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# Masks of Achievement: An Experiential Study of Bosnian Female Refugees in New York City Schools

JACQUELINE MOSSELSO

Agencies and personnel working with refugees increasingly view schools as a central pillar for providing vital services that assist refugees in their survival and rehabilitation (Sinclair 2002). The schooling of refugees has often been suddenly and violently curtailed by the onset of the emergency situations from which the refugees have fled. Experiences of war and flight deeply affect the psychological well-being of refugee youths. When refugees are resettled away from the refugee camps in neighboring countries, they are often expected, even legally obliged in many countries, to enroll in schools in which they may find themselves at an academic, social, and emotional disadvantage. The school systems in their new host country may not be able to accommodate their often extensive needs. However, schools may, at the same time, be uniquely situated to offer key services for refugees. This article explores the gap between what schools can do and what refugees may need from schools by examining the experiences of a group of Bosnian young women refugees in New York City schools. The analysis explores how the refugees constructed their identities and social relations in an attempt to have schooling meet their psychological needs.

Depending on how school personnel, other students, and others in the school community relate to refugee youths, schooling can provide vital opportunities to begin healing in three crucial ways. First, schooling may provide a reassuring constancy in lives that have been marked by instability. Second, returning to the identity of "student" may allow the individual to retreat from the stigmatized identity of refugee and may furnish a space in which the youths can connect with those in her new surroundings. Third, and perhaps most crucially, education may restore in refugee youths a sense of hope for the future that had been ripped away from them.

Refugee flows have dramatically increased over the past few decades. The vast majority of the 19.2 million people who are currently displaced from their homes because of flight remain in countries neighboring their homelands (UNHCR 2005).<sup>1</sup> While refugees who are resettled in the industrialized countries are a significant minority in the vast refugee population, they also

<sup>1</sup> The 19.2 million people include 9.2 million refugees, 839,000 asylum seekers, 1.5 million returnees, 5.6 million internally displaced persons, and 2 million others of concern.

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face further traumas as their experiences of war and flight are compounded with unsettling realities in their new homes—often they find themselves in legal limbo as they struggle to adapt to new cultural and social realities. As they resume an interrupted education, refugee youths face the challenges of adjusting to a new and unfamiliar school system, of adapting to different cultural norms and expectations, and of learning a new language of survival and instruction (Jones and Rutter 1998).

Schools ideally play a key role in creating a sense of national identity, “a common understanding of identity in terms of what is imagined” (Waters and LeBlanc 2005, 129). As an imagined community, a nation relies on schooling and education to socialize its young into the ideas, values, and beliefs of its citizenry (Sinclair 2002). Refugee youths witness the collapse of the imagined community (preflight phase) and find themselves ensconced in the middle of a new, imagined community (resettlement phase), often passing through another along the way (temporary settlement phase).<sup>2</sup> This disjuncture between their own cultural values and socialization history and those of the new culture around them can be keenly felt in the school. Schools provide refugees with “sites of social interactions where meaning is constructed in a particular cultural context” (Adely 2004, 355) and thus are key locations in which refugees can learn how to negotiate a new culture. Students’ adaptation to “schools is mediated by a variety of intracultural and intercultural factors”; “a major problem is that these factors generally remain confounded or interact with each other” (Portes 1999, 491). Thus, schools also “serve to support existing power structures and to socialize young people” (Adely 2004, 355) to their roles in these relations. For young refugees in schools, both the coercive aspects of social reproduction and the creative forces of cultural production provide liminal spaces for the youths to learn how to navigate the new culture and society.

Schools therefore play a paradoxical role in the lives of refugee youths; they may be places where the refugees are highly aware of their “foreignness,” but they may also offer opportunities for learning the hegemonic ways of the new imagined community. Much of the literature on schooling for refugees in the United States points to the ways in which refugees are let down by their educational experiences (see, e.g., Suárez-Orozco 1989; Ahearn and Athey 1991). In creating the imagined community, schools define a “we” and, by default, a “they.” In the United States, the “they” all too often includes, among others in the classrooms, refugees. According to Tony Waters and Kim LeBlanc (2005, 129), “refugees are by definition, people who are ‘imagined’ to be . . . nonmembers.”

As a group, young refugees are heterogeneous not only in terms of their educational experiences and achievement but also in terms of background—

<sup>2</sup> See Alastair Ager (1999) for a discussion of the four phases of the refugee experience.

they come from a range of social classes; ethnic, national, and religious groups; and both urban and rural backgrounds. In addition, their experiences, family situations, and resources, and their stories of war, flight, and relocation differ significantly from each other. Despite heterogeneity, the vulnerability of their circumstances, and the crucial educational stage at which they arrive, young refugees share a set of common and urgent needs. Thus, the findings of any study of refugees can be superficially broadened to derive implications for all refugees, but on specifics, different refugees have different expectations, needs, goals, and experiences. Thus, it is with utmost caution that one generalizes findings about one group of refugees to other refugees let alone develops programs without first adapting them to meet the specific needs of the refugees actually being served.

