care of my sister in... yeah, in Freetown. So I was just with my brother.

Uh, we made farms. We make farms, like, me made rice farms, potato farms, cassava farms, and uh, we sold them, in the camp yeah, that was in the camp, yeah, because we made 7 years in the camp, 7 years... Yeah after school we go to work. Like the day, because back home we come from school like 2:00. And after 2:00 we go on the farm, until like, uh, (laughs) sometimes we used to be like 8, pm, sometimes 9 pm we coming home. But only us we used to go to school, after school we used to go and meet our family on the farm, so that's how we used to get our school fees.
The differences between school here and back home, is here you don’t pay school fees and back home we pay school fees. And, here like, some schools, they use a uniform, but like in Africa all the schools use uniforms. Yeah, and like, like, here, you don’t do like, you only take 8 subjects a year, but back home you take 12 subjects a year. 12 subjects, so that will be like crazy to study, yeah, exam times come, and like, and here exam is like, you take one exam and go home, but like Africa, you take like four exams in one day. Yeah, in one day, so its actually difficult back home. 

Back home learning is actually difficult. Yeah, too much of struggle, you have to struggle for school fees, you have to make a lot of contract to get money to pay your school fees, but like here you just go to school, and you learn anything you want to do. Yeah, but back home its actually difficult.

Because over there, like, when you are over there you don’t actually, because you have to work, you have to make contract to make money to pay your fees, and like when you grow up you have to take care of your family, you have to live on a farm, so it would be very hard to go to school. Yeah, it would be very hard to go to school.

Junior’s education in Monrovia and in Sierra Leone was all conducted in English, but because he spent his earliest years in the countryside, Junior’s first language was the tribal language Gbandi that he spoke with his family and with everyone in his village. He learned English during his refugee experience, and considers it his second language.

Yeah, I speak real Gbandi. My grandmom doesn’t speak English, just Gbandi... No, English is my second language... Actually I started learning English in Sierra Leone, and we was there in 2004, and when we went to Monrovia I knew how to speak English.

6.4.3 Migration to Canada

As mentioned earlier, Junior’s sister and brother both had significant health issues that they were dealing with while living in Sierra Leone. Because the conflict in Liberia was officially over at this point in time, resettlement to Canada required a special case, and Junior’s family qualified because of these health issues.
We were in Monrovia in 2006, and my dad sent for us, because we were like, because of my sister, because of my sister case, we were on the, because in Africa if you want to come to, if you want to come North America, yeah, you have to be, like you have to have some case that would cause you to come, but you have to get someone abroad to send for you. So that was the case we were fighting for... But I lost my sister and my brother. Yeah. My brother died in 2010, yeah.

Because over there, when you get that kind of case, when the person died, its very hard for you to come back, its very hard for them to pick up your file. Yeah, so when she died we wasn’t thinking about coming here so much. My dad wasn’t living with us, he was living in Liberia, yeah, he was living there and he was working... he was working some kind of, take care of people, to teach people, to fix cases between people. So when they died, my dad came, he said, “I don’t think this case is going to work again”, but the guy who was after the case, who can make you come, he told my dad and my mom, “No, you shouldn’t go yet, there can be still hope.”... That would be the hope, so we stayed for a while, like, we stayed for a while... So like when my sister died now, America rejected our paper, and Australia rejected our paper, so Canada was the one that took it.

Finally, we got our interview, because the capital city of Sierra Leone they call Freetown, that’s the Sierra Leone capital city, yeah, they called us to Freetown for an interview. When we went for the interview, like, because before you came here you have to, you have to really suffer, you have to do a lot of work, yeah you have to do a lot of work, its not easy to come here. Right now people are sitting that, over there, they are trying to come here, yeah. So before we came here, we went in too much of problems, too much of hard times, too much of poverty, live farm, swamp, so...

The hope that Junior’s family had to still qualify for resettlement was realized and they were granted interviews and orientation before leaving Sierra Leone and travelling to Canada.

Yeah, we had interviews, in the capital. Uh, the interviews, like, there’s a guy, he used to call my parents to interview for like, sitting like this, doing like how you are asking me questions, and signing it, writing it. Yeah, if like, if another person come,
what you say, if another person come, and they ask that person, the person have to say the same thing. If the person say a different thing, they say you guys are lying, they will not trust you. So you have to put your words together, before you go for the interview you have to sit and talk about what you’re going to say. Yeah, you have to sit down; you have to say with your family, discuss what you guys are going to say on the interview. You have to say the same words. It’s kind of crazy

Um, I think about that, like, it was actually, it wasn’t a good thing, yeah, because like, you don't remember everything, what you say, you don't remember everything. And like, your family, I may say something, I may say something different and you go say something different to another person. Like if I say something to this person, and then you may go say a different thing. So, like, the thing that we would discuss already, for us to sit in one place, I will say this, you go and say this, if I go say different word, you go say different word, yeah... Yeah, that actually was a hard thing

And then we got a call; we got a call that Canada have accepted us to come... Before we came to Canada, there’s a lady came to interview us how is everything, how when something happened, like when fire alarm comes in your house, how can you call 911... Yeah, this was in Freetown. How you can call 911, or if you don’t know your address, how you can make just, call 911 and put the phone in your ear so they can look for you, they give us a bag, its called Welcome to Canada. Yeah that’s the bag that when you’re walking with your dad or mother, that’s the bag that has to hang in your hands. So if like, if the people that are working in the airport, when they see it in your hand, they will say, come this way, so you will follow them, and they will take you where you’re supposed to be... I didn’t know anything about Canada. I didn’t even know if you, like, because back home, police, if you have, we don’t have anything to call 911 there, yeah, but like, I didn’t even know if something happened in the house you have to call 911, what is the number of 911, I didn’t know anything about that. But she showed us everything, and we wrote the number down.

We stayed like; before we came here we stayed like for one month. In 2010 April, we came to Canada. We catch a flight in April... Uh, it was a Canadian flight, I don't
know, I think England flight because we changed like, we changed two plane... Yeah, took us to a van, and the van took us to Hamilton. So, uh, when we get here, it was dark, yeah, we got here in the night, to [the settlement agency], we had all good foods, good drink, yeah.

[I was] a little bit nervous (laughs). I was afraid, because like, when I come here I didn’t know, I don’t know anyone, I don’t know no site, yeah. Like, about the weather, like back home the weather is so hot, like when we pass on the street we don’t wear shirt. But like when winter time comes, when winter reach here you have to wear the boots, you have to wear the coat, you wear something that will make you warm, but over there we don’t have winter.

6.4.4 Life in Canada

Junior and his family arrived in Canada in the spring time when there were just two months left in the school year. He was registered for the nearest public secondary school, and began his studies in the ESL program, at the most basic level despite having years of schooling in the English language.

Yeah, I get to school in the end of April. I think so... The school I’m going to is an immigrant school. Like, its there for like, of course it's a Canadian school, but like, its also immigrants are there, not only immigrants, Canadians are going there too.

My first day of school was like, a little bit nervous and scared, a little bit lonely, because like I didn't have no friends there to go to hang out with... Actually, when I walked through the door, because first, before I went to school I went with my dad to register to the school, to the office, to the principal. So we got through all of that, they tell me when you can start school. So I went to school... My first day in school, like, my first day in school was like a little bit hard on me, because like, lunch time I just sit in the class and go nowhere, so kinda nervous and sad, I said if this was back home, we making a lot of noise, like, hanging out with friends, but right now we come down sitting, and my first day in school was actually a blessing for me. My teacher gave me five dollars for my lunch. Yeah, that was the, that was my first day.
The teacher gave me money in the school. He gave me $5 for lunch, and I went in the cafeteria to buy something to eat. Yeah

Yeah, up to now I am still in ESL classes, they still put me there to ESLAO. Yeah, it was already May now, so they tried to put me there, so 2011 I went to B. Because we have like, semester 1, and semester 2. In semester 1 I went to B, semester 2 I went to C, that was last semester, I was to C, I was in C. Right now I’m in D... Yeah, February I started D, so September next year September I’m going to start E, I’m going to start E, and after I’m going to start regular English.

They put me in ESL to improve my English. They put me in ESL to improve my reading, yeah, reading and writing. Mostly reading, and writing, because my handwriting is not actually good... I think it was a good idea, because I wanted to, I still wanted to improve my English because my English is not, kind of, good. And my writing. I still want to improve my English and writing.

I was thinking that it was easy and boring, like, because how will you tell me to spell C-A-T or D-O-G or write ABC? If I already know it...yeah, some teacher or some of my friends, yeah, I always tell them that in my country, you know when they used to give note to people, oh you should do translation, like because in my country we doesn’t do languages, they only teach about English, we only take English courses, so I used to tell the teacher, I said, “I don’t know how to write in my language [Gbendi], I don’t know, so I only learned about English, so I want to do it in English”, and she said, “Okay, you can do it in English”, because, yeah, Liberia is an English speaking country... Like, my ESL teacher right now, he still want me to be, he still want me to take ESL, because he still wants me to improve my reading and my writing. My ESL teacher is the one that is putting me, making me take ESL until now, because he still wants me to learn like, to improve my reading and writing. So that’s why to this day I’m still in ESL... I would rather be in regular classes; I want to take regular classes next year, in September.

