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# 'It is not easy at all': A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Resettled Afghan Refugees in Canada

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

‘It is not easy at all’: A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Resettled Afghan  
Refugees in Canada

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

With the decade long security crises in Afghanistan, many Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada with a significant history of trauma due to war, with hopes to rebuild their lives by learning and adapting the norms and structures of their host societies. Amidst the extended nature of their displacement, learning and education can be a source of healing and gaining social and economic mobilities. However, they experience multifaceted difficulties in their learning journeys, and their learning experiences and needs often go unnoticed. Capturing the rich experiences of refugees, particularly Afghans, have received limited attention in the past. Previous studies on refugee learning experiences have majorly focused on secondary and post-secondary education and their associated challenges, and little attention is paid on the importance of other forms of learnings which help learners accumulate social and cultural capital necessary for their resettlement. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. Specifically, this study examines the factors, sources, and strategies that facilitate their learning experiences, and barriers and challenges they face during their learning processes. By utilizing the theoretical framework of forms of capital, this qualitative study describes transformative learning experiences of Afghan refugees in Canada, particularly in terms of the disruption of their previous social and cultural capitals and the establishment of the new forms of capital during their resettlement processes. Additionally, these Afghan refugees illustrated the role of social connections and support systems in their learning experiences, their unique and informal pathways of learnings, as well as their learning motivations and aspirations. Moreover, this study confirms and demonstrates devaluation of their past educational credentials, language barriers, challenges from governmental and educational institutions, and mental health concerns as significant barriers to their learning experiences.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original, unpublished independent work by Sameer Nizamuddin. The study was approved by Ethics Certificate number REB22-1670 issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Ethics Board for the project “It is not easy at all’: A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Resettled Afghan Refugees in Canada” on January 25, 2023.

## **Acknowledgments**

In September 2022, I decided to visit my home to meet my mother and find a closure after my father's sudden demise in Pakistan. Upon landing in Karachi on September 04 at around 4 am, I was held hostage by 5 gunmen when I was commuting home from the airport. I was physically injured, lost all my valuables, and most of all, lost my thesis work that I intentionally started earlier to finish it on time. As I look back and reflect, the trauma of visiting home will remain for years, the only good part of my trip was spending time in the arms of my mother. The marks on her face sketch the map of her own miserable life, but her sweet eyes gave me a new life when I lost hope and decided to give up on my life. She lifted me up and gave me a new soul. Any of my life achievement, especially the end of my master's degree, will be incomplete without acknowledging what she has done for me.

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Lastly, to the One whose blessing has brought me where I am today. Thank you for your blessings and giving me opportunities to learn and do better. I am still on a journey to understand you and the world.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Safia Sher Ali. Your love and sacrifices have brought me here. I cry every night with a hope to see you again; spend my time in your arms, rejuvenate my childhood memories with you, and show you who I have become and becoming with your love. I love you, mom.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

On August 16, 2021, a horrifying cell-phone video of young men falling off a cargo airplane made the news headline as the US's war in Afghanistan came to an abrupt and chaotic end. Zabi Rezayee, 17, a young soccer player, and Fada Mohammad, a 24-year-old dentist, were among the Afghans who died while trying desperately to flee from Kabul as Taliban took over Afghanistan (Linge, 2022). Hundreds of Afghans rushed to the Hamid Karzai International airport, scrambling and panicking, getting onto American cargo flights to flee out, with hopes for survival but no clue of their final destinations (Harding & Doherty, 2021). This was not the first time the world witnessed mass movement of Afghans from their home country. Since 1979, when the Soviet invaded Afghanistan, followed by the emergence of the Taliban regime and the US led bombing, Afghan refugees became one of the largest refugee groups, and it is estimated that every fourth Afghan is a refugee now (Khan, 2017). It is also estimated that 64% of Afghan refugee population is children and youth (UNICEF, 2017), and considering the rapidly deteriorating situation in 2021 and 2022, the number will continue to rise (UNHCR, 2021). Many of them arriving to their host countries have experienced significant trauma due to war, violence, and conflicts (Miller et al., 2019), and the nature of being a refugee significantly modifies their personal lives and their engagement, including accessing and attaining education and learning opportunities (Vijayakumar, 2016).

Learning and education can be a source of healing and empowerment for vulnerable population, particularly refugees, who have had limited social and economic mobility due to their extended nature of displacement. However, unlike most newcomers, refugees experience difficulty in navigating and accessing learning opportunities in their host countries. In comparison to other migrants, they experience low rates of enrolment in post-secondary

institutions, language barriers, discrimination, and poor mental health support that is necessary in achieving their goals (Shakya et al., 2010). Despite the severity of the problem, the literature on learning experiences of refugees, particularly Afghans who are currently facing one of the largest refugee crises globally, is sparse. It is crucial to investigate and understand the experiences and perspective of refugees, particularly in the ongoing policy debate in refugee learning and development initiatives. By using a phenomenological approach, this study will understand the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. In particular, I aim to examine the factors that inform their learning processes, sources and strategies that facilitate their learning experiences, and challenges and barriers faced during their learning journeys.

### **Global Refugee Movement: Trends and Patterns**

Migration of people across borders is not a new phenomenon; it has taken place in every historical era in the past. Even though it is not exclusively modern, the new scale and unprecedented velocity is characterized and influenced by modern conditions. There was no point in the history of humankind where people worldwide were ready to migrate or compelled to migrate in this pace due to environmental disasters, wars, and conflicts (Hakovirta, 1993; Karakasoglu et al., 2022).

Globalization has tremendously changed the social, economic, and political spheres, accelerating the rate of changes in global mass movement of people (Richmond, 2002). Earlier studies (Gatrell, 2013; Hakovirta, 1993) show that the scale of refugee movement has fluctuated exponentially since the mid-twentieth century, with most refugees originating from the Global South. Most people who are forcibly displaced due to civil wars and human rights abuse seek refuge in their neighboring countries (Fransen & Haas, 2021; Hatton, 2020). Data on global migration is incomplete but the figures available by the UN (2019) estimates that over 272

million people live outside their country of birth (Finnegan, 2022). Today, hundreds of thousands of refugees continue to make their ways across the Mediterranean to Europe with hopes for better quality lives. It is estimated that more than 65 million people today are internally displaced individuals or refugees, whereas the average length of exile time of a refugee is about 20 years (Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021).

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol related to the status of refugees, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (p. 3). Over the years, this definition also included individuals and groups that have fled wars, conflicts, and/or religious and political persecution. The UNHCR (2018) estimated that by the end of 2017, there were over 25.4 million refugee men, women, and children registered across the world, and millions of them fled as unregistered or illegal refugees. The figures have drastically escalated in the recent years. In 2020, UNHCR reported that the global rate of displaced population is at a record high, with around 80 million people being displaced forcibly by the end of 2019, including refugees, internally displaced peoples, and asylum seekers (Fransen and Haas, 2021). The global forced displacement figures surpassed 84 million by the mid of 2021, out of which 26.6 million are refugees. It is also noteworthy that around 68 percent of the refugee population originates from five countries, including Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Congo, Somalia, Central African Republic, and Eritrea are also counted as the refugee origin countries (UNHCR, 2021). In 2018, approximately 10 million refugees originated from Asia, while 7 million were from Africa. In the same year, 32 percent of the global refugee population originated from Syria, followed by 15 percent from Afghanistan. Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are also a growing

refugee group, while the recent increase in refugee numbers originate from African countries, including South Sudan and Central African Republic (Fransen and Haas, 2021).

Hatton (2020) argues that the most common factors of the refugee movement from the Global South to the Western countries are political terror, lack of civil liberties, environmental disasters, and conflicts, which affect people's resources and livelihood opportunities (Hattan, 2021; Spiegel & Mhlanga, 2021). A common perception about the rapidly increasing refugee flow in the past decades is the increased level of violent conflicts across the world. The Chinese and Greek civil wars and the Korean War, the Vietnam war in 1972, followed by Iran-Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan have considerably increased the number of deaths and migration flows. Recent conflicts in Syria and the Middle East, the re-emergence of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and the emerging Russia-Ukraine conflict also witnessed millions of displaced refugees across countries (Fransen and Haas, 2021; UNHCR, 2021).

In the urgency of the issue, several policies and agreements have been passed by the international bodies. In December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly declared the Global Compact on Refugees by stressing at the urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibilities for refugees. Later, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the Global Compact for Refugees were also passed and adopted to facilitate international cooperation on refugee settlement (Devictor, Do, & Levchenko, 2021; Guo, 2022).

### **Canadian Refugee Resettlement Programs**

Canada has experienced several refugee movements in the history. With Canada's White and ethnocentric immigrant promotion policy from 1867 until 1966, the aftermath of the Second World War witnessed many Eastern and Central Europeans, including 35,000 Jewish Holocaust

survivors, arriving to Canada. Non-European immigrants were few, including black Caribbean women who arrived as domestics, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks fleeing the Iron Curtain during 1960s (Guo & Wong, 2018; Wiseman, 2018). Concomitantly, Chilean political refugees and expelled Ugandan Ismaili Muslims of Indian descent also arrived in the early 1970s. Ethnic Chinese from Vietnam came at the turn of the 1980s, and Hong Kong Chinese as well as Bosnian and Kosovar refugees came in the 1990s. The recent sectarian and civil wars in Lebanon, Syria, and Afghanistan also triggered the resettlement of refugees in Canada (Agarwal, 2018; Macklin et al., 2018; Wiseman, 2018). The Government of Canada admitted approximately 23,000 refugees per year from 2006 to 2015, with numbers fluctuating every year. For instance, between 2011 and 2016, around 12 percent of newly arrive migrants constituted of refugees. Later, about 40,000 Syrian refugees came between 2015 and 2017, with the proportion of refugees increased to 20 percent (Agarwal, 2018). In 2021, Canada provided refuge to over 30,082 refugees, with the number continuing to increase in 2022 (UNHCR, 2022).

Canada has resettlement programs since 1978, with acceptance for various sub-quota features including emergency resettlement, medical emergency cases, women at risk cases, humanitarian assistance to people fleeing from persecution, and family reunion programs. Refugees in Canada arrive through three main programs: Government-assisted refugees (GAR), Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) refugees, and Privately Sponsored refugees (PSRs), (Elgersma, 2015; Reynolds & Kazak, 2019; UNHCR, 2018). The government-assisted refugees are usually UNHCR-referred refugees, particularly for those no longer in their countries of origin and cannot return due to their fears of persecution. The Government supports them mainly through non-governmental agencies, typically during their first year in Canada. Upon arrival, they are met by state-funded service providers who provide them services required for their

settlement. Blended Visa Office referred refugees are also UNHCR-referred refugees who are matched with a private sponsor. The Government provides partial financial support, while the rest is sponsored by the private sponsor for the first year in Canada. This hybrid sponsorship model limits sponsors' choice of whom they can sponsor (Agarwal, 2018; UNHCR, 2018).

Privately sponsored refugees, however, are refugees or people in refugee-like situations that are identified and supported by private individuals or organizations, typically religious and social groups, and communities. Private sponsors also help refugees in finding jobs and accommodations, supporting their children for schools, as well providing support with food and healthcare (Beiser, 2003; Yu et al., 2007). The private refugee sponsorship is a noteworthy program within Canada's larger immigration policy. The program has a long history of almost forty years. It played a vital role in Canada's response to international refugee crises, including Southeast Asian Boat People in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the recent arrival of Syrian refugees (Denton, 2003; Hyndam et al., 2017; Kaida et al., 2020). The private sponsorship program is considered more effective than the Government-assisted program, as the former allows long-term, successful adaptation and integration of refugees. However, private sponsorship can be stressful and onerous, with many logistic and operational issues (Agarwal, 2018). Refugees are usually granted permanent residency after their arrival and are eligible to apply for citizenship once all requirements are met (Nourpanah, 2014).

### **Afghan Refugee Crises**

Afghan refugees are the second largest refugee group after the Syrians, making it one of the largest refugee crises globally. It is estimated that one in four Afghans has been a refugee, and even after decades long efforts by different governments and organization, the crisis is getting worse every day (Khan, 2017). The first large scale wave of Afghan displacement was

witnessed in 1979 when Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union. More than 1.5 million Afghans crossed the border of Pakistan, and around 2.6 million crossed the border of Islamic Republic of Iran (Marchand et al., 2014). From 1981 to 1985, the war intensified, and the number of refugees rose to around five million, with majority living in Pakistan (Khan, 2017). During the Soviet occupation, the net migration rate of Afghan population was -56.7/1000 persons (Marchand et al., 2014, p. 30). After a decade long battle between the US funded forces and Soviet Union, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 caused another wave of refugees, with more than 6 million Afghans forcibly displaced from their homes (Marchand et al., 2014; Hugo et al., 2012).

The second major migration wave was observed between 1992 and 2000 when the Taliban emerged and imposed their order in the country. The Taliban gained control of the main populated areas including the capital city of Kabul, resulting in extreme human rights violation and insurgencies. Later, the third mass displacement was the result of war and bombing between the Taliban and the United States coalition forces in 2001. The terrorists attack of 9/11 aggravated the international reaction towards Afghanistan, and as a result, US forces invaded Afghanistan in an attempt to end the Taliban rule. The armed conflict between Taliban and Northern Alliance forces and the US led bombing campaign fostered dire security conditions in the country. These crises were worsened by droughts, people contending with hunger, cold and lawlessness, and severe psychological effects on children and young adults (Parker, 2002).

According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) statistics published in 2016, “Net refugee populations outside Afghanistan began to climb again in 1999 to reach 3.8 million in 2001, with 2.2 million in Pakistan and 1.6 million in Iran. Asylum applications by Afghans in Europe grew steadily from 8,542 in 1991 to 12,943

in 1997, then escalating to reach a peak of 50,946 in 2001” (p. 24). Apart from Pakistan and Iran as the two most important destination states for refugees, Afghans also migrated to the Gulf and Western countries, primarily to the United Arab Emirates, Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey, United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Canada. (Marchand et al., 2014). The Canada 2001 Census recorded 25,230 Afghans living in Canada, which increased to 48,090 in the 2006 census (Marchand et al., 2014).

The most recent migration wave of Afghans was triggered on August 15, 2021, when the government of Afghanistan collapsed and the Taliban re-gained control on the capital city of Kabul, as a result of President Joe Biden’s announcement of withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan in May 2021. The collapse of the government suspended international assistance from donors and development agencies, and thousands of Afghan residents rushed to the airport to flee out of the country (Dhaliwal, 2022). Canada played a crucial role in responding to the crises. The Government of Canada provided \$47.1 million in humanitarian disbursements in 2021, with an additional \$94.2 million in March 2022. Canada also increased its refugee resettlement efforts for Afghans, and as of June 2022, 14,645 people have arrived in Canada since August 2021 under all refugee programs, with 6,735 Afghans (out of 14,910 applications) arriving as government-assisted refugees, and 7,910 people coming through separate humanitarian programs (Dhaliwal, 2022).

Three special Afghan resettlement programs were introduced by the Canadian government in 2021. The first one was referred as the Special Immigration Measures (SIM), introduced in July 2021 with its focus on Afghans who assisted the Government of Canada in armed forces or workers employed at the embassies. Since the beginning of it, 16,135 applications have been received, out of which 10,970 applications are approved, and 8,305

individuals have arrived in Canada. Afghans arriving through the SIM program fall under the government-assisted refugee program. (Dhaliwal, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022). The second one is a humanitarian program for other groups of Afghans who face risks under the Taliban rule. This includes women leaders, human right activities, persecuted religious or ethnic minorities, journalists, and LGBTQI+ individuals. So far, 14,250 Afghans have arrived in Canada under this program. While the third program is a family reunification pathway for extended family members of former Afghan interpreters. Introduced in December 2021, this program prioritizes family members of former interpreters and staff members who supported Canada's combat mission in Kandahar, and who came to Canada as residents under the 2009-2012 public policies as Afghan interpreters. Canada has welcomed 360 Afghans and plans to welcome 5,000 Afghan nationals through the family reunification pathway. All applications are processed by Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) (Dhaliwal, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022).

Such resettlement programs are not without its challenges. Amidst fears faced by Afghans and waiting for their time to flee, poor communication from governmental bodies, requirement for biometrics and documentations, and perceived lack of resources to handle the backlog are some of the reported obstacles on the path to safety for Afghans. Afghans residing in a third country face additional challenges of documentations, with each country having its own entry and exit requirements. Some Afghans living in Afghanistan have had no other choice but to destroy their own identity and travel documents to avoid Taliban reprisals (Dhaliwal, 2022).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Adult refugees with limited education are a distinct group with distinct learning, social, and psychological needs. They are not a homogenous group. Their gender, age, cultural and

ethnic affiliations impact on their learning abilities and integration in their host societies.

Displaced from their past communities, cultures, and values, refugees often leave their previous identities and capitals and learn new behaviours and rules that are necessary for their survival. As a part of resettlement, refugees acquire new job-specific skills, learn new languages, adapt to the new environment, and create new knowledge that generate from their novel social encounters and experiences, leading to deeper engagement and relationships, and construction of new meanings that are often complemented by the replacement of old patterns of knowledge and meaning-making processes. Therefore, becoming a refugee is a source of transformative learning as they experience changes and adjust to reshape their lives (Moorice, 2007).

Among the large-scale refugee movements across the world, the movements of Afghan refugees have come in waves, and today, it is one of the largest refugee crises around the globe (Khan, 2017). Amidst the extended nature of displacement, learning and education can give them opportunities to heal and gain social and economic mobility. However, they experience multifaceted difficulty in their learning journeys, including poor emotional and financial support (Benseman, 2014), high dropout rates (Shakya et al., 2010), discrimination and isolation (Bajwa et al., 2017). With the decade long security crises in Afghanistan, many Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada with a significant history of trauma due to war, with hopes to rebuild their lives by learning and adapting the norms and structures of their host societies.

Previous studies on learning experiences of refugees have focused on their challenges in post-secondary education (Bajwa et al., 2017; Idin, 2018), their aspiration and hopes (Shakya et al., 2010), and the need of higher education in the context of refugees (Peterson & Giles, 2010). Other studies highlight refugees' downward economic and social mobilities with respect to their economic and job activities (Etzold, 2017; Hope, 2011). While some researchers have

demonstrated the role of English language and its acquisition as a part of refugees' reintegration processes (Ghadi et al., 2019; Huang, 2021). However, the broader literature on refugee learning and education has focused on primary and secondary education, primarily accredited forms of formal schooling, which, firstly, misses out on adults and youth who face a wide range of barriers to learning, and also negates the importance of other forms of learning which help learners accumulate social and cultural capital necessary for their resettlement.

Capturing the rich experiences of refugees, particularly Afghans, have received limited attention in the past. Their experiences and challenges often come from those who speak on their behalf (Muhamat, 2020). To understand the complexity of living experiences of the subjects from the subjects themselves is a powerful tool. Therefore, by using a qualitative inquiry, the intend of my study is to examine the learning experiences of Afghan refugees in Canada by hearing and understanding the experiences in their own words. Such learning experiences go beyond the mainstream forms of schoolings, and also capture learnings through non-formal and informal ways, including learnings in their workplaces, families and social interactions, as well as in their overall environment. It also includes learnings of new patterns, values, and norms, language acquisition and knowledge that contributes to their social and economic mobilities. For the purpose, one effective methodology of research to explore and capture their lived experiences is phenomenology. Canada as one of the host countries of Afghan refugees, it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to understand their learning experiences, particularly in the current and potential policy initiatives that are going to facilitate their resettlement processes.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. Specifically, I intend to examine the factors and strategies that

facilitate their learning experiences, and barriers and challenges they face during their learning processes. By utilizing the theoretical framework of forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986), my study examines how adult refugees describe their transformative learning experiences, particularly in terms of the disruption of their previous social and cultural capitals and the establishment of the new forms of capital during their resettlement processes.

### **Research Questions**

My research is guided by one central question, and three associated sub-questions

1. What are the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada?
  - a. What factors such as educational background, work experience, and social ties, referred as social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), inform their learning experiences?
  - b. What are the struggles and barriers they encounter during their learning processes?
  - c. What strategies and sources have proven successful during their learning experience?

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As a researcher, it is imperative to locate my positionality in terms of my own cultural and political standing, as well as my interests and influences. I sensitized to the plight of refugees and displaced people, first through my grandfather who experienced the Partition of India when he was 18. He fled from India to Pakistan in 1947, when trains and roads from one country to another were full of corpses. My father fled from Muscat to Gwadar (one of the seaports of Pakistan) as a result of religious prosecution against his minority group. My mother, originally from Mumbai, India, was stranded in Karachi due to the war between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Later, she had to flee from Kuwait because of the Persian Gulf war. Then, when I was 17, an Afghan refugee family settled in my neighborhood. I spent many days playing with the boys next door, until, too soon, they had to leave their home suddenly to evade a military crackdown against refugees. With this as a backdrop, I wanted to understand the refugee experience, notably the impact of trauma on their life prospects, and education as a nexus with identity, belonging, and a source of empowerment and healing. Over the course of my undergraduate studies, I worked with Afghan refugee youth as a part of my honors thesis, gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the second-generation refugees in the context of Pakistan. This made me realize that for those who lost everything as a consequence of displacement, access to education can improve their quality of lives within any receiving society.

To the end, I bring my own interests, familiarity, and expertise in the social and historical context of Afghanistan, with a focus on social justice in the current global refugee debate. With my academic background and interest in educational research, I am keen to understand their learning needs, patterns, and challenges, and how we can make an inclusive learning environment for all.

### **Significance of Study**

Firstly, the study has its theoretical and methodological significances. Phenomenology has been widely used in refugee studies, particularly in understanding refugees' mental health issues, their experiences in the labour market, and accessibility to social services. The use of phenomenology to examine learning experiences in general, and for refugees in particular, is sparse. Likewise, the framework of the forms of capital has been read and discussed in the context of its significance in the labour market. My literature search did not reveal any study that explicitly used this framework to understand the learning experiences of refugees in their host

societies. My research, in turn, fills the scholarly gap that exist in the wider research in refugee studies and adult learning.

Secondly, my study moves beyond the mainstream discursive assumption that learning equals to schooling. My research captures formal, non-formal, as well as informal forms of learning experience. Non-formal and informal forms of learning are often ignored in the literature but play a significant role in refugees' lives. One learns every day, and that learning often facilitates how we act and improve ourselves in our daily lives. Breaking the supposition that learning happens in the four walls of a classroom is important, and my study is going to contribute to the larger scholarly literature around learning and education beyond classrooms.

Amidst the current security crises in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan refugees continue to increase, and there is a growing number of refugees coming and settling in Canada. Studies have shown that adult refugees have witnessed multiple types of violence, including conflicts, death of loved ones, and deplorable living conditions, and as a result, face psychosocial consequences throughout their lives, which can create hinderances in their life prospects, including learning and education (Shakya et al., 2010). Becoming a refugee is a source of transformative learning and studying it can allow researchers and practitioners to understand their needs and design better responses. There is a pressing gap in research and policy literature to better understand and overcome their learning experiences, barriers, and challenges. This study will contribute to the growing scholarship by providing insights about barriers and challenges faced by refugees as how they navigate their lives in Canada. Consequently, this will inform and help organizational and governmental bodies to design and strategize better support systems that are sustainable as well as relevant to their needs. This study will also amplify the voices of refugees who are often overlooked as a subset of migrant population, without realizing

that they are different than regular immigrants. Therefore, it is crucial to understand and take into consideration the unique experiences of refugees, and how to support them in their learning journeys.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

My thesis comprises of five main chapters. After the introduction of the problem and its contextual understanding, I review the past literature in the second chapter, including scholarly work done in the areas of refugee resettlement, refugee learning and adult learning initiatives globally, specifically in Canada, with a detailed eye and attention to learners' experiences, including their challenges, barriers, and opportunities. Additionally, the second chapter discusses the theoretical framework of forms of capitals, and a brief overview of the previous literature that has utilized the theoretical framework in the context of migration. This, in turn, leads us to the third chapter of my thesis, which expands on the methodology and its rational, and form of inquiry used. Concomitantly, data collection strategies and data analyzing tools and methods are discussed in the same chapter. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, I present my findings that I gathered during my data collection process. In the fifth chapter, I present my analysis that answer my research questions, relating it to the wider literature conducted in the similar areas. This is followed by the final chapter that discuss the conclusions and implications of my study, implications, and some critical notes for future studies.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This research intends to explore learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees, including factors that inform their learning experiences, strategies utilized during their experiences, and barriers and challenges faced. To conduct this study, it is imperative to carry out a literature review to situate my study in the wider scholarly work, document gaps, and the significance of my research in addressing them. To answer my research question and explore learning experiences of my participants, this chapter will report and analyze the major issues, debates and perspectives that exist in the literature. I begin by a brief overview of refugee settlement and integration in global and Canadian context, followed by the significance of learning for refugees. I then move to transformative learning in the context of refugees, followed by a comprehensive review of literature on learning experiences of refugees around the globe. This is followed by a review of literature on learning experiences of refugees in Canada, capturing the experiences in formal settings as well as informal ways of learning that is often missed out in wider educational literature. The last section of this chapter describes my theoretical framework and how it drives from my research questions and problem statements. I provide a comprehensive foundation of the framework and its usage in the context of refugee experiences, along with theoretical gaps that my study ultimately intends to address. I conclude this chapter with a strong rationale of my framework and its cohesive link with my research goals.

While conducting this literature review, it became clear to me that there is a paucity of literature on learning experiences of refugees, particularly in the context of Canada. Most of the literature focuses on schooling of refugee children and youth, with limited to no attention on how adults are learning through ways that are not always channelled by accredited forms of learnings. I also realized that my theoretical framework provides a strong theoretical foundation to

understand the complexity of learning challenges and patterns of refugees, and despite that, the framework is not adequately used to report learning experiences of refugees. Hence, my research addresses such theoretical and methodological gaps that contribute to the on-going and potentially growing debates on refugee issues around the world.

To conduct my literature review, I used a variety of information sources, including books, academic journals, news reports, and dissertations. I accessed most of these resources from the University of Calgary library portal and Google Scholar. Some of the key words I used in search engines are ‘learning experiences’, ‘refugee learning’, ‘refugee experience in Canada’, and ‘Afghan refugee experience’. I also reviewed the reference lists of the articles that I found in my preliminary search and found more resources through them.

### **Refugee Settlement and Integration**

Since 1950s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a mandate to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of refugees by coordinating international action plans to protect refugees. However, the global refugee problem has escalated in the past few decades, and the globalized world has changed in many ways that this mandate did not account for. Interventions and programs for the rights of refugees have proven to be inadequate, and aid effectiveness and mechanisms are far more complex. The relief responses and management of refugee camps are insufficient to tackle the crises (Beiser, 2006; Simsek & Corabatir, 2016). Additionally, more countries are now closing their borders to refugees, considering them as a threat to their security, particularly for refugees coming from predominantly Muslim countries. This situation is alarming, as it risks the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, and exacerbates xenophobia and Islamophobia (Simsek & Corabatir, 2016). In the face of refugee crises, numerous scholars have advocated integration and resettlement as a durable solution (Azarnert,

2018; Beiser, 2006; Hynie, 2018). An early investment in refugees' successful settlement helps to ensure that they become contributing members of their host societies (Beiser, 2006).