### **Schooling and the Refugee Experience**

As was the case of the Bosnian refugees involved in this study, community structures, including schooling, are disrupted by war or other events that turn residents of one society into refugees relocated to another society. The loss of feelings of safety and security is compounded by the loss of a daily routine and the lack of future orientation that schooling provides for many students. According to Francisco Rivera (1997), schooling perpetuates the myth of childhood socialization and continuity over the life course. Refugees learn that socialization is context specific and that different socializations are appropriate in different settings. They also live through a discontinuity over their life course, an experience that can cause hopelessness and depression (Luthar 1999) if the lack of a future orientation persists during the resettlement phase. Both in providing a safe and caring atmosphere and in seeking appropriate outside support, schools can make a difference to the further adjustment of children (Kaprielian-Churchill and Churchill 1994; Jones and Rutter 1998) who have been unwitting victims of adults' failures to resolve differences by means other than war.

Schools play a unique role in socializing their students (Althusser 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Foucault 1977; Willis 1981). Schools furnish refugees with opportunities to discover and experience—both positively and negatively—the host culture in a unique way. As a public institution, schools are one of the most continuous institutions in youths' lives. As an “accessible [and] appropriate unit of intervention” (Garbarino et al. 1992, 52), schools can play a crucial role in reaffirming an imagined future and in restoring an element of hope: schools can be forward looking and constructive (Sinclair 2002) when they “are sensitive to [the refugees] and their burdens” (Garbarino et al. 1992, 52). As UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guidelines state, “the trauma of exile should not be aggravated by the trauma of a loss of educational opportunities” (1995, 12). However, under some circumstances schooling may have a less salutary effect for refugee youths.

Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (1989), for example, documents the frustrations of Central American refugees in California who described being denied access to mathematics classes appropriate to their abilities; rather, their schools and teachers placed them in remedial classes because of their perceived need for English language learning.

Unlike the refugees who have been documented in studies by other authors, all the refugees in this study are white Europeans from a country whose war was given much attention in the U.S. media. Despite the fact that all the refugees in my study arrived in the United States with limited English skills, a reason often cited to place refugees in remedial classes, all the students in this research population were able to enter age-appropriate classes within 6 months of arrival. However, they also all told me that this took much perseverance on their part, immersing themselves in English to improve their language skills and also in challenging their teachers and administrators: "I learned that you have to make things happen. Because often I would go to people and ask, hey can I do this, and they would say, no you can't do this because of the law or you don't have money or even you do have money but there are hurdles, and so on. Then I meet the boss person, the dean, or the admissions officer, and they say fine and they fix it. . . . It's a stupid system and easy to crack. I didn't get [here] by doing what I'm told or being afraid of what people think of me" (Amalia, age 20, from Mostar). Nevertheless, the fact remained that they were ultimately granted access by a "boss person," "dean," or "admissions officer" when refugees from other places have been documented as being consistently denied similar access. This research does not address the various reasons why Bosnian refugees were granted access while other refugee populations were not. However, the experiences of this population of refugees do support the findings of Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill and Stacy Churchill (1994) and Crispin Jones and Jill Rutter (1998) that when refugees are not held back by school authorities, they are often among the most academically successful students in their host communities. This factor makes it important to ensure that all refugees are given opportunities and are not excluded based on cultural or social differences.

Refugees are usually a resilient and determined population, having already overcome high odds against survival and successful resettlement in a safe country (Ahearn and Athey 1991). Education and educational attainment are important contributing factors assisting the reintegration of identity in exile and the successful creation of a new life (Luthar 1999). The school experience can restore a "student identity" and a future orientation. Educational attainment can play a vital role in giving refugees optimism and a sense of accomplishment, factors that are protective and foster resilience among youths affected by stress or traumatic events (Luthar 1999). Although many minority group members resist acculturation (Ogbu 1978), immigrant minorities tend to turn to education as a means of accommodating their new

environments, understanding the new cultural norms, and learning how to become a member of the new imagined community (Gibson 1988). Refugees share this perspective and are apt to see challenges as temporary barriers that all newcomers face and that they will ultimately learn to overcome (Portes 1999).

School-age refugees have experienced and witnessed sacrifices made on the part of their families and caretakers to safeguard their children's futures. Education is strongly linked to a successful future, and throughout history, refugee groups have attempted to make certain that their children gain an education that will ensure their success in the new society (Suárez-Orozco 1989). Teachers report high achievement rates among refugees, and "some of the most outstanding students . . . come from a refugee background" (Kaprielian-Churchill and Churchill 1994, 7). However, refugees are more likely than other demographic groups to suffer high rates of depression and other pathologies (Rutter 1994), as the "disruption and insecurity inherent in refugee situations can harm children's physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural and social development" (Sinclair 2002, 7).

The high achievement attained by many refugee groups may signify to those around them who are uniquely positioned to help them overcome trauma that they are "well-adjusted" (see, e.g., Suárez-Orozco 1989; Kaprielian-Churchill and Churchill 1994; Jones and Rutter 1998). However, Carol Gilligan and colleagues (1990) report that parents and school professionals often fail to recognize depression among girls who are academically successful. The adults in the lives of these girls viewed academic success as an indicator of the girls' adjustment. When Gilligan and her colleagues interviewed several of the most successful girls, though, they found that rather than being "happy," the girls actually reported suffering from depression and feelings of inadequacy. My study builds on this research to look at academically successful refugees to discover whether the high grades are indicators of a healthy transition and whether achievement is viewed by the refugees themselves and/or by their teachers as a sign of psychological or emotional well-being. Ultimately, I ask whether schools are adequately meeting the multiple needs of their refugee students.

