African refugee mothers’ experiences of their children’s school readiness, and the role of supported playgroup

Rebecca New

Edith Cowan University

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Dated: 29th October, 2012
African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of their Children’s School Readiness, and the Role of Supported Playgroup

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan University.

Submitted October, 2012

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REFUGEE MOTHERS AND CHILDREN’S SCHOOL READINESS

African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of their Children’s School Readiness, and the Role of Supported Playgroup

Abstract

An emerging pressure for refugee parents in Australia relates to children’s ‘school readiness’. Existing research on mainstream, ethnic and migrant parents has highlighted that preparing children for school can be stressful; however, current literature has not considered this phenomenon for refugees in Australia. Social support is important for parents as they navigate school-related problems, and supported playgroups can potentially play an important role here for refugees. However, existing research has not yet examined the ways such programs can support these individuals in dealing with school readiness issues. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of African refugee mothers in relation to their children’s school readiness and transitions to school, and the ways one supported playgroup assisted them in this context. A focus group and interviews were conducted on a sample of eight refugee mothers from a supported playgroup. Two playgroup staff and one kindergarten teacher were also included for validation purposes. Using an interpretive phenomenology approach, five main themes were identified: meaning of school readiness; preparing for school; mothers’ experiences of children’s transitions to school; perceived supports; and playgroup support. It was found that women’s experiences were fraught with underlying tensions and conflicts influenced by social and cultural factors, and assistance provided through the supported playgroup was highly important to the women in this context. It was argued that further research is required to support government policy in this area.

Researcher: Rebecca New

Supervisor: Associate Professor Andrew Guilfoyle
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Dated: 29th October, 2012
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African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of their Children’s School Readiness, and the Role of Supported Playgroup

Refugee parents encounter a range of difficulties in their attempts to resettle and acculturate in their new societies (Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer, 2008). The turbulent and often traumatic pre-migration experiences of refugees position them in a psychologically vulnerable position upon arrival. Compounded by additional post-migration stressors, such as difficulties in adjusting to a new culture, navigating parenting issues can be particularly stressful for refugees.

Education for children has been identified as a strong priority for many refugee families in Australia (Sidu & Taylor, 2009); however research has highlighted that supporting children while at school can be a difficult and stressful task. An emerging pressure for refugee parents in this context has resulted from an increased focus on ‘school readiness’. This refers to a child’s preparedness for starting school, and is related to their overall transition into formal education.

School readiness is a concept widely discussed in educational contexts (Mustard & Young, 2007). In recent times, the Australian Government has stressed the importance of children being prepared for starting kindergarten as part of a broader focus on the early years (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian [CCYPCG], 2004; Mustard, 2008). Being ready for school has emerged as a pertinent community issue, whereby it is noted that there are many contributors to children’s successful transitions to school who are influential in shaping their lifelong learning experiences (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2010). Acknowledging the role of family and other social factors in children being optimally ready for school, the Government has recently drawn its attention to school readiness issues in ‘at risk populations’ (Dockett et al., 2010; McTurk, Lea, Robinson, Nutton & Carapetis, 2011). To date, however, little attention has been paid to the school readiness
experiences of refugee families – an at risk population which encounters significant economic, cultural, and social disadvantages.

More generally, social support has been found to be an important resource for many parents in regards to school-related issues (Lewig, Arney & Salveron, 2010; McAllister, Wilson, Green & Baldwin, 2005). In McAllister et al.’s (2005) research, ethnic parents described the importance of the practical and emotional support they received from family and friends in preparing children for school. Furthermore, refugees in Lewig et al.’s (2010) study described their need for additional support as they helped children with schooling. Research has shown that supported playgroups can provide valuable assistance to refugee families in Australia (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011; Jackson, 2011). Such programs can be a strong source of social support for otherwise isolated women and their children, and present opportunities for the development of important social networks (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011; Jackson, 2011). Given the benefits of supported playgroups, and the Government’s focus on school readiness, it is important that research is conducted to enable better understanding of the ways in which these programs can assist refugee mothers in the context of their children’s school readiness.

In light of these considerations, the purpose of this study is to explore the meanings refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness. The present study will examine the women’s understanding of this topical concept, and the issues they experience in relation to school readiness and their children’s overall transition to school. Furthermore, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an evaluation of supported playgroups, the study allows for examination of the ways in which one such program assists refugee women in this particular context.