The concept of settlement and integration is widely used in refugee context, but a consensus on a firm definition has hardly been achieved. Settlement includes supporting newcomers with housing, food, language training, schooling, public services, and understanding of their rights and responsibilities in their host societies. While integration focuses on a longer-term process, where migrants fully engage in their life by participating in economic, civic, and community activities (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). Integration is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and is individualized, contested and contextual (Robinson, 1998). Settlement and integration usually overlaps and can never be achieved in an assumed or fixed timeline (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020).

Integration leads to a durable solution for refugees. In general, the process of integration has three interrelated dimensions. First, it is a legal process where refugees are granted a range of rights and privileges by the host country. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, some of the entitlements include the right to seek employment, to enjoy freedom of movement and mobility, to engage in income-generating activities, and to have access to public services such as education and healthcare. The second dimension of integration can be regarded as an economic process, where refugees acquire rights to establish and improve their sustainable livelihoods, develop self-reliance, participate in local economy, and become less dependent on aids and humanitarian assistance. Third and most importantly, integration is a social process that allow refugees to live alongside their host population without any discrimination and exploitation. An important component of integration that makes it more useful than assimilation is the maintenance of refugees' own identity in the process (Crisp, 2004). As Kuhlman (1994) points out, a successful local integration for refugees involves maintenance of their own identities yet

becoming a part of the host society in a way that refugees and host population live together in a peaceful way.

The European Council on Refugee and Exiles (ECRE) has defined refugee integration as a two-way process, involving refugees integrating in the receiving society and a perception of acceptance of the established population and other communities (ECRE, 1999). Refugee integration also refers to sharing of resources and equalizing of territorial and political rights, as well as cultural exchanges between refugees and their host society members. The process also develops a sense of belonging among them and a confidence to exercise their rights without any fear (Sacramento, Turtiainen & Silva, 2019; Simsek & Corabatir, 2016).

A growing literature on integration has been influenced by Ager and Strang (2004). Ager and Strang (2004) provided a framework for a successful process of integration. In their account, the framework is structured in four main headings. The first one is ‘means and markers’ that involves employment, housing, education, and health, followed by ‘social connections’, including social bridges, social bonds, and links. The third one is ‘facilitators’ that comprises of language and cultural knowledge, safety, and stability, and lastly ‘foundation’ that includes rights and citizenship. This comprehensive approach offers a way to understand the spheres of integration, however, it fails to consider the dynamics of host societies, the status and situation of migrants and the issue of class and privilege (Ager & Strang, 2008; Simsek & Corabatir, 2016). Settlement and integration processes are significantly impacted by socio-economic status, social identities such as gender and sexual orientation, as well as social networks in the country of origin and host society. It is also noteworthy that refugees are likely to be at a disadvantage as compared to other immigrants in terms of social and economic upliftment (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Edge et al., 2014).

When the international refugee regime was established around 50 years ago, the process of local integration was recognized as a potential solution for refugee crises (Crisp, 2004). The 1951 UN refugee Convention considered the role of citizenship as an essential component of integration (Crisp, 2004; Strang & Ager, 2010). According to article 34 of the Convention, “the contracting states shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees. They shall in particular make every effort to expedite naturalization proceedings” (p. 30). However, such integration process of refugees in the Western countries and in certain non-European countries also depend in relation to their legal status and access to fundamental rights. This multi-dimensional complexity has not received much attention in research, and therefore, it is important to draw on the experiences of refugees in their receiving society (Simsek & Corabatir, 2016).

The interrelation of various aspects of refugee integration is not surprising. Refugees with limited language skills have a greater difficulty in finding income-generating activities or accessing services. Individuals with inadequate housing risk and poor physical and mental health find it difficult to settle and integrate in their host societies (Hynie, 2018). Cheyne-Hazineh (2020) also report that language barriers, literacy gaps, limited resources at the end of service providers, and limited opportunities for community engagement are some of the barriers to successful integration of refugees. In low and middle-income countries, barriers can be propagated by political instability, poor infrastructure, and lack of proper healthcare and education facilities (Segatto, 2021). Furthermore, lack of knowledge and cultural sensitivity at the end of service providers can also pose serious challenges for refugees who strive to integrate in their host societies.

Refugee settlement and integration in federal countries like Canada assume different responsibilities, including central role of government in refugee integration, to decentralizing it to provincial governments, or contracting non-governmental organization and private sector to provide services. The involvement of federal government in refugee integration in Canada dates back to 1940s when the government decided to assist foreign-born family members of Canadian soldiers and war refugees. During 1970s and 1980s, a range of settlement services were introduced, including translation, orientation, and assistance with permanent housing, income support, and language training in English and French. Later in 1990s, such programs were developed for all immigrants regardless of their status (IRCC, 2016). In the mid of 1990s, provincial cuts in federal funding changed the policies of immigration and policies, which increased provincial responsibilities to settle refugees. Quebec was the first to take responsibility, followed by British Columbia in 1988, and Ontario in 2005. The process was accompanied by its own challenges as some provinces opposed the responsibilities, while other required negotiations, which ultimately led to an increase in federal government fundings (Segatto, 2021).

Canada's current model of settlement and integration policy involves the National Settlement Program and provincial programs, both involving non-profit sectors to provide most services. The settlement services include information and orientation, literacy and language services, labour-market access support, education and healthcare, crises counselling, and transportation. Government-assisted refugees and refugees identified with special needs receive monetary support for one year. The federal government also provides health-care coverage and special protection for women and individuals under threat. Additionally, the federal government also funds programs to promote multiculturalism and anti-racism (IRCC, 2016; Segatto, 2021).

## **Learning in the Context of Refugees**

### ***Significance***

Displacement is associated with increased levels of poverty, functional illiteracy, and poor health and well-being. Refugees often face livelihood difficulties because of loss of assets with an uncertainty of their future, which significantly impacts their emotional, social, and economic progress of lives (Awidi & Quan-Baffour, 2021; Hanemann, 2005; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021). Many refugees arrive to their host countries with a significant history of trauma due to war, violence, and conflicts (Miller et al., 2019), and the nature of being a refugee significantly modifies their personal lives and their engagement, including accessing and attaining learning opportunities (Vijayakumar, 2016). While securing shelter and safety is the primary concern for refugees after displacement, resuming or starting their learning journey is also an immediate step for successful reintegration in their host societies (Ager & Strang, 2008; Streitwiser et al., 2019).

Learning plays an instrumental role in both preventing conflicts and rebuilding post-war societies. It helps refugees in identifying their needs, providing them with skills to navigate the time of transition and economic crises, and preparing them for the future through knowledge acquisition, reflection, and reconstruction (Awidi & Quan-Baffour, 2021; Kapplinger, 2018). Learning plays multiple roles in livelihood adaptation and progression. It goes beyond its economic benefits, and works as a tool to make competences visible that enhances self-motivation and social participation (Erdogan & Erdogan, 2020; Subasi, 2018). Drobner (2001) notes that adult education facilitates migrants to ‘thrive’ and be ‘connected’, which empowers them to reposition as active members of their host societies. For Subasi (2018), education and learning are also tools for perspective transformation. It opens doors for constructing new patterns and ways of understanding, which ultimately becomes a driving force in the integration

and resettlement of refugees into their host communities. The European Agenda on Adult Learning also emphasizes on the role of learning and education in promoting active citizenship and social inclusion, reducing poverty and gender inequities across societies (The European Council of European Union, 2011).

Learning can be a source of healing and empowerment for vulnerable population, particularly refugees, who have had limited social and economic mobility due to the extended nature of displacement. However, unlike most newcomers, refugees experience difficulty in navigating and accessing such opportunities in their host countries. In comparison to other migrants, they experience low rates of enrolment in post-secondary institutions, language barriers, and poor mental health support necessary in achieving their goals (Shakya et al., 2010). Education and learning often do not become a part of humanitarian response, despite multiple frameworks emphasizing for the provision of education in emergencies since 2004, including Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), Minimum Standard for Education in Emergencies, Sphere Project Humanitarian Charter, and the Institutionalization of an InterAgency Standing Committee (IASC) humanitarian response cluster for education since 2006 (Peterson & Giles, 2010). The lack of learning opportunities can be witnessed, for example, in the Dadaab camps in Northern Kenya, where 75 additional schools were urgently required, and despite that, education was not included in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appeal for the Horn of Africa in July 2011. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes the right to education, including ensuring accessibility to tertiary education for all by every appropriate means. Despite this, there are lack of possibilities for education in exile, meaning that refugees miss out on their chances of attaining education and consequently, not getting enough chances of uplifting their quality of lives (Peterson & Giles, 2010).

Much of the literature on refugee learning and education has focused on primary and secondary education, which indeed does capture the largest demographic refugee population but misses out on adults and youth who face a wide range of barriers to learning. According to the UNHCR (2016), 61% of refugee children have access to primary education, while 23% to secondary education. However, only 1% of refugees transition into, or back into, tertiary education compared with the 36% of the global average who access education in their adult lives. This 1% figure is highly alarming, but, as argued by Streitwieser et al. (2019), it is also noteworthy that the statistics can significantly vary, depending on the region and contextual factors. Even so, there is a paucity of literature about adult refugees and their learning, especially in the context of learning opportunities and experiences that go beyond formal learning systems. With the limited scope in the existing academic literature, this section aims to provide a snapshot of some of the empirical studies and interventions conducted in the context of the learning needs and experiences of refugees.

### ***Transformative Learning in the Refugee Context***

Learning is an essential element of being, and human becoming is achieved through learning. A learner is always becoming because of doing, thinking, and feeling throughout the learning process. According to Jarvis (2006), learning occurs where there is a tension and dissonance between our inner and outer selves, what he calls as a ‘disjuncture’. Humans constantly learn to overcome this sense of dissonance to achieve harmony. It is the disjuncture state that we desire to satisfy, and this way, learning is contemplative, reflective, and experimental. In the current globalized, life-changing scenarios, our world frequently induces various states of disjuncture, sometimes greater ones that require substantial learning and change. As Jarvis (2008) eloquently points out, in this rapidly changing world, individuals are compelled

to learn all the time in order to find better ways to survive in their societies. Hence, learning is “now endemic” (p. 5).

Such learning experiences can serve as a basis from which individuals may transform their lives. Taylor (1994) calls this adaptation an “intercultural competency” (p. 155), and Mezirow (1981) termed this as “perspective transformation” (p. 6) or “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5), which is an emancipatory process of critical awareness of how and why the societal structure and cultural assumptions has constrained us and our relationships. Transformative learning is reflected in the work of several adult educators, including Paulo Freire (1970), Jack Mezirow (1991), Larry Daloiz (1986), and Robert Boyd (1991). Jack Mezirow’s model of transformative learning is useful in understanding the development of intercultural competence, particularly in adapting more effectively to the demands of changing socio-cultural contexts (Dirkx, 1998). Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 8). Reflective learning becomes transformative when past assumptions are no longer authentic and valid, and at this stage, learning becomes the process of using prior interpretation to construct a new or revised version of the meaning of one’s new experience to guide future activities, including self-examination of feelings, exploration of new roles and relationships, acquiring new knowledge and skills, building competence and self-confidence, and re-integration into one’s life by learning new perspectives (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). For Mezirow (1991), the outcomes of transformative learning are inclusivity in individuals’ perceptions of their world, openness to other points of

views, and ability to integrate different perceptions and dimensions of their experiences into meaningful and holistic relationships. In this context, transformative learning is at the core of adult learning and development (Dirkx, 1998).

The concept of transformative learning gives immense importance to the experiences of individuals that act as a point of initiation for the transformative process of the problematic frames of reference, conviction, and expectation, so the individuals in the process become more inclusive, multi-faceted, open and emotionally ready for change (Mezirow, 2000). The key concept is that when an individual's frame of reference is in disharmony with their experience, a disoriented dilemma occurs, and individuals begin to self-reflect and question the validity of their past perspectives. This results in transformation of perspectives, greater cultural awareness and confidence, and competence in dealing with new relations and contexts (Mezirow, 1991; Morrice, 2013). For Clark (1993), transformative learning produces far-reaching changes in the learners than does learning in general, and these changes have a significant and far-reaching impact on the learner's subsequent experiences. Transformative learning, therefore, offers a unique perspective on such learning opportunities to refugees who have been disadvantaged by living in displacement (Finnegan, 2021; Onsando & Billet, 2009).

Uprooted from their past communities, cultures, and languages, refugees are often forced to leave their previous identities and learn new behaviours and rules and adapt to new social values and structures. Becoming a refugee, therefore, is a source of learning as they encounter unexpected changes and are required to adjust and reshape their lives (Morrice, 2011). For Jarvis (2006), learning occurs when individuals face dissonance and disjuncture between biography and experience, where "our biographical repertoire is no longer sufficient to cope automatically with our situation, so that our unthinking harmony with our world is disturbed and we feel unease" (p.

16). In such a case, when refugees move across social spheres, it involves intense feelings of disjuncture. They try to re-establish harmony when feeling uneasy by modifying the structure and meaning of their lives and adapt to the new spheres. Migration, in other words, often disrupts the inherited frames of references and leads to learning new behaviours, values, and rules (Morrice, 2013). Refugees are expected to adapt to changes that will often be in conflict with their personal and communal ways of living (Onsando & Billet, 2009).

In the context of refugees, movement into new socio-cultural contexts requires adults to construct new meanings that are often accompanied by the replacement of old ways of meaning-making processes. Concomitantly, the geographical transitions often result in inner psychological transitions and transformations due to the new frame of references with they come into contact, including formation of new mental attitudes, religious matters, and gender and intergenerational relations (Finnegan, 2021; Margaroni & Magos, 2018; Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011).

These new meaning structures are more appropriate to the demands of new developmental phases that refugees encounter in their lives. As a part of reintegration, refugees acquire new job-specific skills, learn a new language, and construct new knowledge that arises within the social acts of trying to make sense of novel encounters and experiences that lead to deeper engagement and relationships with themselves and the world (Dirkx, 1998; Margaroni & Magos, 2018). The creation of new frames of references and meaning-making structures are often acquired through formal learning, as well as informal, non-formal, and incidental learning that living in a new culture demands (Morrice, 2012).

### ***Learning Experiences of Adult Refugees in Global Contexts***

A wide variety of interventions have been made to increase the accessibility of refugees to learning in their host countries. Streitwiser et al. (2019) provide an overview of the efforts

initiated by, originating from, or functioning within North America and Europe. For example, one of the oldest refugee organizations in the Netherlands, the Foundation for Refugees Students University for Asylum Fund (UAF) provides support, counseling and employment opportunities for refugees and asylum-seeking students in the country. UAF is also known for offering grants and loans for highly qualified refugees and providing them necessary mentorships and training. In formal accredited learning programs, international organizations such as UNHCR's DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) is also one of the established interventions that provides funding and recognition to refugees for their educational support in their host countries (Streitwieser et al., 2019). Unlike traditional university programs, accredited on-site and blended learning programs play a significant role in refugee learning. One such program was Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER), initiated by York University in Canada in 2010, in partnership with Kenyatta University and Moi University in Kenya, along with Windle Trust Kenya and the UNHCR. It has supported more than 393 students since 2013, providing them bachelor's degrees offered by the York University, which proved to be valuable for many who later sought refuge in Canada. Similarly, Southern New Hampshire University launched its global initiative for refugees in July 2017, enabling 50,000 refugees to earn degrees in accredited American universities in 20 different locations (Redden, 2017). In Canada, the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) serves the dual purpose of helping refugees access educational opportunities in Canada, as well as resettle them into Canadian life (Dryden-Peterson, 2012). The Certificate Programs by the University of Ottawa and WUSC (Duval, 2015), Borderless Opportunities for Learning and Development by the Arizona State University (Lingenfelter, 2017), and diploma programs by Sweden's University of Gothenburg in

collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council are among many that target refugee population by providing them on-site and online learning platforms (Emma, 2016).

Adult refugees with limited education are a distinct learner group with substantial and distinctive learning, social, and psychological needs. While learning plays a key role in their integration process, achieving it is not a smooth process. As Morrice (2013) points out, refugees are not a homogenous group; their age, gender, cultural and ethnic affiliation impact on their ability to learn and integrate in their new host societies. They are generally mature in their age, may have caring responsibilities, and they also juggle between studying and paid working. The experience of migration changes and reshapes their sense of identity, especially in the context of belonging and inclusion (Morrice, 2013).

There are numerous studies done on the challenges and barriers faced by refugees in accessing education and learning opportunities in their host countries (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006; Kirova, 2019; Morrice, 2013; Morrice, Shan & Sprung, 2018; Subasi, 2018). Subasi (2018) examines the experiences of learners in the adult education facilities for refugees in Hatay, a city in Turkey at the border of Syria. After the Syrian crisis in 2011, Turkey has played an important role in the region in hosting the war victims. While the Ministry of National Education does provide learning opportunities, accessibility to it depends on one's religious and social background. Culture and religion act as decision-makers and knowing the local values and language has always been preferred in employment opportunities. Another study from Australia also pointed out language as a hindrance to the settlement, and lack of instructional resources for refugees are considered as gaps to successful reintegration (Miller et al., 2014; Windle and Miller 2012). Interestingly, Crea and McFarland (2015) also report cultural and social challenges as significant barriers to accessing learning opportunities for refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa,

Syria, and Jordan. Poor mental and physical well-being was also reported to be a significant barrier.

Kuykendall and Johnson (2019), who investigated the refugee literacy needs and experiences in Dallas/Fort Worth, stressed on healthcare as an immediate need for refugees arriving in the US. Refugees coming from Somalia, Laos, and Rohingya come from situations of high poverty with little to no adequate healthcare. They often suffer from chronic illnesses, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It can be challenging for newly arrived refugees to navigate the complicated healthcare system, let alone deal with cultural and social stigmas associated with mental health. Benseman's (2014) qualitative study in New Zealand identifies that learners with a refugee background have complex needs and require specialized approaches. Most have endured physical and psychological tortures that significantly impact their ability to learn and integrate in their host societies. After interviewing 36 refugee learners from 10 different countries residing in Australia, Benseman (2014) considers a supportive learning environment that acknowledges learners' needs, and helps learners develop their learning skills, attitudes and knowledge that enable them to undertake their daily tasks in a new country.

Webb et al. (2021) draw on their longitudinal narrative enquiry to explore the experiences of adult students in Australia from asylum-seeking backgrounds during their undergraduate degrees. The study stresses that the prior experiences and distinctive needs of asylum seeking and refugee learners are mostly invalidated and misrecognized by institutions and governmental bodies. Such misrecognition is accompanied by interrupted education, poverty, and language and cultural dissonance (Earnest et al., 2010; Hartley et al., 2018). For Lombrechts (2020), such students are often 'super-disadvantaged', and their distinct support and needs are failed to be addressed (Morrice, 2013; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Webb et al., 2021). Webb et al. (2021)

also note that refugee learners also struggle to overcome informational and financial barriers in navigating academic and career support and pathways. Since their legal status remains uncertain in Australia for a certain time, even those who secure admissions in schooling systems decline it as they cannot afford to enrol themselves as international students (Hirsch & Maylea, 2016).

Exploring the learning experiences of unaccompanied refugees upon resettlement in Norway, Pastoor (2017) emphasizes on the need for reconceptualization of refugee learning as inclusive of diverse learning contexts beyond formal schooling. Drawing on sociocultural as well as ecological developmental approaches, Pastoor (2017) mentions that in the course of resettlement that may lead to psychosocial adjustment, refugee learners may also face increased vulnerability, risk of maladjustment, dropout and exclusion. Furthermore, several researchers also report lack of childcare, low income and high workload, affordability, housing and transportation problems, gender barriers, low self-esteem, and distrust as significant barriers to their participation in learning in their host societies (Benseman, 2014; Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021; Watts, White & Trilin, 2001).

Khanlou (2008) finds that refugees' pre-migration experiences often include exposure to war and violence, conflicts, physical and sexual violence, and political instability. Depending on the experiences, Kanu (2008) highlights that refugees often have a fear of authoritative figures, including teachers and educators, therefore, restoration of a sense of safety and well-being should be a priority for refugees in educational contexts (Frater-Mathieson, 2004; Kanu, 2008). This, in turn, also implies that educational institutions should make learning spaces more welcoming and safe, and teachers need to be sensitive to learners' experiences. They should be aware of the background and identities of their learners and acknowledge that adjusting in a new

environment can be a difficult process (Cummins, 2001; Hones, 2007; Loewen, 2004; Ring & West, 2015; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008).

### ***Learning Experiences of Adult Refugees in Canada***

Data from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) indicates that a large number of refugees arriving in Canada have less than high school level of education, with no English and French language ability. Arrivals from 2000 to 2009 indicated that adult refugees are four times more likely to have nine years or less of schooling, as compared to other immigrants in Canada. Yet, literature on experiences of refugees in this context is sparse. In Canada, evidence on access to learning is particularly thin because the education sector does not collect or consider data about pre-migration or post-arrival experiences of learning (Shakya et al., 2010).

Unlike other immigrants, refugees experience lack of access to learning in Canada, which contributes to limited social and economic mobility and downward occupational mobility. This leaves many refugees to unemployment or underemployment, in comparison to other newcomers (Bajwa et al., 2017; Lamba, 2003; Yoon et al., 2019). Refugees are an integral part of the social fabric of Canadian life and investing in their learning and educational attainment can benefit the wider Canadian society (Frede, 2010; MacLaren, 2010). Refugees arriving in Canada often have little to no social support and may not receive adequate resettlement information to navigate the Canadian societies. They also report receiving unclear and conflicting information and experience lack of English and French fluency. This, in turn, creates further obstacles to their learning and career advancement (Karunakara et al., 2004).

Social exclusion and systematic racism are reported to be some of the challenges faced by refugees during their resettlement experiences in Canada. Danso (2001)'s mixed-method study examines the initial settlement experiences of Ethiopian and Somali refugees in Toronto,

particularly those who aspire for their economic and social mobility. However, ‘pure discrimination’ against African migrants in general results in downward socio-economic mobility. Refugees often face obstacles in family reunification, which can have a significant impact on their economic and psychological well-being of refugee families. The exploratory study by Makwarimba et al. (2013) also asserts the difficulties faced by Sudanese and Somali refugees in Toronto and Edmonton. Service providers in many urban cities of Canada do not speak the language of refugees, which inhibits their access to services. The information upon arrival is either incomplete or overwhelming. Low-paying jobs, lack of child-care, unsafe neighborhoods, financial and language problems, and difficulties while establishing social networks are some of the challenges that eventually impedes their economic and educational advancement (Danso, 2001; Makwarimba et al., 2013).

Several studies have found that learners from low socio-economic backgrounds and racialized and ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in Canadian societies (Parekh, Killoran & Crawford, 2011; Schroeter & James, 2015; Wilkinson, 2002). Guided by participatory community-based research principles, Shakya et al. (2010) studied the aspiration for education among newcomer refugee youth in Toronto. While many newly arrived refugee youths are motivated after arrival to Canada, the study revealed numerous challenges faced by them. Balancing educational goals with family level responsibilities is one of the key challenges faced by refugees, particularly women. They find themselves to be the service navigators, interpreters, and caretakers of their families. Information barriers, systemic discrimination, and linguistic barriers were also reported to hinder education for refugees in Canada. Likewise, Bajwa et al.’s (2017) study also highlights the experiences of refugees in post-secondary institutions in Toronto, Canada. Refugees who are survivors of torture and war find it difficult to access

educational and professional support and often receive unhelpful and inaccurate guidance from social services.

Huang (2021) conducted research on Adult Syrian refugee learners' needs and experiences in Canada, with a primary focus on language as a critical barrier. By involving language instructors and government-sponsored refugee learners at Canada's language-training program for immigrants (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LNIC)), the development of basic literacy skills was concluded to be a huge challenge for Syrians, especially at lower levels. Arab speakers particularly face this difficulty due to differences in letter formulation and writing in their own languages. This unique situation of Syrian learners in Canada calls for a learner-centered approach, instead of one size fit for all. Local needs assessment, culturally appropriate strategies, and target-based employment related training are some of the ways to counter such challenges (Huang, 2022; Huang, 2021; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). These findings are also stipulated in a study of the curriculum orientation of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LNIC), where Cervatiuc and Ricento (2012) criticized that LNIC trainers often take a prescriptive approach to teaching the dominant curriculum to newcomers, negating their cultural values, epistemological views, and life experiences.

Studies from New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta (Ghadi et al., 2021; Guo, Maitra & Guo, 2021; Kirova, 2021; Massfeller & Hamm, 2021; Stewart et al., 2021; Yohani, Brosinsky & Kirova, 2021) on the Syrian refugees' encounters with the education system in Canada report a significant level of discrimination against refugees who identify as Muslims. This increases a generalized sense of fear, increased dependency on others, and interpersonal challenges that are often not attended or considered by service providers and

learning institutions. Furthermore, low levels of English language proficiency among Syrian refugees' impact on their establishment or maintenance of social connections which are essential for their integration. Another important challenge noted is parents with limited language skills relying on their children in navigating their lives in Canada, which often leads to family tensions, weakening of family bonds and stress among Syrian refugees (Yohani et al., 2021).

MacNevin (2012) demonstrates the educational experiences of teachers and learners with refugee backgrounds in Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. Utilizing ethnography, interviews and textual analysis, the author highlights several experiences of refugee youth in PEI and other Canadian provinces. Schools and learning institutions often work as spaces to thrive and heal, however, with the unique social and psychological needs of refugee students, they are often deprived from appropriate learning. Miller (2009) also adds that individuals with “interrupted education often lack the topic-specific vocabularies for their academic subjects, understanding of register and genre, cultural background knowledge to scaffold their understanding and learning strategies to process content” (p. 573). This significantly impacts refugees who enter in classes where English is a dominant language. Additionally, as MacNevin (2012) emphasizes, challenges related to adaptation and acculturation, social isolation, anxiety related to understanding finances, and the failure of the education system to recognize and acknowledge past learning experiences and knowledge also remain prominent barriers to the accessibility of effective learning for refugees. Learners with refugee backgrounds often do not have solid foundations on which to build upon their learning, therefore, they often have to work from the basic level. Refugee learners in Canada, particularly from war-zone regions, score higher in self-efficacy, but the neurophysiological effects of stress reactions associated with trauma interfere with their concentration, regulation, and academic success (Stermac et al., 2010).