### **The Study**

Between January and June 2001, I studied a core group of 15 Bosnian young women refugees attending school in New York City. In order to minimize variety in cultural, class, age, ethnic, and gender differences, I decided to focus on a specific demographic group that is perceived to have a low level of cultural distance (Hofstede and Hofstede 2004) from the dominant ethnic groups in the United States. By exploring the experiences of a white refugee population, I further draw attention to issues of access (as all refugees in this study were eventually able to gain access to classes and grades that



refugees from other areas tend to be denied) and issues of knowledge (all refugees benefited from the relatively high level of media attention to the Bosnian war, which differentiated them from refugees from other places). Despite these advantages, the refugees in my study all described being met with ignorance and fear by many of those who were ideally situated to help. It is sobering to think about how much worse this is for refugees who are more “culturally distant,” do not look like the “we,” and whose homelands receive less coverage in the U.S. media.

To probe the phenomenon of school experiences among this group of Bosnian young women refugees, I decided to narrow my research to an experiential study.<sup>3</sup> I chose the core population of participants through criterion-based selection, with personal contacts and the chain effect as the primary vehicles for locating participants.<sup>4</sup> To reduce the diversity within my research population, I limited participation to those who fit certain criteria: all participants were female, were from an urban area in Bosnia, were between the ages of 16 and 24, left Bosnia after 1995, and were attending school in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

The participants in this study were all in late adolescence or early adulthood. I chose this age group partly because they were old enough to be able to remember their schooling experiences in prewar Bosnia, but also because the age group is widely documented to be a population that is often hard to reach by those working with refugee populations (Lowicki 2001). Finally, I chose to work with female refugees for several reasons. First, I contend, based on Gilligan’s work with teenage girls, that depression among females is easier to mask as female teens distinguish between the public and private voice (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan et al. 1990). Thus, girls are more likely to suffer from an internal conflict between the private and public domains, a factor that may be more acute for refugees whose private and public domains become confused with the stresses of two different sets of societal expectations. Second, females are often portrayed as passive victims of their circumstances, and thus I wanted to focus specifically on them to contribute to dispelling this notion. Finally, I focused on females as women and children constitute 80 percent of the world’s refugees.

As a researcher who was asking personal questions about academic

<sup>3</sup> Experiential studies are described by Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod (2005, 24) as an attempt to “understand people’s perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation.”

<sup>4</sup> The chain effect identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know which cases are information rich.

<sup>5</sup> It is impossible, however, to control for differences in, for example, family situations or exposure to traumatic situations. The late cutoff date serves to decrease the heterogeneity of the sample, as many who left in the very early stages of the war were wealthier and had more personal contacts in the United States. The later groups of refugees were more alike in that they were less connected, less affluent, and more likely to be fleeing than escaping. They were also more likely than the former group to have witnessed the daily effects of the war, to have had their schooling interrupted, and to have arrived in the United States with fewer resources and greater needs.



achievement and school attitudes, and who was affiliated with a prestigious U.S. university, I risked accumulating many noninteractional artifacts while working with the refugees. It was important to the nature of my research, and to my convictions, that the refugees viewed me as a nonjudgmental researcher interested in their subjective experiences. In short, it was vital that the refugees trust me. Therefore, I decided to gain access to participants through personal contacts. Being introduced to me by someone they already knew diminished their suspicion of my intentions and increased trust. It fostered a better understanding of my research as the starting point of my contacts was through my former colleagues who would pass along a more relaxed attitude to their children, who, in turn, would pass this along to their friends and other participants.

In order to contextualize the self-narratives of the core participant population, I met individually with 10 additional members of the Bosnian refugee community. Six were related to the core participants—two younger siblings, one father, and three mothers. I also spoke with two adults in their late twenties and two more fathers who are unrelated to the core group of refugees. Parents and family members often embody the culture the refugees have left behind, and adults are often slower to adapt than adolescents and children, often being keen to preserve the culture they left involuntarily (Portes and Rumbaut 1990). Speaking directly to the Bosnian adults helped me to understand the home lives and situations that, for the young women core participants, the schools and new friends often seem to contradict. Interviews with the younger siblings (ages 6 and 8) helped to illuminate somewhat the priorities that the adult Bosnian refugee population instills in its children. The interviews with the unrelated family members were useful in providing context for the community as a whole and in gathering background information from another source as to what the priorities and perceptions of the refugees are. In this article, I present data from both sets of participant groups, but emphasis is placed on understanding the perceptions and experiences of schooling from the perspectives of the core participant group.

My research methodology consisted of semistructured interviews, in which the researcher and the participants work together to arrive at the heart of the matter (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). However, I had in mind specific topics that each interview needed to cover; the logic of the topics and their relation to the refugees' experiences meant that they were covered naturally, with minimal prodding from the interviewer. The participants were informed that each interview would last at least 2 hours (in fact, the shortest lasted approximately 2.5 hours, and the longest interview was roughly 5 hours). All interviews were tape-recorded and coded to protect each participant's confidentiality. The refugees chose their own pseudonyms with minimal guidance; their pseudonyms are used in this article.