Junior’s schooling in Canada has been mainly in the ESL program, but he was able to take some other courses as well (he wasn’t sure if they were topical ESL level courses or not, i.e. ESL geography etc.). He really enjoyed these other courses and was looking
forward to the next step in his education when he would be finished the ESL program.

However, because of his age, he will have to finish the last half of his schooling at an adult school.

Yeah, actually I love social studies, I love social studies, I wish I could take that course, but not yet, I only took, uh, ESL history, Canadian history, and civics, Canadian civics, and geography, yeah... Uh, I have 16 credits, and I need 34, yeah... I’m not going to go to that school again because of my age, yeah. So I’m going to go to adult school, so I will go to adult school or I will go to [a different school] to get my high school diploma.

I want to go to college... I don’t actually know yet. I don’t know what to study yet. But I want to go to college to learn like, to learn like, if I want to take business, to learn about business, or accounting, or like engineering... but somewhere else, maybe, because in particular Ontario is kinda difficult to find a job, but some places, if there is a job there, yeah, and like, Ontario tax is so big, yeah. I might go towards, like Alberta, or Calgary, or Vancouver, or Manitoba.

Aside from planning on further education after high school, Junior also hopes he can go back to Liberia sometime and visit his family again. He feels a very strong tie to his people back home and to the country of Liberia, but he likes Canada very much and looks forward to when he can claim to be a Canadian citizen.

I would say I’m Liberian Canadian, of course I’m not a Canadian yet, but I will be a Canadian, but right now I’m still a Liberian... I would say I’m from Liberia, because I was born there, uh, Liberian, and then Canadian, and then Gbandi is after. As for me that’s the, yeah.

Canada is a good country, they have good people, they doesn’t offend you like, how they feel, yeah, like, you are free, like, yeah, they have free health care, they have free school, they doesn’t pay for high school, that’s more of an advantage that they have, like free health care. In America you have to a pay before the doctor touch you, yeah, but here they have... Yeah, because you can go anywhere and you can come
back anytime, but if you are not a citizen you go, you have to tell the time you will be back, so when you are Canadian, whenever you want to go and anytime you want to come back you are welcome, yeah, and like when you are Canadian, they can’t send you home again, they can’t send you back home again, they can’t deport it because you are already a Canadian, you are part of Canada.

Yeah, sometime, I wish to go back [to Liberia]. To go see my family, to go see my friends, my schoolmates, maybe when I get older I will go and live there... [Speaking Gbandi] its important to me because when I try to go back home I will be able to talk to my people in my language, like my sister, my family, my uncles, my grandmother, my grandfather, so I will be able to speak to them so they can understand me, not just English, because my grandmother doesn’t speak English, only Gbandi... Its important, yeah, because they will be able to talk to my people, and they will be able to understand when they talk to them in Gbandi, (pause), you know language is important, its good to know many languages.

6.4.5 Summary Remarks

Junior’s life story differs from the other participants’ because of his mostly stable family situation and his background of living in the Liberian countryside for the majority of his childhood. The cultural differences between the urban and rural areas of Liberia, as well as the different experiences of the conflict that he had because of his location, provide us with an important understanding of how diverse the experiences may be between different members of the same cultural or national group.
Chapter Seven – Discussion and Analysis

7.1 Introduction

This research project began with the intention of examining the life histories of Liberian youth to develop answers to the question of:

How do Liberian youth negotiate their personal and social identities in the context of the Canadian public education system?

To achieve this goal I engaged in the lives of four youth who agreed to share their particular histories, experiences, thoughts and feelings with me to try and help me better understand how they personally negotiate their identities while engaging with the school system here. Each of the four participants opened up to me about their family, home life, language use, previous schooling, paths of migration, experiences of war and suffering, expectations, hopes, anxieties, and difficulties. It is my role here to attempt to critically analyze what they have shared with me in the context of the historical settings that their lives have been lived in, and present a discussion and analysis of the topics and themes that they have shared.

With this in mind I have analyzed the life histories of the four participants in the study and have recognized particular themes and findings that I believe are both relevant to the situations faced by similar youth in the educational system, and also important for educators and policy makers to consider for the benefit of students. I have presented these themes and findings in this chapter, with the understanding that they are my representations and analyses of other people’s stories. While they are based on careful and thorough readings of the data coupled with in-depth research in the historical contexts and
the relevant academic literature, I posit these findings as my best interpretations of this data.

The themes that will be discussed here are: 1) negotiating identities, complexity and *mouvance*, 2) the power of schooling, and 3) fitting ‘out’ and fitting in – otherness and resilience. An analysis of the life histories of these youth must begin with an examination of the complexities of their identities, and how they understand and represent the multi-faceted aspects of themselves. By foregrounding the identities that these participants claim and represent, I hope to provide the necessary conditions for us to examine how they interact with the educational system in Ontario, and the ways that schooling impacts and re-interacts with them. This discussion will help us understand a little bit more about the consequences (positive, negative, and otherwise) of the intersection of who these students are and how the school system educates them. It becomes clear at this junction that while the dominant discourses of society and education position these students as fitting outside the norm and occupying a space of otherness, the participants demonstrate exceptional resilience in their complex and dynamic negotiation of identities as they seek to claim a position of equality and equal opportunity in this society. This is the path that this discussion will take below.

### 7.2 Negotiating Identities – Complexity and Mouvance

In the context of this research project, identity is understood to be a very complex and multi-faceted aspect of a person’s life that reflects the influence of a variety of factors that contribute to the socially-constructed nature of identity (Gérin-Lajoie, 2005; Bucholtz and Hall, 2010). The shifts, fluidity, and negotiation of identity that occur during a person’s
life happen “according to how the subject is addressed or represented” (Hall, 2006, p. 253) and are therefore a reflection of the social, personal, and politic interactions that an individual has experienced and been influenced by during their lifetime.

In the life history interviews that were done with the four participants of this research study, a large amount of time was spent discussing schooling and experiences in West Africa before the participants migrated to Canada. This time and effort served many purposes, including developing a rapport with the youth and allowing me to ask them about their lives beyond the everyday experiences that most Canadians would be familiar with. However, the most valuable contribution of this discussion of the participants’ backgrounds was the data that was shared with me regarding the influences that affected how they viewed and positioned themselves. Gérin-Lajoie (2005) recognizes this social positioning as

“The phenomenon of mouvance, or this back and forth process experienced by people in society, [which] will influence, at the individual level, their identity path… due to the fact that it calls individuals to positions themselves in regards to their social and linguistic practices (p. 903).

Delving into the participants’ backgrounds pre-migration is important in that the youth were able to provide a vast amount of information regarding how they developed their personal and social identities in the particular contexts and situations that they found themselves in. Like the bulb of a flowering plant, these experiences lay beneath the surface of their lives here in Canada, but were intimately connected to and largely responsible for how they go about their lives here, post-migration. I as a researcher would never be able to understand the ways that these youth negotiate their identities and social locations in relation to the educational system unless they were willing to share with me the aspects of themselves that often remain hidden in the past.
What becomes clear when the backgrounds and pre-migration lives of these youth are examined and analyzed is that there is an incredible amount of complexity and diversity in their backgrounds and in their identities as a result. A shared national or ethnic identity as Liberian youth groups them together, but they have vastly different educational experiences, and linguistic interactions and competencies. These aspects of their lives greatly impact their personal identities and also serve to represent how diverse the population of one small group of students really is, despite shared aspects of their national identity (Anderson, 2006; Hall, 2006).

The goal of this analysis is to represent the ways that these individuals in the school system represent very complex identities that must be recognized as distinct in a variety of ways from one another. Unfortunately, in the context of Canadian society, the discourse around members of groups that are deemed to be part of a ‘minority’ (representing something that is different from the dominant majority, which is in this case white, Canadian-English speaking, mainstream youth) positions all members of a minority group together and ignores the differences within that group (Ship, 2001; Connelly, 2008). This is what allows the concept of a ‘visible minority’ to maintain itself as a means of labeling groups of people in Canada who do not fit the norm of white dominance. As Daniel Yon (2000) states,

In a simplistic reading of bodies invoked by discourses of ‘visibility,’ Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, for example, are lumped together with Hong Kong nationals who arrive in Canada with substantial capital and differences within are flattened out and made secondary to differences between ‘visible’ groups. This practice follows the logic of cultural pluralism and the belief that if one knows the culture of Others, then it will be possible to tolerate them, accommodate them, join them, or simply stay away from them. (p. 143)

I hope to disrupt the notion that the participants represent a homogenous group of people that can be labeled together and therefore treated as a whole through generalized
educational methods and approaches. The consequences of recognizing this diversity and complexity must be taken into consideration, and is discussed below.