Magro and Ghorayshi (2011)'s work with refugees and service providers in Winnipeg notice that the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) protocol of credential recognition makes it harder for individuals who have lost their documents in their homeland and have no means to get them back. Downward economic mobility and non-recognition of previous educational credentials remain two of the foremost challenges encountered by refugees in Canada. Shakaya et al. (2010) also highlight that several refugees criticized how their previous capacity and educational credentials were not valued in Canada. The non-recognition of previous learning credentials made them feel 'disrespected'. They considered the educational system to be inflexible and insensitive towards assessing degrees and learnings from back home, including acknowledging that many refugees may not have copies of their educational certificates, may have lost them during their forced/multiple displacement, and may not get additional copies due to political instabilities in their home countries. Non-Canadian work experience is also not valued in the Canadian labour market (Bajwa et al., 2017; Shakya et al., 2010). Refugees in Canada often experience downward occupational mobility. Many well-educated refugees with employment experience in professional management find it difficult to work in similar areas (Senthanar et al., 2019). In such situations, they strategize and find other sources of learnings such as volunteer work (Guo, 2014; Taha & Cherti, 2005), or learning at their workplace (Cain et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021), which often takes more time and efforts. According to Krahn et al. (2000) and Yu et al. (2007), such downward mobility is not only because of the credential recognition problems. Rather, refugees also face discrimination in the labour market, with employers hesitant to recruit them because of their race, language, and other 'non-Canadian' attributes.

A major area of learning that is often missed out of the mainstream discourse is the existence and significance of informal and non-formal forms of learning. The term 'informal learning' is often used to mean informal education or learning programs outside of formal education. However, informal learning is not a planned learning. It is unplanned, everyday learning from life's experience that every person does intentionally or unintentionally (Rogers, 2016). Informal learning refers to knowledge, skills, and understanding gained outside of the curricula of formal and non-formal educational institutions. It can occur every day, can be intentional or unintentional, explicit, or implicit. Learnings such as personal growth, confidence, self-motivation and empowerment, social relationships and resilience are important in the context of migration and transnationalism, and they are usually gained and transmitted through informal learning (Elsdon, 1995; Guo, 2011; Livingstone, 1999). Large number of children and adults have never been to schools, yet they continue to learn from their social and cultural contexts, experiences, and social interactions. Learning to use technology is one such example that adult and youth continue to do for their own purposes (Jacobson, 2012; Rogers, 2016). For Papen (2005), a significant number of youths who have not been to schools possess a range of literacy skills acquired informally. Such informally acquired skills are often used in formal and nonformal learning programs. In most cases, informal learning is social and comes from interaction with others, such as family, work colleagues, and community members. It is also individual that often includes the inner construction of oneself. An important source of informal learning is from experiences. Critical reflection on experiences can open avenues for transformative learning, and learning by experience can be intended, self-directed, and didactic through trial and error. In turn, informal learning can be reactive, unintended, and also intentional (Eraut, 2000; Rogers, 2016). Despite its importance, informal learning is not only less

discussed, but also dismissed in wider policy discourse. In this sense, what individuals learn in their daily lives is not valued, and without participating in formal learning programs, they lack learning and accreditations (Rogers, 2016).

Within the limited literature on learning experiences of refugees in Canada, the role of informal learning has been ignored in favour of accredited academic formal learning (Coffield, 2000; Field & Spence, 2000; Jarvis, 2007). Guo (2011) explores the role of informal learning of immigrant parents in Canada and challenges the deficit views of knowledge that is restricted to formal education. Knowledge construction in informal learning is often considered incompatible, inferior, and invalid (Abdi, 2007; Guo, 2011). Informal knowledge, as Guo (2011) argues, is gained and used as transcultural knowledge construction, where migrants change themselves by integrating diverse cultural lifeways into their existing ones. For instance, Liu (2007)'s study of Chinese immigrants in Toronto reports that Chinese parents adapted to the Canadian way of educating children through informal learning. Exploring the learning experiences of refugee women in Atlantic Canada, Brigham, Abidi and Zhang (2018) aptly explain the role of informal learning in women's lives. Moving to a new country involves tremendous changes and in those 'disjunctural' situations (Jarvis, 2007; Guo, 2013), social networks and relations become necessary for survival. Such interaction often emerges from learning that goes beyond formal, institutional learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of forms of capital (1986) offers a significant context for our understanding of how individuals experience and utilize opportunities and progress throughout their lives. The concepts are extensively used in the scholarly work of migration, particularly how migrants struggle and experience during their resettlement processes (Etzold,

2017; Hope, 2011; Uekusa, 2020; Yoon et al., 2019). For Bourdieu (1986), capital is “accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its “incorporated”, embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour” (p. 241). It is, what Bourdieu calls as, *vis insita* and *lex insita*, meaning forces inscribed in objective or subjective structures, and the principles that regulate the social world. Capital takes time to accumulate and produces profits in its identical or expanded forms. The structure and distribution of capital represents the immanent structure of the social world, that is its constraints, reality, governance, and practices (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) also asserts that it is impossible to understand the structure and functions of the social world if capital is not introduced in all its form that goes beyond its only recognition by economic theories.

For Bourdieu (1986), capital has three fundamental types: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Economic capital is the immediate and directly convertible capital into money, while cultural capital is the institutionalized form of educational qualification which may or may not be converted into economic capital, whereas social capital is the social connections and networks one has, which is also convertible into economic capital in certain situations (Bourdieu, 1986; Ortlieb et al., 2020).

### ***Cultural Capital***

Cultural capital can further exist in three forms: the embodied state, which is the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and the institutionalized state, which is a form of objectification of educational qualifications. Bourdieu (1986) further expands and points that cultural capital is often restricted to its profitability; however, the role goes beyond its functionalist dimensions and contributes to the

reproduction of the social structures by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital. The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state presupposes a process of embodiment and incorporation and involves “a labour of inculcation and assimilation” (p. 244), often called as the work of acquisition or self-improvement that an individual invests on themselves. However, this form of embodied capital cannot be transmitted instantaneously in the form of money, property, gifts, or exchanges. The only transmissible form of cultural capital is in its objectified state where objects and media can be transmitted in its materiality (Bourdieu, 1984).

Acquisition of cultural capital depends on the social structures of the society, the social class of an individual, and the time period one takes to accumulate it. It is often acquired unconsciously and transmitted disguisedly. Unlike economic capital, it functions as a symbolic capital that is often unrecognized as capital and recognized as a legitimate competence. The institutionalized state of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications gives its holder a cultural competence where a conventional and legal significance of the capital is guaranteed, producing a relative autonomy at a given time. Moreover, it also makes it possible to establish exchanges between cultural and economic capital in the form of monetary value. However, the material and symbolic profits of the institutionalized state of cultural capital also depends on its need. The investment made may also result in less profit than anticipated (Bourdieu, 1984).

### ***Social Capital***

Social capital is linked to the possession of networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition, or membership in a group. Putnam (1993) defines social capital as a public good, as features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and

cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 2), with family and community ties as less valuable than larger social organizations. The volume and significance of this capital depends on the size of the network one can mobilize, and the size of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) owned by the members of the network they are connected with. Social capital may not be reduced to the economic or cultural capital one possesses, but it is never independent of it either because the membership in a group of networks can be the basis of profits which can lead to the expansion or accumulation of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This network of connections, however, is not always naturally given or transmitted. It is, as Bourdieu says, “a product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term” (p. 249). The maintenance of these networks, whether in neighborhood, kinship, or workplace requires short and long term obligations, efforts, and exchanges (Bourdieu, 1984; Morrice, 2009).

Social capital is not inherently beneficial or detrimental in social integration. For Karimi (2020) and Uekusa (2020), it can become influential in its interaction with other forms of capital and social structures. Social capital is said to have better social outcomes, social cohesion and inclusion, improved health and educational achievement, lower crime and unemployment rate, economic growth, and active citizenship (Harper, 2001; Morrice, 2007). Forming or restoring new social capital is time consuming since it requires continuous efforts as well as investment of time and capital. Membership in a social organization or group does not automatically mean that one has access to its social capital. Therefore, the application of Bourdieuan approach rejects the assumption that migrants have the ability to bridge social ties, rather it emphasizes on individual’s agencies and power relations that exist in the accessibility of various capital through

social groups (Edwards et al., 2003; Karimi, 2020). To understand the role and significance of social capital and its accumulation, it is important to know individual's possession of capitals, their accessibility, their ability to build new ties, power dynamics, and the interaction and reproduction of other forms of capitals that facilitate individual's integration (Adamuti-Trache, 2012; Karimi, 2020).

Social capital is intrinsically linked with learning. Field (2005) suggests that social capital is associated with formal and informal learning by offering access to new ideas, information, and skills. In certain situations, information and skills picked up from family and friends can be far more effective than that gained by formal education. This means that the more bridging and linking social capital they have, the greater the access to informal ways of learning skills and knowledge. Much of the social literacy involved in learning the rules of social engagement and values is learnt informally from people we socialize and work with. In this way, social capital is also a powerful form of learning (Morrice, 2007).

As stipulated earlier, Bourdieu's analysis of capital has been widely used in migration studies. In terms of cultural capital as a symbolic capital, access to cultural capital is a basic human right that enables adults to access other rights too (Piggozi, 1999). To find a suitable job as a migrant may require possessing a form of cultural capital which later can be used to accumulate economic capital in their host country. Access to English language allows to enhance their chances of integration and greater economic mobility, while social capital facilitates the gain and the use of cultural capital, particularly for refugees who lack the appropriate cultural and linguistic capital in their host countries (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2016; Ghadi et al., 2019). As refugees flee their homes and lose their belongings, they are also deprived of economic capital and access to economic resources. They struggle to find meaningful jobs, go through extensive

bureaucratic procedures, and find it difficult to show supporting documents that they cannot provide (Ali et al., 2021; Lamba, 2003). Ali et al. (2021) study on Afghan refugees also reveals that due to lack of knowledge of their rights, refugees are treated unfairly by their employers, such as working below minimum wages, underpaid, and unsafe working conditions, which further reduces their access to economic capital.

Using Bourdieuan analysis, Akkaymak (2017) and Etzold (2017) examine the challenges migrants experienced during their resettlement phases. In case of immigrants and refugees, their former educational credentials and skills, or in Bourdieu's terms, their incorporated institutionalized 'cultural capital', is devalued and often go unnoticed or unrecognized by their host countries. Bauder (2003)'s study in Greater Vancouver demonstrates that non-recognition of their non-Canadian cultural capital often impedes their access to upper segments of labour market. Consequently, they often find it difficult to navigate through local fields of labour, remain under or unemployed, or pursue accreditations in their host countries all over again (Bauder, 2003; Etzold, 2017).

Unlike immigrants who bring their recognized human and financial capital in their new countries, most refugees rely on social capital to access support. Social relations through pre-existing family or business connections, inter-marriages, and common ethnic and religious connections provide them access to valuable cultural and educational information which offers them social and economic mobility (Ali et al., 2021). Ties outside of family, such as ethnic or faith-based groups also help newly arrived refugees with access to accommodation, employment, language training and other community benefits in terms of friendship, marital prospects, and sponsorships (Lamba and Krahn, 2003, Morrice, 2007). However, this restoration of social

networks within their host country may also limit them within low-income economic sectors with low chances of social and economic mobility (Akkaymak, 2017; Lusi and Bauder, 2010).

Migrants, particularly refugees, lack social, cultural, and symbolic capital after they move from their homes to their new host countries, that is from one field to another field with different local rules and values (Ortlieb, et al., 2020). Their existing embodied capital is often devalued which compels them to acquire new embodied capital, including learning a new language, adopting new norms and values, and obtaining new knowledge and skills (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Lamba, 2003). Ortlieb et al. (2020) study on Austrian programs facilitating labour market integration of refugees emphasizes on the role of state sponsored programs in adjusting and extending their capitals to gain new forms of capital. Such programs not only provide them new and relevant cultural capital and increase their awareness of their existing institutionalized and embodied capital portfolios, but also help them gain social capital through contacts and services (Ortlieb et al., 2020).

As my study aims to understand the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada, with a particular attention to factors such as social and educational backgrounds, work experience and social ties, the framework of Bourdieu (1986) informs and lays the theoretical foundations of my study in terms of understanding the complex social and cultural realities and contexts that are required and accompanied throughout the resettlement process. Learning does not occur in isolation, nor it is restricted to formal schoolings. Becoming a refugee is a learning process (Morrice, 2012). As a part of resettlement, they go through transformational learning experiences every day by acquiring new skills and knowledges, learning new norms and values through social encounters and experiences, which often result in the destruction of old patterns and knowledges and the construction of new ones.

Using the framework of Bourdieu (1986) will allow me to understand the complexity of their learning experiences and processes, in terms of their sources of learning, factors that contribute or hinder their learning during resettlement, and strategies and resources that have proven to be successful. Bourdieu's framework of institutionalized cultural and social capital, as well as its accumulation and access to economic capital will be vital in understanding how refugees learn, what has worked and what did not, and what can be done better. This resonates with my research questions and informs my research theoretically, and therefore, I considered the forms of capital as the most appropriate framework to understand my inquiry.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a review of the existing literature on refugees' learning experiences. Starting with a discussion on refugee settlement and integration, I highlighted scholarly work conducted on learning in the context of refugees, its significance, and transformative learning experiences in the refugee context. Then, I provided an overview of literature on learning experiences of refugees from around the globe, followed by a specific review of learning experiences of refugees in Canada. Lastly, I outlined my theoretical framework, its utilization in the past scholarly work, and my rationale of using it.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees, particularly the factors that inform their learning experiences, barriers and challenges they face, and strategies and resources that aided their learning experiences. My research characterizes learning beyond formal schooling. In the context of refugees, learning also includes acquiring new skills and knowledges, learning new norms and values in the changing social spheres. For the purpose, I decided to capture and understand their rich learning experiences during their resettlement phase. To explore the phenomena, I decided to apply a qualitative study, and used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. I gathered data through individual interviews with research participants to dig deeper into their past experiences, current situations, future aspirations, as well as the role social and educational backgrounds and experiences that informed their learning experiences. I believe this methodology was the most appropriate fit to address my research question(s), which are as follows:

1. What are the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada?
  - a. What factors such as educational background, work experience, and social ties, referred as social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), inform their learning experiences?
  - b. What are the struggles and barriers they encounter during their learning processes?
  - c. What strategies and sources have proven successful during their learning experience?

In this chapter, I describe the rationale of choosing a qualitative inquiry as well as the methodology, and associated philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, and axiology).

I also explain the significance of reflexivity in my research, and elaborated my research design, data collection process and analysis, the issue of trustworthiness, and ethical consideration of my research. Lastly, I also highlight some limitations and delimitations of the current study.

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry with its focus on the way people make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Qualitative approach aims to understand and interpret social phenomena perceived by individuals, groups, and cultures. The basis lies in the interpretive approach to social realities and in the interpretation of the behaviours, feelings, and experiences of human beings (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Qualitative inquiry is always context-bound and emphasizes on the sensitivity of the context in which it is conducted.

Individuals cannot be separated from their context, whether the context is their home, family, work, or the broader political and social frameworks of their cultures (Creswell, 2007; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). As Koro-Ljungberg (2008) points out, participants not only have their own values and beliefs, but are also connected with their environment which influences their daily interactions. With the understanding of the context, researchers can locate the actions and perceptions, and grasp the meaning that they communicate and associate (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Qualitative researchers immerse themselves in the setting of the people with a focus on the “emic” perspectives (p. 3), that is the views, perception, meaning and interpretations of the people involved in the research (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The term ‘emic perspectives’ was first introduced by the linguist Pike in 1954, meaning that researchers attempt to describe and understand the experiences, feelings, and perceptions of the people they study, rather than imposing any frameworks of their own. Approaches in qualitative research are linked to the

subjective nature of social realities. They enable researchers to understand the events as their participants do and provide insights from the perspectives of their informants. Qualitative research is based on the foundation that people are best placed to describe and interpret their situations and feelings (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Qualitative inquiry is particularly conducted because of a problem that needs to be explored. For Creswell (2007), this exploration is required because of a need to study individuals or groups, recognize the complexity of their issues, identify variables to measure, or hear the voices that are usually silenced. It is also conducted when we want to hear stories from people themselves, unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the past literature. This empowers individuals and minimizes power relations that often exist between research participants and researchers (Miller & Boulton, 2007). Therefore, reflexivity and collaboration throughout the research process is essential in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

### ***Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology***

The description of the design and methodology of my study will be incomplete without discussing the philosophical assumptions and worldviews utilized in my work. These philosophical assumptions and paradigms shape and inform how I see my world, how I formulate my research, and how I seek and collect information to answer my questions (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). As a part of qualitative inquiry, my ontological assumptions emerge how I create meaning out of realities. As a researcher examining the experiences of refugees, I embrace the idea of multiple realities in the sense that every individual has their own reality, influenced by their place and time in the world. These realities can be captured by stories and experiences of participants and how they make sense of their own world (Creswell, 2013;

Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). With the epistemological assumptions, which is one's way of knowing and what counts as knowledge, conducting qualitative research requires researchers to get as close as possible to the participants, and hence, subjective evidence is gathered based on individual's views and experiences (Creswell, 2013). My epistemological assumption is informed by how my participants shared their lived experiences, and knowledge is constructed through the subjective experiences of individuals participating in my study (Creswell, 2014).

My research is informed by constructivist worldview. Constructivism is often used interchangeably with interpretivism. This paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed, and therefore, there is no single, observable reality, rather there are multiple realities and interpretations of a single event (Merriam, 2009). Researchers with this worldview believe that understanding human experience is essential (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). For Creswell (2013), the multiple meanings and realities lead "the researcher to look for the complexity of views, rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (p. 24). These subjective realities are negotiated socially and historically, and are formed through interactions with others, as well as their historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2014). My research questions seek to understand the experiences of individuals by telling their lived experiences and acknowledge that there are multiple realities.

With my axiological assumptions, I acknowledge that my research is value-laden (Creswell, 2013), and I bring my own assumptions and biases in my study. I am aware of the influence of my own position and acknowledge my worldviews and background as a part of reflexivity. My interest and subjectivity statement, as outlined in the first chapter, dictates and influences my approach. I have my own pro-refugee stance, and I bring my own social and

historical awareness and knowledge of refugee crises, particularly in Afghanistan. As an adult learner, I also believe that learning is ongoing, and formal and informal ways of learning are equally important in individual lives. This disclosure will continue to shape and inform the interpretation of the methods and outcomes of this research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

### **Phenomenology: Philosophy and History**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach and not specifically an independent method of inquiry. As Caelli (2001) argues, “because phenomenology is first and foremost philosophy, the approach employed to pursue a particular study should emerge from the philosophical implications inherent in the question” (p. 275). The term phenomenology is derived from the Greek word *phainomenon*, meaning ‘appearance’. For McLeod (2001), phenomenological philosophy is about the epistemological question of the theory of knowledge of how we know what we know, the relationship of the person who knows and what can be known. It is also intrinsically linked with the ontological question of ‘what is being’, primarily concerned with the nature of reality and human knowledge about it. Beyond these philosophical underpinnings, phenomenology is a study of ‘consciousness’ (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). When humans are conscious, they are always aware of something. Consciousness in phenomenology relates to the person’s consciousness of the world (Langridge, 2007).

Theoretically, it is a project of thoughtful reflection on the lived experiences of human beings, and those reflections must be free from theoretical, prejudicial, and suppositional intoxications (Manen, 2007). Before discussing the methodological implications of phenomenology, it is useful to trace its historical emergence and development throughout the past.

Phenomenology begins with Edmund Husserl (1895-1938) who is considered as the core figure in the development of phenomenology as a modern movement, and those who expanded

his views, including Martin Heidegger, Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The first phase involved Husserl and later Heidegger. Cohen et al. (2000) discuss Husserl's work in the development of phenomenology and highlight his search for rigourness, his critique of positivism, his conceptualization of phenomenological intuition, and phenomenological reductionism. In this sense, phenomenology is the study of a phenomena as they appear through consciousness. It is a movement away from mind-body dualism, that is, minds and objects both occur within experience and reality of being something is not 'out there' or separated from the individual (Jones, 1975; Koch, 1995; Lavery, 2003). Husserl (1970) considered intentionality as a process where the mind is directed towards the objects of study. Conscious awareness is the starting point to know the reality, and by directing one's focus, one can develop a conscious description of particular realities in question (Edie, 1987). Polkinghorne (1984) noted that Husserl's description of phenomenology emphasizes on the world as lived by a person, not the world or realities as something separate from the person. The 'life world' is understood as what we experience pre-reflectively without any categorization or conceptualization, and often includes things that are pre-determined or taken for granted (Husserl, 1970; Lavery, 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019).

For Husserl (1964), phenomenological reduction *epoche*, which is derived from the Greek word, meaning suspension of belief, is central in the suspension of attitudes, beliefs and suppositions to properly understand what is present. Husserl (1964) uses the name of 'bracketing' as a feature for the actual 'doing' of phenomenology (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). He argued that researchers need to bracket out their outer world and meanings associated with it, as well as individuals' biases to successfully achieve the true description of any phenomena with its essence.

Unlike Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, Martin Heidegger developed phenomenology into interpretive philosophy that later became the foundations of hermeneutical methods of inquiry. This mode of study is oriented towards lived experiences (phenomenology) and interpreting the texts of life (hermeneutics) (Creswell, 2013). Like phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology deals with the study of human experiences with illuminating details and trivial aspects within experiences, with an aim to create meaning and achieve a sense of understanding (Lavery, 2003). Interpretation is seen as critical to understanding of lived experiences. Heidegger emphasized that one's history or background, including their cultural contexts and situatedness cannot be suspended from hermeneutic phenomenology. Claiming that to be human is to interpret, Heidegger noted that every encounter or experience involves an interpretation influenced by individual's background, as hermeneutics itself is an interpretive process that seeks to examine human cultural activities through texts and language to find intended meanings through interpretation (Kvale, 1996; Annells, 1996). Thus, in Heidegger's opinion, understanding of an experience is intrinsically linked to a given set of fore structures, that includes one's historicity (Lavery, 2003).

Building upon the philosophy of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadmer also viewed language and interpretation as inseparable to human experience of being in the word. Like Heidegger, Gadamer also considered that phenomenological reductionism, or as Husserl calls it 'bracketing', is impossible to achieve. Understanding of a lived experience and interpretation through language are bound together and is always an interactive process, thus, one definitive interpretation of a phenomena is never possible (Polkinghorne, 1983; Annells, 1996). These understandings are based on the realization that examining an experience will always involve

some prejudice and suppositions; a researcher can never leave their immediate situation and context out of the study (Laverty, 2003; Sadala & Adorno, 2002)

### **Phenomenology: Research and Methodology**

Van Manen (2016) describes phenomenology as the study of the lifeworld - “the world as we immediately experience it” (p. 9). This way, “phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness” (p. 9). Manen (2016) has given a more ontological expression to the notion of phenomenological research. For him, “lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence-in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (p. 36).

Methodologically, phenomenology is a study of subjective experiences. In theory, it studies the structure of experiences, or consciousness, including things appearing in our experience, and/or how we live through them or perform them (Woodruff, 2018). It studies conscious experiences from a first point of view, offering an alternative to instrumental or objective ways of understanding knowledge, leading to more experientially sensitive epistemologies (Given, 2008). Instead of a heavy reliance on empiricism and positivism, knowledge is produced through interpretation of the subjects themselves (Howell, 2013; Tekcan, 2015). Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (such as grief, anger, insomnia). Qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon and proceed to collecting data from individuals who have experienced that particular phenomenon. The descriptive step becomes a concrete description of specific experiences from the perspectives of others (Giorgi, 1997). Later, the inquirers develop a

comprehensive description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals, consisting of ‘what’ they experience and ‘how’ they experience it (Creswell, 2007).

This exploration of a phenomena can be from a single individual as well as a group of individuals who have all experienced it. Phenomenologists following Husserl try to bracket themselves out of the study by suspending their own experiences and presuppositions about it. This way, they only focus on the experiences of the participants in the study. The process is often termed as transcendental phenomenology (Solomon, 1980; Moran, 2005; Creswell, 2007). While those who follow Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty consider phenomenology beyond its descriptive model and consider interpretation as an important process element. Within phenomenology, the hermeneutics approach, which will be used in my study, goes beyond description, and involves an attempt to understand the meaning of the phenomena under discussion by focusing on historical and social contexts that surround actions (Edie, 1987; Woodruff, 2018). The phenomena described by participants are understood by “a phenomenological reflection and writing, such that developing a description of the phenomena leads to an understanding of the meaning of the experience” (Flood, 2010, p. 10). In practice, interpretations with descriptions are necessary to go beyond the data (Giorgi, 1992).

Phenomenology as a methodology is widely used in studies that capture social inclusion, belonging, and displacements. For example, Lems (2020)’s study on the phenomenology of exclusion uses ethnographic encounters with marginalized refugee youth to argue for more nuanced research methodologies that better capture everyday social processes of refugee crises. The study reveals that phenomenological approach brings the invisible voices and their stories, that are often silenced in mainstream research. By shedding light on lived experiences, particularly of vulnerable, phenomenological approach shows the “limitations of an overly

enthusiastic emphasis on the potentially emancipatory role of voices as a research tool” (Lems, 2020, p. 123). Likewise, Gangamma (2018) utilizes a qualitative cross-sectional, phenomenological design to explore Iraqi refugee experiences resettled in a northeastern city in the United States after the start of the 2003 war. Taylor et al. (2020) research also uses an interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand the nature of trauma and grief experienced by asylum-seekers and refugees based in the United Kingdom. Capturing the rich experiences of the participants provided guidance for the potential development of trauma-informed evidence-based interventions for refugees. Numerous phenomenological studies are used to examine a variety of experiences of refugees and migrants across borders. Idin (2018)’s research focuses on the challenges of refugee students in science courses in Turkey, Hurly (2018) explores the meaning of leisure for African resettled women in Canada, while Lee et al. (2014) studied Chinese women’s perspectives and experiences of maternity care services in Canadian societies.

I utilize a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for four main reasons. Firstly, the purpose of my research goes beyond mere descriptions and try to give meaning to participants’ experiences. Secondly, the researcher does not conduct the research without declaring his biases and assumptions, rather believe that attempting to bracket my own experiences and assumptions would be impossible to achieve. Thirdly, reflexivity and self-reflection remain an important part of the research, and my chosen methodology is congruent with my philosophical assumptions, particularly the social constructivist framework that acknowledge the existence of multiple realities. Lastly, my choice of using this approach is a response to the lack of research conducted in the field. Despite the abundance of phenomenological studies, there is a paucity of literature on the utilization of hermeneutic phenomenology in the context of refugee learning. Therefore,

my study will contribute to the growing scholarship, and consequently inform organizational and governmental bodies to design and strategize better support systems for resettled refugees in Canada.

## **Research Design**

### ***Participant Recruitment and Sampling***

For my study, I followed the guidelines essential for phenomenology, which involves recruitment, small sample size, eligibility, and flexibility, yet rich, in-depth interview procedures (Duke, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989). My study utilized both a criteria-based purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) to select participants with seemingly homogenous characters and interests (Creswell, 2013; Sanelowski, 1995). The inclusion of participants in this study was purposefully determined with a specific criterion. The inclusion criteria involved participants who were:

- a) born in Afghanistan.
- b) entered Canada as a refugee.
- c) can speak and understand English.
- d) have spent at least one year in Canada.

To understand the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada, it was crucial that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied, and therefore purposeful sampling allowed the selection of individuals who can purposefully inform about the central phenomena in the study. Therefore, being born in Afghanistan and entering to Canada as a refugee were important criteria. The rationale of choosing the length of residence to be at least one year was to ensure that the individuals have achieved some knowledge of living and navigating the Canadian society.