Firstly, a brief overview of Australia’s humanitarian program and relevant statistics will be provided to frame the topic. The resettlement experiences of refugees in Australia will
then be briefly explored, including examination of their traumatic pre-migration conditions, and additional post-migration difficulties. Parenting in a new cultural context will subsequently be discussed as one aspect of refugees’ post-migration experiences. This includes consideration of adjustments in culture, such as the shift from a collectivist-based culture, and the conflict refugees can experience upon immersion in Australia’s individualist society. Here, the experiences of African refugee women will be focused upon as an example of a prominent humanitarian group in Australia experiencing significant changes in culture. Moreover, African refugees have been regarded as having unique welfare and educational needs (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009), and face many difficulties in relation to parenting (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

A review of the literature in relation to parenting and children’s education, and parenting and school readiness, will be subsequently provided. Due to the paucity of research on refugee parenting experiences in an Australian context, the present study will necessarily draw upon broader national and international research. This includes studies from different host cultures, and those which utilise mainstream, ethnic minority, and migrant populations. Reviewing this literature will provide some context for Australian refugee parents’ experiences.

**Refugees in Australia**

Within a hotly debated political context, national statistics indicate an increase in the number of humanitarian entrants residing in Australia in recent times (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIC], 2011). Humanitarian entrants are people who have been granted refugee status, or have been formally recognised as requiring protection from persecution (DIC, 2011). Between 2010 and 2011, 13 799 humanitarian visas were approved, of which 5998 were refugees (DIC, 2011). A refugee is defined under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as an individual who is outside of their country of origin,
and is unable or unwilling to return there due to substantial fear of persecution on the grounds of religion, race, nationality, political position, or membership of specific social groups (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The scope and focus of Australia’s humanitarian program is determined annually in response to global need. Accordingly, between 2010 and 2011, priority assistance was provided to refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (DIC, 2011). During this time, a total of 25.2% of ‘offshore’ refugees in Australia originated from Africa (DIC, 2011).

**Resettlement of Refugees**

**Pre-migration Factors**

Although the pre-migration experiences of refugees in Australia are unique and varied, most individuals from this population share the experience of some form of trauma prior to relocation (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel & Lacherez, 2006). Examples of traumatic events experienced by refugees include exposure to violations of basic human rights, extreme violence, separation from family, forced isolation from others, and the inability to access medical treatment in the case of ill health (Schweitzer et al., 2006; Steel, Silove, Phan & Bauman, 2002). Research has examined the detrimental effects of such trauma on the physical and mental health of refugees.

A focus within the literature has been the impact of trauma on psychological well-being (Fazel, Wheeler & Danesh, 2005; Gerritsen et al., 2006; Halcon et al., 2004; Hollifield et al., 2002; Robertson et al., 2006; Scholte et al., 2004). Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] have been highlighted as the two most common mental health problems experienced in refugee populations (Steel et al., 2002; Steel et al., 2009). Trauma has been associated with increased psychological vulnerability, which, in combination with stress, can result in adjustment difficulties in a person’s new host country (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Refugees from Africa are believed to have welfare and educational needs “never
before encountered” in past humanitarian intakes into Australia (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009). The greater settlement needs of African refugees have been attributed to particular pre-migration experiences common for this population. These include greater levels of poverty, lower levels of formal education and English skills, larger families, higher occurrences of health problems, lengthier periods in refugee camps, less exposure to urbanised environments, and increased rates of trauma (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009).

**Post-migration Factors**

Alongside pre-migration factors, refugees encounter a range of post-migration factors which impact upon their acculturation and resettlement experiences in Australia (Murray et al., 2008; Schweitzer et al., 2006). Berry (1997), a pioneer researcher in the field of intercultural relations, defined acculturation as the changes which occur following migration, when people from one culture encounter new contexts. This process typically involves the breakdown of cultural traditions and social norms. Notwithstanding the psychological effects of traumatic pre-migration experiences, a person must detach from elements of their original culture, and learn those of their new host country (Milner & Khawaja, 2010). This conflict in culture can result in acculturative stress, which impacts a person physically, psychologically, and socially as they adjust to their new environment (Milner & Khawaja, 2010). Basic ‘culture shock’ can also occur, whereby a person experiences a deep sense of loss upon leaving the familiarity of their home country, and resettling in a new, foreign environment (Hebbani, Obijio & Bristed, 2010).

A number of studies have explored these acculturation difficulties of refugees, and have identified additional obstacles influencing their resettlement experiences (Hebbani et al., 2010; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee, 2007; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009). Recent research has effectively used qualitative methods in particular to explore the post-migration experiences of
refugees. Purposive sampling, for example, has enabled rich analysis of the full complexities of this phenomenon for specific groups of people.