The emphasis on voice as a tool in research is grounded in feminist methodology (Millman and Kanter 1975). Narratives were deemed vital in understanding women's perspectives, and the feminist practice of oral history emphasized the importance of voice in an experiential study (Millman and Kanter 1975). By undertaking an experiential study, I hoped to be able to probe more deeply into the girls' thoughts by letting them describe the phenomena of which they are a part. Research has delineated perceptions of refugees in schools, and discussions have taken place in the literature on how they adapt; "they," however, are rarely asked themselves. For these reasons, I wished to bring the voices of the refugee young women into the discussion of the situation in which they find themselves.

As a first step in the interview process, each participant was asked to draw a genogram with the researcher, which generally served as an icebreaker and also to introduce the concepts and foster reflection in the interviewee. The genogram is a tool for a researcher to obtain the interviewee's subjective representations of family history, relationship patterns, and events that may have an ongoing significance for an individual (McGoldrick et al. 1999). The genogram also served as an important starting point for the rest of the interview, which progressed naturally, without prodding from the researcher. This enabled the interview to be participant driven, with the researcher only having to set the stage with the neutral request of drawing a genogram. Interviewees generally reported feeling comfortable and relaxed during the interview process, with most making some comment to express positive feelings toward the process at the conclusion of the interview.

#### **Education as *Raison d'Être* in the United States**

The depression that all refugees, young and old, told me about during my data collection phase was overwhelming. For example, Nataša spoke about being "suicidal" and "severely depressed" and said that her first year in the United States "was almost harder than the war. I was extremely depressed because I started suffering from PTSD." Nataša's use of terms like "depression" and "PTSD" (post-traumatic stress disorder) was typical of this research population; all the refugees spoke about suffering psychologically to a greater or lesser extent. I was interested in the subjective experiences of the refugees, and thus I neither asked whether these were diagnosed conditions nor did I seek to confirm them myself. Their descriptions of the loneliness they felt, however, made me constantly wonder how they found the strength to stay in the United States or to return after vacations to Bosnia. Although many participants reported learning of opportunities to return to Bosnia once the war was over, none of them spoke about actually planning to leave the United States, and all of them highlighted education as being the most compelling reason as to why they remain in the United States.

Strongly ingrained in the students was the notion that education is the

single most important aspect of their lives in America, and they are highly motivated to attend the schools with the best reputations in their areas. For the Bosnian young women refugees, their happiness at being in the United States was mostly defined in terms of their education. For example, Ines (age 19) comments: "I'm happy to be here because otherwise I could not go to college." Nadia (age 17), however, questions whether she would be so "lucky" if she had to attend her local high school instead of one of the specialized high schools in which she was enrolled. All the members of the core group in this study sought out, and were able to attain, the educational opportunities that became the focus of their relative happiness in New York. For these Bosnian female refugees, choices have shifted and priorities have changed, and while many, like Nataša and Nadia, ponder somewhat wistfully what their lives might have been, all the study participants spoke to me about the opportunities that being in the United States affords them, even as they regret the war that caused them to be here.

The parents marvel at the education available to their children in New York. According to Ivan (a refugee father), "I had thought my high school was so good, but when I went to see [her school], I thought, oh, I wish I could be a high school student again. So that is really great. Something like that you wouldn't be able [to attend] in Bosnia." Sabina, like all the parents in this research population, told me how she and her husband strongly encourage their children in school: "If they do well at school, we keep motivating them. Both gently and by brutal examples! You know, kids tend to think, oh, I'm smart, and we usually tell them, oh, what does that mean, that's nothing, schools are not finished by head but by butt; you have to sit long enough to study! We teach them they shouldn't think the world of themselves because they happen to be relatively smart, that's no big deal. Hard work is a big deal." By helping their children in the middle of all their other struggles, they send a strong message of the importance of education to the children in the refugee community. Ivan spoke about how "all the Bosnian kids are exemplary students," but he clarifies that it is "not because they are smarter, but because they are so much more motivated than Americans." He explains, "it's not because they're Bosnians, it's because they're refugees. . . . They do understand the value of education."

The refugee adults also recognize a paradox in prioritizing their children's commitment to education in the United States. The adults perceive flaws in the system: "education here is too politically correct; I think that sucks" (Ivan). They also point to the ways in which it creates a cultural divide between the adults and the youths in the Bosnian community, as the children become "too Americanized." For example, Sead (a refugee father) commented that the students become "too strategic" about their choices: "the way they plan their future . . . there is less fun in it. Less personal liking of this and that, and more economic applicability of certain moves. Normally

we don't think like that; we are somewhat romantic when it comes to the choices of what you want to do in your life." Furthermore, the adults worry about the degree to which the children have to work; as Zudha (a refugee mother) expresses it, the students "have to work harder to catch up and then to get into the selective New York public schools."