A comparison of the academic experiences of the four participants reveals not only different levels of achievement, but also varying degrees of connection to the educational process and systems, based on prior experiences with teachers and schools.

Daniel and Willifred both spent the majority of their schooling in a refugee camp in Ghana, but while Daniel was able to continue through school with a soccer scholarship, Willifred had to leave several times either because of conflict with her step father or because she became pregnant. Promise also had many disruptions to her schooling because she was moved from place to place by her family and spent two years working on a farm while other children her age went to middle school. Junior’s experience was mostly similar to Daniel’s, in that he was able to attend school regularly, but the demands of working on the family farm to provide money for the whole family affected his education in Sierra Leone.

While some ESL students in Canada, such as Daniel, may have attended school regularly and progressed through elementary school at a consistent rate, others such as Promise and Willifred may have had greatly interrupted schooling that was devoid of structure and continuity in preparation for attending secondary school in Ontario. Their prior educational experiences also varied greatly with regard to interactions with teachers, and investment in the learning process. These two factors have influenced their willingness to advocate to teachers for their particular needs in the classroom, and also to pursue additional help when required because of an investment in their schooling.
The linguistic diversity of this group of students is also truly remarkable despite their shared cultural and national background. Daniel’s linguistic repertoire is limited to Liberian English, which he is very careful to say is, “not broken English, it’s just English with an accent; it’s still English, it’s not broken.” Promise also learned the indigenous language of her family when she lived in the countryside as a young teenager and has vast experience living among linguistically diverse populations during her time in the countryside of Liberia and in Sierra Leone. Junior also lived among the Krio-speakers of Sierra Leone, but his experience is unique from the other participants in that he considers English to be his second language, and the indigenous language of his family his first language. He can list three different languages that he is competent in and has used in a wide variety of contexts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Canada. Finally, Willifred’s linguistic repertoire spreads across English and the indigenous language of her family, but she gives special importance to “proper Canadian English” over “broken Liberian English”. The indigenous language of Willifred’s family would only be helpful in her mind in the case of another civil war, where linguistic affiliations can protect you from persecution from other groups.

The importance of these differences in linguistic competencies and views of language are summarized in Jim Cummins’ work on public language education. The metalinguistic awareness that is developed when a student interacts in more than one language most often provides that student a substantial foundation for learning an additional language, such as standard Canadian English (Cummins, 1981). The students in any single ESL classroom will have vastly different competencies in written and oral languages, in experiences of code-switching and translation, and in their understanding of grammatical concepts and structures. Attitudes towards languages and language learning
also play a role in how an English language learner will be motivated to learn in their new school context (Cummins, 2001). These attitudes are not simply carried with the student into the classroom but the messages that the school and the teachers communicate to the students about their first languages and language abilities impact each student's personal identity in profound ways. As May (2000) emphasizes, language is a vitally important aspect of a person’s identity, because it is the means through which they demonstrate their own personal identity to others, and respond to the words and actions of those around them. When Liberian youth hear and recognize negative attitudes towards their home language of Liberian English (i.e. “broken” English), it can have a real impact on their interactions with the ESL classroom and curriculum.

The complexity of identities that is demonstrated through the participants’ experiences of language and prior schooling have made clear the fallacy of the discourses of “groupism” (Brubaker, 2004) that gather all four participants together in the Canadian educational context into a single unified body with shared characteristics. In fact, the different experiences and influences that each participant has gone through have worked to socially construct their personal identity path in very distinct ways (Gérin-Lajoie, 2005). Recognizing this distinct nature of a student's identity is essential for engaging them in schooling and contributing positively to the continued construction of their identity in relationship with their new contexts post-migration. Alternatively, ignoring the particular aspects of a student's personal and social identity results in the positioning of that student in social categories that block out and erase their distinctiveness and rob educators of the ability to meaningfully engage with each of their students.
7.2.1 Mouvance – Negotiation and fluidity

Recognizing the diversity and complexity of the backgrounds of a small group of students, such as those that have participated in this research project, helps provide us with a foundation upon which we can analyze their choices and actions with regard to representing themselves and negotiating the identity options that are available to them. The concept of identity that I have applied to this analysis is laid out previously, and presents one’s identity as a shifting and complex notion as opposed to a stable, permanent and singular aspect of one’s self. This shifting and fluidity is recognized as *mouvance*, where borders between identity options are crossed and navigated according to the positioning that an individual claims in different settings and situations (Gérin-Lajoie, 2005).

The way that the youth in this project presented themselves in particular contexts within the social and educational settings in Canada varied from situation to situation, and provided them with the opportunity to position themselves in particular ways in different contexts. The purpose of this varied positioning is often in response to the power relations that are being enacted in a situation, and the youth adopt certain aspects of their identity to accommodate those power relations (Sarkar and Allen, 2007) and to exercise individual agency in their social contexts and lives (Holland, et al, 1998).

*Mouvance* is represented in the data of this project in the ways that the participants recognized the value of identifying as a member of their particular tribal group within Liberia in particular locations or in a conflict situation. Choices were made to identify as members of the tribal groups Kpelle or Gbandi when it was advantageous, but then to move to a Liberian or West-African identity in refugee situations when their particular tribal identity provided no positive impact on their social positioning.
Because of limited prior experience and exposure to people or news from the country of Liberia, the majority of Canadians’ prior experiences extend only to an understanding that Liberia was a place of a brutal civil war where the disgraced leader Charles Taylor committed atrocities that he was indicted for before the international criminal court in Den Hague, the Netherlands. Echoing Brubaker’s (2004) discussion of national identity and conflict, Willifred noted that in her interactions with Canadians who recognize her as being born outside of Canada, she was labeled according to an incomplete conceptualization of the Liberian conflict:

[They ask] “where are you from?” And I’m like, “Liberia”. “Where is that?” And I’m like, “In West Africa”, and I explain with the border and everything, because a lot of people don’t know, a lot of people don’t know Liberia, and I’m like, “Its by Nigeria, its around Guinea, its around this”, and they are like, “Oh, oh, Charles Taylor”, and I’m like, “yeah”, and they’re like, “Oh, I know!” Everyone know Charles Taylor, like everyone. They don’t even know the current president, but they know Charles Taylor, so yeah.

When the association of your cultural and national identity is solely based on the war crimes of a former leader, it is not uncommon for youth to judge a particular situation and the potential consequences of identifying themselves to others as Liberian. The relations between the youth and the outsider then determines how the youth will represent themselves in different contexts; at times they will identify as African or Canadian, and at other times, when it is less likely to bring out negative stereotypes or reactions, these same youth may identify as Liberians.

The fluidity of how Liberian youth negotiation their identities does not result solely from the power-relations being enacted in their interactions with others. Another aspect of the complexity of their representation and identification is the limited and disjointed manner in which they developed a Liberian identity in the country of their birth (Joseph, 2010; Hampshire et al, 2008). All of the participants left Liberia before they entered high
school, and spent the majority of their youth living in refugee camps, and then in Canada as permanent residents before some of them were able to obtain citizenship. This results in a sense of identity that is located in a place that the youth have very little recollection of, yet deep-seated ties to. This reflects the uprooted sense of identity that Okom’s (2008) work discussed with Liberian youth in the United States, where the students in a mid-western American high school demonstrated ties to the country of Liberia, which they have very little experience, or memories of. The youth in this project are tied to their Liberian roots, but as Daniel mentioned, they know very little about the history or political situation of their own country. They face a difficult situation of claiming a national identity that they understand mostly by proxy, through the stories and experiences of the older members of their community. This difficulty is represented well by the discussion Willifred shared with me regarding the national identity of her son, who never lived in Liberia itself. The conflict in her mind was between claiming a Liberian identity for her son who was born in another country that she does not want to be a part of his identification, despite his legal nationality being listed as Ghanaian.

Promise experienced fluidity in her identity when she grew up in Guinea with a relative’s family, and was part of an ex-patriot community where “most Liberian people run away to Guinea and they become a Guinean. So they spend all their lifetime in Guinea”. In this context, it would be understandable for her to adopt a Guinean identity as part of her self. Promise, however, decided that she would solely identify as Liberian in that context because she felt that her life “was a refugee life in Guinea” so she wouldn’t claim a Guinean identity there.

In the context of Canada, the youth demonstrated incredible ability to negotiate the need to identify with different groups or social positions at various times according to
the positions available to them. It makes sense to them to claim a Liberian identity within
particular groups when it is a matter of pride and self-expression. It also makes sense to
claim a Canadian identity when the citizenship benefits (such as travel, security, and
membership in the dominant group) provide the youth with social and personal
advantages. Alternatively, when in Liberia, or among the Liberian community in diaspora
in Canada, it is at times advantageous to claim an identity as Krahn, Gbandi, or Gio for the
youth in relation to other Liberians.