For example, Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2009) reported in-depth about problems with language, the law, parenting, gender roles, social relations, and social isolation. The inability to communicate effectively due to language barriers was associated with feelings of powerlessness and disadvantage, whereby participants expressed difficulties in establishing social connections, and believed they could not equally participate in the Australian way of life. Participants further described additional obstacles found to exacerbate acculturation difficulties, including problems relating to obtaining employment, financial instability, and issues surrounding access to accommodation and health care services (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009).

Many of these factors have been supported in further qualitative research on refugees, such as that of Hebbani et al. (2010), and a mixed-method study by Murray (2010). In the latter study, additional factors found to be pertinent for refugees included discrimination and negative stereotyping in the general community (Murray, 2010). These studies illustrate a general depiction of post-migration experiences of refugees, and indicate the need for a more focused exploration of pertinent issues facing this population during resettlement. One particular area that is critical to post-migration, given the aims of refugees to provide a better life for their children and families, is parenting (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

**Parenting in a New Cultural Context**

Renzaho and Vignjevic (2011) assert that African refugees in Australia face many challenges in relation to parenting. Family values and parenting practices are highly diverse, culturally bound, and are typically a reflection of the broader social context of one’s environment (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Difficulties arise, therefore, when refugees enter
new social contexts in which parenting goals, styles, and practices, are starkly different to those of which they know and uphold (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

African refugees for example, typically originate from collectivist cultures, in which extended family and community are perceived as the foundation of a society (Schweitzer et al., 2006; Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Family loyalty, maintenance of group harmony and norms, and an authoritarian parenting style (characterised by the enforcement of strict rules and low warmth) are foundational to this type of culture (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Raising a child is considered the responsibility of immediate and extended family networks, as well as close friends, and it is common for older children to play a prominent role in looking after their younger siblings (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). The shift to a new culture which supports an individualistic parenting ideal can position refugee parents in deep conflict, and can affect their psychological adjustment in new environments (Renzaho, Green, Mellor & Swinburn, 2011). Schweitzer et al. (2006) states that particularly for African refugees, when differences between their original culture and Australian culture are so vast, individuals can question their identity and sense of belonging (Schweitzer et al., 2006).

After surviving turbulent living conditions and traumas associated with war, African refugee parents arrive in a new social context. Critically, their prior family support networks are no longer accessible (Renzaho et al., 2011). Whereas these individuals previously relied on extended family and close friends in raising children, they must now negotiate the task of parenting without this fundamental support network. Furthermore, they are confronted with a different style of parenting endorsed in Australia, which emphasises individualism and an authoritative parenting style (a child-centric approach promoting independence, clear boundaries, and high warmth) (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Typically in individualist cultures, parents independently raise a child, and emphasis is placed on valuing individual needs and accomplishments, as well as autonomy and personal freedom (Zervides &
Knowles, 2007). This ultimate conflict in culture encountered by many refugee families in Australia underpins a range of complex issues which parents must negotiate (Lewig et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2008; Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011; Schweitzer et al., 2006). One key area of stress for refugee parents relates to their children’s education (Atwell, Gifford & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2009; Lewig et al., 2010; McBrien, 2011; Murray et al., 2008; Tadesse, Hoot & Watson-Thompson, 2009). Literature exploring parents’ experiences in this context is reviewed below.

**Refugee Parents’ Experiences of their Children’s Schooling: A Review of the Literature**

Sidu and Taylor (2009) identified that children’s education is a strong priority for many refugee parents arriving in Australia. Furthermore, school is often viewed by the families as a primary point of interaction between themselves and their new communities, and an opportunity for them to learn about, and participate in, new cultures (Tadesse et al., 2009). It has been found that although schooling is a strongly desired and positive experience for some refugee families, many others encounter significant challenges when children begin formal education (Atwell et al., 2009; Lewig et al., 2010; McBrien, 2011; Tadesse et al., 2009; Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009).

International studies such as that of Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2009) have highlighted the experiences and opinions of migrant and refugee parents, in relation to their children’s schooling. In this study, interviews were conducted with Sudanese parents, as well as children and teachers, to explore their experiences in relation children’s education. Experiences were examined particularly in the context of literacy. For parents, education was found to be important, and was considered a means through which children could adequately take care of their families in the future. Participants also expressed difficulties in helping their children with school work, due to their poor English and reading skills.
Tadesse et al.’s (2009) study aimed to explore the views of parents and teachers in relation to African refugee children’s early education in the United States [US]. Stark differences were noted between these two groups. For example, disparities were noted in regards to learning philosophy, whereby the mothers disagreed with teachers’ strong emphasis on play, and expressed preference for the teaching of academic skills, such as counting numbers. Similar to participants in Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse’s (2009) research, parents perceived the role of teachers as instructional and authoritative. In regards to assessing children, the mothers felt as if teachers were influenced by low expectations, racial stereotypes, and a lack of understanding of the cultures of the families. For example, a Somali mother felt as if her child’s ‘loudness’ in the classroom was mistaken as disruptiveness, when this demeanour was considered normal behaviour in her culture of origin.