Similarly, all the Bosnian young women refugees I interviewed refer to education as being central to their daily lives and their choices in the United States. For those whose families are not permanently resettled with them in New York, education is referred to as the strongest motivating factor behind returning to the United States after a visit to Bosnia, even when they felt they were returning to a situation characterized by loneliness and depression. Nataša (age 24, from Sarajevo), who lost her mother in the war and watched her father fade into mental illness, returned to Bosnia after a "miserable first year in the U.S." She states that "the one thing I did enjoy [in the United States], apart from hating school, I loved the education. And the education I was getting here, I enjoyed. And that was really important to me. So I came back." Another refugee, Nadia (a 16-year-old from Zenica), came to New York with her mother and her brother. She also spoke of the centrality of education in her life here. She frequently commented on how a good education means "you can succeed anywhere." She equates her experience in the United States with educational opportunities: "I realize I caught a break by coming here, and I want to act on it. And I think that's one of the reasons why all the Bosnians you see here are in the top classes. And I don't mean just we caught a break because we left the war. Like Mom, she really didn't have a chance in life. Even though she's so hard working, and she's very smart. There was just not much for her in Bosnia, and it's even harder for kids there now to have a future." Amalia discusses how education motivated her to come to the United States: "When the war dragged on and on, I wanted to get out to study. Basically, that's what my major motive was, other than to stay alive." Moreover, she stated that she remains in the United States because "school motivated me to come back" after visiting Bosnia. Amalia's family remains intact in Mostar, and she is the only one who is not with them. She says that she is using the educational opportunities here "to position myself at home." She sees a bleak future in Mostar without education and is making the sacrifice to be away from her family and friends by being in the United States, where "my life is work, work, work," noting that "I go to Bosnia to recuperate."

Beyond schooling, education is at the forefront of these Bosnian young women refugees' lives. Nadia often talks about America in terms of opportunities she has here compared with a lack of opportunities in Bosnia: "Hard workers here get a lot more rewards than you do in Bosnia. Like my mom . . . she was in the wrong country." Nadia regrets having to leave Bosnia, but like all the Bosnian young women refugees I interviewed, Nadia is quick to

point out: "I'm also glad I came here because it opens more doors for me." Nadia links her experiences directly to the educational opportunities she has encountered in the United States. And these experiences mean that she has to work hard and make sacrifices: "In Bosnia, I remember going skiing all the time. Here, you can't even go swimming. If I lived there, I would swim and ski and play all the time. . . . [However,] I probably wouldn't get as educated as I am now." She talks about her life in the United States on this practical level: "If you stay here your life will be a lot better. You have a lot more opportunities. If you're smart and you work hard, you really have a chance to succeed." She surmises that this is what she appreciates most about life in America—the American immigrant's dream. Amalia expressed the dichotomy in opportunity more succinctly: "In America you work; in Bosnia you play."

Despite this dichotomized approach, or perhaps because of it, schooling (or work) and achievement play a vital role in the psychosocial healing of the Bosnian young women refugees involved in this study. Schooling allows them to retreat from their refugee/foreigner identity in favor of the more familiar and comfortable student identity as well as providing them with the all-important socialization opportunities and the vital chance to reconnect with their future imaginations.

#### **Education as Security in an Insecure World**

When my daughter asks me, "why do I have to go to school?"—she really asks me this, I say, "because whatever you learn, you always carry it with you, whatever happens to you, it's there. You have a tool to rebuild yourself, no matter what happens." (Ivan, refugee father)

The study participants all spoke about education as what I define as "portable capital." As they have suffered great loss—of family members, homes, the imagined community of Yugoslavia, money, and safety, among other things—all the refugees in this research lauded the value of education as giving them a portfolio of skills and knowledge that would travel with them should they be obliged to move again. The value of education runs deep for those who have learned that life can be transient. People who have been forcibly uprooted from their lives, who have left everything behind, as is the case with all refugees, shift their focus to transferable and transportable knowledge that can go anywhere with them. Estela (a refugee mother) provides her children with an example about the importance of education: "I tell them, well, if you happen to own a shop and that maybe makes you the richest person in town in some place, wherever that is, the moment that burns you're out of your edge. If you have . . . knowledge and skills, that's your edge." The Bosnian young women refugees reiterate this awareness. For example, Nadia discusses how someone in Australia could appreciate her

educational attainment more than a story of having owned, for example, a factory somewhere else, and Fadila (age 22, from Sarajevo) referred to how “education goes with you wherever you go. It’s possible nothing else does.” Her education is deeply significant to her and forms some semblance of security for her; if she has to flee again, she can take her education with her to help establish herself in a new place. This point is also stated succinctly by an 8-year-old sibling of one of my core participants: “Well, I like school, because you know, education goes everywhere you go.”

Education has a dual function in terms of identity for many of the Bosnian refugees in this study: (a) it returns to them a semblance of control over their future, and (b) the refugees can transform themselves from “the foreigner” to the “A student,” highlighting their identity as a student and one who is achieving. Like other refugees, the Bosnian young women I interviewed have experienced life as fragile and tenuous—that material assets and status can be lost. One core participant, Ines (age 19, from Mostar), told me that her family was financially privileged and well-respected in Mostar before the war. Upon her arrival in New York, she had to adjust to “being the same as everyone else and getting furniture from the street.” Her previous status and her relative wealth were irrelevant now. She holds strongly to her hope for her future and her identity as a student to build that future. She explains: “the only thing that matters is education—if my dad could show people a Harvard degree instead of pictures of our old house, it would be better. They could use that, but his memories and stories are useless.” Her response, then, like all the participants in this study, is to ensure that she gains the best education available to her. In every interview, both with the core and secondary populations, the importance and transportability of education were stressed. Refugees seem to gain a semblance of control by seeking and valuing a strong education. Education anchors their identity, as a student in an unfamiliar cultural context, and it provides a base for their future aspirations.