The capacity to position themselves according to social contexts demonstrated by
these participants reveals a complex and thorough understanding on the part of the youth
of how power relations are at work in institutions and in social interactions. The ability to
navigate the potential dangers of claiming particular identities in particular contexts while
adopting what is beneficial or necessary in other contexts is truly remarkable in the lives of
these young people. Rather than placing themselves in a stable and fixed position, they
have demonstrated a complex understanding of how a fluidity of identity is an important
and valuable tool to navigate challenging or difficult social environments and institutional
settings. Educators and others can benefit, therefore, by recognizing the strength that these
youth possess to understand and negotiate the most beneficial and positive outcomes in a
particular setting that they find themselves in. Providing information and guidance in new
educational or social settings, such as those then encountered when they first migrated to
Canada, will empower these youth to discover and claim the best position for themselves as
they employ their strong ability to negotiate and navigate different environments.
7.3 The Power of Schooling

A primary focus of this research project was to understand not only the ways that the personal and social identities of the participants are negotiated, but to relate their identity options and identity choices to the school system that they enter into upon arrival in Canada. Through their telling of their life stories, it became clear that their interactions with schooling and education in Canada could be examined through the lens of power relations. It is helpful here to consider Foucault’s notions of power as being enacted in relationships between people and groups, and that the exercise of power is in effect the limiting of options and opportunities of others (Rabinow and Rose, 2003; Mills, 2002). This understanding of power relations allows us to analyze the interactions of the four research participants with the public school system, and discover that their identity options and their opportunities for self-expression are limited by various factors of the school environment. Schooling in this sense is a powerful system in the lives of these participants.

The power of schooling is realized in two distinct manifestations in the relationships between students and the schools, as indicated by the discourses of these Liberian youth. These can be classified with Cummins’ (2001) distinction between coercive relationships of power and collaborative relationships of power. Firstly, power is exercised in the limiting of options and opportunities for youth by the interactions of the students with the different elements of the educational system that they come into contact with, namely: school board placement testing, streaming into and movement through ESL programs, teachers, administration, and age-limits for school attendance. This coercive aspect of the power of schooling will be discussed and analyzed further through the discourse of the participants below. The second manifestation of power in the relationships of students with schooling is found in how the participants in this project discuss their own views of schooling in Canada,
recognizing that they have power themselves in relation to their education, no matter what
difficulties they may face or what contexts they find themselves in. In this way, the students
are empowering themselves to engage with education for their own benefit and are
choosing to not allow themselves to be limited. This empowerment and agency of the
students will be discussed first here in the context of being a collaborative relationship
between the participants and the educational system.

7.3.1 The Land of Opportunity

When the participants in this study were asked to relate the reasons for their
migration to Canada, rather than emphasizing the challenges and difficulties of living in
Liberia post-civil war, they mentioned that one of the major motivators for migration was
the educational opportunities that are available to them in Canada. This theme reflected
the popular discourse of opportunity and meritocracy that dominate conceptions of Canada
as a multicultural and pluralistic society where success is available to everyone, without
discrimination (Li, 1999).

Daniel remarked that when new Liberians arrive in Canada, he wants them to
recognize the opportunity that is before them:

I will tell them, yeah, this is a country of opportunity, so you are already here, so
make use out of it, the opportunity that you doesn’t have back home, you already
have it here. So thank god that you are already here, make use out of it, don’t mind
other people, make use out of it. You come here to make your life better and come
back, and other people will say, oh, he come back and he did something good, so
other people, your friends and family back home will be proud of you, so come here
and do something and be something that will be good, but don’t come here and do
dumb thing because I know you want to go back to live, so come here and go to
school. Mainly you just have to go to school first, get your education, then you can
get a job good.

[The opportunity here] I’m talking about school, I’m talking about, I was telling you
that back home you never used to pay for school, but here you go to school free.
Back home if you’re even done high school to go to college you still have to pay, but
here the government is going to give you money and you’re going to pay it back later
if you start working, and you’re just not going to pay on the same spot. After you start working, they going to start taking it from your pay cheque, so that’s a lot of opportunity.

All four of the youth that were interviewed expressed a great appreciation for the educational opportunities that are available here in Canada. After struggling to pay school fees throughout their young lives, the chance to attend school for free and not have to purchase uniforms, textbooks, or other school materials was a theme in all of their conversations. Canada’s educational system provides a chance for these students to achieve academic success that would have been much more difficult to achieve back home in Liberia or in a refugee camp elsewhere. Because of this reality in the minds of the youth, school is greatly valued, and the obtaining of a secondary school diploma was a very special and meaningful occurrence for the two participants who have already graduated.

Education in Canada, however, is very rarely an equal opportunity or discrimination free experience, as noted by Knight (2008). Multicultural education maintains the dominance of white hegemony and places minoritized groups on the margins, emphasizing their differences from the mainstream (Harper, 1997; Gérin-Lajoie, 2005). Moving through the school system here was not easy for the participants as they struggled to integrate into the school population, and they shared stories of difficulty transitioning to adult school after reaching an age that required them to leave their previous school. They also talked about how the placement in ESL classes and streaming into less academic programs may have set back their ambitions, causing them to graduate later than they had anticipated. While these aspects of education must be better understood and analyzed, it is valuable to note that the overall impression that the participants gave of their educational experience is a positive one where they took advantage of a unique opportunity to better themselves that is offered to few people back home. The youth claimed an agency in their education, no
matter what challenges they face, and were determined to successfully complete their studies.

Promise's discourse on the educational opportunity in Canada revealed what many participants shared with me; that it is important to seize this chance in Canada to improve yourself for the sake of the people back home.

I want to become a nurse... I want to because I want to build, that’s my dream, I want to build a nursing home in Liberia... I started thinking about it when I was, when I, when the Canadian government accepted us, because they said if you come to Canada, everything going to be easy, going to be that, I said fine, I’m going to become a nurse, I’m going to Canada. After high school I will go to university and learn my nursing course. After I’m done my nursing then after I will go back to Liberia, because little kids are dying from sickness, common, common sickness, and they are dying... I want to build a nursing home in Liberia

You see, the government didn’t bring us here to be a slave, right? They bring us here to go to school, to benefit, to do something better in our country. That’s why they bring us here. This doesn’t mean that if they bring us here we’re forced to stay in Canada. So if you know you can make your country to prosper, after you get good money to build your country up. The government would be so proud, just for example, if I’m a person who goes to school, and then I’m a doctor and I open a clinic all over the villages, and then I take one big man from here, like, the government, one of the big man from the government to see the country, they would be proud of me, like, they will want to send for other peoples. Even though I accepted to become a Canadian doesn’t mean I shouldn’t help my country.

As Promise points out here, the great opportunity that the participants in this project have before them is one that they see has potential benefit not only for their own lives, but also for the lives of their families back home, and the country of Liberia as a whole.

This multicultural discourse of opportunity for all reflects the hegemonic influence of the dominant ideology, and it was adopted and internalized by the students in this study as they saw the opportunity that education in Canada provided. However, as Sarkar and Allen (2007) note, there is a “constant dialogue with the discourses in which they are embedded” (p. 120) and the participants demonstrated their agency to claim the
opportunity and the powerful ways schooling might benefit their lives, in spite of the challenges and difficulties of existing as marginalized students. Through the relationship with education and society, the participants have expressed their understanding that they can collaborate with their schooling to empower themselves and create opportunities that would not have existed for them otherwise.

7.3.2 Generalization of education: English as a second-first language

Schooling can be an opportunity for the empowerment of youth and has been seen as such by the participants in this study, but it also has become clear that the power of educators can also limit the opportunities for some students, especially in the context of English language education. As Rabinow and Rose (2003) state in reference to Michel Foucault’s work on power relations, the exercise of power in a place such as a school “…incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, it makes more probable or less” (p. 138). In the words of Cummins, (2001), school can be a place where coercive relationships of power are used for control by “a dominant group to the detriment of a subordinated group” (p. 16).

The policies for placement in ESL programs in Ontario’s secondary schools and the life stories of the participants in this project reveal that students within these ESL programs are generalized under the label of English language learners, and that their unique needs, strengths, and abilities are overshadowed by their shared lack of academic and conversational abilities in the dominant variety of Canadian English. ESL students share this one characteristic with each other, and any geographical differences, cultural differences, linguistic differences, academic differences, gender differences, personality differences or differences of ability that might exist between these students become secondary to this primary shared identity of being an English language learner.
I was reminded of the participants of this project as I was hiking through a small town nearby my home city recently, and I passed an old school building that was in the process of being converted into condominiums. The curious thing about this beautiful old school was that it had two entrances on the front, with stone carvings above each entrance that read, “Boy’s Entrance” and “Girl’s Entrance”. When the school was built in the 1920’s, the students were divided according to one characteristic that was seen by the policy makers as having the single most important impact on their schooling: gender. When students enter public education in Ontario today, gender is not the over-riding characteristic that defines how one enters into the building, but students are directed into different streams based on the one criteria of their effectiveness of communication in Canadian English. In effect, all of the individual characteristics of that student are hidden behind the label of being an English language learner, and this single difference from the majority population allows “a dominant group [to] use its power to impose certain social positions on subordinate groups” (Castles and Davidson, 2000, p. 69).