In an additional study by Atwell et al. (2009), the researchers examined factors affecting the ability of refugee parents to envision the futures of their children, and how they could effectively support them in establishing and achieving goals. Interviews were conducted with refugees who were newly arrived in Australia, and issues relating to culture and education were often raised by participants. Similar to parents in Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse’s (2009) research, parents in Atwell et al.’s (2009) study were found to value education overall; however, they also discussed many difficulties they experienced in this context. For example, one mother described an incident with her child in relation to his behaviour at school. She explained how she was unable to effectively communicate with her son’s teacher, and thus experienced a sense of powerlessness and disadvantage in trying to resolve the issue. The researchers further highlighted parents’ sense of being between two cultures, which was exacerbated by language difficulties. The inability to speak English was found to be a major issue for participants, as they were unable to understand many aspects of
their new environment, including social norms relating to parenting in Australia. These language difficulties were pervasive and associated with low levels of confidence and authority, as well as elevated fear for the well-being and unity of the family.

Furthermore, parents in Atwell et al.’s (2009) study explicitly feared a breakdown in traditional culture for their children as they became more exposed to new social and cultural norms at school. Similarly, they were anxious about the shame that would result if children were not raised according to what was deemed appropriate in their own communities. The findings in this study are supported in more recent research, such as that of Lewig et al. (2010).

Lewig et al. (2010) highlighted issues facing refugee parents in Australia, in regards to their children and formal education. Similar to Atwell et al.’s (2009) study, Lewig et al.’s (2010) research exposed parents’ fears that their children would lose their original culture, and expressed concerns regarding their children adopting conflicting cultural norms. For example, some parents indicated their dissatisfaction with the way school staff seemingly encouraged children to contest authority, as this was not consistent with their traditional culture, in which obedience and respect for elders are highly valued. Diminished social support was also noted by all parents, who reported a strong sense of isolation. Somali refugees, for example, discussed issues with being a small cultural group in Australia, and asserted the need for agencies to help establish and strengthen their community. Furthermore, most participants were reluctant to access available parenting services due to language barriers, and a lack of understanding of available agencies. In light of these factors, parents’ involvement with their child’s school was reportedly low, and connections within the school environment were minimal. Due to reports of need for social support, a key finding was that mothers should be provided with more opportunities for social gatherings, in order to establish important social connections that could assist them in their parenting role.
The research on parents’ experiences in relation to their children’s formal education provides insight into the diverse and complex range of issues encountered by refugee families in this context. While not discussed in previous refugee literature, an emerging, more specific body of research in the area of mainstream parenting relates to the notion of school readiness, also known as ‘kindergarten readiness’. This concept refers to a child’s preparedness for starting kindergarten, and is related to their broader transitions to formal education. Research on school readiness in mainstream populations is increasingly supported by Government policy, whereby a number of topical articles and policy briefs have been developed in recent times. This includes that of the Centre for Community Child Health (2008), Farrar, Goldfeld and Moore (2007), and Sorin and Markotsis (2008). However, minimal research has been conducted on this phenomenon within refugee populations.

**Parents’ Experiences of their Children’s School Readiness**

School readiness is a multi-dimensional, education based construct which considers a child’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development in relation to their preparedness for starting school (Farrar et al., 2007). Research and political discussion surrounding school readiness has emerged in educational and child developmental contexts, whereby a child’s preparedness for school is seen as an essential buffer against a range of future academic, social, and mental health problems (Farrar et al., 2007). School ‘unreadiness’ has been found to be particularly costly for the individual child as well as society as a whole (Farrar et al., 2007; Mustard, 2008; Mustard & Young, 2007). In contrast, evidence suggests that investment in the early years is cost-effective, resulting in many long-term benefits for children and societies (Farrar et al., 2007; Mustard, 2008; Mustard & Young, 2007). In light of these considerations, Farrar et al.’s (2007, p. 4) topical paper indicated the position of the Australian Government, in which it was stated that “school readiness has never been more important.”
In defining school readiness, Government literature on this topic emphasises that a child’s preparedness for school is a shared responsibility (Farrar et al., 2007; McTurk et al., 2011). That is, a child’s preparedness for school is not simply their individual skills and abilities, but is a product of relationships and interactions with their family and social environment (Farrar et al., 2007; McTurk et al., 2011). This ecological approach emphasises the important consideration of the “perspectives, experiences and expectations” of all involved in preparing children for the transition to school, in order to work towards “strategies and approaches that value participants, and promote genuine collaboration” (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p. 187).