#### **Educational Achievement as Providing Emotional Space**

Now all of a sudden they think I’m so clever. All of a sudden the war didn’t affect me. And all of a sudden, I’m not so exotic, they can’t even talk to me. Now I’m just one of the girls! But it’s still just me. . . . But now they treat me better and don’t complain that I’m too weird for them. And it’s really funny because I’m still weird in their eyes, but they don’t think so because I got 100 on the last math test. (Amalia)

The Bosnian young women all spoke to me about ways in which their initial school experiences in the United States heightened the sense of alienation or loneliness they had when they first arrived in the country. For example, Nataša spoke to me about her classmates: “I was so different and so odd. I ended up in an all-girls, Catholic school in the middle of Ohio where everyone is blond and everyone wants to get married and have babies. . . .



And no one wanted to talk to me; *no one even wanted to talk to me*. I was the only person in the class that no one ever talked to because I'm so different, and they all made a point of seeing me as different." And she described experiences with teachers as being no better: "The teachers were horrible. Some of them were really nice, some of them were really insulting, asking me questions like . . . do you know what rock music is, have you ever heard that, do you have a television . . . just questions like I came from some kind of jungle." Nataša realized that her very appearance disappointed those around her: "They had their own image of what I was supposed to be, and I wasn't that. . . . I had just survived 4 years of war and my mother's death, so I was too strong for them. I was too weird for them. And also I was too sophisticated for them because they expected to get some kind of, they had images because in the news you always saw these women with scarves who don't have any teeth, who, well, they expected me to be this poor, poor thing. . . . They couldn't handle me." Nadia (age 17, from Zenica) describes her early memories of school: "I remember being at school, and these kids are all talking to me, and I didn't know anything, and then this one kid says 'she's stupid.' And that's one word I recognized, and I go, 'I no stupid.'" Nadia's feelings of isolation were heightened by the divide between her internal world of war trauma and memories and her external world at school when nobody asked her about the war. She talks about an uncomfortable situation when, after she had established herself as one of the "smart kids," some people at school started to ask her about the war, "and I started to make up these wild stories. I don't know why. I just wanted to." She elaborates:

The closest thing I ever came to being hurt was 100 meters away, but I told stories about more. I mean, there were planes on top, grenades, land mines all around. We weren't allowed outside. We weren't allowed out. We weren't allowed to touch anything on the ground, even if it looked like a toy. We saw kids all over the place who lost limbs and stuff. It was a turning point in my life. . . . But everyone at school, well they don't think it's such a big deal because I was never blown up. And they laughed when I said, well in the war, I was afraid. So I made the bigger stories so I could tell them my fears.

Nadia's exaggerations were quickly discovered, and she reports being again laughed at by her classmates. The experience served to highlight for both Nadia and her peers the gulf between their life experiences.

Despite—or perhaps because of—these challenges, all the Bosnian young women refugees in this study achieved high academic success. They pointed to how their academic achievements allowed them to hide behind their accolades. They spoke about being initially seen as "different" at best, and how, as their grades improved, they began to be seen as "bright." Instead of being "exotic," they were "the A student," and the latter excluded the former. For instance, Nadia reported that once she started achieving straight As, she had



common ground with the other high achieving students and joined study groups. She reported her relief at being “just one of the girls” and links this directly with her high grades. And Alina (age 18, from Sarajevo) explained:

Now people didn't say “oh, you're exotic,” although Europeans aren't really exotic, or “oh, you can't take this class, your English isn't good enough” or “we can't put you in AP Biology, we have different standards than Bosnia,” like their standards must be higher [than in] Bosnia. And if I wanted help, then I was told not to worry so much, because they didn't think they should waste their time helping me. Anyway, after 6 months they started saying, “Oh, you should think of college, you're smart.” And, “How can I help you?” And I wanted to scream, “but I needed your help then, and now I figured it out all by myself.” And then I realized it was all very funny, because they were treating me so good after they treated me so bad, but I was the same person all the time. But they didn't know, because all they saw was my A grades and the idea that I might go to [an] Ivy League school, and that would look good for the school when it's all me and not them.

Every member of the core group of Bosnian young women refugees spoke to me about the ways in which attitudes toward them at school changed from ones based on ignorance, or worse, to acceptance as their grades improved. All the refugees understood this shift to be solely due to their high achievement rates, and all seemed slightly bemused by it. Yet, they also consciously used this change in attitude to afford them the space to no longer feel out of place and to connect with their classmates:

Before I proved myself in high school, they didn't know what to do with me. I was a refugee. They were afraid of what I'd seen, and they didn't know how to handle a kid who had seen the worst of life when they couldn't imagine it. But, then, when I started getting As, they were so happy because now they could talk to me. They understood and they could clasp something they knew, and now they could pretend that's all I was—the A student who they could offer something tangible to, college advices [*sic*], school support. I think before they wanted, but they didn't know what to do with me. (Fadila, age 22, from Sarajevo)

Their A grades gave them a valuable new status that they could use to connect with their new schoolmates and allowed them to be seen as peers rather than as refugees.

Paradoxically, however, this shift meant that their war experiences and related pathologies became “invisible” (Nataša). The Bosnian young women refugees in my study were all high academic achievers, and similar to findings by Gilligan et al. (1990), they were thus all presumed to be “doing fine” (New York City public school teacher). Every one of the core participants said that they had never been asked how they were coping with their war experiences by any school professional. Indeed, when I spoke informally to New York City public school teachers about my research, I was repeatedly asked why I was doing research on this group of refugees, and these teachers made comments

like: “Oh, you don’t have to worry about them, they’re fine” or “that’s a resilient bunch, they don’t need help.”