The provincial Ministry of Education defines who will wear this label in the following way:

_English language learners_ are students in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario’s schools, and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. These students may be Canadian born or recently arrived from other countries. They come from diverse backgrounds and school experiences, and have a wide variety of strengths and needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

As youth register for secondary school, they are administered a language test by an official at the local board of education (who almost always does not speak the language of the students) to determine what level of literacy they have attained and what class they
should be placed in. This was the experience of all four participants in this study, with the result of being streamed into the ESL program despite their prior knowledge of English. Students are then attached with the label of being English language learners and placed in the ESL program, and their entire educational experience is directed according to that placement.

Unfortunately, ‘ESL’, ‘ELL’, and ‘non-English Speaking’ definitions of students are based on a deficiency model, whereby students are labelled according to a perceived lack that they have when compared with the “normal” English speaking students. Dawn Allen (2007) refers to this as “name-calling”, or the labelling and positioning of people in relationship to a particular social norm. Students such as those in this study from Liberia, carry with them a wide variety of individual, social, linguistic, educational (and other) aspects of their identity, but in the Ontario educational policy, the fact that they are different from students who communicate at a greater level in Canadian English is the most important defining aspect of their identity. Promise found this both frustrating and amusing in her retelling of a particular interaction she had at school. When she knew the definition of a word that others around her (who were not English language learners) did not know, she was questioned by a neighbour how she had learned that. Promise responded by saying, “You were born here in Canada and you don’t know that word? How come I’m the one in the ESL?” She then went on to explain to me that her knowledge of grammar and sentence structure far surpasses that of many of her Canadian-born schoolmates who have never been placed in an ESL class.

Because students in the ESL program are defined by official policy as having the same need to develop English language ability (based in the deficiency model), they are grouped together despite their vastly different competencies, needs and prior experiences,
as demonstrated in the case study above. A generalized method of instruction and a generalized curriculum is then imagined to be possible in an ESL classroom where all of the students are reduced to solely being learners of English. This same assumption is not made, however, about the students in the non-ESL classes, where a prominent part of teachers’ work is putting into place accommodations according to individual needs and abilities. When the differences between ESL students are recognized, as can be seen in the later part of the official definition of an English language learner above, these differences are accommodated only as they affect the student’s progress through the ESL program. ESL program teachers are only encouraged to provide dictionaries, picture books, newspapers, and magazines of varying levels of difficulty for the students to access (English Language Learners: ESL and ELD programs and services, policies and procedures for Ontario elementary and secondary schools, kindergarten to grade 12), but the importance of individualized instruction according to learning strengths, abilities, and processes based on each students’ needs is not addressed in the ESL policy documents.

With diversified and individualized instruction essential parts of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s approach, one would expect a similar focus to be present in the standard ESL program that is available in public schools to help newcomer and non-English speaking students achieve educational success. Unfortunately, however, the name-calling of students by the educational system based on a single perceived deficiency that they share with others in the program allows the generalization of instruction and the whitewashing of differences and diversity that is present in the policy on educating English Language Learners.

As discussed earlier, language is an essential component of one’s personal and social identities (Day, 2002), and in fact is the medium through which other aspects of one’s
identity are communicated to others (May, 2000). It is therefore important to consider how the positioning of Liberian youth by the school according to linguistic norms affects their mediation and negotiation of their personal identities.

When a student arrives in a public school and is streamed into ESL programs in the manners described above, it has a tremendous impact on the student's understandings of language and education. As Ruiz (2010) describes, “for these children, we have made routine the notion in policy or practice that the language of their parents is not good enough to be used in school” (p. 166). When the participants in this project arrived in school, they noted that they often keep silent because they feared the negative consequences of being marked as speakers of Liberian (or non-standard, accented) English. Peirce (1995) notes the coercive control that is exerted over a person through this silencing of their language:

> It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to – powerful social networks that give learners an opportunity to speak (p. 13).

Earlier in the discussion it was made clear that the participants in this study demonstrated a very complex understanding of how to navigate social situations to their benefit despite facing multiple challenges. In this context of subtle controlling messages about their languages, they most often chose to silence themselves to avoid experiencing perceived or real discrimination because of their accent and way of speaking.

Despite the complexity of the background knowledge and linguistic repertoires of the participants in this study, one thing that they all hold in common is a knowledge and understanding of the English language that they brought with them from their childhood to the English-speaking context of Canadian education. Whatever the differences of accent,
intonation, vocabulary and grammar, each individual was able to communicate freely and openly with me, a speaker of Canadian English, for several hours through all the interviews that I held with them. Perhaps some of this ability to communicate and understand one another can be contributed to the instruction that the students received in ESL classes in school, but an important point to make and to keep in the forefront of our discussion is that these students speak English as a first language, and are able to understand and communicate with speakers of Canadian English.

What, then, is the impact on an individual when they are told that they are evaluated and labeled as not able to speak their first language? In this context, the coercive power of schooling is evident in the limits it places on students who speak English as a first language, but are admitted to secondary school on the condition of taking courses for students of English as a Second Language (Garcia et al., 2006). Rather than working with the students’ abilities and strengths, streaming into ESL (while potentially valuable to students in many contexts and situations) denies the youth in this project and others like them the opportunity to express themselves with confidence in their first language, and take an active part in the continuation of their English language education, which began years before in Liberia. The model of ESL placement conceptualizes a particular manner of communication and written literacy in Canadian English as being superior and more valuable in this society than the abilities and literacies that the students already possess (Haneda, 2009). However, there is no single level of skill or knowledge that qualifies a person as “literate”, but instead there are multiple levels and kinds of literacies (Schaeffer, 2003). This understanding was pointed out by Promise when she challenged her Canadian born classmate’s position in the mainstream program when she had a greater understanding of grammar and vocabulary yet was still in the ESL program.
The interesting twist in this discussion is some of the participants’ perceptions of their own languages as being broken, and not worthy of passing on to their children growing up here in Canada. Willifred would prefer that her son face derision from members of the Liberian community for speaking “proper” English than that he maintain the ability to communicate in Liberian English with them. This is indicative of her perception of the superiority of Canadian or standard English, a perception that obviously extends beyond the minds of Canadians and is shared by speakers of other languages. In the Liberian context, this dichotomy extends back to the historical relationships between the powerful Americo-Liberians who had access to education in standard American English, and the subordinate indigenous Liberians who spoke tribal languages or Liberian English. Drawing on Bourdieu’s work of symbolic power, Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) discuss this perception of the value of different languages in a dominant context:

The official language or standard variety becomes the language of hegemonic institutions because the dominant and the subordinate group misrepresent it as a superior language. For Bourdieu, this misrecognition of the legitimacy of the dominant language (and culture) “contributes towards reproducing existing power relations” (p. 247).

The reproduction of existing power relations can be seen in the lives of these students who spend up to three years of their high school education in ESL classes that do little to prepare them for further education, and yet believe that they need to continue to “improve their English” and therefore do not often advocate for placement in the mainstream classes. The theme that was prevalent for the most part in the interviews with these youth is that the educational system must know what’s best for them, so they will attend ESL classes, and only after completion of schooling (often at an adult education centre) will they reflect on the challenges that the ESL program set before them. In essence,
for the majority of their Canadian education, they were speaking English as their first language, and learning it as their second.

The coercive disempowerment of these students in schools works to ignore their complex and individual identities and generalize their educational experiences according to a deficiency model of their prior knowledge and experiences of schooling. While this reality can often result in delayed completion of secondary school requirements, the youth in this project have demonstrated that they recognize the ways that schooling can be an opportunity for exercising their individual agency and achieving success despite the challenges and coercive relations of power they encounter.