Sample size in qualitative inquiries, particularly in phenomenological studies, is governed by the actual procedure involved in understanding the experiences of individuals who have

experienced the phenomena (Bartholomew et al, 2021; Creswell, 2013;). Given this aim, even one sample is also sufficed if it directs towards discerning the essence of experiences (Sandelowski, 1995). However, scholars in phenomenological studies have considered 5-6 individuals to be a sufficient number (Dukes, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989). Keeping this as a backdrop, I recruited and interviewed 6 individuals.

For participant recruitment, I contacted Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) as an intermediary organization. CCIS is a non-for-profit organization that provides settlement and integration services to immigrants and refugees in Alberta. CCIS has been particularly active in supporting Afghan refugees in the recent years, providing them assistances with government documents, building connections, finding accommodation and job search, employment orientations, and language and workplace training (CCIS, 2022). The purpose of keeping the organization as an intermediary was to build and have a sense of trust and comfort among participants, who would not know me otherwise as a researcher. Coming through the contact of the organization created a sense of ease as they had already known them. The organizations also helped me with identify refugees who fulfil my specific inclusion criteria. Due to the reach of the intermediary organization, participants were only from the province of Alberta.

The permission of CCIS was obtained by submitting CCIS's application to conduct research as well as a recruitment requisition letter to the organization (Appendix A). Later, two representatives from the organization contacted their Afghan clients through a poster (Appendix B) to inform about my research. To ensure that participants had a control over their personal information, the intermediary organizations sent my contact information to the clients and then they contacted me if they were interested. Upon the initial contact, I discussed about the study, its purpose, consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. I only interviewed them once they agree to

participate after the discussion. The organization or their representatives were not informed when participants decided to withdraw from the study.

Those who agreed received an email from me with the details about the study, consent, and asking about their availability for an interview (Appendix C). The identified individuals were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix D). As a part of my ethical commitment, the process of consent was iterative (Block et al., 2022). After signing the written consent form, I also took an oral consent from the participants before starting the interview. CCIS did not play any role in data collection or analysis.

### ***Interviews***

I conducted individual interviews for my data collection. Interview as a method is necessary when representing unobserved behaviours and feelings. It helps to understand how people interpret their experiences, particularly when we are interested in past events that are not possible to revisit or replicate. Interviews also provide opportunities for active engagement and learning while identifying and analysing issues, as well as offer flexibility to pursue emergent issues in a conversation (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2015). The interviews were conducted using semi-structure interview guide via Zoom. Participants also had an option for an in-person interview depending on their feasibility. However, all participants chose to have their interviews online.

My interviews were guided by semi-structured interview questions, with a focus on their learning experiences, successes, and challenges. Interview questions (Appendix E) included their education and work experiences since their arrival in Canada, their social networks and connections, their experiences of learning languages and cultures, and the challenges and barriers they faced during the process. For the purpose of analysis, all interviews were audio-recorded

after seeking permission from the interviewees. The interviews were between 50-60 minutes long.

## **Data Analysis**

Following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s guide on the phases of thematic analysis, my analysis was based on 4 main stages. To begin, I transcribed my recorded data manually and familiarized with the data by reading it. Using the guidelines by Gibbs (2012), Saldana (2013), and Xu and Zammit (2020), I generated codes, followed by a search for themes. After developing initial themes, I went back and reviewed them to ensure they reflect the findings of my data. This stage had additional 6 levels. I first reviewed my coded data and formed coherent patterns, followed by reviewing those codes that did not fit in any themes. I reworked on the generated themes again, which resulted in the creation of new themes to ensure my themes reflect the meanings. As a process, I later went back to my transcripts and re-read them to see if the themes are working with the data. I re-coded any missing codes, and as a next step, I fit my re-coded data into themes. Subsequently, I reviewed all my over-arching themes and sub-themes again to make sure they reflect the meaning of my data. The codes which did not fit any theme were reviewed and later disregarded. Finally, I refined my themes, including re-naming some of them. The stages of my data analysis are illustrated below (Table I).

Table I: Stages of data analysis

Stages	Process
<b>Stage I</b>	Reading and familiarizing with transcripts
<b>Stage II</b>	Development of codes and searching for themes
<b>Stage III</b>	Reviewing themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level I: Review of coded data and forming coherent patterns.</li> <li>• Level II: Review of codes that did not fit among themes.</li> <li>• Level III: Rework on themes and creation of new themes</li> <li>• Level IV: Reread transcripts to check if themes reflect meaning.</li> <li>• Level V: Re-code missing codes and fit them in themes.</li> <li>• Level VI: Review of all themes and sub-themes to ensure they reflect meanings.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage IV</b>	Refinement of themes

### Trustworthiness

Credibility is one measure of trustworthiness that refers to the true representation of participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). To address it, I developed a codebook to assure coding process is systematic. Secondly, interviews were coded twice to ensure that important finding are not missed out. Trustworthiness was addressed by thick, rich descriptions of participants' actual language and words. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Decuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2018).

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the findings. In qualitative research, this applies only to case-to-case transfer (Nowell et al., 2017). With hermeneutic phenomenology, participants share a common phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1997). Therefore, my selected participants were a homogenous group, however, the associated factors that influenced their experiences differed. The likelihood of transferability exists, with a caution that the purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology is to describe the lived experiences of individuals, instead of concluding final interpretations.

For dependability, it is important that researchers report every stage of the research, and the reported procedures are logical and traceable. It is also recommended that researchers provide rational of every theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices made throughout the research (Nowel et al., 2017). My study provides and reasons of every step in detail, including the rational for why I did what I did. Rigour in research is ensured by clearly documenting every step of the research. I also kept a self-reflective journal for reflexivity to address my own bias, expectations, and assumptions, which is an important component of hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **Ethical Concerns with Refugee Research**

Before reflecting on ethical considerations in my research, I believe it is essential to discuss the ethics of research with refugees and how I incorporated them in my own research. Marginalized communities like refugees are likely to experience traumatic events during their lifespans. A number of researchers have discussed ethical concerns when working with refugee population (Dona, 2007; Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Hugman et al., 2010; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015; Muller-Funk, 2021; Pittaway et al, 2010; Thapliyal & Baker, 2018; Voutira & Dona, 2007). There are numerous ethical issues reported in research involving refugees, including power and consent, confidentiality and trust, risk to researchers and potential harm to participants, cross-cultural and cross-cutting issues of gender, culture, human rights, and social justice (Halilovich, 2013; Pittaway et al., 2010). Power imbalance between researchers and participants can raise complex issues in research. Bourdieu (1996) suggests that this risk of power asymmetry can induce ‘symbolic violence’ through misunderstanding or misrepresentation. Potential misrepresentation can arise through difference of position of

researcher and participants within social structure. In such a case, the most disempowered participant is the most vulnerable to symbolic violence (Block et al., 2012).

Research methodologies that involve sharing lived experiences, such as phenomenology, may result in feelings of discomfort, anxiety, false hope, guilt, self-doubt, but also self-awareness, hope, a sense of moral stimulation or liberation, or thoughtfulness. Research interviews have a potential to make participants remember unpleasant events, and in doing so, the feelings of fear, shame, anger, and pain may emerge (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015; Voith et al., 2020). Research also demonstrate that majority of refugee participants do not find the experience of recalling past as distressing, rather many survivors find sharing stories as an opportunity to feel relieved and valuable (Seedat et al., 2004). Therefore, it is the responsibility of researchers to be ethical and find approaches and processes that suit best to participants (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 1997).

Underpinning the goal of ethical research, informed consent has become a central feature of research following the Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent has both philosophical and pragmatic basis. Philosophically, it is based in the idea that all humans must be valued as moral beings, it is important that every human is treated as equally worthy of respect as moral agents. To do otherwise means treating humans as objects and denying their humanity. From this, it follows that no other person can use another person to meet their ends, unless that other person understands and gives their genuine agreement (Hugman et al., 2011; Limbu, 2009). For research involving refugees in which a direct benefit may be less evident, researchers should ensure that participants have understood the purpose and process of research, as well associated social, financial, emotional, and other risks of participation (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Seedat et al., 2004). Researchers often rely on service providers or refugee organizations to gain access to potential

participants. Refugees might feel pressured or obliged to participate to sustain their relations with service providers who are in a position of authority. Refugees may have dealt with multiple bureaucratic paperwork processes where linguistic and cultural differences can be barriers to comprehension and filling out forms is considered mandatory. Such situations might make them not fully understand how consent to participate works (Deps et al., 2022). In case of the involvement of gatekeepers, participants should understand their right to refuse to participate at any stage in the research process, without any impact on their access to services (Clark-Kazak, 2017). For Mackenzie et al. (2007), participants' lack of familiarity with research aims and processes requires gaining informed consent at more than one stage to assure participants have the capacity for self-determination. Therefore, consent needs to be iterative and involve ongoing negotiation, instead of a standard research model of gaining consent as a single event (Block et al., 2022).

Refugees are likely to have experienced interviewing or being questioned or interrogated by the officials of the country they have fled from, and on arrival to their host countries. On arrival, they might also had to present their stories or experiences to border security or officials who have judged their credibility for granting refugee or asylum status (Morrice, 2011). Therefore, particular sensitivity and reflexivity is required to ensure that participants are aware about the research purpose and its possible uses. As a part of reflexivity, researchers should reflect and scrutinize their conduct themselves, including building relationships with participants who are often in vulnerable situation (Deps et al., 2022). All stages of research should incorporate ethical reflection, informed by core values of respect, integrity, justice, and beneficence (Block et al., 2012).

### ***Ethical Considerations in my Research***

This research acquired ethics approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Subsequently, I recruited my participants through CCIS to ensure that there is a sense of ease and trust among participants. The organization sent my contact information to potential participants to ensure that they have a control over their personal information. The purpose and process of the study, consent, and concerns around confidentiality were discussed with the participants, and I only interviewed them once they agreed to it. A written consent was obtained from participants, and before the start of the interview, I spent a couple minutes to revisit the consent form and answered any questions that my participants had. An oral consent was taken again before I started audio-recording. It was clarified to the organization that the participants should recruit themselves as volunteers, without any sense of coercion or mandate for the services they have received from the organization. It was also clarified to the participants that their decision to participate, or responses will not be disclosed to the organization, nor it will impact their relationship with the organization, including if they are accessing any services. CCIS was not informed when participants decided to withdraw from the study.

For interviews, a secure Zoom link was generated, and it was clarified to the participants that only the researcher will have access to the recording. Pseudonyms were assigned to all the respondents to ensure the anonymity. Any information that could directly lead to them or their family identities were slightly modified or kept confidential. The raw data is kept in a secured, password-protected folder in digital form, and all handwritten notes and memos were scanned and destroyed. No identifying information is used to name and save the files; only pseudonyms

are used. The files are stored in the encrypted folder in the researcher's laptop, and no copies are stored on servers.

There were emotional risks involved in the research. The research participants recalled their experiences at school/universities, workplaces, families, and interactions in their daily lives since their arrival in Canada. There was a possibility that recalling such experiences might result in unpleasant or upsetting feelings. They recounted their expectations and how they were met/not met, experiences of racism and discrimination, loss of culture and social values, and/or financial or emotional challenges that they faced since their arrival. Some also spoke about their experiences before arriving to Canada as a refugee, and it might have caused feelings of distress or upset. To minimize risks and discomforts, I avoided asking questions to recount their life stories before coming to Canada, rather my focus was on their experiences after their arrival and present situation. I did not ask any questions about their experiences of fleeing their country, but I left to them to decide if they want to share. I asked my participants if they need to take a break or disregard any question that they did not want to answer. I envisaged that my interview questions might cause distress and anxiety among my interviewees, therefore, a post-interview follow-up process was carried out with the participants. As a part of the consent form, I also shared details about mental health services and resources available, including Centre for Resilience, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Calgary Distress Centre (24-hour helpline), Calgary Counselling Centre, and Eastside Family Centre, Calgary. One of my participants was a university student, so I shared the services available at their institution's wellness center. Throughout the research process, I reminded myself of the complexity of ethics, particularly in refugee research, and to continuously think of ethics as an iterative process at every stage.

## **Post-interview Follow-up**

Researchers should prioritize empowerment, participants' voice, and physical and emotional safety after data collection. In case, it is recommended to conduct additional procedures to understand any potential stress (Voith et al., 2020). Revisiting the past experiences can be an emotional event that can induce anxiety and stress, and the interview discussion can be triggering for some of my participants. After the end of my interview questions, I acknowledged the challenging nature of conducting the interview and conducted a brief check-in with participants. I also spent some time and reflected on the discussion by asking them how they feel talking about their past and present experiences. A debrief session (Appendix F) allowed them to express their emotions and concerns emerged because of the interview. The next day after each interview, I sent my participants a text message to check-in if they are doing well. Everyone acknowledged my message and assured that they are keeping up well. I also emailed them the details of mental health resources and services available in the city.

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a critical reflection by positioning the researcher in their research inquiry. The researchers' own values and knowledge shape the research, and it should be explicitly mentioned in the qualitative inquiry. Being aware of your own preconceptions and assumptions during knowledge generation has a significant place in the research process (Creswell, 2013; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The first chapter of my thesis highlights the importance and positionality of myself as a researcher, as well as the expertise and values I bring in during the conduct of research. As a part of my research, reflexivity was an important part as I kept on questioning and reflecting on my choices and practices. What is my relation to the phenomena? What is driving my interests? What are my beliefs, values, and biases, and am I aware of them?

(Lumsden et al., 2019). These were some of the questions that I kept asking myself before, during and after every stage of my research. For example, I kept a personal journal with myself and while recruiting my participants, I reflected on my own position and power as a researcher. I acknowledged my role and assumptions as a researcher and interrogated them throughout the research. Before my interview, I practiced affirmations about my role and its influence in research. Once my first interview was completed, I spent a couple minutes to reflect on if my biases and practices influenced my data collection, and in turn what I can do to minimize them. I practiced it after every interview, and I did not stop it after my data collection. While transcription, coding, and thematic analysis, I ensured that I keep reflecting on my position, biases, and assumptions, and hence my thematic analysis was also reflexive in nature (Bruan & Clark, 2019). I was personally aware of my values and practices, reflected on them in my personal journal and ensured that they are not influencing my research. I also considered the contextual understanding of the phenomena in question rather than bringing my own prejudices. In turn, reflexivity was an important and iterative process in my research.

As with hermeneutic phenomenology, it is imperative for a researcher to state their biases, expectations, and assumptions (Creswell, 2013) to ensure transparency as much as possible. As a follow up, a researcher should remain open to distinctive ways of interpretation of the findings and engage in the process of interpretations and re-interpretations of the collected experiences. In my research, I did not develop any hypotheses, however, I had my own assumptions and guesses that I want to discuss here. Throughout this project, I was eager to understand the experiences of my research participants. I assumed that my participants had traumatic journeys and have had difficulty in navigating their lives as refugees. I anticipated that every participant would have a difficult story to tell, with different situations and emotions, and

they will be more expressive about them. I also assumed that my male participants would have navigated the system easily as compared to female because of the patriarchal culture they belong to. However, my main aim was to hear stories from themselves and try not to bring my own preconceived notions and ideas in my research. That was an ideal goal that I set for myself, but realistically, I do have my own biases which I cannot eliminate completely. The best I did was being aware of them throughout the processes, reflect on them, and try to limit them as much as possible.

### **Limitations**

Similar to other qualitative studies, the result of my study cannot be generalized as the findings are limited to the sample and setting of this study. As a researcher, I knew that I stood in a position of power, which could impact the conversation. To minimize it, I gave a short introduction of myself and the importance of the study, as well as initiated an informal conversation to ensure there is no hesitation that could hold back any information.

The participants were recruited through an intermediary organization based in Alberta; therefore, the geographical location of the participants was a limitation. Additionally, due to the limited scope of the research, as well as time and resource restrictions, this study only recruited participants who were able to communicate in English. If I had done these interviews in Dari and Pashto, I would have received a more nuanced understanding of their learning experiences. Possibly, my intention in further studies will be to expand the geographical location and expanding it to other languages too. Lastly, there is a room for research bias, and therefore, reflexivity was a key practice in my research. Appropriate measures are taken to acknowledge and declare those biases and assumptions as well as self-reflection in personal journal throughout

the research process. Despite these limitations, the findings can be meaningful for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

### **Delimitations**

The scope of my inquiry was restricted to six refugee individuals who arrived in Canada as refugees. This lends itself to the criticism that my findings cannot be generalized.

Generalization was not the intention of my research. My goal was to understand the learning experiences of these individuals who navigated their resettlement phases after fleeing from a war-torn country. However, in conjunction with the literature on refugee experiences, my theoretical and methodological findings may be transferable to other similar contexts.

Since I was focusing on learning experiences only, I ensured to ask specific questions about their experiences after arrival to Canada. Their past experiences were a part of conversation that my participants chose to tell as they considered them influencing their new experiences. Another parameter I intentionally imposed was their duration of residence in Canada. I did meet refugee individuals who arrived in late 2022, but I did not interview them for my research. As stipulated in my methodology section, residing in Canada for at least one year gave them some knowledge of living and navigating the Canadian society, and therefore, duration of living in Canada was another condition that I intentionally imposed as a delimitation.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed discussion of the methodology used for this study. I explained the rationale of a qualitative inquiry, my philosophical assumptions, and reflexivity. I also discussed phenomenological approach, its philosophy and research, and my rationale of using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees. Subsequently, I discussed the details of my data collection and analysis procedures,

including sampling, recruitment of participants, and interview process. Furthermore, I also explained the ethics of refugee research and my own ethical considerations. Lastly, this chapter highlights trustworthiness and limitations of my study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

To iterate, the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada. The description and relevance of ‘learning’ in my study goes beyond the didactic connotations of learning in formal schoolings. Refugees are often forced to leave their previous identities and learn new norms, behaviours, languages, and structures to integrate in their host societies. Therefore, becoming a refugee is a learning process as they experience changes and develop their perspectives to deal with new relations and contexts (Morrice, 2013). Therefore, my study considers ‘learning’ beyond the four walls of a classroom. It involves learning a new language, socializing and expanding networks, seeking employment, upskilling with new knowledge, and learning new norms and behaviours to better integrate in a new environment.

This chapter presents my research findings categorized in five overarching themes. I begin my findings with a description of participants with a brief introduction of their educational and employment backgrounds. Collecting this information was important as their learning experiences and prospects were influenced by their past education and work experiences. The chapter continues with descriptions of the dominant themes and subthemes that emerged from interviews with the participants, illustrating their learning experiences, its sources, pathways to learnings, as well as challenges, barriers, and aspirations. I unfold my findings by highlighting the voices of the participants to give authenticity to their experiences and reflections. Participants’ name and their affiliations are de-identified to ensure their privacy and confidentiality.

## **Participants' background**

Following the guidelines essential for phenomenology (Duke, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989), I interviewed six Afghan participants who arrived in Canada as refugees. As a part of my commitment to ethical research and limiting emotional and social risks to my participants, I did not ask any questions to recount their life stories before arrival to Canada, rather the focus was on their journeys after their arrival and current situations. I left the decision on my participants to discuss their stories of their lives before arriving to Canada. This background description emerges from the introductory questions I asked in my interviews, as well as participants' sharing their stories of living in Afghanistan. A summary of their background is illustrated in table 2.

### ***Participant 1: Mumtaz***

Mumtaz holds a Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) from Afghanistan, a diploma in Information Technology (IT), and a Bachelors' in Business Administration from India. He arrived in Canada in August 2021 when Taliban started taking control over Afghanistan. He fled from Afghanistan with his wife and 3 children in the first few US charter planes that flew from the Kabul Airport. With an uncertainty of their destination, they took a transit in Kuwait for a week, before coming to Toronto as their first port of entry in Canada. Mumtaz and his family stayed in a hotel in Toronto for 20 days as a part of government's mandatory quarantine policy, before moving to Calgary. Upon arrival, they stayed in a hotel where they received support from settlement services and later received their permanent residence paperwork from the government. Mumtaz's educational credentials were not recognized by World Education Services (WES) (credential evaluation organization), and he

currently works as a resettlement counsellor at the port of entry, as well as doing a security guard training. Mumtaz is fluent in English, Hindi, Urdu, Pashto, and Dari.

***Participant 2: Nizar***

Nizar has a Bachelor's of Arts degree from Canada and is now pursuing a Master's degree from a Western University in Canada. Nizar moved to Canada in 2006 with his family and started his high school in Canada. Before coming to Canada, they stayed in Tajikistan and spent a brief time in Pakistan as refugees. Nizar's mother holds a Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelors of Surgery (MBBS) from Afghanistan, while his father was a full-time professor in a University in Afghanistan. Upon arrival, his parents had to start from the beginning as their professional experiences and education were not recognized here. Nizar also did not know English language and learned from its foundations once he moved to Canada. Nizar works as a Research Assistant in his university and had multiple volunteer positions in organizations that work for newcomers, especially refugee youth. He aims to work on sports education and leadership, especially among newcomers.

***Participant 3: Reyan***

Reyan holds a Bachelor of Business Administration from Afghanistan and arrived in Canada in August 2021 soon after the re-emergence of Taliban. She arrived with her mother, brother, and his family, leaving behind two sisters who are still in Afghanistan. Before arriving, she worked as a Human Resource (HR) Officer in one of the government institutions affiliated with the Government of Canada. Since her past work experience was not credited here, she was unemployed for a few months, and later joined a volunteer position in one of the settlement services organizations that assisted her when she arrived as a refugee. She currently works as a Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) counsellor in the same organization, assisting refugees

with their administrative and personal needs during the first few weeks of their arrival. Reyan is fluent in English, Urdu, Hindi, Pashtu, and Dari, and wants to study a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) in the future.

***Participant 4: Adam***

Adam is a high school graduate from Afghanistan and worked as a construction worker for several years before moving to Canada in 2018. He fled Afghanistan alone, leaving his family members behind who are still waiting for their refugee paperwork to be processed. Upon arrival, Adam could not get an employment opportunity for several months, and later started working as a volunteer in one of the settlement services organizations in Calgary. Currently, he works as a part-time construction worker, as well as a settlement counsellor for newly arrived Afghan refugees. During the past years, Adam was enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at one of the colleges in Alberta but could not continue due to health concerns. Before coming to Canada, he stayed in El Salvador for 9 months in a transit state where he attended Spanish for newcomers' classes and learned Spanish. Adam can understand and speak English, Urdu, Hindi, Pasto, Dari, Persian, Arabic, and Spanish.

***Participant 5: Ali***

Ali holds a Master's in Business Administration from Afghanistan, a certificate in advanced accounting program from Canada, and a certificate in basic security training from Canada. Before moving to Canada with his family in December 2021, Ali worked as a Senior Finance Manager for one of the ministries of the Government of Afghanistan, and has a vast experience in finance and audits, logistics and operations, and customer care services. Before arriving in Afghanistan, Ali and his family took refuge in Pakistan, until a charter flight was arranged for them to Canada. Ali is enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) course in

one of the local colleges in Southern Alberta and aims to start an MBA program in Canada. After looking for work for over a year in his area of his interests and expertise, Ali is still unemployed and seeking work in any profession that pays him enough to run his expenditures. Ali speaks and understands English, Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, and Dari.

***Participant 6: Zia***

Zia holds a Master of Business Administration from Afghanistan, and a Bachelor of Business Administration from the United Kingdom, while his father worked as a civil engineer for several decades in Afghanistan. Before arriving to Canada in the beginning of 2022, Zia worked as an Executive Director for an international human rights' organization in Afghanistan. He arrived in Calgary with his parents and siblings, and his uncle's family. Before moving to Canada, Zia and his family took a transit in Pakistan and lived in Albania for six months. Zia cleared his English Language requirement test and received equivalence of his educational credentials from the World Education Services (WES). He is currently unemployed and seeking work and helping his parents and sibling with the transition to Canada. He aims to study finance and accounting in Canada and open his own business in construction work.

Table 2: Participants' background

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Year of arrival in Canada</b>	<b>Highest level of Education</b>	<b>Current occupation</b>
Mumtaz	Male	30-40	2021	MBBS, Bachelor of Business Administration, Diploma in Information Technology	Resettlement counsellor
Nizar	Male	20-30	2006	Bachelor of Arts	Student
Reyan	Female	30-40	2021	Bachelor of Business Administration	Resettlement counsellor
Adam	Male	40-50	2018	High School	Resettlement counsellor and construction worker
Ali	Male	30-40	2022	Master of Business Administration	Unemployed
Zia	Male	40-50	2022	Master of Business Administration	Unemployed

### **Overarching themes and sub-themes**

After four cycles of reviewing coded data, five major overarching themes emerged regarding the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees. The themes revolve around their sources of learnings, motivations and aspiration, past experiences and new learnings, and barriers and hurdles in their learning journeys. The central overarching themes are a) Social connections and support for learning, b) Sources and Pathways to learning, c) Past and new learning experiences, d) Challenges and barriers to learning, and e) learning motivations and aspirations. To simplify the complexity of overarching themes and their sub-themes, I have illustrated them in table 3.

It is important to note that the described experiences under each theme are not experienced by all participants. Every participant had a unique situation, depending on their year

of arrival, and social and educational backgrounds. However, it is also noteworthy that these themes do not stand alone; every theme and sub-theme are interconnecting, overlapping, and influencing each other. Isolated categories of the themes will create a reductionist approach, which is not the purpose of my analysis. The interconnectedness of these themes is shown as arrows in table 2. Additionally, the sequence of themes and their sub-themes do not represent its significance, the variation in the experiences exist and the sequence of the emerging themes are not universal.

Table 3: Illustration overarching themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Social connections and support	Pathways to learning	Past and new learnings	Challenges and barriers	Learning inspirations and goals
<b>Sub-themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significance of social connections</li> <li>• Role of friends and family</li> <li>• Support from service providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer work</li> <li>• Learning at workplace</li> <li>• Informal ways of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizing past experiences in new environment</li> <li>• Learning English language</li> <li>• Learning new norms and behaviours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devaluation of past educational credentials</li> <li>• Lack of Canadian experience</li> <li>• Language barrier</li> <li>• Challenges from governmental bodies and learning institutions.</li> <li>• Mental health concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning motivations</li> <li>• Desire for further education</li> </ul>
	↔	↔	↔	↔	

## Description of Themes and Sub-themes

### *Theme I: Social Connection and Support*

As my participants described their experiences of moving to Canada as refugees, it became evident that their existing and new network and support system played an instrumental role in their resettlement and learning processes in a new environment. All participants identified

social relations as key to their learning experiences and came up with examples of their family members, friends, religious and ethnic affiliations, and service providers that supported them with their transition and learnings about resources available for their social and economic mobilities. Most of my participants shared a positive experience with their social networks, including learning language and receiving their first employment through their connections. Before providing detailed examples and reflections, it is also important to discuss the significance of social connections that surfaced as a key sub-theme from the interviews. Hence, this overarching theme is divided into three main sub-themes a) Significance of social connections b) Role of friends and family members c) Support from service providers and settlement organizations.