Most of the young female Bosnian refugees consciously used their success as a mechanism behind which they could hide their vulnerabilities, war experiences, and anything else that made them feel “different” from their peers. My findings for this population point to school success being used as a “mask of achievement” behind which one can find instances of depression, PTSD, and unhappiness. As Amalia states: “They never ask me whether I still think of the war, or if I have nightmares. But of course I do. Because getting good grades didn’t obliterate my memory.”<sup>6</sup> Nataša described how her academic achievement provided something for her to hide behind, and she appreciated the space she was given, as she began to value “being invisible” after the initial interest in her made her “feel like a freak.” In the meantime, however, her war experiences still dictated her daily life: “Shopping. I still only buy things I absolutely need and things I can take with me. That’s the mind-set I’m in. . . . I can always get out of here.”

Academic achievement is at best a superficial indicator of emotional well-being, and though a positive, protective mechanism (especially when combined with a strong belief in education as portable capital and in a renewed sense of future), school success does not render all else about the student moot. While the mask of achievement has several protective/useful qualities, for example, enabling the student to connect as a student with others, it also meant that others were quick to overlook the experiences of war the refugees had so recently had. The refugees’ A grades promoted their resilience, were an important coping strategy, and signaled perseverance and hard work, but, as Gilligan et al. (1990) point out, academic success can also often be a lonely experience. For the refugees, this loneliness remained a part of their school reality even as they achieved remarkable academic success and began to be accepted by their peers.

When the refugees started to do well in school, they were categorized as “successful” and “well-adjusted” simply because of their high grades. The shift was aided by the belief that feelings of isolation and war memories do not fit the model of a “good student” and become invisible to those who, had they looked more closely and had they the necessary knowledge and skills, might have helped them.

### Concluding Comments

Education can serve as a vehicle through which refugees can gain control over their situations on three levels—(1) creating a sense of normalcy and

<sup>6</sup> Consistent with the emphasis on participant voice, refugees in this study were only considered to have PTSD or depression, etc., if they revealed it themselves. I made no attempt to diagnose or verify self-diagnoses and considered that to do so would be outside the realm of this study.

student identity, (2) restoring a future orientation and providing a form of portable capital, and (3) offering a key place for socialization and connections with peers, even if from behind a mask of achievement. Thus, education becomes a panacea for their refugee experience. All the Bosnian young women refugees I spoke with repeated the same themes, and it became evident that for the core participants in this study, education ultimately acts as a vital coping mechanism as they adapt to their new life trajectories.

The young women understood their lives in the United States as inherently tied to their student identity. Their student selves could more easily understand and transcend the challenges created by their refugee-ness. They all talked about being “miserable” and “lonely” in the United States and suggested that the education system made up for their unhappiness: “If I had stayed [in Bosnia], . . . I’d probably have a lot more friends. But I also wouldn’t know too much English. I’d probably have to learn German or something. English is more useful.” This immediate shift from recognizing perhaps a happier life in Bosnia is immediately qualified by a return to the pragmatic value of life in the United States, and it was typical of all the interviewees. Interestingly, refugees shied away from discussing social lives, even when asked directly about friends and their social activities. Since I was interested more in what they felt was important, I did not probe further. However, it was an almost universal phenomenon that the participants in this study described their lives in the United States mostly in terms of schooling and the related work. If friendships were mentioned, the focus of them remained on the practical level of how their friends helped them by telling them which classes to take, what extracurricular activities are important, and so on. Descriptions of life in the United States remained consistently on this pragmatic, schoolwork-related level and were compared with descriptions of vacations in Bosnia.

A focus on education allows the refugees some semblance of security in a world they have already learned can be transient. When asked about schooling, all the refugees in this study, from the youngest to the oldest, discussed the importance of education as “something that always goes with you no matter what happens.” The refugees had lost the majority of their belongings, their homes, their homelands, their businesses, and their money, and despite presenting no evidence of refugee friends who exchanged their Bosnian degrees for appropriate positions (indeed, Nadia’s mother, an engineer with advanced degrees, works as a secretary; Ivan’s wife, a pediatrician, is a secretary in the same company), all the refugees articulated the importance of education as virtually guaranteeing a fresh start elsewhere.

This finding is related to the first finding; education creates portable capital, and students’ educational opportunities in the United States were generally perceived to be better than the ones in Bosnia. However, these young female Bosnian refugees talked even beyond this notion. They seemed

to use their “good luck” at being in the United States as a motivator to push them to work hard at school here. They all spoke to me about the opportunities they had here as central to their self-understandings and as being behind their drive to achieve. The drive propelled them to succeed, and they confirmed their sense of control by being more successful and, seemingly, more secure. They also found greater opportunities that further confirmed their “luck” at being here and seemed to help resolve the cognitive dissonance or guilt they felt at “being comfortable” while family and friends continue to struggle in postwar Bosnia.