7.4 Fitting “Out” and Fitting In – Otherness and Resilience

One of the benefits of a life history approach for this project is the ability to contextualize the stories of the participants in the discourses and settings of the institutions and society that the youth are engaged with. An analysis of the interactions of the participants with the education system can be positioned within the broader societal conceptualizations of who the participants are, and how their embodied social positionings are influenced by dominant discourses and by their own individual agency. In a society where whiteness is the dominant norm, it is foreseeable that the youth are positioned in similar ways to the experiences of Fanon (1991), and also of Ibrahim (2008) who arrived in the United States as a Sudanese refugee:

As a refugee in North America, my perceptions of self is altered in direct response to the social processes of racism and the historical representation of blackness whereby the antecedent signifiers become secondary to my blackness, and I retranslate my being: I become black (p. 242).
Reminiscent of Connelly’s (2008) discussions of otherness, the participants in this project engaged with the school and with society, and their individual markers of identity which may distinguish them from one another in Liberia (tribal affiliation, linguistic background, family history etc.) were displaced by a common identity of being ‘other’. Because of their physical characteristics they are marked as being non-white, but additionally their spoken accent marks them as being from outside of Canada, and their background experiences mark them as being different from someone who has grown up in this social and educational setting.

In the life histories of the participants, they told stories of being asked where they learned English because it was expected that an African immigrant must not be a native English speaker. Willifred shared her thoughts about interactions she has with people who are in her words “Canadian people”:

Sometimes like you see how someone look at you, you know exactly what they are thinking. Yeah, like, they don’t like you because of what they see on TV [about black people] or because of your skin colour, or because someone that looked like you did something to them before, and I don’t think it should be like that. I think you should get to know someone before you can judge them, yeah.

This perception of what others think about her, whether or not it is an accurate perception, is reminiscent of what Shadd (2001) states, that “…there are constant reminders that we are not regarded as truly “Canadian” (p. 11). These reminders extend beyond the personal interactions that the participants have with individuals in their daily lives. As discussed above, the educational system labels Liberian youth as learners of English and positions them in the beginning of their academic experience as separate from the mainstream based on a deficiency model of language education. In educational contexts
as well as in social contexts, then, the participants in this project have the characteristics of the ‘other’ contrasted with the norm of Canadian whiteness.

For this reason I have labeled part of this discussion, “Fitting ‘Out’”. Rather than fitting in with the majority dominant culture and society, Liberian youth from refugee backgrounds - in their bodies, in their past experiences, and with their spoken words - fit very well into the current dominant conceptualization of the outsider in Canadian society. As a result they face incredible challenges in negotiating a positive and affirming personal and social identity that comes to grip with their past experiences and opens up to their current reality.

In the face of these challenges the participants have conceptualized their experiences of being othered in a way that allows them to make sense of their lived reality and the actions of others. In this context I expected to spend a large amount of time discussing issues of racism and discrimination with the participants of the study, because of the prevalence of these themes in the literature on schooling and African youth. In the interviews each participant was provided with the opportunity to discuss their understandings of diversity in Canada and any negative or positive experiences they had around the issues of ethnicity or race. The stories and experiences that each participant shared were very remarkable cases of racial discrimination by their peers, neighbours, or sometimes their teachers. In the discourses of the four participants about these cases, the cause and root of the problem was the particular individual that was committing the act or speaking the words at that time. Each situation of racial discrimination was actually made light of by the participant, and the perpetrator was written off as someone who wasn’t worth worrying about.
This individualization of racism and discrimination by the project participants demonstrates how the dominant discourses of Canadian tolerance and acceptance have been internalized by the youth, despite their own experiences of racial abuse. Here is an example of what Apple (1990) describes regarding the work of hegemony in society:

The crucial idea...is how hegemony acts to saturate our very consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it, become the world tout court, the only world. (p. 5)

The students in effect have chosen (consciously or not) to navigate their personal challenges with racism by ascribing the discourse of colour-blindness to Canadian society, in effect cancelling out the possibility that the discriminatory actions of a few people represent a larger undercurrent of racism and inequality (Bell, 2003).

Daniel provided an insightful look into his understanding of racism and discrimination in Canadian institutions when he spoke about his challenges in finding employment in Canada since arriving here several years ago. While he toys with the idea that there may be some systemic discrimination, he ultimately argues that anyone who claims the existence of democratic racist ideology is actually trying to ‘brainwash’ others, and he decides to place blame for discrimination at the feet of black youth who have tainted the view of other black youth in the eyes of potential employers.

In Hamilton, oh, its very hard to get a job, but before people used to get a job, but now it's very, very hard to get a job... Sometimes I feel, the way I think is not the way that other people think and the way other people think is not the way that I think. So sometimes I say maybe I'm black, or what, that's like, but maybe it could be it, maybe it could not be it, so maybe in my own mind I say its because I'm black but I don't know... Because other people say that too, our friends brainwash us and stuff, so we think its true, but for me, if I really want to get a job I can get a job because, yeah, I can get a job it just depends how you are going to put yourself... So I heard the proverb that one bad apple can spoil the whole tree, so maybe just some black kid go to the job and cause some trouble, so maybe they'll be thinking all black kids are the same. But for me, if I want a job, if I really want to get a job, I can get a job, I trust myself, I can get a job.
Daniel’s understanding of his own difficulties in finding employment are based on the assumption that while he may suspect that race may play a part in the hiring for certain positions, the only reason this would be the case is because an individual employer had a prior bad experience with an individual black youth. The extent of his internalization of the discourse of meritocracy, that everyone can succeed as long as they work hard and earn it, shows the impact of the hegemonic dominant discourses of the society around him despite his own challenges in finding employment over several years. In his mind, any black youth can succeed in finding meaningful employment if they really want it badly enough and try hard enough, and nothing will keep them from achieving that goal.

In the face of challenges and discrimination, the project participants have made sense of their experiences by adopting a discourse that reinforces Canadian democratic racism by leaving it unchallenged (Henry and Tator, 2006). This may seem to be a resignation to marginality on the part of the youth. However, as has been seen above, they have all demonstrated a unique and complex ability to recognize and navigate the relationships of power around them, and to move fluidly between aspects of their identity in response. It has become clear through the life histories of the youth that rather than accepting a position of marginality in schools, through their interactions with other students and with teachers, the students strive to fit in with the rest of the student population, and try to avoid being singled out from the group. To this end they represent and position themselves in ways that in their eyes are more acceptable to the mainstream, and they also try to keep parts of their lives hidden if they may make them stand out from others. These methods of attempting to fit-in allow them to move through their social interactions in ways that are meaningful to them and that they believe will provide beneficial opportunities to them. How they navigate their social positioning and
demonstrate their agency is discussed below, where I look at the names and positions that the students claim for themselves, and at the ways they conceal their refugee stories and experiences from others.

### 7.4.1 Navigating Refugee/Immigrant Identities

As highlighted by Vickers and McCarthy (2010), Quaicoe (2006) and Sweeney (2008), resettlement of refugees in a new host country often involves a marginalization of the newly arrived former refugees in society. The societal views of who constitutes a refugee, along with the academic discourse that focuses on trauma and conflict in the lives of refugees (Hardgrove, 2009), attach particular negative labels and stereotypes to the newly arrived former refugees. It is not difficult to understand, then, what Hatoss and Sheely (2009) describe as a “wish to exit the refugee identity” (p. 127) on the part of people in similar situations to those that the project participants find themselves in. Gérin-Lajoie’s (2005) work recognizes that social positioning by individuals often reflects the ways they are responding to the relations of power enacted around them, and in the context of negativity regarding refugees, the discourses of the participants regarding a refugee or an immigrant identity can be analyzed and understood.

An important aspect of the life history project that I undertook in this research was maintaining a respect for the discourse and words of the participants, and representing them in ways that matched with their own values. With each participant I asked for their thoughts the ways that their particular situations might be presented and named in the academic literature, and how people in similar situations to theirs may be labeled in the media. I was struck by how strongly every one of the four participants felt that they did not want to be name-called as refugees because of the negative connotations that word carried with it in their own minds. Previous experiences I have had working with the refugee...
community had also indicated a tendency to want to avoid the label of refugee by people who had migrated to Canada under an asylum program or from a refugee camp. The participants in this project shared with me that they did not want to be labeled in the minds of other people in Canadian society as poor, displaced people with no ability to help themselves. In the words of Willifred,

I don’t like refugee, because in Ghana we were refugee and they didn’t respect us, in Ghana, like, it wasn’t a good life, it was not okay. No, I don’t like that word, refugee, I don’t like that word. I’m pretty sure all Liberians, they don’t like that. We even make fun of it, like, “Refugee, you refugee!” It’s not a good life, like poor people without a home... newcomer I don’t like it, newcomer you don’t know much, yeah... But not refugee, definitely no!

Similarly, when I asked Promise about the title for this project, she adamantly argued that the term ‘refugee' was not a desirable title, not because it was an inaccurate term, but because the connotations and baggage it carried.