### ***Significance of Social Connections***

Participants perceived their social connections as the first point of information in a new country. All participants agreed and discussed the importance of their connections and networks, whether existing ones or newly build, in their lives. When refugees move to Canada, one of the significant ways of learning and integration is through employment, hence, I view their integration into Canadian labour market as a process of learning. Two of my participants got their first jobs through their social networks, one of them learned about language classes and government benefits through them, while others learned about new norms and rules through their friends. Mumtaz articulated his experience of strategies for job search, and considered his social relations as ‘vital’, especially for those who are newcomers and have no knowledge about the system. As he reflected on his social connection, he mentioned:

I firmly believe that having such relations is very vital. Even I can use the word vital here because if they don't have that relation, you will have no job, no job means no money, and no money means hunger and hopelessness.

Mumtaz further described his first job in Canada that he received through his networks.

He said,

If I haven't had that relation with people in the organization, I wouldn't be here right now, and I would not even have this job now because there are thousands of Afghans who are not earning. They came here and I'm not sure that even 10% of them have the kind of job I have, like a good job with decent earning. They just joined the labour market. They're working on minimum wage or unemployed. But based on that relation and network I built, and of course my efforts, I at least have a job and gaining some Canadian experience. I have a future.

Like Mumtaz, Ali also noted the significance of social connections during his learnings about resettlement. For him, knowing about government benefits plan and services played an important role in providing him economic mobility. Government benefit plans supported him in starting his new life in Canada, as well as supporting the education of his family. Ali got to know about such services through his friends. As Ali mentioned:

I know most of the services in Canada because of my relations with friends. You need to understand, everything in your life now depends on economy and monetary, especially if you are a refugee. Without money, nothing comes. I'm the first person who found out the information about the benefits. About the benefits provided by the government, and it's all because of the relations I have. Now you will see they are announcing it on the radio

that the government is supporting people with low income with one-time rent benefit.

Other people are just finding it out now, but I got that money two months ago.

Ali further explained that since refugees come without any financial support, such benefit plans are crucial for them. For example, Ali used the same money to not only pay for his rent, but also paid a fee for his police clearance certificate that he had to submit to join a volunteer position. For Nizar, despite coming at a young age unlike my other participants, he expressed that having a social network is meaningful and indispensable, especially when one comes to a new country. He expressed,

When you move from one place to another place, everything is new for you, and you are not familiar with anything. In an environment where everything is new for you, you definitely need help with integrating, or just learning about where basic things exist.

Without support from people who you know, it will be very tough to survive.

All of my participants considered their social networks as ‘beneficial’. These social networks are not limited to existing family members and friends, but also include Afghan community already residing in Canada, service providers, work colleagues, as well as the networks they build after their arrival. For Reyan, knowing people who were here was a “relief”. She mentioned:

If we don’t have connection, how can we find job? How can we know about services that exist for us? What things are available at the community level that we can participate in and learn from them. If we didn't have connection or if we didn't build any relationship, life will become too tough here. Have those connections make us feel good or connected, it is good for our well-being.

As stated, Reyan considered her social connections as beneficial not just for their economic and social mobilities, but also for her overall well-being, which is significant for learning and starting a new life in a different country.

In addition to the role of social networks in attaining jobs which leads to further learnings, participants also discussed how social network helped them knowing the system better. For example, all participants indicated that their friends and family members were the first one to help them understand how the transit system works in the city. For Zia and Adam, the bus and train system were difficult to understand as they never experienced such a ‘systematic’ transit system back in Afghanistan. Adam particularly emphasized that the red line and blue line transit system was ‘confusing’, and once he could not attend his first English class because he got into the wrong train. But later, he called his friend who told him about which train to take that could take him to his college. Like Adam, Zia also affirmed its significance in adaptation and integration in the host society, because when a refugee arrives, they “don’t know anything”, and they encounter “new things that they have never seen in the past”. For Zia and Reyan, if one does not have an existing connection in the new country, one needs to build it. As Zia pointed out:

If it's not there, you need to build it, otherwise it will be very difficult for you, it will take you more time to learn, and take you more time to integrate with the community. I think it is very important and every person needs to build it.

Another key element highlighted by Zia was how one takes and process the information received by others. For him, social connections help, but it also depends on how one moves forward with the information. For example, while discussing his arrival to Canada and strategies for job applications, Zia agreed that information provided by his friends and family members

was important, it is not just about receiving the information, rather learn from it and process it. Otherwise, “there is no point of having those connections”. Zia stressed on the importance of information received from social networks, but also highlighted the importance of how to negotiate and use one’s own efforts in the process.

### ***Role of Family and Friends***

During the course of the interview, an important sub-theme that consistently emerged was the role of family members and friends, including existing and new friends that one builds during the time. Participants provided examples from their experiences that showed a positive role of their friends, including from their ethnic and religious affiliations, in supporting their learning in Canada.

When Mumtaz arrived in Canada and applied for the evaluation of his credentials, his educational qualifications were not recognized by the World Education Services (WES), and therefore, he started applying for skill-based courses offered by local colleges and universities. While applying to the first college, his high school degree and past credentials were rejected, and with an utter disappointment, he applied to a university. On first, like the past college, the university’s admission team also did not recognize his credentials and rejected his application. However, later he found out that one of his friends’ sister works in the university and can be reached out for clarifications. He talked to his friend and expressed his disappointment, who later spoke to his sister. Later in the same week, he received an email from the admission’s team and was asked to send his educational documents again for verification. After almost a month, the university reverted back with an apology and accepted his documents for admission. After describing his experience, Mumtaz noted,

As I told you, if I haven't had that relation with one of my friends who I met in Canada, I would have given up on further education. So based on that network and relation I had with him and now his sister, she approached the right person in the university ... she tried to find the right person and now we are on the right path. So, can you imagine how my relationship with this friend is valid and vital here? We didn't know each other. And now we are like a family; we go to each other's house; we go to each other's party. This is based on the things that I learned. Making network! And through that she helped me to find the right spot for my future.

Mumtaz particularly emphasized the importance of friends in his life as a refugee. For him, friends and family members not just help you with giving the right information, but also support in understanding norms and values that are often new for refugees. Mumtaz learned about his rights as a refugee, and responsibilities as a resident of Canada through his friends, although the orientation provided by the service providers also played an important role. Learning about the healthcare system was particularly important for him, because when newly arrived, Mumtaz and his family were expecting a baby.

So, for example, back home, if you miss a doctor's appointment or get late, you can make an excuse and you will be fine. But not here. I had an appointment with my family doctor, I called my friend and asked if I can miss it. He said no, no, no. Don't. I learned the importance of punctuality through my friend, now I go anywhere, I am on time. He also told me about government programs that help with child benefits.

Nizar was the only participant who had an existing family in Canada before his arrival. He considered himself 'lucky' to have them there already as he heavily relied on them for support and comfort. His family members helped with every aspect of his life, including

financial and social support, as well as helping them understand school lessons. His cousins, who were older than him, helped him with “language and literacy”, as they often taught him English and Mathematics lessons. Nizar had an interesting experience of adaptation and integration in Canada. As the oldest sibling but still young, his cousins understood his struggles of migration. Even though they were already there, having family members of similar age group also helped Nizar emotionally. They understood his problems of adjustments, particularly “the tensions that emerge when you have a different culture at home and a different one outside of home”. As he indicated,

I learned a lot just from my friends and cousins I grew up with. I loved sports in my teenage, so I also played with them here on the playground. I liked hanging out outside because I would hang out with my cousins, and they would hang out with their friends. And then that way I was also a part of their friend group that was not just my own family. My cousins really explained a lot to me. Like when we play on the playground or sports and maybe I'd be a little too aggressive or maybe I'd be not aggressive enough and stuff like that, my cousin would pull me over and be like, ‘hey, you can't do this’ or ‘hey, you should do this a little more different way’. So, they taught me how to behave. Good that they were there, honestly.

Nizar also noted that while applying for his master’s degree, friends from his religious community who were already attending universities supported him with the application process. They helped him with shortlisting the programs to choose from, as well as scholarships and bursaries applications. “It is a difficult process, especially for newcomers who have never gone through that, so knowing people who could help you is a huge help”, he shared.

Similarly, Reyan also reflected on her friends' role in identifying learning opportunities. Reyan said that she got to know about the Center for Women through one of her friends who is now her neighbour. She started visiting the Center with her friend, and later also offered help when they invited Afghan girls for group activities. Reyan learned sewing and origami from that Center, and now she wants to learn tailoring too.

In the cases of Ali and Adam, friends through religious affiliations have supported their learnings. Both of them noted that going to mosques and meeting other Muslims have made them feel like 'home'. Adam mentioned "when you go to prayers on Friday and you see other people sitting next to you and doing the same thing, you almost feel connected, as if you are not alone". Adam particularly recalled an incident where another Afghan man from his local mosque helped him out with finding a job. He said,

One day when I went to the mosque, a man sat next to me for prayers. He is also an Afghan but he came before me. He saw me stressed in mosque after Friday prayers because I was missing my family back home, I was crying. He approached me, then we got to know we both are refugees from Afghanistan. He helped me with learning about how to navigate jobs, and basic things too like getting Uber for ride. He told me about where to learn driving from because driving is important, I cannot take bus in -20 C. We talk on phone and text. He also encouraged me to learn English and do volunteer work so I can be accepted in the market. We then became good friends, and we often talk about our lives back home and situation of war in Afghanistan. Talking to him is also good for my health, especially when I am stressed and homesick. His friends work in a construction business, so one day he asked me if I want to connect because I worked as a

construction worker in Afghanistan. I work with his friend now, who is now my friend too.

Friendships have particularly been seen as an important aspect in learning processes for refugees. Another participant, Zia, wants to open his business in Canada and is interested to learn where and how to begin it. As a newly arrived refugee, he is not aware of the systems and regulations, but his Afghan friends have helped him learning about it. Zia mentioned,

There are many Afghans in this city. So definitely we find connections with people who live here for a long time, for 17 years or 20 years. Many of them are now my friends as well. So, through mutual friends like somebody lives here, he is a friend of my friend. And that's how we got connected with people and that helped us a lot as well in many things, like understanding buying and selling of products, or looking for cars when I needed one, or how to apply for driving license.

Zia noted that he prefers to do his own research especially about government policies, but sometimes things become “puzzling”, as the content on government websites is not easy to understand. In such a case, he approaches his friend. For instance, his friends helped him with knowledge test for driving licence. He cleared his knowledge test and learned driving through his friends. As mentioned, Zia is interested in starting his own business, and in doing so, his friends often meet him over dinner and chat about what kind of business is common in Canada, or which business can be more profitable.

I have friends from different sectors, one is in construction, the other one is in import/export. We share ideas and start from there. So, for example, my friend told me about the requirements of a business, that I need to go to a customer agent first, or if I want to do something in business then how to contact big construction companies, and if I need a

business license then I first need to visit the registry. We all sit, also use internet to search, and then discuss. If I do not understand, I call and ask them if there is an easier or better way to do it. They explain to me everything.

Having a strong social network with friends, ethnic and religious affiliation can facilitate learning. For Zia, Adam, and Mumtaz, when their connections grow and they continue to engage with them, the network expands, and then people are more aware about their experiences. This can be beneficial with employment opportunities, because most of the work opportunities are now taken and advertised among networks. As Zia also noted,

Who knows tomorrow there is a job opportunity in their office, and they just remember me, OK, Zia has an experience in finance, let's get in touch with him if he's interested or we can introduce him then he can have an interview and see if he can work.

Indeed, the role of family members and friends have played a significant role in the learning processes of newly arrived refugees. In the next section, I explore the role and support from service providers in the transformative learning journeys of my participants.

### ***Support from Service Providers***

For government sponsored refugees, the first point of contact is their service providers or resettlement counsellors. They provide support from the first day of landing, including providing transportation from the airport to the hotels, language training, support with immigration documentations, clothing, and housing. The role of service providers become particularly important for refugees who do not have any family members or connections in Canada. In that case, service providers become their first point of network, which can further expand during their resettlement process.

In the case of Mumtaz, after applying to numerous jobs, he noted that he went to his service provider and discussed about his challenges. He mentioned,

The initial source of this learning was from our service providers. They have advisors for employment or work who help you with how to make a CV, how to apply for the jobs, give better interviews etc. They also taught us how to look for jobs, which websites to use, and how to email organizations to ask if they are hiring.

Mumtaz further elaborated that while applying for jobs, his expectations and hopes were always high. He always thought he would get in because of his past experience. But speaking to his service provider made him realize about the reality of Canadian job markets. “The job market is not as simple as it looks. My service provider taught me how to approach people correctly, and how not to have lots of expectations, she made me learn about the reality”. Mumtaz was later told by his service provider to improve his English language by attending classes offered by the government. He started his first Canadian work experience by doing a volunteer work with his service provider, and he was later hired as a full-time employee in the same organization. As he noted “if I hadn’t built such a kind of relation [with my service providers], I wouldn’t even have a job. I like what I am doing, I am learning so much at this workplace that I will apply in my next career step”. Similarly, Zia also added that service providers helped him integrate in the Canadian society by providing learning opportunities that one might miss out without knowing them through someone.

These organizations provide you with a lot of information with a lot of sources. When refugees like us come here, we obviously want to start from somewhere. Many of us want to learn, especially English language. And they [service providers] introduce us to such courses for learning. They are not free of charge normally, but for newcomers it is free of

charge because these organizations have got this connection with them. The government pays for them. So, there is a lot of information that service providers have, even people who live here might not be aware of because these are not the kind of services that were available 5 or 10 years ago.

In the case of Zia, his siblings got to know about free English language courses through their service providers. They also inform them about skill-based trainings and learning opportunities, such as carpentry, plumbing, and electrician training courses.

For all participants, service providers are the main source of their information. Starting and navigating their lives in a new country is not easy, but settlement organizations can facilitate their process of integration in a new country. Reyan, in particular, had some interesting experiences with her service provider. Her service provider not just supported her with providing information and learning opportunities, they also introduced her to other groups and associations that eventually expanded Reyan's social network and learning avenues.

That person [service provider] introduced me to a group of women from Muslim association. This happened when my mom asked her about where to find a mosque. She provided us the address, but I was not aware about how to go there, and how to find bus that will take us there. Then she taught me how to use Google maps, and she introduced me to other Muslim women who were also refugees. We are now good friends; we go to shopping and parks together. She even told me she will teach me driving in the coming months. My service provider is great.

As Reyan reflected on her experiences, she also discussed some of the challenges that she faced and the role of her settlement counsellor in supporting her. During the first few months of her arrival, Reyan was homesick and stressed. She started feeling emotionally unwell and

hopeless. “I kept questioning myself. What did I do to myself, how can I start everything from the beginning. This is not easy. I used to cry all the time, I kept on thinking how I will move on with my life, where should I start my journey from”. She later reached out to her settlement counsellor who connected her with a therapist. Belonging to a cultural background where mental health is a taboo, she was first not accepting that she needs help. But her service provider explained her the importance of mental health and resources available. Through the contact, Reyana went through therapy. “The therapist helped me a lot. She gave me hope and tools to feel better. I learned to take care of myself”, she said.

When refugees come to a new country, they find ways to learn and integrate into their host society. This learning often involves learning new perspectives, identities, cultural norms and values, as well as applying for jobs, learning new languages, and skills. All my participants identified their social networks, including their friends, family members, service providers, and religious and ethnic affiliations, as sources of their new learnings. In the next theme, I will discuss their pathways to learnings for my participants. These pathways are linked to my discussion on social connections and support. Through social networks and support, one finds better and effective pathways to learnings that eventually facilitate refugee integration.

### ***Theme II: Pathways to Learning.***

Throughout their resettlement process, participants strategized their pathways to learning through various sources and experiences. All interviewees faced numerous challenges during their learning journeys, particularly understanding where to start from. As stipulated earlier, these pathways to learning are intrinsically linked to my first theme of ‘social connections and support’, because their first source of learning for my participants was their friends, family members, religious and ethnic affiliations, and service providers, which eventually connected

them with further learning opportunities. This overarching theme is further divided into three sub-themes a) volunteer work, b) learning at workplace, c) informal ways of learning.

### ***Volunteering***

Volunteer work is a powerful source of knowledge and skills in newcomers' integration into Canadian society (Guo, 2014). My study found volunteering as a way to participate, navigate, and learn about the Canadian labour market. Lack of Canadian experience as a backdrop, my interviewees considered volunteering as a significant way to learn and gain valuable experience in Canada. For example, Reyan, Adam, and Ali started working as volunteers in the resettlement organizations that supported them initially, while Nizar took the opportunity to work in several institutions that contributed to the area of refugee health and resettlement. For instance, after discussing with her service provider, Reyan started working as a volunteer in a settlement services organization. She stressed that volunteering was important for her to understand the work environment in Canada. According to Reyan,

Since I arrived in Canada and my whole environment changed, I was not able to apply for the same position that I was in my own country. So, I started by working with the organization as an admin support. It was a volunteer position, and my service provider helped me getting it. I also felt good, going and coming to the job, talking to different people. The volunteer position helped me a lot with understanding how people work.

In the case of Reyan, she assisted the newly arrived refugees with translations, filing their paperwork, as well as looking after their basic needs. For her, volunteer position was a gateway to understand the hiring processes and access further learning opportunities. As a newcomer to Canada with limited network and work prospects, volunteerism allowed my participants to learn

about the system, the way people work, workplace norms and ethics, as well as how to network for further learning and development.

While for some participants, volunteering was crucial for them to explore the labour market and gain learning experience. However, for some, volunteering was a necessity, it was a means to an end. Similar to Reyan, Adam also started working as a volunteer, however, his perception was not as positive as Reyan. For him, it was a “compulsion”, because “there is no other option but work for free first”. He explained,

After visiting multiple offices and submitting my CV everywhere, I gave up. I could not find jobs. Then I went to that organization and asked them to give me some volunteer work. The lady was happy, even I was happy because being jobless was stressful. At least I had something. Now through volunteer work, I built more connections, I looked how other people are working. I learned how to be presentable and speak to big bosses. They wanted someone who can speak multiple languages, I do, I speak many. But I then also thought my knowledge of language cannot go for free. Why do I have to work for free. I was angry, but anyways.

In Adam’s narrative, it is noteworthy that not all my participants did volunteer work with a spirit of volunteerism, rather the purpose was to find ways to access the market and gain Canadian experience. Adam started volunteer work because he could not find work anywhere else. Despite having skills and work experience, lack of Canadian work experience was still a barrier for him. He was eventually hired by the same organization as a settlement counsellor. Interestingly, despite expressing his anger and frustration, he considered his volunteer work as a source of learning, and a pathway to further learning and opportunities. “I now share my

experience with new Afghan refugees. I tell them to learn and start volunteering. Volunteer as soon as you arrive so you learn how everything works”, he mentioned.

Nizar and Ali also volunteered in settlement organizations. Nizar particularly emphasized that volunteer work enabled him to build strong communication and interpersonal skills. He added “it definitely diversified my social circle. So, for example, you would rarely see refugees or other immigrants building relationships with indigenous communities. I did through my volunteer work. I learned about them, respecting their identities, and their history”. Likewise, Ali also highlighted his brief volunteer work that allowed him to learn about Canadian culture, norms, and behaviours. Such learnings through volunteer work can have additional benefits to their social and economic mobilities.

In turn, my respondents resorted to volunteerism to both learning and as a means to an end to enhance their employability. The next sub-theme, I focus on workplace learnings, including formal trainings and relational learnings in workplace.

### ***Learning at Workplace***

Knowledge acquisition and learning new skills can be enhanced by workplace activities. This involves formal training and workshops, educational programs, experiential learning activities, or learning through collegial participation and interactions (Jacobs & Park, 2009). I treat such learning activities as an important part of overall learning experiences for refugees for their integration.

Learning at workplace also emerged to be an important element in my participants’ learning processes. This mainly involves work trainings, orientations, upskilling, or learning new skills for work. Reyan, for example, works as a settlement counsellor and received a five-day training at her workplace. The training not just involved orientations about work responsibilities,

but also modules on introduction to government's resettlement policies, data management and confidentiality, communication skills, and healthcare and well-being. Reyan stated,

I have never dealt directly with people in my past work, let alone working as a counsellor. This was all new for me. I got my training on how to communicate with clients, how to be on time, professional gears, what time we can work, what time we cannot work, etc. My training taught me what to do when a new client arrives, how to introduce yourself to them, what to do when clients need extra support. These trainings were very new and practical. It was an amazing learning experience.

Reyan's experience with workplace learning both developed her professional knowledge and boosted her self-confidence to work with other refugee arrivals. For her work, she also learned Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint, and for the purpose, she attended free online courses offered by her workplace, and received a certificate which she considered a valuable asset. "As a part of the work, I learned new computer skills and software system and database. I have a certificate that I know Excel". Reyan further added that her training and work experience has made her more self-reliant and independent. "I am now capable of communicating well in English and I gained strong interpersonal skills". She further added, "previously, my supervisor used to orient new clients, now after training and learning from her, I give orientations. I have seen a change in me", she added. Reyan also indicated that she improved her English language at workplace.

My English started getting better at my workplace. I started speaking it with my colleagues and clients, especially those who are not from Afghanistan. If there were discussions or meetings that I attended, be it our team meeting where I did not have any

major updates to give, I will simply sit and observe people talking. That made me learn a lot.

In addition to formal structured trainings, Reyan highlighted work meetings as an important participatory learning space. She presented her work in regular staff meetings, and also learned from other presenters.

Feedback from work colleagues and supervisors also played an important role for Reyan. For example, after her job interview, she asked her manager to give her feedback so she can learn from it. She said “that interview and her feedback were a learning opportunity for me. I learned most of the things during that interview that I had”. She also added that whenever she faces difficulty at work in terms of using software and tools, she will ask her colleagues to help her out. “My work colleagues are very approachable. I learn from them every day. My work teaches me a lot, honestly”, she mentioned.

Another participant, Adam, also shared his workplace learning experiences as a construction worker as well as a resettlement counsellor. As a settlement counsellor, he deals with the daily matters of refugees, regarding their permanent residency application, healthcare cards, building CV and resume, and helping them contact IRCC. He attended several professional development trainings which his organization offered. It included full day orientation trainings, inviting professionals and experts to teach strategies and techniques to provide services to refugees coming with a history of trauma, as well as clients who are young, women, or seniors. As a part of his continuous growth, he is expected to take educational courses offered by the organization as well as IRCC, which enhances his knowledge about his work and how to better serve his clients. “It teaches me a lot about my work and the society too. How to work, how to deal with people, how to make network and use them correctly”, he said.

As a construction worker, Adam also underwent numerous trainings in quality assurance, occupational health and safety, and inspection and quality control. He added,

My job is mainly flooring. I put tiles, paint them, and clean them. I usually go every Thursdays for inspection, create a list and hand it over to my boss. Canadians take quality and safety very seriously, so I took many trainings, and they keep teaching me on how to improve quality in my work. Like the inspection training taught me how to take quality assurance seriously. I have certificates from these trainings. And if I switch jobs, I will use.

Similarly for Mumtaz, his work as a settlement counsellor at the boarder services requires him to complete trainings and read policies and procedures about his work. He is often given policy books to read, which not only helps him with his work but also learn about other programs and policies by the government.

### ***Informal Learnings***

In addition to formal and non-formal learning experiences, all participants experienced informal learning. This mainly involved engaging with more experienced people, observations, learning through social interactions, and making errors and rectifying them. Nizar stressed on the importance of such learning and mentioned that “well I learned more through informal ways than sitting in a class or learning through books”. He said,

The informal aspect of learning has probably helped me more in learning things in Canada, like culture, and even literacy in terms of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As I said, these things I feel I've learned more in informal ways than through formal way.

When I asked Nizar to elaborate more on this, he provided numerous examples that supported his stance on informal learnings as an essential part of his learning. For him, observing people speak was one of the ways to learn. “When you don’t speak their language, you can’t do much but observe, and those observations teaches a lot”. He further added,

I think I learned English informally, and I found more value in it. I would just be visiting a shop and listen to people. Sometimes it’s not any deliberate efforts that I made, it’s unconscious too. Like you will listen to them and just learn. Another instance is my classroom. I was obviously new. So, I did not know what to do when I have a question, or how to answer something. I noticed how other students were participating or approaching teacher. There was a different way of doing things back home. I saw other people here and adopted, I had to make sure my presence is seen.

Likewise, for Ali, another aspect of learnings through informal means is not feeling the “burden” or “stress” and the “hardship of learnings”. Formal learning often requires additional efforts, such as going to classes, buying books, working on a computer, and finishing assignments, and “you can get tired of learning. One constantly feels pressured to learn. But with informal learning, whether one is in a social setting or doing any activity, one keeps learning. It is like “there is no pressure at all, right?”.

Ali also noted,

It felt like we were just doing things that we would normally do and the whole time you're learning and you're learning in so many different ways. You're learning a language, you're learning culture, you're learning relations, you're learning foundational things that support you in all aspects of your life.

Mumtaz shared some interesting insights about informal learnings in his daily life. As a newcomer to Canada, he had trouble navigating transit system or interacting with people outside of his social setting. However, he observed people outside and learned how to greet them, how to apologize and accept an apology, or how to say ‘thank you’ when in public. Similarly, during the first few weeks of his arrival, he often took wrong bus routes and later understood the transit system of the city. He noted.

I would just attend events and social gathering and observe what people are doing and how they are doing it. How they approach each other and how they solve their problems. All these things are required and necessary for your daily life in Canada, it is important. I learned it through observing and listening to people, this happened outside of education setting, of course.

Similarly, Reyan also indicated the role of informal learning in her daily learning experiences. She shared her experiences of navigating the transit system by standing at a train station and observing people.

I did not know how to buy tickets. So, one day I just went to the station and noticed people. They were making a queue to buy tickets, that’s what I observed. I realized that you need to line up, you cannot cut it like back home. You need to wait and be patient. I also never broke any queue since then. A lady was using her mobile to buy ticket, that was easy, but I found paying there [at the station] easier.

Another participant, Zia, reflected on his informal learning experiences. As a newcomer, he wanted to learn driving, but he soon realized that driving in Canada was a challenge because of the snowy roads. While discussing his experience, he noted that despite learning it through friends and attending a few classes that he paid for, he found learning by observing was easier.

“Driving on such big roads was difficult, and as I started driving, I looked at how people were driving on roads. What big turns to take, how to slow down in the snow”, he added. Zia also shared that he learned how to fuel his car through informal ways. He would just stand near the gas station and look at how people would first pay the amount, get charged, and then put gas in their cars.

Such informal means of learning often go unnoticed in the wider discourse of learning but play a significant role in the lives of refugees who learn and adapt in a new environment. The narratives of my participants demonstrate how observations, social interactions, collegial participation, and engagement in their daily activities can enhance their learning experiences, which ultimately facilitate their integration.