The Government thus speaks of a community-based approach, which has resulted in increased attention on school readiness being extended to at risk populations (Dockett et al., 2010; McTurk et al., 2011). For example, some research has explored school readiness in indigenous Australian populations, and has highlighted low socio-economic status, poor attendance of pre-school programs, language and cultural differences between school and home settings, and other risk factors in the home environment, as potential contributors to disadvantaged children’s poorer performance on aspects of school readiness (Dockett et al., 2010; McTurk et al., 2011).

Despite the Government’s increasing interest in school readiness, particularly for at risk populations, a gap can be identified in the existing literature, whereby there is a lack of research on this phenomenon in relation to refugee families. Refugee populations can be seen to experience similar disadvantages to indigenous Australians, such as low socio-economic status, and differences in language and culture between home and school environments. In addition, however, they can be psychologically vulnerable due to their prior experiences of war and trauma (Schweitzer et al., 2006). They also lack valuable informal supports following separation from important family networks that could assist parents with school
based issues such as school readiness (Renzaho et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a need for further research to be conducted which explores school readiness matters in refugee populations. This includes their perceptions of, and involvement in, preparing their children for starting school; the unique difficulties and concerns they may face during this period; and the meaning of these experiences.

In the absence of research on the school readiness experiences of refugee parents in Australia, related international and national studies utilising samples of parents from mainstream, ethnic minority, and migrant populations, provide some contextual background for the present study. For example, in a study by Wesley and Buysse (2003), the researchers qualitatively examined the school readiness perceptions of 25 mainstream parents living in the US using focus groups. Perspectives of school professionals were also considered, and a number of key findings were deduced. Parents emphasised the importance of language, social, and emotional development in describing a ‘ready’ child, and de-emphasised the importance of academic skills. A key conflict for parents, as well as other school professionals, was the external pressures they felt to ensure children could perform at a certain level at kindergarten entry. They were surprised at the school’s expectations of children’s academic achievement. Interestingly, the notion of the ‘ready school’ was also discussed. Here it was suggested that changes in the school environment need to be implemented to promote better communication between parents and staff, and increase social and cultural awareness. Participants believe that this will ensure the needs of diverse families are met.

A study by Dockett and Perry (2004) provides insight into the school readiness experiences of mainstream parents in Australia. This study considered parents’ school readiness experiences as part of a broader focus on their transitions to school, and included parents whose children had begun school, and parents whose children were soon to begin
school. Using questionnaires and interviews, participants indicated their general thoughts on children’s transitions to school. Data from approximately 300 parents, 300 childhood educators, and 300 children was analysed using grounded theory. A number of key findings were reported. Parents emphasised the importance of children possessing certain self-help skills prior to starting kindergarten, such as the ability to dress themselves. Parents also expressed concerns over their children’s adjustment to the new environment and routines of school, and desired for their children to ‘fit in’ with their peers. Feelings of loss were also experienced when their children began kindergarten, as well as a sense of freedom as they encountered less demands on their time. Physical aspects of school were also discussed, whereby parents were concerned about their child being bullied, whether they had the appropriate uniforms and packed lunches, and the safety provided to their children in the school environment.

McAllister et al.’s (2005) study is the first to highlight ethnic parents’ conceptions of school readiness, and their concerns relating to their child’s preparedness for school. The researchers focused on the transition processes that parents themselves experience surrounding their child’s entry to school. Several qualitative methods, including interviews, case studies, and the ‘photovoice’ approach, were used to examine these experiences in a sample comprised predominantly of African-American mothers. Participants often discussed the meaning of practical aspects of preparing children for school, such as organising their children’s new backpacks, and emphasised academic ability, the adherence to rules, and social and emotional skills, in evaluating their children’s school readiness. However, they also revealed stressors surrounding their children’s start to school.

Children’s transitions to kindergarten were found to be particularly stressful for parents, and required adjustment to new daily routines, new social environments, and changes to parent-child relationships (McAllister et al., 2005). Parents often conveyed their
perceptions of school as a ‘foreign’ environment – one which was potentially threatening for their child. They were concerned about racism, discrimination, and a lack of appreciation for differences between individual children and families. Parents were also found to be minimally involved in their children’s school communities, and it was suggested that they themselves may also perceive this environment as threatening. In the context of these concerns, the participants described the importance of social support. For example, “parents indicated their need for social and emotional support to fulfil these new roles and described the informal family and community support systems on which they relied” (McAllister et al., 2005, p. 622). Friends and family were found to provide practical assistance, as well as contributing to parents’ emotional well-being as they navigated the changes associated with their children’s transition to school. In this way, McAllister et al. (2005) concluded social support was instrumental in buffering against the stresses experienced by parents at this time.