Why would you put refugee? ...I don’t like the word refugee. I don’t know, you can say anything, but don’t say refugee...I don’t know, anything, but just don’t put refugee, you can say anything, but don’t...I don’t know

Daniel suggested that one of the reasons he disliked the term refugee was because of the way it conveyed images of poverty and destitution. He stated that it was important to him that his peers at school did not know that he shopped at thrift and value stores because money was difficult to obtain, and using the term refugee would automatically associate him in the minds of others as being a poor person who needs help. This theme echoes the analysis of Hatoss and Sheely (2009) that “refugees often suffer from low socio-economic status and the feeling of inequality” (p. 127). While this may often be the case with people’s associations with the word refugee, the actual definition of the term by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and Citizenship and Immigration Canada states that refugees are people who are fleeing persecution and deserve the opportunity to live in a safe country. Often these individuals may have difficulty providing materially for their
needs, but this is not the case for all refugees, and the definition of the term refers only to a need for protection and safety, not a material need.

One other factor in the minds of these youth to avoid using the term refugee is linked to their own previous negative experiences, and the ways that they would be forced to remember and in a sense re-live these experiences when labeled with the term, ‘refugee’. As Daniel put it,

Yeah, I am a refugee, well, I just tell them I’m an immigrant, tell them I’m an immigrant... Because I feel, I feel like, like the life I went through, what I am going to tell them is not good, because sometimes you don’t even get food to eat, even food to eat, like you don’t have it, you going to tell someone I never used to have food to eat, even to go to school, you feeling bad, when you just saying that, food, just common food, you don’t even have it to eat, wow, then you’re really suffering, you know. But to tell them and say, I used to carry worn shoes, I wasn’t having the proper uniform, like four shirts or three pants, then I say, wow, you’re really suffering, I can see you’re really suffering, you know. And on the camp at that time I was so skinny, I was so skinny, so I don’t want people to look at me, I’m already skinny and stuff so I don’t want people to say, look at me, I just feel bad and embarrassed, I just be thinking all kinds of negative things in my mind, would just be coming through my mind. And I don’t know if that is the way they think, but that’s what was coming in my mind, so I was just feeling bad

The preferred term for the youth in this project was the word immigrant, which carried less negative connotations or baggage for them. Immigrants, in the minds of the participants, are people who come to another country for a better life, and are more respected in Canadian society than refugees. Additionally, by referring to themselves as immigrants (and by having other people refer to them in this way), the participants are able to position themselves in a way that explains their national identification with a place outside of Canada, yet allows them the opportunity to leave behind them the negative memories and experiences that may have been part of their refugee experience in West Africa. In keeping with this analysis, Junior mentioned in his interviews that while he would prefer not to be labeled as a refugee, he is very proud to be a Liberian immigrant.
This notion of claiming an immigrant status and refusing a refugee status is not unheard of in the discourse around migration to Canada. However, it is very important to note that while a multitude of studies have been done with immigrants and/or refugees, this particular theme was not evident in a survey of the academic literature. Where this discourse is prevalent is in the more popular media, where it can be found in children’s books (Don’t Call Me a Refugee by Etta Johnson), online weblogs, and also in musical lyrics. The importance for many people who have had experiences of displacement and relocation as refugees can therefore be related to the participants in this project who seek to move forward from their past experiences and adopt a more positive and affirming label in their current national and social contexts.

Because of the literature about otherness and from personal experience, when I began this research study, I foresaw the challenge of asking the participants to open up about themselves and share intimate details about their prior experiences and thoughts with someone who has very little shared background knowledge to the issues that these youth were speaking about. What I found surprising throughout the interview process was the willingness with which the youth shared their stories. While it was at times difficult to elicit particular answers to questions I was asking, and at other times the participants avoided going into depth about issues that may have been too difficult or private for them to want to share with me, all four youth in this study demonstrated a willingness to openly share many aspects of their lives with me during our interviews together.

A very intriguing thing became clear as we talked more about the participants’ experiences of migration to Canada, and the ways that they guarded their personal histories and experiences from the vast majority of the people that they came into contact with. In contrast to their openness during this research project, the youth shared their personal
stories only with members of their Liberian community who they trusted, or with a few select individuals or teachers who the youth felt were genuinely interested and willing to listen. When I asked Daniel about how he talked about his past with his peers and teachers at school, he gave a response that provides valuable insight into the reasons the participants had in keeping their stories to themselves.

Yeah, [when people ask me] I tell them I'm a Liberian and I was born in Liberia, but I moved to Ghana because of war in my country, I move to Ghana and I have to come here because to make my life better and stuff, they say, “Wow”. They tell me, “How’d you come here, how hard the process is?” You know, it’s too long; I don’t want to say it, its too long. Sometimes I am like, “I'll tell you later”, but sometimes they won’t ask and I don’t tell them again because I don’t want to keep going, keep telling people about my life story...

I don’t know you too good, like I don’t want to just tell you my story and stuff, I don’t want to tell you my story, I just don’t want to tell you it, yeah because I’m embarrassed because of this and that. I was embarrassed to tell them how you used to sell and stuff, to eat your food and stuff, all the things man, a lot of things. You don’t eat, and how your parents, you won’t go to school and stuff, a lot of stuff, so sometimes we would just be embarrassed to tell our story, yeah...

You tell them how your life is hard and how your family make it for food and what you used to do or what you used to sell, how your family used to sell sometimes for school, for you to get money, sometimes you won’t go to school, sometimes even if you say your story, it kinda make you mad too, you know, so sometimes, like, I don’t want to tell people my story because I don’t want everybody just to know about me like that, so I just don’t want to tell them my story, I just want to keep it to myself, and go through the pain and what I see during the war and just keep it to myself... Yeah, you don’t tell them the pain you went through during the war, how you used to never eat...

Why then did Daniel share his life stories with me during the interviews for this research project? In his particular case, we had prior interactions that caused him to develop a level of trust with me, but that was not so for the other three participants. Junior said that he didn’t share his story with anyone since coming to Canada, “No, only you... I don’t like telling people about my story, like, no, I think just to be comfortable with it [is the reason I tell you].” Promise and Willifred also told me that the stories and experiences that they shared with me during our interviews were the first time they had shared with anyone.
outside of the Liberian community since arriving in Canada. Part of this willingness to share can be contributed to the nature of academic research that insists on keeping the identities of research participants confidential, and the fact that the youth understood that their stories would not include any identifying information, allowing them to share freely without fear of negative consequence. Additionally this research may have been helpful insofar as it is focused on the participants’ personal testimonies and centres their perspectives by allowing for their voice to be the element of description for the events of their lives. These elements allowed me to hear the youths’ stories when the motivating factors were coupled with the willingness of the participants to bravely trust an outsider researcher to listen to, interpret, represent and analyze their life histories.

However, it can be seen from the interviews that the participants did not simply desire to help me with this project, or to further the academic discussion about identity and schooling, but that they all were very glad to have the opportunity to share their stories in a meaningful way. Each participant expressed gratitude to the researcher for listening to them, and for allowing them to speak freely about their lives. At the end of each interview, while I expressed my thanks and gratitude for their participation, they all thanked me for listening to them, and for being interested in their lives. This presents an interesting subject for further analysis, because in contrast to the school environment where the students hid their stories from others, they relished the opportunity to share their stories in a particular context at a particular time. While it is beyond the scope of this study to really engage with the participants regarding how they choose to share certain aspects of themselves at different times, it is valuable to look at these interactions through the lens of power. When the situation at school provides an opportunity for the students to open up about their lives with their peers, they find that it would not be in their best interest to do
so because of the potential loss of social capital that could result from exposing the
challenges of their past (thus Daniel’s retelling of how a friend shared her refugee
experience with others and was ridiculed afterwards, motivating him to keep his story to
himself). However, in a context such as the research interview with a trusted individual, or
in Daniel’s case with a particular teacher who had already demonstrated by her actions in
the classroom a deep care for her students, the participants found great value in sharing
their backgrounds and experiences to someone who was willing to listen. A
recommendation that one of the participants had for teachers and educators when dealing
with newly arrived students reveals this need:

When they come first, every kid that come from Africa first they going to be nervous, they going to be shy because of their language, they don’t want people to make fun, so what can make the school better, at first when they come, make yourself go around, and talk to them, and make them to open up to you and they will tell you most of their stories. Because some of them are coming with pain, some of them are coming with really pain, frustrated, after a few times that’s the time they are going to get over it, okay, now I gotta remove my bad thinking, and I am already here, let me put my Canada thinking on and focus, encourage them but don’t discourage them... And try to know most about them... yeah, listening

In Daniel’s mind, this encouragement is what students need when they get to school
in Canada, and is what will provide them with the necessary positive environment for their
expression of themselves through their educational experiences. Educators then can work
with the youth to accomplish their shared goals of empowerment and academic success.
Chapter Eight – Conclusion

This chapter will provide a summary of the findings of this research project and also discuss the contributions that have been made to the advancement of knowledge in the particular areas that this project is concerned with. Finally, I will posit future directions that research in this area might take.

The research question that guided this project and that I sought to find answers to was concerned with the identity negotiation that Liberian youth experienced in their interactions with the Ontario education system since migrating to Canada as refugees.