### ***Theme III: Past and New learning Experiences***

Throughout my data collection, I noticed an intertwined and complicated link between past and new learnings. Some participants adapted into their new environments through their past learnings, some disregarded their past learnings and started learnings from the scratch, while some were keeping a balance between both and using it when and where needed. To unfold the complexity, this overarching theme is further divided into four more sub-themes, including a) utilizing past experiences in a new environment, b) learning English language, and c) b) learning new norms, behaviours, and values. These sub-themes aim to capture the overlaps between my participants’ past learning experiences in Afghanistan and their learning experiences since their arrival in Canada.

### ***Utilizing Past Learnings in a New Environment***

Past learning experiences, including formal and informal, can facilitate new learnings in a different environment. While sharing their experiences of navigating their new lives in Canada, my participants reflected on their past skills and knowledges and their applications in their current situations which helped facilitate integration process. For example, communication and interpersonal skills are some of the transferable skills that one can directly use from past experiences and apply them in their new environments.

Mumtaz worked as a healthcare professional for several years in Afghanistan. During his work, one of his responsibilities included engaging with a diverse group of people from a variety of educational and social backgrounds. While working in Afghanistan, Mumtaz learned social skills and applied them in Canada. He noted,

It's like I already had 50% of these learnings from back home. I already knew how to communicate better, I learned it back home because I worked with different people, national and international organizations in Afghanistan, and I dealt with all sorts of people – from angry patients to helpful supervisors. So, I knew how to talk to people here and build network.

Mumtaz further added that he used his strong communication skills and developed strong relations with his service providers. Later, he connected with them and found a job. His current job requires him to manage sheltering and guidance for newly arrived refugees. Upon asking about his work, he told, “I have handled such a pressured environment back home, I used to help 2000 people under my supervision. A few hundreds now are nothing. I already knew how to deal with it”. The response from Mumtaz indicated that skills like communication and interpersonal,

and people management are not newly learned, rather adapted from his previous learning experiences.

Like Mumtaz, Zia noted that since he has travelled to different countries in the past and lived in Europe for a considerable amount of time, he knew about the system and culture. For him, knowing the language and norms of a foreign country was beneficial, as it allowed him to “quickly integrate” in the system. “Learning how people work and the system runs was not entirely new for me, I knew many things from the past, so I was a little less worried”, he added.

This experience also overlapped with Adam’s experience who applied his past workplace learnings in his new environment. While applying for jobs, he indicated that he knew what people wanted from him, so he tailored his CV and interview accordingly. When I asked him to elaborate further, he noted that a couple times when he applied for a job in Afghanistan, his rejection was based on his skills not matching with the job requirements. He later tailored his CV based on the description of responsibilities. “I knew what they wanted and how they wanted from the past. I just knew, so I did the same.” For Adam, his past experience as a construction worker also allowed him to secure work. His past skills of painting, flooring, and tiling satisfied his work team, and he was hired to work with them, with a notice to attend formal work trainings. This indicates that possessing a skill is vital and can be used for further learning opportunities.

Apart from social and communication skills, my participants also indicated that knowing more than one language were an asset for them as it significantly improved their chances of securing employment. For instance, Adam, Reyan, and Mumtaz currently work as resettlement counsellors. Their main job is to facilitate the settlement processes of newly arrived Afghan

refugees. As a part of their work, knowing multiple languages, especially those spoken by the clients worked in their favour. While discussing his job applications, Adam said,

I went to that organization; they help refugees and immigrants. I went there and met the lady who realized that I speak multiple languages. I can speak Urdu, English, Spanish, Arabic, Pashtu, and Dari. Also, Persian. They needed a translator for their work. The guy there even made a joke. He said you are a language machine. If I press one part of your body, you will speak a different language.

These experiences indicate that possessing language skills can be crucial in finding employment opportunities and accessing further learning avenues through work. In this way, past knowledge and skills are a significant cultural and linguistic asset that not only provide economic benefits but also enhance further chances of learnings.

### ***Learning English Language***

A struggle to be better with the English language was shared by all participants. All participants could understand, read, and write English, but as a part of their resettlement plan, they were required to improve their English language. Most of them learned it to secure better benchmark in language test for citizenship, while others also noted English language as an important part of their integration process. This sub-theme describes my participants' experiences of learning English through formal and informal ways of learning.

Since Adam finished his high school and did not get a chance to study further, he believed that his English was “really poor”. He had difficulty navigating the system, talking to people, and finding jobs. However, he was determined to learn it. He noted,

A friend told me some programs offered by the public library, so I went there. I visited them, and the guy there introduced me to some courses and books. I read them. I went

there every week. Then I also enrolled myself in a language class offered by a college here. But what also helped was just speaking small words and sentences. Like I would go to Tim Hortons, and just say good morning or good evening to the lady at the counter. Then I will read the menu and order my favourite drink. I will just form sentences and find ways to speak it.

Interestingly, Nizar also had a similar way of learning English language. He learned the language through listening to other people talk. As he said,

Let's say I learned 10 words. I would try to make as many sentences as possible with those 10 words. Then I learned 20 more, and I would try to explain everything I can in my daily life with those 20 words. Then eventually I learned 100 words and used them to build sentences. From sentences I learned what phrase to use when. If I had fallen and was hurt, I would learn in that moment what to say so the next time I fell down and got hurt, I would know what to say. These experiences build my understanding of the language, and once you have a solid foundation, you can just learn it in a formal way too and comprehend and use dictionaries.

When Adam, Ali, and Mumtaz arrived in Canada as refugees, their service providers notified them that they would be appearing for a language test and based on the points scored, they will be asked to further develop their language skills. Ali attends a local college in the city to learn English. He is currently at level 5 and needs to complete the courses until he reached level 7 or 8. For Mumtaz, learning English is not a challenge because he studied in an English-medium school back in Afghanistan. However, he could not clear his reading comprehension section in the test, and therefore attends ESL classes to further improve it. Similarly, Reyan also enrolled in the language classes. However, more than attending the class, she learns from her

colleagues. “I listen and speak to my colleagues, especially young ones who have lived here for long”, she said.

### ***Learning New Norms, Behaviours, and Values***

Moving to a new country often result in change in perspectives and values, and requires the need to learn new norms, roles, and behaviours that are essential for integration (Morrice, 2013). All my participants shared their experiences of learning new cultural values and rules that were new and unique for them. All my participants indicated a shift in their perspectives and behaviours since their arrival in Canada. As a woman from Afghanistan, Reyan had to learn to be independent, as living in a patriarchal society back home altered her perception about women and their strong role in the society. While reflecting on her experiences, she told,

In Afghanistan, it is very difficult for a woman to be independent, but since I arrived here, I learned that every man and woman live here with their freedom. Back in my home, it was not like that. Girls were not allowed to go outside much, especially after evening. When I came here, I was first a little stunned to see women roaming around on roads freely. They can do jobs, go study, even drive. It was very difficult for women to study further or drive back home, but since I move, I learned everyone is equal and free. I learned to be independent.

Of the participants who discussed about learning new norms and perspectives, Reyan’s comment stood out to me. Reyan described learning about LGBTQIA+ community. Reyan noted,

There is no concept of a third gender in our community – you are either a man or a woman. When I was filling a job application here, they asked me my gender. They had options of man, woman, and there was another one too. I was confused – what is that. We

never had it back home, such things did not exist in Afghanistan, or maybe it existed but because of the culture people were hiding it. It is common here. People can show who they really are, they are not hiding, unlike back home. Like you can be transgender, or gay, or anything.

Similarly, for Zia, expression of love in public was something different and new. He called it a cultural shock.

I learned that it is normal for people to hug and kiss each other in public. I mean it was a shock at first. Then eventually I learned that it is okay. People have a different way to express or behave. What was even more shocking, obviously from the cultural background I come from, was two same genders holding hands and kissing. I later learned about LGBT people. It's something new I learned. I now also taught by sibling that whenever you see such things in public, do not be shocked.

Apart from learning about the existence of different roles in the society, my participants also described their experiences of learning new values and cultural norms in the past years. Reyan, for example, mentioned that whenever she was in public, she would notice people smiling and greeting, regardless of whether they knew each other. "That lady in the train just smiled at me. I first thought she knows me, but no. Other people did it too. They respect me, so I learned to respect them". It was interesting to see that the value of respect remained an important learning for all participants. Every participant noted that they observe Canadian society as respectful and humble. "People are so polite here, no one cares what your gender or religion is" said Zia while discussing some of his cultural learnings. Observing such behaviours and values made them learn about the Canadian culture and how to adapt through it as a part of their integration.

Adam learned workplace ethics and norms during his work. He particularly stressed on the aspect of “human rights” as an important aspect of his learning. He added,

One thing I learned here was about human rights. At work, they give enough time for your break. Enough time for you to work and relax. People here understand their rights and responsibilities. There are laws and regulations for everything. My country is different, we are always under pressure to work, which is not good. So here, I learned the new rules. I made sense that I cannot expect other people to work during their break. Nor should I be expected to work. I have a right, they have rights.

Learning new norms, behaviours, and values is a part of daily learning, especially for refugees who come from a different environment. This was particularly an essential finding for refugees coming from Afghanistan, as adjusting in a ‘Western culture’ is often accompanied by conflicts and dissonance. For example, Nizar noted some of the cultural differences that he had to learn but find them hard to align with his own ingrained cultural values and norms.

One of the things I struggled with was the understandings of new culture and previous understandings of norms; there seems like a clash. Obviously, there are different set of norms here, and I am not saying they are right or wrong, but there are definitely different and having a different set of ideas, thoughts, beliefs, whatever you name it can get in the way of learning differences. Because not only are you learning something new, but you’re also learning something that might be contrary to what you already know and practice. For instance, one of the biggest things that I had noticed was a difference in modesty. I come from a culture where people valued modesty and I was always trying to practice modesty. But people here are so upheld, which is often disrespectful in my sense.

Nizar highlights the disharmony between his previous ingrained learnings and the new learnings that he encountered in a Canadian society. For him, he is learning something that is contrary to what he already knew. As mentioned earlier, such a difference was also observed by Reyan and Zia while reading and seeing the expression of homosexuality. Such dissonance often results in disjuncture where individuals try to strategize and learn new behaviours to achieve harmony with those differences. All my participants considered these dissonances as opportunities, and negotiated and learned new norms and behaviours as a part of their adaptation and integration process.

#### ***Theme IV: Challenges and Barriers***

Refugees' learning experiences were not without challenges and barriers. My analyses reported multiple barriers that refugees face during their resettlement that significantly impact their learning processes and consequently their social and economic mobilities. This overarching theme is further divided into five sub-themes, with each sub-theme focusing on a unique but overlapping challenge. These sub-themes include a) evaluation of past educational credentials, b) lack of Canadian experience, c) language barrier, d) administrative challenges from governmental bodies and learning institutions, and e) mental health concerns. To begin, I will highlight the experiences of recognition of educational credentials in Canada.

#### ***Devaluation of Past Educational Credentials***

Once arrived in Canada, all participants applied for the evaluation of their educational credentials for three main reasons: at the recommendation of their settlement counsellors, to gain equivalency of their degrees, and accessing the Canadian labour market. Mumtaz, Reyan and Ali were among many newly arrived refugees whose previous educational degrees were not verified. They expressed their anger and frustration during the conversation. Mumtaz described the non-

recognition of his Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) degree and work experience as traumatizing. While sharing his experience of his degrees not recognized by the World Education Services (WES). Mumtaz got emotional and expressed,

When I went to the WES website, I could not find the name of my university in Afghanistan. I still submitted my credentials. I still have the original copy of my credential from back home, attested and approved by the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan, as well as by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for International Studies. But they rejected my degree, they did not recognize it. I did not give up. Later, I sent a letter to my former university, asking them to send a verification letter. They took some time because you know the situation of Afghanistan. I again sent it for verification. They still did not accept it.

Mumtaz further added that his second degree of business administration was also not recognized by WES, and as a result, he could not continue his education in Canada. He said,

I needed to show my credentials that I'm not a high school graduate. I have education, I have worked hard. Still, they say that we are not recognizing this university from India either. I just gave up on WES. All universities here are telling me the same. Can you believe that a person who worked for 12 years, worked hard to earn degrees is feeling this way? They recognized my degree back home and that's why they recruited me, and they paid me for 12 years. And now Canada does not want to recognize, even my high school credentials? Can you believe how frustrating this is?

He further added,

My medical degree is recognized by the Medical Council of Afghanistan. I went to the

university here to apply for admission. I went in-person to explain my point. But the staff said no, I cannot join their program. Why? That is not okay!

Mumtaz noted that currently the province he is living in experiences a shortage of medical staff and healthcare professionals. There is a minimum of 6-10 hours of waiting in emergency rooms, but there are hundreds of qualified doctors who could not continue their profession because of non-recognition of their credentials, or they are still waiting for approvals from governmental bodies.

Why don't they process things a little quicker? There is a long queue of professionals just waiting. Firstly, you wait, then give multiple exams, and then wait again. I know a lady from Iran, she is waiting to get her license for almost 4 years now. She is getting old. Look at me. I have studied and worked for 22 years, and now they are telling me I am not the right person for this education? Am I expected to study everything again? I have three kids, and my wife is a student. I want to pay my rent and buy food. I am done with the system.

Non-recognition of educational credentials and the struggle for re-credentialing made my participants feel hopeless and upset. They feel frustrated by the system and often find it difficult to start their education again to meet the criterion. With his concluding remarks on the issue of non-recognition, Mumtaz noted emotionally:

This is what happens with immigrants and refugees who come to Canada with lots of dreams. I have passion. And I have a hope that I will go and continue my education in this country and do something good for this country, for this society and for my children and my future. But when they arrive, and they meet the system, they give up. Their hard work is wasted.

Similar to Mumtaz, Reyan also showed her concern regarding this.

They are saying that my education will not be considered here. I have to start from the beginning. That is difficult for me. I can't do that; my career will finish. I have to start a new career here and it's too difficult for me. How can I go to the school? How I can start a new university here. This is the most important thing that bothers us.

Mumtaz's experience of dealing with the institutionalized credentialing system points at the existing structural barriers that devalue their educational assets and deny their access to the Canadian labour market. As a result, they are forced to engage in manual labour which is often unrelated to their skills. Non-recognition of educational credentials is a major concern for refugees. Most of my participants had additional family responsibilities, and their government sponsored funding was ending soon. As a result, they were worried that upgrading their educational credentials or starting a new career is going to take time and will not be financially feasible for them.

### ***Lack of Canadian Experience***

Another important barrier that surfaced from the interviews was the lack of Canadian experience, which often left my interviewees to enter low-wage jobs or remain unemployed. Ali and Zia held managerial position in Afghanistan and led international projects funded by USAIDs. Despite their extensive work experience, they were not allowed to enter the Canadian labour market because they lacked experience inside Canada. During my last conversation about his employment strategies, Ali said,

I looked for jobs in similar areas of my profession, something in finance and audits. I have my expertise in it. But nobody hired me. Now all I want is any job. I am happy to do cleaning jobs too, I want to feed my family, I want to keep my family alive.

The barrier of not having a Canadian experience often leads to downward economic mobility. Mumtaz, Reyan, Adam, and Zia shared that there are hundreds of refugees who are well educated, but they end up engaging in low-wages jobs instead of contributing well to the Canadian society. Mumtaz worked as a medical doctor was several years in Afghanistan, and also holds a degree in business administration. Upon arrival, he faced the same challenge and could not get any job. “They expect us to have Canadian experience. This is a big question, how can I get Canadian experience when someone is not willing to give me a job?”, he added. After several attempts, Mumtaz gave up on finding work and decided to volunteer. He mentioned,

The only way was to volunteer. But there is another challenge. Who is going to recommend me for this job as a volunteer, I do not know anyone. I cannot go to any office and ask them to give me work. Even when they keep me as a volunteer, they ask for police clearance, and that too costs \$52 and 20 days of wait.

This indicates that the denial to enter the labour market further leads to additional challenges, including financial hardships. Mumtaz also expressed his concern about his downward economic mobility. His past educational experiences were negated here, and he ended up doing a security course to find a job. “Can you imagine my medical degree is wasted and now I will be standing at a store as a guard to earn a few hundred dollars?”, he added.

Zia also noted that hundreds of educated refugees who come to Canada face similar challenges. Their past learnings are disregarded, and they end up doing jobs that is often low wages. “My friend came here with a PhD. He worked as a scientist in Afghanistan. Now he is an Uber driver. Not that driving job is bad, I have respect for every job, but do you see where are we going?”, he noted.

Similarly, Adam also maintained that the challenge of lack of Canadian experience can pose a significant challenge in their learning and development. As a construction worker, he applied to multiple positions, visited numerous organizations to submit his CV, and contacted several people, but lacking a ‘local’ experience was considered as the most common backdrop of rejection. He ended up working in an organization that his friend referred to. After telling his strategies to find work, Adam iterated,

It makes me so much upset. I went to a couple of places that they were saying, oh you don't have the Canadian job experience. Like if you want to help somebody like me who really needs a job, why can't you train me and give me a Canadian work experience? You don't have to turn us away.

Although my participants learned new strategies to find work and start a different career trajectory, the process was not smooth and often upsetting. They called it “painful”, “frustrating”, and “a headache”.

### ***Language Barriers***

My study reveals language barrier as a prominent challenge for refugees. My participants could understand and speak English, however, often the hesitation to speak it perfectly excluded them from participating in the wider societal activities. Nizar came to Canada without any knowledge of English. He had trouble understanding his peers and learning it from the scratch was an “unpleasant experience”. Nizar said,

When I came, I could not speak English at all. I hated English a lot because obviously I excelled in my own language. I was able to read, write, speak, understand, and comprehend in my own language, and then you are thrown in an environment where you don't know anything. And it's just like you can't understand anything. You have to make

meaning with what you do understand, which was nothing. So, making meaning with nothing is really hard. It is not easy at all. And then you can't say what you're thinking. And then you can't read what's written. You can't write what you want to. And so that's very difficult. It was a huge, huge challenge.

Creating meaning out of an unfamiliar language was a challenge for Nizar. He used to rely on his parents to help him understand until he started learning it himself. He expressed his struggle as “hate”, which depicts a strong emotion. Due to the language barrier, Nizar also had trouble in his formal education. Despite working hard in his academics, he was disheartened by low grades, because it took him more time to study and work unlike other students. “You study 4 or 5 times more than your classmates, and they end up getting better grades. You are like, what am I doing wrong here? I am working hard, why do I not get good grades”, he added. Zia also considered language as a hurdle in their learning. For him, even if they want to learn something new or ask a question, they could not, because “even if somebody explains us in English and if a person doesn't speak English, it will be difficult to learn and understand anything”.

Likewise, for Reyan and Ali, not knowing the language was also adding additional family responsibilities for them. Since their family members did not know the language, they had to accompany them for their routine tasks such as visiting a clinic or going to a grocery. “I had to take my mom to clinic, which was literally next door. She could not understand what the doctor was asking. I had to take breaks from work and go with her”.

### ***Challenges from Governmental Bodies and Learning Institutions***

A significant barrier reported by my participants was administrative issues from governmental bodies and learning institutes. When Reyan first arrived in Canada in 2021, she received a Confirmation of Permanent Resident (COPR) at the airport. Upon noticing, she

realized that her last name was incorrect, and she immediately reported it to the boarder officers. While describing her experience, Reyan mentioned,

I told the border security officer. She said let me correct it with my pen, the officer said. I said no, you cannot do that. You need to print a correct one. They asked me to go home, and they will send it to my address.

It's been more than 18 months now and Reyan is still waiting to receive a correct COPR letter from IRCC. "I called them many times, wrote to them, they do not respond, what do I do?", she said. As a result, Reyan could not enrol in English language classes because the college required either a Permanent Resident (PR) letter or a study permit. She cannot apply for a study permit right now due to her financial instability. She further noted,

It was their mistake. This error was never in my documents. Every document that I sent from Afghanistan when I applied for immigration had my correct spelling. Now every time I receive a mail or a letter, it has my wrong name in it. When I call them, they either don't reply or ask me to wait. How long do I wait?

Similar to Reyan, Adam also received his completed landing documents after 3 years. "I could not join any university that I wanted to because my documents were not received". He said.

For Mumtaz and Adam, learning institutions also lacked proper systems that can support the needs of refugees. While working full-time, they both could not join any local college for courses as none of them offered part-time programs in their relevant fields. Mumtaz switched to another course and applied to study an eight-month long part-time certificate course, but he is on the waiting list since the end of 2021.

When discussing theme I “Social connection and support”, I highlighted the experience of Mumtaz when he submitted his educational credentials to multiple universities in the city. While the first university outrightly rejected his application on the basis of non-recognition of his previous educational credentials, second university considered and approved his admission. This lack of clarity and communication among universities within the same province also poses challenges for refugees who aspire to continue their formal education in Canada. Mumtaz expressed his frustration and gave up on continuing any formal education programs.

Mumtaz, Adam, and Zia emphasized on the lack of staff and faculty’s training in dealing with refugee students. Adam failed his English classes and was eventually dropped out. When I asked him about his experience of his classes and reasons of dropout, he said,

I saw my other classmates who were performing good. They were different, from different countries. I was born in a wartime; teacher did not understand that. I grew up in a world where I saw war. It affected my brain and body. Other people had a normal life, I did not. If I also had a good childhood and I was somewhere else, I was also top educated. Even after coming here, nobody told me my weakness and how to improve it. I did it myself. But my teacher and other class members did not understand it. Nobody supported me.

For Mumtaz, Adam, and Ali, their course teachers were not understanding their stress and trauma, and therefore, they were treated and taught like other students. During the course, they also did not receive any mental health support from their universities. “I feel like my teacher knew my background, but she did not bother”, Adam noted.

### ***Mental Health Concerns***

Overlapping with the previous sub-theme, all my participants reported stress, anxiety, and depression as a part of their journeys, which impacted their learning processes too. Fleeing one country and moving to another is not an easy phase, especially when one has witnessed war, or have left their families behind. Since Adam moved here alone and still waiting for his family members to move from Afghanistan, he often feels sad, lonely, and depressed. While describing his experience of English class, he mentioned,

I faced many challenges. I was feeling weak in front of my other classmates. I could not focus so I was not doing good in classes. I had some stress in my head and mostly because of that, I could not study. I found that I have stress which was adding even more stress. It felt like I have no power to do anything. I was lonely and sad.

My participants also noted that stress and feeling of uncertainty often hold them back from learning and growth. Reyan shared that she spent the first few months crying and depressed, as she was missing her family back home and was not sure how her life will progress in Canada. Like Reyan and Adam, Ali and Zia also noted that mental health and stigma around it often stop them from seeking help. This, in turn, points that trauma and mental health concerns among refugees often remain an unresolved challenge, which negatively impacts their learning and integration in their host society.

### ***Theme IV: Learning Inspirations and Goals***

Despite multiple challenges and setbacks, my participants also shared their motivations and aspirations with me. As newcomers to Canada, they wanted to improve the quality of their lives, educate themselves and their children, and become an active and responsible citizen of the

country. This theme highlights some of their inspirations and goals through two sub-themes a) learning motivations, and b) desire for further learning.

### ***Learning Motivations***

My participants reported a number of factors that motivated them to learn more, upskill themselves, and continue their further learning. Adam and Ali derive their motivation from their religious values. Adam noted, “we are obliged to keep learning in Islam. It is part of our religion. It is our religious duty to keep learning and make sure our children also learn”. Ali also highlighted that the first word in the holy book Quran is ‘*iqra*’, which means to read. Learning regardless of one’s age and background is an essential part of being a Muslim. For both of them, religion acts as a key inspiration for continuous learning and growth.

Another key motivation is the opportunities of increased social and economic mobility that comes with more learning. Reyan and Mumtaz aim to become financially stable, while Zia wants to start his own business in Canada. “I want to become self-sufficient and have more money. Who doesn’t like more money in their lives”, Zia mentioned. A better economic mobility particularly plays a crucial role in the lives of refugees as most of them have left their economic capitals behind in hopes of a secure and safe life ahead of them.

### ***Desire for Further Education***

Regardless of their ages, all participants have aims to study further. Nizar, who is currently doing his masters in Canada, plans to earn his specialization in leadership education, especially in the area of newcomer youth. Zia and Reyan, on the other hand, want to do a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) to upskill their knowledge and skills. Zia particularly stressed on it as one of his goals is to establish his own business, and having a degree in business

administration will equip him better. For Ali, courses in Information Technology and Business will allow him to find better job prospects and “stand on his own feet”. Mumtaz is currently enrolled in a certificate program in healthcare profession and intends to take skill-based courses that can eventually land him back to a healthcare setup. Adam, on the other hand, plans to improve his English language and will be enrolling himself in advanced level language courses.

### **Summary**

To sum up, I presented five overarching themes that emerged from my interviews. First, all participants emphasized on the significance of their social connections, and the support they received from their friends, family members, religious and ethnic groups, and service providers in accessing learning opportunities. Reflecting on their experiences, participants considered their social networks as important and vital for the learning. In the second theme, I presented various pathways to learnings, including volunteer work, learnings in workplace, and informal learning. Such learning experiences allowed my participants to gain access to the Canadian labour market and eventually enhance their social and economic mobilities. In the third theme, I elaborated on the past and new learnings reported by my participants. This involved the use of past learnings in a new environment, learning English language, and learning new norms, behaviours, and perspectives. In the next theme, I highlighted some of the barriers and challenges faced by my participants that inhibit their learning processes. Some of the barriers included non-recognition of their past educational credentials, lack of Canadian experiences that leads to downward economic mobility, language barrier, administrative challenges from governmental institutions, and mental health concerns. Finally, I discussed their learning aspirations and motivations, including their desire for further education.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This phenomenological qualitative inquiry explores the learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada. Utilizing the voices of the participants, I aim to understand factors that inform their learning experiences, strategies and sources that aided their learning processes, and challenges and barriers they faced during their experiences. The participants of this study had a strong educational background from Afghanistan and strategized their access to learning opportunities to integrate in the Canadian society. Upon reporting my data in chapter 4, it becomes clear, from the voices of my participants, that the findings address the research questions the study sought to answer to. This chapter discusses my findings concerning my initial research questions and examines their relations with relevant literature. In the light of the past scholarly work, this chapter interprets and synthesizes the findings to provide a thorough understanding through four major foci: learning experiences in the context of refugees; factors informing learning experiences, learning strategies and sources, and challenges and barriers during learning processes. These foci, although separated by headings, are coherent and interconnected, and add further details and nuances while answering the research questions. To begin, it is important to unpack and reiterate what learning means in the context of my research, as well as its meaning and understanding in the context of refugees that were part of my study.

### **Learning Experience in the Refugee Context**

My research findings found two important learning experiences in the context of refugees: a) learning of new patterns, norms, and values, and b) gaining linguistic capital.

#### ***Learning New Patterns, Norms, and Values***

The analysis of this research unfolded ‘learning’ in the context of migration beyond its formal and non-formal characteristics. Learning is intrinsic to living; it is an existential and

lifelong process. Adult learning literature refers to such critical events as disjuncture, disharmony, or dissonance, and humans constantly learn to overcome this sense of disharmony (Jarvis, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). The learning model of Jarvis (2006) elucidates that once individuals encounter events, either positive or negative, and that they find challenging or conflicting with their previous knowledge or perspectives, it ignites a feeling of disjuncture. They struggle and learn to achieve harmony with their disjuncture. Mezirow (1978) referred to this situation as “disorienting dilemma”, which leads to new phases of reassessment and growth to challenge familiar knowledge and behaviours (p. 101).