Outside of general ethnic based studies, limited research on migrant populations in relation to school readiness has revealed similar difficulties and concerns for parents of this background; however, additional issues surrounding cultural and linguistic differences have been highlighted. Using a sample of Bangladeshi migrant mothers in Sydney, Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005) aimed to qualitatively explore these parents’ concerns and expectations prior to their children’s transition to school. Findings indicated that parents were anxious about the children’s inability to speak proficient English at school, as well as their ‘darker skin’ colour. Parents believed these factors could be a source of racism and discrimination within the school environment and therefore they feared for their children’s well-being. Parents were also concerned that children would lose the values of their traditional culture and religion upon exposure to western culture.

Following Sanagavarapu and Perry’s (2005) study on the pre-school experiences of parents, Sanagavarapu (2010) explored perspectives of Bangladeshi parents subsequent to
their children starting school. Using a more rigorous phenomenological analysis, several key findings emerged. Parents indicated their belief that they had a significant role in preparing their children for school, and described the ways in which they were involved in preparations. They expressed concerns over loss of culture for their children when they began kindergarten, and believed that English difficulties contributed to adjustment problems at school. Parents also reported a lack of awareness of the school’s expectations, and issues understanding written information. In light of this, Sanagavarapu (2010) suggested that migrant parents be empowered through the provision of linguistically appropriate forms of information when their children begin school, as well as the implementation of support and bilingual services for these families.

In comparison to mainstream parents, research to date shows that migrant parents face some additional concerns surrounding their children’s school readiness and transitions to school. From this, it is suggested that refugee parents may share concerns of mainstream, ethnic and migrant parents, and these may be exacerbated. However to date, no research has been conducted in this area. Considering their unique pre-migration and post-migration contexts, there is a need to explore this phenomenon for refugee parents, who are a particularly vulnerable and marginalised populace in Australia.

**Social Support**

In reviewing the research on parents’ experiences of children’s formal education and school readiness, a significant observation noted across this literature was the importance of social support. These supports were found to buffer against the stresses experienced when parents were preparing children for starting school in the work of McAllister et al. (2005). Furthermore, refugee parents in Lewig et al.’s (2010) study were found to be socially isolated, and reported the need for additional support. Within the literature, definitions of social support are diverse; however broadly speaking, this concept refers to practical and
emotional assistance offered by informal (friends and family), semi-formal (community networks such as playgroups), and formal (professional agencies) supports (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Johnson, Akister, McKeigue & Wheater, 2005).

Research on mainstream parenting has highlighted social support to be a buffer against parental stress, increasing individuals’ personal resources, and reducing the impact of various types of stressors (Sepa, Frodi & Ludvigsson, 2004). Earlier research by Gage and Christensen (1991) emphasised that social support can assist parents as they navigate significant adjustments. Social support can help to communicate empathy and concern for stressed parents, and can be a catalyst through which information about new situations can be learned (Gage & Christensen, 1991). The buffering effect of social support against parental stress has been further supported in more recent research, such as that of Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar (2005). Less is known about the effects of social support for refugee parents; however informal and semi-formal supports have been associated with increased psychological well-being during resettlement in studies such as that of Schweitzer et al. (2006). When considering the types of social supports available to refugees in the context of parenting, recent literature has focused on the key role of supported playgroups in assisting marginalised as well as mainstream families (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011).

**Supported Playgroups: Support for Refugee Parents**

Supported playgroups are based on a dual-focused model, functioning to assist both children and parents (Jackson, 2011). They service both mainstream and marginalised, hard-to-reach families, and are continually funded on the premise that supporting families during critical periods in children’s development will result in long-term benefits for children (Jackson, 2011). In these playgroups, facilitators educated and skilled in the area of early childhood development, implement play-based programs for children and their parents to participate in. Additionally, family support staff and bilingual cultural workers are available
to help engage families and assist them in dealing with a diverse range of issues impacting on their well-being (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011; Targowska, Guilfoyle, Teather & Fernandez, 2011).

Recent research (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Targowska et al., 2011) emphasises the benefits of supported playgroups for children as well as parents. Supported playgroups help to increase the social, emotional and academic skills of children at a critical stage in their development, and contribute to successful transitions to school (Targowska et al., 2011). Jackson’s (2011) study on three supported playgroups in Australia highlighted the additional benefits of these programs for parents. Through the playgroup, important friendships with other parents and staff at the playgroup were established. These relationships helped to meet their emotional needs, and reduce social isolation. Parents also developed their parenting knowledge, skills, and confidence through peer support offered at the playgroup. Furthermore, they felt supported in their roles as parents, and appreciated practical assistance through the provision of information and other resources.