For the refugees who had been shunned previously by their schoolmates, academic achievement also had the social and psychological advantage of opening doors to friendships. As the refugees started achieving high grades, their classmates and teachers were increasingly able to reach out to them. The fears of their war trauma or their differentness were bridged by the common goal of academic success, at least among the non-Bosnian students who were achieving high grades. All the research participants were able to use their academic success as a bridge out of isolation. One wonders, then, about the tools available for those refugees who are unable, for whatever reason, to achieve academic success. Indeed, this factor may confirm John Ogbu’s (1978, 1987, 1992a, 1992b) findings that those who are excluded from academic achievement in a given context may instead form a shared group identity of resistance.

Although the core participants in this study were keenly aware of the utility of their academic success in connecting with their schoolmates and teachers, and they appreciated it, they also insisted on pointing out that their A grades did not change their memories or their war trauma. It is vital that school professionals are aware that their students may still suffer from effects of war, despite their academic achievement. The masks of achievement may serve refugees’ short-term needs, but the masks do not allow for their (and future refugee generations’) emotional needs, associated with issues such as PTSD or depression, to be recognized, understood, and treated. Further, the masks deprive schools of opportunities for learning about the lived experiences of their students. Adina (age 17, from Mostar) told me, laughingly, that she and her classmates had to watch a movie on living through war so that the students would understand the impact of war, but that no one ever asked her to talk about her own experiences of living through war. Despite her bemusement at the situation, Adina also spoke about how she was frustrated because she felt no one at school was interested in her life prior to her arrival. By recognizing Adina’s experiences, her school may have helped her feel less isolated and may also have provided a powerful learning opportunity for other students.

While the mask of achievement served the Bosnian young women refugees in this study by helping them to connect with their peers and school

professionals, it remains imperative that the person behind the mask can still be seen and heard—not only to discuss school work and future plans but also to learn more about the refugees and their experiences. Until the mask of achievement is removed, teachers will feel reluctant to ask refugees about their experiences, lest they are raising a sensitive topic, and refugees will feel reluctant to share their experiences, lest they are thought of as being “weird” or “too much.” By incorporating the experiences of refugee students into the classroom, educators could work to overcome the hidden curriculum that confines and encloses the refugee as “other” and could also foster greater understanding among the members of the school community. Encouraging refugees to share their experiences helps the refugees by giving them a voice and also benefits their schools and classmates by engaging them in the larger world. The refugees’ achievements should not only be a bridge for connecting with the refugee as a student but also for connecting with the refugee as a person.

While the mask of achievement does have its shortcomings, it is important to recognize the value it holds for the refugees themselves. However, this then raises concerns about those refugees who may not have access to constructing their own masks of achievement and may therefore remain blocked from its positive, inclusionary aspects. Research by John Ogbu and Maria Matute-Bianchi (1986) and Suárez-Orozco (1989), among others, has documented that immigrants, including refugees, who are perceived to be more culturally different from the dominant groups in the host country may not be afforded the opportunities that this perceived culturally close group of Bosnians experienced. Culturally distant refugees may therefore be blocked from using achievement as a mechanism through which they can build ties with the local population. The frustration and isolation of this group of culturally distant refugees may therefore grow. By engaging refugee voices in the larger curriculum, other bridges to understanding may be built.

Immigrants and refugees tend to see early challenges they may face in the school system, among other places, as temporary barriers that as newcomers they would eventually learn to maneuver around. For the white, European refugees in this study, the barriers were ultimately permeable as they gained access to the resources and opportunities they sought. For refugees from more culturally distant groups, the barriers may remain firmly in place. As Pedro Portes (1999, 490) points out, “ethnicity is often associated with differences.” As refugee students are socialized to their roles in the existing power structures in a given society, cultural differences “may emerge reactively” (Portes 1999, 491). These reactive cultural differences may entail what Ogbu terms secondary cultural differences, or “differences that arise after two populations have come into contact with each other or after members of one population have begun to participate in the schools or other institutions controlled by members of another population” (1987, 239). These

differences develop as a response to a situation that “involves the subordination of one population by another” (239) as may happen when a refugee group learns that the barriers, which they had assumed to be temporary, persist.

In the United States at least, white refugees may learn the privilege of being white and act accordingly, whereas refugees of color may learn the racial prejudice and become alienated, as Ogbu (1992b) argues, adapting or acculturating to minority status. In this way, schooling helps reproduce the social stratification and to produce the cultural attitudes that reinforce it. It is therefore important with this research population to move beyond the protective notion of the masks of achievement to probe further in recognizing and understanding the refugees as individuals and more than A students. This may enable education professionals to find more ways to connect with the refugees and the people themselves, and perhaps then to build bridges with those refugee populations for whom the barriers remain impermeable. The masks of achievement are effective for those who are granted the tools and opportunities to construct them, as they introduce a common ground for understanding. A future area of research must be to investigate other means for building common ground.

This research provides evidence of the crucial role schooling can play in the lives of recently resettled refugees in the United States. Schooling may not only provide an important routine for new arrivals but also reestablish a familiar student identity that allows the individuals to reconnect with their prewar selves. Education and the skills it may provide could restore a future orientation to refugees and a way of safeguarding that future by building stores of portable capital. Refugees place great value on education (Jones and Rutter 1998), and when allowed access to appropriate level classes, they typically become among the highest achieving of all school demographic groups (Kaprielian-Churchill and Churchill 1994). This last factor has the added benefit of providing a way to bridge the cultural divide between the refugees and their schoolmates and a way for the refugees to retreat from their “refugee-ness”—although they continue to cope with their refugee experiences behind masks of achievement.

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