Every participant of this study experienced such sort of events in their post-migration phases, and that disjuncture ignited a need to learn new knowledge, perspectives, values, and norms about life in Canada. All participants admitted that they felt an urge to explore more learning avenues, connect with resources, or experience more learning opportunities that can transform their learning and assist them in their integration processes. In the context of refugee learning, such perspective transformation, or as Mezirow (1997) termed it as “transformative learning”, becomes useful in adapting to the demands of changing socio-cultural contexts (Dirkx, 1998), which my participants experienced after their arrival to Canada. Their past frames of references, assumptions, and meaning-making processes changed, and the revised versions of meanings of new experiences guided their future activities (Mezirow, 2000).

All participants shared their experiences of learning new behaviours and norms that were new and unique for them. In the case of Reyan, for example, the role of women happened to be a reflective moment of learning. Her past beliefs and opinions changed after seeing the independent role of women in the Canadian society. Zia and Reyan also highlighted a shift in their perspectives around gender norms and knowledge about sexual orientations when they

learned about a “third gender” and LGBTQIA+ population in Canada. Both the respondents first found it shocking and confusing, but later, acquainted themselves with the new roles and perspectives in their new socio-cultural setup. This finding was echoed in the research of Margaroni and Magos (2018) on the transformative learnings in terms of new gender and intergenerational relations experienced by newly arrived Afghan refugees in Greece.

Such change in frame of references and assumptions as a learning process is widely studied by Morrice (2012). Her study on the transformative learning experiences of refugees in the United Kingdom revealed that becoming a refugee is a source of learning as they encounter changes and are required to learn new patterns and behaviours that are often not present in their past experiences. In the case of my participant, Zia, despite his previous travel to Europe and the US, he denoted his new situation as a “cultural shock”. Like Zia, Adam also referred a change in his understanding of culture and social values. Moving across social spheres and adjusting their lives in a Western culture, my participants sensed that dissonance, and adopted new behaviours such as changes in their perception of greetings, politeness, and understandings around freedom and human rights. Nizar, however, had trouble experiencing such dissonances between his past and new perspectives around the values of respect and modesty, which, first, was a point of conflict, but later became a moment of reflective learning and adaptation. Such social and cultural transformative learning experiences are also found by Magro and Polyzoi (2009) on exploring the experiences of adult learners from war-affected backgrounds in Canada. Learning in the context of refugees characterizes changes in knowledges, norms, and values, which often result in the destruction of old patterns and knowledges and the construction of new ones (Magro & Polyzoi, 2009; Morrice, 2012).

### ***Gaining Linguistic and Cultural Capital***

A key learning experience highlighted by all participants of this study was learning English language as a part of their integration. Most participants, including Mumtaz, Ali, Reyan, and Adam learned it to secure better scores in language tests for citizenship, while all of them noted it as a crucial part in their economic upliftment. English as a medium of instruction has become a dominant characteristic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the context of Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital framework, the role of English as a preferred medium or as a 'gatekeeper' is conceptualized as a linguistic capital. Language becomes a form of wealth, and it regulates and empowers (or marginalize) individuals by providing them access to social resources and memberships that shape their daily activities. For Bourdieu (1991), this dominance is a form of cultural capital that is asserted through symbolic means. Accumulating linguistic capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) through learning English language can be a parameter to thrive within dominant groups, communities, and society (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021). Every participant agreed on the value and dominance English language possesses, and their efforts to achieve more linguistic capital to sustain themselves in the new environment.

In the case of Adam and Nizar, their English language was "really poor" when they first moved to Canada. This lack of linguistic capital had numerous negative manifestations in their lives, including problems in finding jobs, and difficulty in connecting with peers and members of the host country. As a struggle to move up their social stratification by accumulating linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1990), Adam, Ali, and Mumtaz enrolled in English as a Second Language classes, referred by their service provider, while Zia and Reyan continued to improve their language skills through non-formal and informal ways. Several studies have described English language as a significant capital in the context of refugees. Ghadi et al. (2019) assert that the loss

of linguistic capital from back home limit the employment opportunities of refugees, impacting their economic advancement and social relations with native speakers of their host society. Similar to previous research on refugees' language acquisition and development (Ali et al., 2021; Hsieh, 2021), participants in my study sought to improve their cultural capital in the form of improved English language, and thus gained opportunities in attaining more cultural and social capital, and possibly economic capital through work experience. Thus, learning the dominant language is not just related to social advancement, but also a source for gaining symbolic capital, resulting in obtaining more social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

As a part of reintegration, refugees learn new perspectives, norms, and languages, which transform their frame of references and wider conceptual constructions to make sense of new socio-cultural contexts (Dirkx, 1998; Margaroni & Magos, 2018; Morrice, 2012). Each participant of this study shared their transformative learning experiences to achieve harmony with their disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006). They acquired new perspectives, skills, and language to cope with the ambiguities, and integrate themselves in the wider Canadian society. It is noteworthy that some participants admitted that such transformative learning experiences were more than learning opportunities. They were a necessity to survive and thrive in their post-migration phases. This suggests that although such transformative learning experiences were meaningful for the participants, they were also a compulsion to avoid social and economic disadvantages.

### **Factors Informing Learning Experiences.**

The findings of this research revealed two important factors that inform learning experiences of the participants. They include social ties and connections, and past learning experiences.

### ***Social Ties and Connections***

The first factor that plays a crucial role in participants' learnings is their social networks. In Bourdieu's framework of forms of capital (1986), social capital, which is the possession of networks and connections, cannot be reduced to economic or cultural capital; however, it is never independent of them, because social ties with a group who already accumulates other forms of capitals can give access to opportunities, allowing further expansion and accumulation of economic and cultural capitals. In the case of Afghan refugees that were part of my research, their social capital allowed them to share information and reproduce social relationships that gave them access to employment and educational opportunities.

All participants demonstrated an agreement on the significance of social connections in their lives. Mumtaz specifically used the word 'vital' and noted that if he did not have social relations, he would not have survived in the Canadian society. While reflecting on their social capital, participants indicated the role of their family members and friends in helping them getting employment opportunities, which became a key resource in their learning experiences. For Adam, after not receiving a positive response from employers, his friend connected him to another friend who owns a construction company, who later hired him as an employee. Similarly, Mumtaz also indicated that his first employment was through his social connections. In addition to work opportunities, all participants also revealed that their friends and family members played an important role in teaching them new norms, behaviours, and perspectives. Nizar particularly stressed that his cousins not only helped him with his university assignments, but also learnings about his expressions of emotions, how to behave in public, as well as learning English language. This crucial role of social capital in the learning experiences of refugees is in accordance with Akua-Sakyiwah's (2016) study on Somali refugee women in the UK. Similarly,

Ghadi et al. (2019) also found that refugees who flee their homes and have no economic capitals, access to social capital can help them achieve their learning goals. This possibly explains why my participants emphasized on the role of their social capital and called it ‘vital’ for their advancement in Canada.

Social capital is linked with learning, as Field (2005) noted that the role of social network is associated with formal and informal learnings that offer access to new information, ideas, and knowledge. Newly arrived refugees who often remain unaware of such information pick up from their family members and friends and incorporate it in their learning processes. Such learnings can be more effective than that gained from formal schooling (Field, 2005). This finding was also revealed in my study when my participant Zia shared that through the contact of his Afghan friends and family members in Canada, he was able to learn driving, apply for multiple employment positions, and aims to start his own business in Canada. For two of the participants, Reyan and Adam, their social networks benefitted them beyond their learning experiences. For example, when Reyan and Adam were going through loneliness, anxiety, and stress, talking to their friends and family members helped them feel less lonely. Reyan’s social connections also helped her seek therapy. This finding is consistent with the literature. In the context of refugees, social capital is said to have better social outcomes, including social cohesion, economic growth, and improved mental and physical well-being (Harper, 2001; Morrice, 2007).

Within the context of social networks, another important connection that was disclosed in the study was service providers. All six participants reflected on the support they received from their service providers or settlement counsellors, as they were their first point of contact in Canada. As newcomers, my participants expressed their ambiguity in navigating the systems and Canadian labour market, but their service providers provided them information about

employment opportunities, language courses, and in-demand skills that proved to be significant in their further learning and development.

Unlike immigrants who bring their extensive cultural and economic capital in Canada, one of the few available sources of capital for refugees is their social capital. Despite the loss of their existing social capital back home, most adult refugees remain part of some social networks, including family, ethnic and religious groups, or their settlement counsellors (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Various studies have highlighted the role of social capital in refugees' learning experience (Akkaymak, 2017; Ali et al., 2021; Dika & Singh, 2002; Morrice, 2007). As also shown in my study, difficulty in accessing resources often make refugees turn to their friends, kin and ethnic members that increase their learning and economic opportunities (Hein, 1993; Gold & Kibria, 1993; Lamba, 2003). In accordance, my findings also revealed a positive link between refugees' social capital and their learnings. Throughout their learning processes, my participants demonstrated that their social capital provided them strategies and resources that eventually expanded their cultural and economic capitals. For example, in the case of participants who attended language classes, their service providers and friends provided them contacts of the courses available for free. By improving their language skills, they gained linguistic capital which eventually landed them in better employment options. These participants illustrated that they utilized those networks for their upliftment, critically reflected on the knowledge received, and applied them to thrive in their changing environments.

### ***Past Learning Experiences***

Another factor that proved to be important in the learning experiences of my participants is the utilization of their past learning experiences into their new environments. One of the questions I was interested to answer was the influence and application of refugees' past

educational backgrounds, skillsets, and knowledge into their new socio-cultural environments. Despite the devaluation of their past educational and work experiences in Canada, all participants noted that they made sense of their new learnings through their past experiences. Participants' detailed instances revealed that their communication and interpersonal skills were transferable in their new work environments. For instance, Reyan and Adam indicated that since they worked at multiple organizations back in Afghanistan, they knew how to engage and build meaningful networks with people. Similarly, another participant shared that their past experiences of communicating with a diverse group of people provided them an edge to communicate better in their current environment and sought better job opportunities through those skills. One of my participants, Adam, worked as a construction worker in Afghanistan, and now also works as a construction worker in Canada. He noted that he knew the foundational techniques of tiling, flooring, and painting from his past work, and a few courses in safety and quality assurance in construction made him start his work here. This finding indicates that despite the absence of their recognized cultural capital in Canada, their past learnings and skills continue to play an important role in their shaping and informing their learning experiences in Canada.

Another important finding revealed in my study was the role of existing linguistic capital in accumulating economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Despite English as a dominant language in the Canadian society, knowing more than one language proved to be an asset for my participants. In the case of Reyan, Adam, and Mumtaz, they were hired as resettlement counsellors because they knew Dari, Pashtu, and Urdu. Consequently, their existing skills impressed their employers, and now they work at settlement service organizations to assist newly arrived Afghan refugees in Canada. Mumtaz called his work "good with a good pay", while Reyan expressed her contentment with her work. Adam was particularly hired because he also knows Arabic, Spanish,

and Persian, along with his command over Dari, Urdu, and Pashtu. This account on utilization of past language skills to access employment opportunities relates with Liu and Guo (2021) study on newcomers' navigation and transition to work as settlement workers in Canada. Bourdieu (1984) argues that unlike economic capital, linguistic capital works as a form of cultural capital that is often unrecognized as a legitimate competence. However, such symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) can influence other forms of capital and facilitate an individuals' integration into wider society (Adamuti-Trache, 2012; Uekusa, 2020). Karimi (2020), in their study on the integration of Gay Iranian refugees in Canada, also documented this influential interaction between different forms of capital, that ultimately result in better social outcomes and economic growth.

### **Strategies and Sources of Learnings**

The findings of this research demonstrated three important strategies and sources of learnings reported by all participants. They are volunteering, workplace learning, and informal sources of learning.

#### ***Volunteering***

The analysis of this research data revealed volunteer work as an effective strategy for learning and accessing labour market to accumulate cultural and social capitals, and resultantly, economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). During their initial phase, all my participants had trouble finding jobs and building networks outside of their communities. Devaluation of their past educational degrees and lack of Canadian experience as a backdrop, most of my participants started working as volunteer in various organizations. Volunteering is a powerful source of knowledge in newcomers' integration (Guo, 2014). For my participants, doing a volunteer work had two main reasons. First was to gain new skills and build their professional networks, and the

second prominent reason was accessing the labour market and gain Canadian experience.

Participants expressed that both the reasons are intertwined for them, but the latter was also revealed because of frustration and anger of not getting accepted in the market system.

My participants, Reyan and Adam, started working as volunteers in a settlement services organization. Their volunteer work allowed them in understanding work ethics and connecting with people who had a similar pathway to the Canadian labour market. Reyan also stressed on the importance of her work in her overall social and mental well-being. The evidence to support a strong relationship between volunteering and psychosocial well-being is reported by Bowdenleigh (2006). Refugees feel less isolated during their experience and contribute to their well-being (Taha & Cherti, 2005). My findings are consistent with the existing studies on experiences of refugees that highlighted the practical benefits of volunteering. Volunteer experience has shown to increase confidence, especially from the training and mentoring received during the experience. They also value gaining a reference to prove their work experience (Guo, 2014; Liu & Guo, 2021; Tomlinson, 2010). In accordance with Yap et al.'s (2010) study, my participants also noticed their volunteer work as a chance to practice and improve their English language.

Unlike traditional forms of volunteering, another motivation for my participants to volunteer was the pressure from labour market. Tomlinson (2010) argues that given their difficulties in accessing paid work, refugees are often encouraged to volunteer to undertake unpaid work to gain experience. In the case of Adam, he started working as a volunteer after giving up on finding jobs. He expressed his frustration for using his knowledge for free. He articulated his feelings as “why do I work for free, I was angry”, and thus Adam referred his volunteering experience as a ‘compulsion’. In contrary to Yap et al.'s (2010) findings, my

participants were pressured to work as volunteers because they were denied entry to labour market. In this sense, as Guo (2014) argues, volunteering can be considered a form of social coercion.

Given the challenges refugees face in accessing the Canadian labour market, refugees adopted volunteering as a strategy to gain Canadian work experience. In congruent to the studies conducted by Liu and Guo (2021) and Tamlinson (2010), volunteer work not only provided my participants useful skills and organizational learnings, but also a steppingstone for their integration and accumulation of social and economic capitals (Bourdieu, 1984; Guo, 2014; Handy & Greenspan, 2009).

### ***Workplace Learning***

As indicated in my findings, the participants reported their workplace as an important source of learning. In a workplace setting, learning occurs in formal, non-formal, and informal ways. Formal learnings usually follow a structured curriculum (Hrimech, 2005), and non-formal learnings focus on noncredentialled learnings, such as training programs, workshops, and conferences (Spencer & Kelly, 2009). Informal learning in workplace includes knowledge and skills acquired through unstructured and collegial participations (Watkins et al., 2018).

Jimenez et al (2017) referred to workplace learnings as a major field of social integration for refugees as it offers opportunities for income and social participation. My participations revealed that their workplace trainings introduced them to modules such as confidentiality, communication skills, safety, and well-being, which benefitted them in acquiring essential skills. Reyan noted that as someone who has never worked as a counsellor, her workplace training developed her professional knowledge and boosted self-confidence.

Computer skills was another learning that my participant reported to be essential for their work. By attending online courses and receiving certificates of completion, Reyan accumulated cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that benefitted her with her further learnings. Similarly, another important aspect is language learning. My participants noted that their workplace was the most essential place where they could practice English speaking, as otherwise it is not possible to do it at home. In the case of Reyan, Adam, Mumtaz, and Nizar, speaking to their colleagues and peers improved their communication and interpersonal skills. Reyan and Adam particularly reported the significance of their workplace as a participatory learning space, where their colleagues and supervisors provided them constructive feedback and helped them learn and grow. My findings are also echoed in various scholarly literature on workplace learnings in the context of refugees (Cain et al., 2021; Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021; Loon & Vitale, 2019). Workplace as a space to learn language and boost confidence was also revealed in Schmidt and Muller's (2020) study on workplace integration of refugees in Germany. In turn, my findings, in accordance with the literature, note that workplace is a source of learning for my participants, providing them access to social and cultural capital for their upliftment and integration.

### ***Informal Learnings***

While informal learning at workplace emerged as a finding in my study, my participants noted that informal learnings at social gatherings and public places is also an important source of learning for them. All participants agreed that their learnings about the system and norms of Canada derived through informal ways. Nizar particularly emphasized that he learned more through informal means than attending courses or reading books. For him, informal learnings happen without any pressure. This signifies that informal learning is one of the key learning strategies for my participants that also facilitated their integration in the Canadian society.

In the context of my study, participants reported observations, spontaneous discussions, social interactions, and making errors and correcting them as few ways that helped them learn through informal ways. Most participants illustrated that they learned to greet people, or professional ways of interacting with people through observations. Most of the time they did not even feel like they were deliberately observing and adapting in certain situations. In the case of some participants, including Reyan, Ali, and Mumtaz, they familiarized themselves with the city's transit system through informal learning. They observed other people buying bus tickets, or made mistakes of taking the wrong bus, and learned the system through it. According to Guo (2014), informal learning, including intentional and tacit learning, is a conduit through which adults learn and familiarize themselves with the systems.

My findings add to the paucity of literature on informal learning, particularly in the context of refugees. Often facing difficulty in accessing formal and non-formal ways of learnings, refugees highlight informal learnings as a part of their everyday meaning making processes (Morrice, 2014). Although not recognized as any essential form of capital, informal learning indirectly contributes to developing social and cultural capital (Morrice, 2007). This is consistent with the findings in my research where my participants learned communication and organizations skills, which landed them in better employment opportunities. It is through informal learning that implicit rules, norms, behaviours, and tacit knowledge is picked up and further developed (Morrice, 2007), which was also evident in the case of my participants who learned about the values of modesty and respect through informal learning opportunities.

Another interesting finding from my research is learning language through informal means. Ali and Nizar reported that they often listened to people talk and picked up new words and sentences to improve their English. Nizar also noted that he first learned 10 essential words,

then listened to people how they were used, and further developed his vocabulary. He also learned what phrases to say in different situations by noticing others using them in their daily speech. In the case of Reyan, she picked up the language while watching movies on television or listening to radio. Such informal sources of learning were also documented by Morrice (2011) while studying refugees' learning experiences in the United Kingdom. In consistent to my findings, the study reported that such informal and incidental learnings facilitated participants' integration in their host societies.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

The findings of this study revealed that Afghan refugees experience numerous challenges that negatively impact their learning experiences. Some of the barriers reported by the participants include devaluation of their past educational credentials, lack of Canadian experience, language barrier, challenges from governmental bodies, and mental health concerns.

Several studies report that newcomers' educational credentials are often not recognized in Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998; Bauder, 2003; Guo, 2010; Shan & Guo, 2013). The non-recognition of previous learning credentials makes refugees feel disrespected (Reitz, 2001; Shakaya et al., 2010), which is reflected in this study too. Participants' valuable institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) was not recognized, and as Morrice (2012) points out, realizing that their cultural capital has little exchange value is often a "painful and bitter experience" (p. 263). My participants found the process of their degree evaluation frustrating. The loss of their institutionalized cultural capital disrupted their entry to the Canadian labour market, which forced them to do jobs that do not return the value they invested in. Little to no exchange value of cultural capital leads to a loss of economic capital. It also involves loss of professional identity and social status, leading to unemployment, more dependence on welfare benefits, and loss of

financial independence (Morrice, 2012). As demonstrated by my participants, the loss of professional and social status impacts their social capital, leading to a downward economic and social mobility.

Like this study, the challenge of devaluation and denigration of past learning experience is echoed in numerous scholarly studies. As Wagner and Childs (2006) observe, highly skilled migrants in Australia often become taxi drivers, cleaners, and grocery store assistants, which Brandi (2001) referred as 'brain waste'. In the context of Canada, such deskilling and devaluation leads to downward social mobility, and this lack of access to professional occupation leads to unemployment, underemployment, and poverty (Guo, 2010; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Krahn et al., 2000). Similar to such findings, my participants also experienced unemployment and underemployment; few of them are still struggling to find jobs with hopes to feed their families and acquire a better living standard.

Before moving to Canada, my participant Mumtaz completed his MBBS, followed by a degree in business administration and information technology. Upon his degree evaluations, none of his credentials were approved, which made him feel angry and hopeless. Such limitations of the point system for international medical graduates are a barrier to the successful integration of refugees into the Canadian labour market (Ricento, 2021). Guo (2009) also note that such waste of valuable human capital trigger disappointment, sadness, and anger among newcomers, which was also expressed by my participants. The loss of Mumtaz's professional status completely erased his hard-earned social and cultural capital. Another participant also noted that devaluation of their institutionalized cultural capital is a major concern for refugees in Canada, and it becomes particularly difficult for adult refugees who have family responsibilities and cannot go back to school for re-credentialing. Similar to Guo (2009), my participants also

noted that such re-credentialing requirements are discriminatory and make it unnecessarily difficult for racialized groups to access labour market and gain institutionalized cultural capital.

The devaluation of existing embodied cultural capital forced Afghan refugees to accumulate new embodied capital, which includes learning the language, gaining job-specific skills, and adopting market-valued practices (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2017). This possibly explains Mumtaz and Ali's learning trajectories when they took security guard training courses and learned English as their existing embodied cultural capital were effectively erased. Such devaluation of capital is a contributing factor in other barriers faced by them, including economic disadvantage and mental health concerns.

In addition to the loss of their social and cultural capital, participants also reported lack of Canadian experience as a barrier to their learning. Belonging to an educated class, my participants brought their professional experience in the labour market; however, given that they did not have any Canadian work experience, their entry to the labour market was denied. Most of my participants had managerial positions in Afghanistan. In the case of Ali and Zia, both worked for international organizations back in Afghanistan as managers, but upon arrival, they were startled to know that they require local experience to have an income. Mumtaz, out of his frustration, questioned these structural barriers and asked, "they expect us to have Canadian experience... how can I get such experience when someone is not willing to give me a job?". Mumtaz remained underemployed and had to do low-skill jobs, while Zia and Ali are still unemployed. Similar to Etzold's (2017) study on refugees' access to labour market in Germany, the participants' account in my study also indicated that due to such barriers in finding work, unemployment is a major concern in refugee communities. This downward occupational

mobility brings refugees at the brink of social stratification, leading to an effective loss of their cultural and economic capitals (Ali et al, 2021; Ortlieb et al., 2020; Yoon et al., 2019).

Such devaluation of prior learning and work experience generates a belief that the knowledge gained in non-Western societies is deficient and incompatible, and connotes knowledge to a positivistic measurement that negates the complexity of knowledge construction and its processes (Guo, 2009). Extending to Bourdieu's argument in this context, such non-recognition of foreign credentials perpetuates the systematic exclusion of refugees from the labour market and erases their embodied cultural and economic capitals. Such process of labour-market exclusion facilitates the reproduction of one particular professional class that enjoys a relatively upper-class status in the society (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Scholars in migration studies call this valorization of institutionalized cultural capital as a political act (Guo, 2009; Hanlon, 1998). Devaluation of prior learning and past work experience of my participants indicates a division between Canadian-education and foreign-educated individuals, and such distinctions enforces the division of labour according to national origin and location of education. As observed by Hanlon (1998), such battles consider what is considered recognized cultural capital and what is not. Such determination and erosion of cultural capitals perpetuates the system of social and cultural exclusion to ensure the continuous reproduction of upper class that has access to most of the professional occupations (Bourdieu, 1986; Collins, 1979). My participants experience of deskilling is consistent with Bourdieu's view of institutionalized forms of capitals that mainly support upper classes.

Another challenge admitted by my participant is the administrative issues from governmental bodies and learning institutions. Some of my participants reported that despite submitting proper information, they received incorrect documentations from Canadian

government, and as a result, they could not continue their educational activities. Reyan could not get admission in language classes, while Adam was not able to enrol himself in the desired courses, as his case was under approval for more than three years. Such administrative concerns and poor communication from the government were also documented by Dhaliwal (2022). Afghans fearing their lives under Taliban reprisals fled from their homes, but lack of resources and additional administrative backlogs from the government were some of the reported obstacles faced by Afghan refugees. Moreover, such administrative issues and poor communication were also reported from learning institutions which added further barriers in their learning experiences. In the case of Adam and Mumtaz, their language teachers did not understand their stress and learning needs. There were miscommunications among universities in the admission processes, and teachers were not mindful of the trauma refugee students bring in their learning journeys. Adam, as a result, ended up dropping out, while Mumtaz could not continue his higher education.

Besides structural barriers, my participants also admitted that language remained a significant barrier for them. Creating meanings out of an unfamiliar language was a prominent challenge for my participants, particularly Nizar who could not perform well academically and socially because his English was “really poor”. Language as a hindrance creates further barriers to accumulate cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1986). My findings are consistent with Huang’s (2021) study on adult Syrian refugee learners’ needs in Canada. Parents with low levels of English language skills rely on their children, which often leads to family tensions and stress among young adults (Yohani et al., 2021). This echoes in my study when Reyan noted that she faces difficulty in accompanying her mother in daily activities.

Lastly, refugees also experience poor mental health and well-being. Due to a significant history of trauma, they face trouble in socializing and achieving their learning goals (Crea & McFarland, 2015; MacNevin, 2012). Similar to the research on the integration of Iranian refugees in Canada (Ali et al., 2020), my participants experienced loneliness, anxiety, stress, and depression, which was further exacerbated by unemployment or underemployment, and loss of their social and cultural capitals. Such issues interfere with their concentration, regulation, and academic success (Stermac et al., 2010).

### **Summary**

To sum up, this chapter first summarized my findings in relation to my research questions and examined its connections with relevant scholarly work conducted in the past. In the light of the literature, this chapter interpreted and synthesized my findings to provide a comprehensive and thorough understanding of learning experiences of Afghan refugees in Canada. I interpreted by findings and laid out my discussion through four major foci: learning experiences in the context of refugees; factors informing learning experiences, learning strategies and sources, and challenges and barriers during learning processes.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications**

This research investigated learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada, particularly the factors that informed their experiences, challenges and barriers faced by them, and strategies and sources utilized during the process. My study goes beyond the didactic connotations of learning in formal schoolings. Rather, it characterizes learning in the context of gaining familiarity with new patterns, norms, and behaviours, language acquisition, and knowledges that contributes to wider social and economic mobilities of refugee communities. In order to do so, I utilized a phenomenological approach as a methodology with Bourdieu's forms of capitals (1986) as a theoretical framework. In this concluding chapter, I summarize and re-iterate my research findings, implications of my research, and implications for future research.