In a review by Boddy and Cartmel (2011) additional benefits of supported playgroups for parents were highlighted. These included the development of practical and general life skills, English language proficiency, and the knowledge and practice of positive parenting strategies. This research has noted the usefulness of these playgroups in supporting families generally. The current review of the literature has highlighted a lack of research exploring the ways we can support refugee parents in relation to their child’s school readiness and transitions into formal education. Considering these two bodies of work together, it seems supported playgroups can play a vital role here, and therefore, an aim of the present study is to explore ways in which supported playgroup may assist refugees in this context.
Limitations and Rationale

Common limitations and gaps have been identified across the reviewed literature. It is acknowledged that studies focusing on the parenting experiences of refugees in Australia are lacking. Research on mainstream, ethnic, and migrant populations provides some insight into the broader parenting issues that may be confronting refugees; however there are minimal studies examining the unique context and experiences of this specific population. Moreover, there is a paucity in studies considering refugee parents’ experiences specifically in regards to their children’s school readiness and transitions to school. This is of particular concern, given the Government’s heavy focus on school readiness and the lack of evidence supporting policy in this area. Lastly, current research has not considered the ways supported playgroup can assist refugee parents as they navigate the changes and difficulties associated with their child’s school readiness.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to qualitatively explore the experiences of African refugee mothers from a collectivist culture, in relation to their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten. It further endeavours to explore the ways in which the mothers were assisted by a supported playgroup, in this context. Extending the work of Dockett and Perry (2004), this study will consider parents’ experiences of prior and subsequent to, their children starting kindergarten. This will provide insight into the school readiness and broader transition experiences of parents surrounding their children’s start to kindergarten. Not only will this study aim to identify the participants’ understanding and concerns in relation to this phenomenon, but will also aim to provide rigorous insight into the meaning of their experiences. This includes examination of contextual factors, such as the women’s original collectivist culture, which shape meanings ascribed to their experiences. Building on the reviewed research, the sample will include refugee mothers only, as they are considered the primary caregivers in collectivist African cultures. Furthermore, the study will
focus on a specific group of women attending a supported playgroup. Based on these premises, the research question underlying the current study is: “What meaning do African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten?”

**Research Design**

**Methodology**

The chosen methodology for the present study is interpretive phenomenology. This approach is based on a social constructionist epistemology which focuses on the processes underlying the way in which a person explains or constructs phenomena in their world (Gergen, 1985). It is suitable to the research question, as a key assumption of this epistemology is that an individual’s understanding of aspects in their environment is socially constructed, and the meanings of experiences are heavily influenced by social context (Gergen, 1985).

The purpose of interpretive phenomenology is to explore how a person makes sense of their individual and social worlds, and the meanings a person ascribes to particular experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpretive phenomenology draws on a range of theoretical frameworks including phenomenology, hermeneutics and social interactionism. This methodology is phenomenological in that it aims to examine human experience, and focuses on one’s descriptions, perceptions and explanations of phenomena, such as school readiness (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Spielberg, 1982). However, interpretive phenomenology is also based on hermeneutic principles, whereby it is assumed that depictions and explanations of particular phenomena are inextricably influenced by the participant and researcher’s own experiences and context (Heidegger, 1962). Following on from the work of Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1975) purported that descriptions of phenomena represent the ‘fusion of two horizons’ – the amalgamation of the participant and researcher’s individual contexts.
This fusion will be an important focus of the analysis. Lastly, interpretive phenomenology is informed by symbolic interactionism, which is based on the understanding that the meaning individuals attribute to phenomena such as school readiness, are influenced by interaction with others (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Symbolic interactionism suggests that through this interaction with others in their environment, people create shared meanings (Patton, 2002).

Embracing these guiding principles of interpretive phenomenology, the present study aimed to understand the experiences of African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup, in relation to their children’s school readiness and transition to kindergarten. This methodological approach was well suited to the present study’s objective of considering the meanings ascribed to these experiences of school readiness. In addition, it examined how these meanings were shaped by the women’s interactions with others in their environments, their broader social and cultural contexts, and in particular, how they felt supported or not. Attention was further directed toward the interpretive processes underlying descriptions of the women’s experiences. The mothers were considered the ‘experts’ on the subject in describing personal interpretations of their experiences; meanwhile, the researcher acknowledged the influence of their own context in producing descriptions of the women’s experiences. This methodology guided the following methods.

