Chapter 1
Beyond Access:
How Racial Othering Undermines Refugees' Educational Capabilities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the profound implications of Racial Othering on students with a refugee background, specifically centring on the experiences of African heritage youth. Drawing on the capability approach as an analytical framework, the chapter illustrates the pervasive nature of racial Othering by illuminating its role in propagating low teacher expectations, eroding student self-efficacy, fostering toxic stress, and inducing unhealthy or negative coping mechanisms. The key message is that providing equitable refugee education goes beyond widening access. Substantive equity provisions necessitate the removal of unfreedoms that impede individuals' ability to fully derive benefits from educational opportunities. In keeping with this perspective, the chapter underscores the imperative need to cultivate racially and culturally safe learning environments. Such environments not only acknowledge the multifaceted impact of racial Othering but actively work towards dismantling it, thereby enabling refugee students to convert their educational opportunities into meaningful and valued outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

At present, millions of people find themselves forcibly uprooted, compelled to abandon their homes and communities due to the profound impact of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and the devastating aftermath of extreme weather events. In recent years, the echoes of war in regions such as Ukraine, Palestine, and the Horn of Africa have reverberated, displacing tens of millions of people from the very fabric of their existence. As documented by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2023), the stark and unsettling reality is that the global count of forcibly displaced individuals exceeded 110 million. This sobering statistic encapsulates the deep-seated challenges faced by communities worldwide,

underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive and compassionate responses to address the multifaceted complexities of displacement. In this context, the narrative of forced displacement unfolds as a shared human experience that demands collective efforts to provide solace, support, and lasting solutions for those grappling with the profound consequences of displacement.

With the rise of mass population displacement, refugee education has become a global agenda. In a series of agreements, transnational actors and national governments expressed their commitments to supporting refugee integration and education. In this regard, the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants marked the commencement of a new era characterized by global agreements and initiatives concentrated on the integration of refugees. Under Section 32 of the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* (2016), UN member states stated:

We are determined to ensure that all children are receiving education within a few months of arrival, and we will prioritize budgetary provision to facilitate this, including support for host countries as required. We will strive to provide refugee and migrant children with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities.

In a resolute commitment to empowering refugees through education, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched the *Education 2030* initiative, with the overarching goal of elevating refugees' tertiary education participation rate to 15% by the year 2023. In 2019, a mere 1% of refugees had the opportunity to access tertiary education. However, thanks to a concerted global initiative dedicated to broadening the educational horizons for refugee youth, in 2023, the percentage of refugee youth with access to higher education has soared to over 7%, though it's noteworthy that the global average tertiary education enrolment rate among non-refugees far exceeds this, standing at more than 40% (UNHCR, 2023). This strategic initiative has garnered support beyond the UNHCR, earning endorsements from key UN agencies including UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNICEF. Following the global commitment, in Europe, the importance of education for refugee integration has widely been recognised (Barbulescu, 2019; European Commission, 2020; IOM, 2019; OECD, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). National and international policy responses have helped bridge the educational gap for refugees and create sustainable pathways for their long-term empowerment and integration.

Measured in per capita terms, Australia has one of the most generous refugee resettlement programs in the world. Since the end of the Second World War, Australia has resettled, on average, over 12,000 refugees per year (Molla, 2023). Starting from the mid-1990s, refugees from sub-Saharan African countries have benefited from the Australian humanitarian migration program. Upon resettlement, African heritage refugee youth encounter a myriad of challenges that can significantly impact their educational and employment trajectories (Molla, 2023, 2024). Language barriers pose a formidable hurdle, affecting communication and access to educational resources. Discrimination and cultural adjustment issues often compound the difficulties faced by these youth as they navigate educational systems and seek employment opportunities.

The Government spends millions of dollars supporting refugee resettlement and integration. Through the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (COAG, 2019), Australian governments agreed to provide targeted support for disadvantaged groups, including refugees. One of the key goals of the Declaration is to ensure that "the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity" (p. 5) through *inter alia*, "supporting all young Australians at risk of educational disadvantage" (p. 9). Likewise, although refugees are not recognised as equity targets at a sectoral level, Australian universities have put

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