### **Conclusions**

The objective of this study was to explore the learning experiences of Afghan refugees in Canada. For the study, I interviewed six Afghan individuals with different years of arrival to Canada, using a phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The result of this study identified five major themes as findings: a) social connections and support, b) pathways to learning, c) past and new learning experiences, d) challenges and barriers, d) learning aspirations and motivations. From the voices of my participants, I interpreted and synthesized the findings to address my research questions through exploring four major foci: learning experiences in the context of refugees; factors informing learning experiences, learning strategies and sources, and challenges and barriers during learning processes.

Firstly, my findings confirm that changes in socio-cultural spheres often result in disjuncture, and when individuals seek to attain harmony, they learn new patterns, roles, and

knowledges. Learning is intrinsic to living and a lifelong process. Such disjunctural events are particularly common in refugee experiences, as often uprooted from their past communities, refugees learn new behaviours, skills, and patterns to integrate into their host societies. My study reported such events in the lives of Afghan refugees who arrived in Canada with limited cultural and economic capitals. Participants demonstrated transformative learning experiences, that included changes in their past frame of references and assumptions, and creation of new knowledge and meaning-making processes. Such events range from changes in understanding gender relations, to conflicting values and beliefs that often require deliberate acquaintance as a part of integration and adaptation into the host society.

Additionally, such learning experiences also include gaining linguistic capital by learning English language. Learning a dominant language is crucial to gain access to labour market. With the change of social spheres, refugees realize the need of learning or improving their English language and begin to explore opportunities and resources that can allow them to do so. This includes learning through formal schooling or courses, learning at workplace, or informal learnings at social gatherings or in public places.

Secondly, the findings of this research disclosed two important factors that inform learning experiences of refugees: social ties and connections, and past learning experiences. Social capital can be a key source of support, especially for refugees who do not bring their recognized economic and cultural capital in their host societies. Despite uprooted from their past communities and facing trauma and displacement, refugees have some sort of social networks, including family members, friends, or ethnic and religious groups. Social connection with service providers or settlement counsellor was an interesting finding of my research, as past scholars have often limited social networks to family and ethnic groups. In the case of ambiguity

or need for learning, refugees often turn to their social networks for support. Such networks often contribute to their learnings, such as providing access to labour market through assisting in finding jobs, passing information about learning opportunities, or providing strategies that eventually expand their cultural and economic capitals. In addition to social capital, past learning skills and knowledge also informed the learning experiences of refugees. Despite the devaluation of their past embodied cultural capital, refugees utilized their previous skills, such as knowing multiple languages, communication and interpersonal skills, and navigated their new learning experiences through them.

Thirdly, this research demonstrated that volunteering and workplace learnings are two key strategies and sources of learning for refugees. Refugees are often denied entry to labour market, and hence, an unpaid volunteer work allow them to gain local experience, develop professional network, as well as practice their English language skills. Volunteering is a powerful source of learning, and my research also demonstrated its benefits in overall social and emotional well-being of refugees. However, as stipulated in my findings, volunteer work was also a compulsion and a mere gateway to find employment.

Furthermore, workplace learning was also indicated as an important source of learning. This includes formal and non-formal trainings, including orientations, workshops, and conferences, which boosted confidence and communication skills among my participants. Another important focus of my research was on informal learnings. Informal learning often does not receive enough attention because of its non-accredited value; however, it plays a crucial role in the lives of refugees. Informal learnings happen at workplace, social gathering or in public. Some of the learnings in the context of refugees include learning a new language, familiarizing

with new norms and behaviours that are often unique, as well as learning English language through listening and observing others.

Lastly, and most importantly, my research highlighted some barriers and challenges faced by refugees during their learning processes. First and foremost, non-recognition of past educational credentials remains a significant barrier for refugees. Realizing that their past institutionalized and embodied cultural capital has no exchange value forces them to do low-wage jobs or remain unemployed. Consequently, they experience loss of professional identities and social status and face downward occupational mobility. Lack of Canadian experience is another challenge that hinders refugees' economic and social growth. Their past skills are not recognized, and they face difficulty in finding work. They also face administrative challenges from the government bodies and learning institutions, including lack of communication, delayed responses, and lack of understanding of their circumstances and learning needs. Additionally, they face mental health concerns, including loneliness, anxiety, and depression, that interfere with their learning process and economic growth.

### **Implications of the Study**

Firstly, this study contributes to the wider understanding of the process and experience of learning in the context of refugees. It characterizes learning as a lifelong process that goes beyond the didactic, banking system of learning in a classroom environment. This indicates that more discourse, scholarship, and research need to be dedicated in studies of adult education in refugee context. Building on the two areas, my research not only investigates experiences of Afghan refugees in Canada, but also broadly addressed their learning needs and challenges. As such, my study draws attention to the need for future research in refugee studies and adult learning.

Secondly, what my study shows is that considering refugees as a subgroup of newcomers often negates the rich experiences they bring into their host societies. Refugees are a distinct group with distinct social and psychological needs that impact their learning processes. Displaced from their past communities, their previous learning patterns, values, and norms are often no longer relevant. They experience a sudden change and pressure to learn, which is not an easy process. Within the group of Afghan arrivals, considering everyone with the same background and needs will again be a reductionist, Eurocentric approach to education, where their unique needs and backgrounds are nullified and an essential one-fit-all framework is considered doable. Despite living in a political turmoil for decades, Afghan refugees bring in a diversity of culture, ethnic and religious affiliations, and identities. This diversity of background and experiences need to be acknowledged and incorporated in the wider policies and programs that impact their lives.

Most importantly, my research shed light on the challenges and barriers they face during their integration processes that significantly impact on their learning experiences and aspirations. This study offers recommendations and future actions for policy makers, governmental organizations, faculty and staff of learning institutions, as well as service providers and settlement organizations.

At the macro level, my study highlights broader issues of policies and structures that hinder successful integration of refugees. For example, credentials' recognition as a requirement not just erases refugees' professional and educational capital, but also devalues their self-confidence. Similarly, having a Canadian experience as a prerequisite for employment also goes against the foundations of multiculturalism and immigration adopted by the governmental bodies and their stakeholders. Such issues require a fundamental change at macro level.

Afghan refugees have witnessed multiple types of violence, including conflicts, deplorable living conditions, loss of loved ones, and as a result, face psychosocial consequences throughout their learning journeys. They often find staff and faculty of educational institutions unhelpful and not trained to understand their needs. Organizations, post-secondary institutions, and universities need to design and strategize better support systems that are inclusive, sustainable as well as relevant to their needs. Staff and teachers should be trained to understand their circumstances, and proper mental health and learning support should be present to assist them.

Uprooted from their past communities, service providers often become the first source of information for refugees. My study demonstrated a powerful role of service providers and settlement counsellors in the lives of refugees. This also indicates that non-governmental organizations, service providers and settlement organizations have even greater responsibilities in facilitating the learning experiences of refugees, that ultimately help them to integrate and grow in their host societies. More programs and learning opportunities should be planned and executed for refugees that help them upskill and overcome specific barriers that they encounter. For instance, mentorship programs, counseling, and career upliftment opportunities that can facilitate their transition.

Lastly, my research has methodological and theoretical implications. Phenomenological research has been widely used in migration studies, particularly to understand refugees' mental health concerns, accessibility to social services, or their barriers to labour market.

Phenomenological studies on the learning experiences of refugees are sparse, despite the methodological significance and richness it carries. Similarly, Bourdieu's perspective plays a prominent role in highlighting the experiences and challenges of refugees. Thus, my research

fills the scholarly gap that exist in the wider research in refugee studies and adult learning. Finally, it needs to reiterate that this study does not intend to generalize refugees' experience. Generalization of my findings will be against the very foundations of my methodological framework as well as my own values and knowledge as a qualitative researcher.

### **Implications for Future Research**

My study has several implications for future research on learning experiences of refugees. Due to the limited scope of the research, English language remained a key limitation of my study. Hearing participants' voices in their own languages would have brought extensive data about their experiences that could add more nuances in the overall findings. English language also limited my participant recruitment to only those who can understand and communicate in the language. Future studies could capture data in English, Urdu, Dari, and Pashto to include more voices in the study.

As the current study was conducted within a relatively short period of time, I could not obtain extensive data about my participants' learning experiences and how it changed over time. Future studies could consider longitudinal research that studies learning experiences of refugees over a longer period of time, including the changes in their transformative learning experiences, formal and informal learning patterns, and their career trajectories that contributed to their learning.

I recruited my participants from one settlement services organization, and five of my research participants were government sponsored refugees. To add further complexity and nuances in the scholarly work, potential studies can recruit participants from a variety of settlement organizations as well as participants who are also privately sponsored. Learning

experiences and associated challenges and factors will be different when a refugee is sponsored by social and religious groups, and not just the government.

When I was conducting my interviews and analyzing the data, I realized that my research reveals Afghan refugees' experiences from their own perspectives. While hearing the stories of refugees from refugees themselves is extremely crucial, another perspective that can contribute to policy implications could include interviewing employers, professors, and family members. The addition of more perspectives in future studies can provide more angles to the current research problem and benefit the audience in understanding and strategizing better learning opportunities for them. However, this will require additional methodological approaches that phenomenology cannot offer. Narrative inquiry, case studies, and participatory action-research could allow further exploration in this context. This is another implication for future studies where more methodologies and methods can be utilized.

Additionally, future studies can also consider an intersectional lens to understand refugees' learning experiences. Learning experiences and access to opportunities can vary by individuals' gender, ethno-cultural belonging, social class, age, sexual orientation, and disability. It will be enriching to see how social belonging and identities can impact, facilitate, or hinder refugees' learning experiences. For example, future researchers could consider criteria such as social class, previous education, gender, and their impact on learning experiences.

On March 27, 2023, IRCC Minister Sean Fraser announced a new immigration pathway that aims to connect employers in Canada with refugees and displaced people to overcome labour shortages in key occupations (Kareem, 2023). This means that more refugees will be working and learning in Canada in the coming future under Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP). For future studies, it will be interesting to investigate how such opportunities changed

or influenced learning experiences of refugees, what factors and resources were helpful, and what were the unique learning barriers and challenges under this program. It will be equally revealing to explore the issue of devaluation of educational credentials, especially in the context of the governments' new immigration pathways on one hand, and non-recognition of previous educational and work experience on the other hand. It is anticipated that such coinciding programs and policies might create a conflict, and future studies can investigate how refugees face and navigate such barriers.

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## **Appendix A: Organization Recruitment Form**

### **Letter of Agreement for Recruitment**



#### **A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Resettled Afghan Refugees in Canada.**

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Hello,

My name is Sameer Nizamuddin, and I am studying a Master of Arts in Educational Research, with my specialization in Adult Learning at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. Currently I am conducting a research project for my MA thesis, entitled “A phenomenological study of learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada”, under the supervision of Dr. Shibao Guo, Professor, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB22-1670).

I am contacting you because I learned that you sponsor and support refugees during their resettlement process. The purpose of keeping your organization as an intermediary is to build and have a sense of trust and comfort among participants, who would not know me otherwise as a researcher. Coming through the contact of the organization will create a sense of ease as they have already known you.

#### **Purpose of the Study and Inclusion Criteria:**

This research aims to understand the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. Specifically, I focus on the barriers and challenges that Afghan refugees encounter during their learning processes, and what strategies and resources have proven to be successful during their learning experiences.

I am currently recruiting participants for my research, who meet the following inclusion criteria:

- a) Born in Afghanistan.
- b) Entered Canada as a refugee.
- c) Can speak and understand English.
- d) Have spent at least one year in Canada.

#### **What will they be asked to do?**

Through your support, I will be recruiting 5 participants for individual interview. My interview will be guided by semi-structured interview questions, with a focus on their learning experiences, successes, and challenges. Interview questions will include their education and work experiences since their arrival in Canada, the role of their social networks and connections, their experiences of learning languages and cultures, some of the barriers they faced, and how they navigated those challenges.

Pseudonyms will be assigned to all the respondents to ensure the anonymity. Any information that could directly lead to them or their family identities will be slightly modified or kept confidential. The interview will last for about 60 minutes. The interviews will either be online or in-person, depending on the feasibility of participants. All participants will be guaranteed with anonymity and confidentiality. For the purpose of further data analysis, the interviews will be audio-recorded and will be transcribed. As stipulated, their identity will remain anonymous by selecting a pseudonym of their choice.

Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and they can refuse to participate at any point of the study, can decline to answer any question, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, and can withdraw from the study without any consequences. Participants will be given a consent form, and I will be discussing that before the interview. They will be allowed to take a decision, and if they agree, they will have to sign and return the form.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Only I as a researcher will collect their name, phone number and/or email address for the purpose of communication for the research. Some of the questions that will be asked during the interview are length of their stay in Canada/year of arrival, their highest-level education, and whether the participant arrived in Canada alone or with family. Their information will be kept anonymous, and during the time of the interview, they will be referred with your chosen pseudonym. The audio-recorded interviews will never be shared publicly and will be saved in a password-protected encrypted folders in digital formats, and no one except the researcher will have access to it. No local copies of the data will be stored on servers.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There are limited risks associated with their participation. It is possible that discussing their past experiences may trigger some negative emotions or can be stressful during the conversation. If they feel any question makes them feel uncomfortable, they can feel free not to answer it and inform me to move on to the next question. I will provide ethical and comfort spaces to them so they will feel safe and comfortable to speak and share their responses. Additionally, on the final page of this consent form, there is a contact list of low or no cost services available to reach out and receive support.

It is anticipated that research will be a chance for them to self-reflect on their learning experiences so far and explore about themselves and their learning journeys. Furthermore, the research findings will inform scholars and practitioners on developing better strategies for refugee learning programs.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. They are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher will be allowed to access the data. If they withdraw from the study prior to completion of data collection, their data will be destroyed. However, if they withdraw from the study after data collection is complete and your data has been amalgamated (two weeks after the interview), their data cannot be destroyed because data is stored without identifiers and cannot be linked to participants.

Digital data collection files are kept in a password-protected encrypted folders in a computer only accessible by the researcher. Any notes taken during the interview will be scanned and saved in the same password-protected folder, and the hand-written notes will be destroyed immediately. The anonymous data will be stored for five years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased.

### **Important Notice:**

Please note that participants should recruit themselves as volunteers, without any sense of coercion or mandate. Once you contact potential participants and they agree to participate, please pass on the contact information of the research team to the participant. On contact, I will discuss about the study, its purpose, consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. I will only recruit them once they agree to participate after the discussion. Please note that I will not inform you if the participants decide to withdraw from the study. As my ethical responsibility, it will also be

clarified to the participants that their decision to participate, or responses will not be shared with your organization, nor it will impact their relationship with the organization and the services they will be accessing through you.

---

### Signatures

I have read and understood the information. I had the chance to ask questions and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to provide support in recruiting research participants.

Organization's name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Representative's name and role \_\_\_\_\_

Representative's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research, please contact:

Sameer Nizamuddin

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

### Supervisor:

Dr. Shibao Guo,

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

If you further concern about the study and how participants will be treated, please contact Research Ethics Administrators, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

### Additional Resources that will be provided to research participants

If you should feel that your participation has in any way resulted in unpleasant or upsetting feelings, please contact any of the resources listed below for further help.

Calgary Distress Centre

[www.distresscentre.com](http://www.distresscentre.com)

403-266-4357 (24 hour Crisis Line)

Calgary Counselling Centre

<https://calgarycounselling.com>

Suite 1000-105, 12 Avenue SE Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 1A1

T: 403.691.5991 (Call Centre) F: 403.265.8886

Eastside Family Centre

<https://www.woodshomes.ca/programs/eastside-family-centre/>

Northgate Village Mall, #255, 495 36 Street NE, Calgary Albera, T2A 6K3

Toll Free: 1-800-563-6106, 403-200-9696

[askus@woodshomes.ca](mailto:askus@woodshomes.ca)

Calgary Counselling Centre

Counselling services with fees on a sliding scale

Contact Phone Number: 833.827.4229

[www.calgarycounselling.com](http://www.calgarycounselling.com)

Catholic Family Services

Pay-what-you-can counselling services (serves all faiths)

Contact Phone Number: 403.205.5294

[www.cfs-ab.org](http://www.cfs-ab.org)

Immigrants Services Calgary

Counselling services with low or no fees on a sliding scale

Contact Phone Number: 403.265.1120

[www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services](http://www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services)

Jewish Family Services Calgary

Counselling services with fees on a sliding scale (serves all faiths)

Contact Phone Number: 403.287.3510

[www.jfsc.org](http://www.jfsc.org)

## Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

### Are you a resettled Afghan refugee in Canada?



### Do you want to share and reflect on your learning experiences?

I am an MA student at the University of Calgary, and I am conducting research for my master's thesis on learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees during their settlement process. I am particularly interested in knowing the barriers and challenges you encountered during your learning processes, and what strategies and resources have proven to be successful during your learning experiences.

Please contact at the information below if you:

- a) were born in Afghanistan.
- b) entered Canada as a refugee.
- c) can speak and understand English.
- d) have spent at least one year in Canada.

I would like to hear from you. Your participation will take place through an individual interview. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB22-1670).

**Contact information:**

Sameer Nizamuddin

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.



## Appendix C: Recruitment Letter for Interviews

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Sameer Nizamuddin, and I am studying a Master of Arts in Educational Research, with my specialization in Adult Learning at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. Currently I am conducting a research project for my MA thesis, entitled “A phenomenological study of learning experiences of resettled Afghan refugees in Canada”, under the supervision of Dr. Shibao Guo, Professor, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB22-1670).

This research aims to understand the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. Specifically, I focus on the barriers and challenges that Afghan refugees encounter during their learning processes, and what strategies and resources have proven to be successful during their learning experiences.

You are invited to participate in an interview, which will last for about 60 minutes. Guided interview questions will be around your learning sources and experiences at your university/college, workplaces, home, and social networks.

The interview will be audio-recorded, and your participation is completely voluntary.

If you would like to participate in an interview, please pick a time within the following timeframes by replying to this email:

[Day of Week]/ [Date]/ anytime between [hour] and [hour]

[Day of Week]/ [Date]/ anytime between [hour] and [hour]

If your availability is not included in the above timeframes, please feel free to let me know the date/time that would work the best for you.

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed as all data will be provided with a code number. Any identifiable information will be disguised in any writings out of the project. You are free to stop or withdraw from the study before the interview and two months after the interview has been conducted.

Thank you very much again for your consideration, and your support is highly appreciated. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the interview or the study.

Thank you for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Sameer Nizamuddin

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Shibao Guo,

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

## Appendix D: Consent Form

### Consent Form



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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Sameer Nizamuddin  
Werklund School of Education,  
University of Calgary.

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Shibao Guo,  
Werklund School of Education  
University of Calgary.

**Title of Project:**

A Phenomenological Study of Learning Experiences of Resettled Afghan Refugees in Canada.

---

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB22-1670).

Your participation is completely voluntary and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the learning experiences of adult Afghan refugees in Canada. Specifically, I focus on the barriers and challenges that Afghan refugees encounter during their learning processes, and what strategies and resources have proven to be successful during their learning experiences. Additionally, I also intend to examine the role of factors such as socio-economic and education background, work experience, and social ties in informing their learning experiences, as well as conditions that Afghan refugees identify as enablers and barriers in their learning processes.

**What Will I Be Asked to Do?**

You will be invited to participate in an individual interview. The interview will focus on your learning

experiences since your arrival in Canada. Guided interview questions will be around your learning sources and experiences at your university/college, workplaces, home, and social networks. The interview will last for about 60 minutes. The interviews will either be online or in-person, depending on your feasibility.

You will be guaranteed with anonymity and confidentiality. For the purpose of further data analysis, the interviews will be audio-recorded and later will be transcribed. Your identity will remain anonymous by selecting a pseudonym of your choice.

Please note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can refuse to participate at any point of the study, can decline to answer any question, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, and can withdraw from the study without any consequences.

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Only I as a researcher will collect your name, phone number and/or email address for the purpose of communication for the research. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, your occupation and education level, and the year you landed in Canada. Your information will be kept anonymous, and during the time of the interview, you will be referred with your chosen pseudonym. The audio-recorded interviews will never be shared publicly and will be saved in a password-protected folders in digital formats, and no one except the researcher will have access to it.

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to and quote me as a pseudonym:

Yes: \_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There are limited risks associated with your participation. It is possible that discussing your past experiences may trigger some negative emotions or can be stressful during the conversation. If you feel any question makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free not to answer it and inform me to move on to the next question. I will provide ethical and comfort spaces so you will feel safe and comfortable to speak and share by participating in this research. Additionally, on the final page of this consent form, there is a contact list of low or no cost services available to reach out and receive support.

It is anticipated that research will be a chance for you to self-reflect on your learning experiences so far and explore about yourself and your learning journeys. Furthermore, the research findings might inform scholars and practioners on developing better strategies for refugee learning programs.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher will be allowed to access the data. If you withdraw from the study prior to completion of data collection, your data will be destroyed. However, if you withdraw from the study after data collection is complete and your data has been amalgamated (two weeks after the interview), your data cannot be destroyed because data is stored without identifiers and cannot be linked to participants.

Digital data collection files are kept in a password-protected encrypted folders in a computer only accessible by the researcher. Any notes taken during the interview will be scanned and saved in the same password-protected folder, and the hand-written notes will be destroyed immediately. The anonymous data will be stored for five

years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased.

Since you are recruited through the contact of the organization, please note that I will not inform the organization if you decide to withdraw from the study. Please also note that your decision to participate, or responses will not be shared with the organization, nor it will impact your relationship with the organization and the services you will be accessing.

---

### Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You may withdraw from this study until two weeks after the interview is completed. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Sameer Nizamuddin  
Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

### Supervisor:

Dr. Shibao Guo,  
Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

If you further concern about the study and how participants will be treated, please contact Research Ethics Administrators, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

### Additional Resources that will be provided to research participants

If you should feel that your participation has in any way resulted in unpleasant or upsetting feelings, please contact any of the resources listed below for further help.

Calgary Distress Centre  
[www.distresscentre.com](http://www.distresscentre.com)  
403-266-4357 (24 hour Crisis Line)

Calgary Counselling Centre  
<https://calgarycounselling.com>  
Suite 1000-105, 12 Avenue SE Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 1A1  
T: 403.691.5991 (Call Centre) F: 403.265.8886

Eastside Family Centre

<https://www.woodshomes.ca/programs/eastside-family-centre/>

Northgate Village Mall, #255, 495 36 Street NE, Calgary Alberta, T2A 6K3

Toll Free: 1-800-563-6106, 403-200-9696

[askus@woodshomes.ca](mailto:askus@woodshomes.ca)

Calgary Counselling Centre

Counselling services with fees on a sliding scale

Contact Phone Number: 833.827.4229

[www.calgarycounselling.com](http://www.calgarycounselling.com)

Catholic Family Services

Pay-what-you-can counselling services (serves all faiths)

Contact Phone Number: 403.205.5294

[www.cfs-ab.org](http://www.cfs-ab.org)

Immigrants Services Calgary

Counselling services with low or no fees on a sliding scale

Contact Phone Number: 403.265.1120

[www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services](http://www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services)

Jewish Family Services Calgary

Counselling services with fees on a sliding scale (serves all faiths)

Contact Phone Number: 403.287.3510

[www.jfsc.org](http://www.jfsc.org)

## **Appendix E: Interview Questions**

### **Introductory questions**

1. Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your highest level of education: \_\_\_\_\_
3. When did you move to Canada: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Did you come alone or with your family members? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Your identified gender: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Education, occupation, and experience in Canada:**

1. Can you tell me about your education and work experience since your arrival to Canada?
2. Can you tell me about your current occupation? Are you a student, and/or do you work, or unemployed?
3. Please describe your experience with getting your qualifications since arriving in Canada?
4. Did you have a social network to connect with? If so, please tell me more about it?
5. Could you please tell me about your cultural/ethnic/social/religious affiliations in Canada?
6. Have your social ties and network expanded since your arrival? How do you build or expand new social connections?

### **Learning about language, norms, and behaviours**

1. Please tell me about your experience of learning new things after coming to Canada (such as language, new skills, cultural norms)? How would you describe your feelings about such learnings?
2. What were the sources of those learnings? (Prompt: social interactions? Observations? Mistakes? Learning at an institution?)
3. Did you learn/improve your language after coming to Canada? If so, what motivated and helped you learn it? (Prompt: did you learn it at any institution, or from your colleagues, friends, and family members?)
4. What factors do you think enabled and facilitated you during your learning process?
5. What barriers and challenges did you face while learning?
6. Who and/or what resources did you approach while dealing with those challenges?
7. What is your biggest achievement so far in your learning journey? How do you think you achieved it?

### **Additional questions for interviewees who have had work experience(s) in Canada.**

1. Please tell me about your work experience in Canada.
2. If your past work is different than what you do now, how did you explore about your current occupation? What resources/strategies did you use to find work?
3. Any particular support or experience that you want to recall that helped you with finding new work?

4. What barriers did you face while finding work? And how did you deal with them?
5. What were some of your learnings while finding work as well as while currently working in that position?
6. Did you develop new skills and knowledge for your current work? If so, what changes do you see and how did you learn them?
7. What are your learning experiences from your workplace, including the work you do, the colleagues you interact with, etc.
8. Do you think your learnings from your workplace helped you adjusting your life in Canada?

**Additional questions for interviewees who studied or are currently studying in Canada**

1. Could you talk about your learning experiences at your university/college?
2. When did you apply for any post-secondary education institution for diploma/degree?
3. What motivated you to apply for it?
4. Could you describe the barriers and challenges did you face as a student?
5. Do you think your learnings from your education helped you adjusting your life in Canada?

## **Appendix F: Post-Interview Debrief.**

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your sharing of experiences and perspectives are tremendously important to this study.

I will stop recording now, and I will now allow you to talk about your views and experiences of answering my interview questions.

How did you feel talking about your experiences?

Have you talked or reflected before on your past learning experiences?

How are you feeling now?

Thank you again for participating in the interview. I know recalling past experiences can be upsetting or stressful.

If you feel that your participation has in any way resulted in unpleasant or upsetting feelings, please contact any of the resources listed below for further help.

### Calgary Distress Centre

[www.distresscentre.com](http://www.distresscentre.com)

403-266-4357 (24 hour Crisis Line)

### Calgary Counselling Centre

<https://calgarycounselling.com>

Suite 1000-105, 12 Avenue SE Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 1A1

T: 403.691.5991 (Call Centre) F: 403.265.8886

### Eastside Family Centre

<https://www.woodshomes.ca/programs/eastside-family-centre/>

Northgate Village Mall, #255, 495 36 Street NE, Calgary Alberta, T2A 6K3

Toll Free: 1-800-563-6106, 403-200-9696

[askus@woodshomes.ca](mailto:askus@woodshomes.ca)

### Calgary Counselling Centre

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Contact Phone Number: 833.827.4229

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Contact Phone Number: 403.205.5294

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[www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services](http://www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/our-services/family-support-counselling/psychotherapycounselling-services)

Jewish Family Services Calgary

Counselling services with fees on a sliding scale (serves all faiths)

Contact Phone Number: 403.287.3510

[www.jfsc.org](http://www.jfsc.org)

If you are a student, please contact Wellness Service Center available at your university/college/institution.

If you wish, I can also email you the above resources. Please provide me your email address.

Thank you again for your time.