What became clear through the analysis of the life stories of the four participants was that their identities are incredibly complex and related to a wide variety of factors in their past experiences and present contexts. All of the youth shared a common national background and a common experience of migration into and from a refugee context. In this context the educational institutions that they attended in different countries were organized in similar ways and with similar practices of corporal punishment, payment of school fees, school uniforms and rote memorization as the method of instruction. Each of the four youths’ experiences of schooling were quite different from one another despite being in these similar contexts, because of their particular situations of migration and ability to pay for school fees. Academically, then, they were all in very different places when they arrived at the Ontario secondary schools where they were to continue their education. These situations were rarely taken into consideration by the schools they were attending. This was also the case with the particular linguistic backgrounds and abilities that the participants had. All were able to communicate in English, and had grown up
interacting with other languages to different degrees, thus developing metalinguistic awareness and linguistic consciousness with regards to multilingual environments. Despite this reality, they were placed into programs where they were taught the very basics of the English language and their prior linguistic competencies were ignored and counted as irrelevant to their education in Canada. These negative messages likely contributed to their conceptualization of their own language as a “broken English”.

The complexity of identities that are demonstrated by the participants provides us with a glimpse into the diversity among a small sample of the population that is attending secondary schools throughout Ontario. Rather than constituting a monolithic group of students who share the same characteristics with each other, they navigate and negotiate their personal and social identities in varied and different ways according to the contexts they find themselves in. Their identities, rather than being a stable and fixed reality regardless of the context, are fluid and shifting, demonstrating some sort of *mouvance*, to position them in particular ways that are meaningful to them and advantageous to them in each context. Their tribal affiliation and ethnic group membership become important in times of conflict in Liberia, or if they were visiting their home country, but in Canada the fact that they come from different tribal groups provides them with very little benefit, and so they claim a Liberian or African identity, and at times a Canadian identity, rather than a Kpelle or Gbandi identity.

The complexities of the identities of the participants were exposed during our interviews for this research project, but are ignored in the discourses of education in Ontario. The youth expressed to me their great ambition to achieve success in education and work since arriving in Canada, but the manner in which they were integrated into the school system was based on a model of education that viewed their background
experiences and knowledge as deficient. Whatever their background, all the students were streamed into classes alongside other students from amazingly diverse experiences, from many different countries, and who had vastly different learning experiences. The single unifying characteristic that the youth in this project had with their peers in the ESL program was that they were deemed by educators to be learners of the English language. The instruction that they received in the ESL classes was generalized, and as such, the youth in this project sat alongside peers who had never learned any English before, and were taught the alphabet in some cases. In fact, they were taught their first language again, as their second language.

Important to note in these interactions with schooling is the power that was exerted by the school over the youth, who were limited in their abilities to express themselves or to claim particular identity options by the manner of identification and streaming that they experienced. Despite this, all of the participants demonstrated a powerful expression of their individual agency to claim the opportunity that they saw that was available to them because of their migration to Canada. In both of these ways, the power of schooling, for positive and negative results, was evident in this project.

After analyzing both the individual identity negotiation that the participants engaged in, and the powerful interactions they had with the education system, it became clear that the youth sought in many respects to fit in with the dominant culture and society around them. They went to great lengths to do this, including refusing the label and identity of a refugee, and claiming the identity and label of an immigrant, which in their eyes held much more potential for positive affirmation in the eyes of the Canadian public. Additionally, the youth decided that it was most advantageous to their efforts of fitting in for them to hide their personal experiences and stories when they were interacting with
fellow students or educators. They felt very strongly that their stories would mark them as different and set them apart from the rest of the student body, and so they would keep their stories to themselves.

However, because of the often invisible and taken-for-granted hegemony of whiteness in Canadian society, the participants fit very well into the categories of ‘others’ by their manner of speaking, their migration experiences, and their physical appearance. They experience on a daily basis a process of minoritization that reminds them of their otherness in the dominant society, and positions them on the margins of the norm.

Very little academic research has been done with the Liberian community outside of Liberia, especially in the Canadian context, and this study has provided an initial understanding of some of the issues and realities that members of this community experience in relation to education.

Aside from a background understanding that can be built up on by future research with members of the Liberian community in Canada, an important contribution of this project is the methodological choices of life history for this particular area of study. By centering the life stories of the participant youth in this study of identity and education, the voices of the youth themselves become the source of the data and analysis, rather than the dominant discourses about diversity, identity, and education, which may drown out the perspectives of youth who are on the margins.

The suitability of life history for such a project relates to the type of information that formed the core of students’ experiences and stories. By spending several hours listening to each youth, I was able to develop a much deeper understanding of their personal identities and their motivations for particular choices and name-claiming that they make in
their interactions with Canadian education and society. I believe this depth of understanding would not have been possible if only one interview was held with each participant rather than a more comprehensive dialogue about life histories.

The introduction of members of the Liberian community as important participants in research studies on education is another contribution of this project. Because of their unique circumstances of having abilities in English, while maintaining an incredible complexity in their linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, Liberian students can provide very valuable insights into the educational system, Canadian society, and issues of diversity and inclusion that could extend in application beyond their relatively small community.

Finally, while this research study stands on the shoulders of so many valuable studies on dominant discourses of diversity and identity, it is important to continue pursuing research that critically analyzes the dominance of white majority discourse, and provides alternative realities and ideologies. This study challenges the concepts of ‘otherness’ in Canada, where groups and individuals that are not part of the mainstream society represent monolithic groups that can be understood as a whole without the need to recognize and investigate the diversity within these groups. Groups that are labeled in our society as ‘refugees’, ‘immigrants’, ‘black youth’, ‘Africans’, ‘at-risk’, ‘under-privileged’, or ‘Liberian’ need to be seen for what they are, diverse and complex groups of individuals that cannot be approached or controlled by the use of singular titles from the mainstream.

This study engaged with the issues of identity and schooling for Liberian youth who arrived in Canada as refugees and pursued their secondary education in Ontario’s public schools. It became apparent through this research that the participants in this study
recognized the importance of education and the opportunity that they had to study without having to pay fees and in a stable environment here. Unfortunately, challenges that the participants faced were in many ways consequences of the educational system’s policies and procedures for labeling ESL students as different from the mainstream school population, as well as the dominant ideology of whiteness and normalcy that positioned the participants as others in this social and educational setting.

With these findings, it would be important to continue to research and analyze the specific ways in which this positioning of students affects the ways that teachers and administrators may interact with particular groups of students around areas such as discipline or extra-curricular guidance provided. Additionally, it would be very valuable to study in depth the impact that the ESL curriculum may have on the perceptions of ESL students by the students in the ESL program and those outside of it.

Beyond the educational setting, it is important to continue to analyze and critique the interactions of minoritized and othered groups with the mainstream discourses of Canadian society, and provide additional perspectives on the influence of hegemonic ideologies and systems on the perceptions of members of the mainstream social groups and on those of the marginalized groups.
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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interview 1 – Early Life

Background Information

- Please tell me about your early life and your family.
  - Where were you born?
  - What languages did you speak in your early life?
  - Who did you live with in your early life?

Life Prior to Migration

- Can you tell me about your life before you started the process of coming to Canada?
  - Where did you live?
  - Tell me about your family.
  - Were you affected at all by the conflict in Liberia?

Early Education

- Please tell me about your first times going to school or being educated.
  - What are your first memories of school?
  - What languages did you speak in school, and which languages did you learn?
  - What did you think about school back then? What was it like?
  - What did you like about school before you came to Canada? What didn’t you like?
  - What did your parents or caregivers think about education and schooling?

Interview 2 – Migration and Identity

Process of Migration

- Please tell me about how you first started the process of coming to Canada
  - What did you know or think about Canada then?
- Who did you migrate with? When?
- What happened when you first arrived in Canada?

Early Integration in Canada

- Please tell me about your first experiences in Canada.
  - How were your early experiences of integration?

Entrance into Canadian Schools

- Can you tell me about how you started school here, where you went, what it was like?
  - How did it relate to your previous experiences of schooling?
  - Please tell me about how you felt about going to school here.
How did the fact of your migration affect your experiences?

*Interview 3 – Language, Culture, Race and Identity*

- Please tell me about the languages you have learned and the places they have had in your life.
- What do you think about Canadian English? Did you have any experiences with people in Canada about language that you would like to share?
- Did you enter the ESL program when you came to school here?
  - Please tell me about your time in ESL and how it affected your schooling and progress in school.
- How did your interactions and use of languages affect how you see yourself here in Canada and in the schools?
- Can you tell me about what’s important in educating students who speak languages other than Canadian English?
- How do you identify yourself culturally or ethnically? Do you feel connections to any particular group or nationality or people?
- Please tell me about your place in Canadian society.
- Have you experienced any negative stereotypes or discrimination because of your race or ethnicity? Please tell me about this.
- Please tell me about how your cultural or ethnic identity relates to your educational experiences.