**Participants**

A purposive sample of eight informants was recruited from a pool of mothers attending ‘It Takes a Village’ [ITaV] supported playgroup. This playgroup is an early learning program managed by Save the Children organisation, and operates in Perth’s southern metropolitan area. The program is available for parents and their children aged between 0 and 5 years, and can be attended during children’s first year of kindergarten. Furthermore, ITaV is predominantly attended by migrant and humanitarian entrant families who are newly arrived in Australia.
Due to the vulnerable nature of the population under investigation, a pragmatic approach to sampling was necessarily employed (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). Refugee populations are typically difficult to access due to a host of logistical, social, cultural, and political factors (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). Therefore, ITaV staff were heavily involved in the recruitment of available participants at the playgroup due to the strong connections they maintained with the African refugee mothers, and their ability to translate information. The women selected were considered key informants in relation to the phenomena under investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2008). That is, each participant could provide rich and in-depth information on their own experiences as an African refugee in relation to their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten.

The mothers were all refugees originating from war-torn Burundi in East Africa. The women were homogenous here, and shared collectivist cultural factors and common experiences in relation to their histories of living in, and escaping, conditions of extreme civil conflict in their homeland (Bundervoet, Verwimp & Akresh, 2009). Informants had lived in Australia for 18 months to 7 years, and spoke minimal English. Six of the eight women had never participated in formal education; while two had completed seven years of school prior to migrating to Australia. Duration of playgroup attendance varied from 4 months to 5 years, and each mother had two to six children. All informants had at least one child who had begun kindergarten in Australia; some had a second child who had begun kindergarten in Australia; and others had a second child who was starting the following year.

Five of the eight women were involved in the initial focus group, and four of these women subsequently volunteered to participate in individual interviews. An additional three mothers who could not attend the focus group, but also wanted to be involved in the study, were interviewed. Moreover, two ITaV staff members and a kindergarten teacher were also interviewed as informants to validate the women’s experiences. This form of methodological
triangulation assisted in establishing interpretive rigour by enhancing the richness and credibility of interpretations of the mothers’ experiences (Kitto, Chesters & Gbrich, 2008). The first staff member was responsible for coordinating early learning playgroup sessions, as well as the life skills classes for the refugee mothers. The second staff member was the program’s cultural worker who was also involved in the early learning sessions, and often translated for the Burundian women. The kindergarten teacher was an allied stakeholder who was employed at a local school. She had recently taught several African children who had attended the ITaV playgroup.

**Materials**

An information letter describing the research was provided to the refugee women (see Appendix A). A separate information letter was provided to playgroup staff and the kindergarten teacher (see Appendix B). On the first day of data collection, consent forms for the refugee women were distributed (see Appendix C). A separate consent form was available for playgroup staff and the kindergarten teacher (see Appendix D). The focus group protocol (see Appendix E) was comprised of questions and appropriate prompts that would facilitate discussion of the mothers’ experiences in relation to their children’s school readiness, their transitions to kindergarten, and the role of the ITaV supported playgroup in assisting the mothers. Interview protocols for the refugee women (see Appendix F) as well as the playgroup staff (see Appendix G) and kindergarten teacher (see Appendix H), were further utilised. It is important to note that in line with interpretive phenomenology, focus group and interview questions were largely open-ended in order to gain in-depth responses and not lead the participants to respond in a certain way (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008).

In addition to the interview protocols, note-taking materials and an audio recorder were used throughout data collection. Finally, a journal was used to freely record any
thoughts and reflections of the researcher throughout the study (see Appendix I). This process commenced from initial observations and meetings with playgroup staff, and continued until the completion of data analysis. Importantly, these notes were used as a form of triangulation to ensure a comprehensive and well-validated understanding of the women’s experiences was achieved. Themes and sub-themes were checked against these notes, which appeared to support findings. Furthermore, reviewing journal entries enabled the researcher to consider their role in the analysis of participants’ experiences. This process contributed to the interpretive rigour of the study, in which the researcher could examine their own influence on interpretations, and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the women’s experiences which was both rich and credible (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong 2007; Kitto et al., 2008).

**Procedures**

The researcher became aware of the ITaV program through their supervisor, and staff members of the organisation were initially contacted to talk about the possibility of conducting the research at this playgroup. A meeting between the researcher, supervisor and playgroup staff was subsequently arranged in which the staff expressed their support for the project, and commitment to assisting the researcher as needed. After receiving approval from the Edith Cowan University ethics committee, the researcher liaised with ITaV staff to organise the recruitment of participants. Availability of the program’s bilingual cultural worker was further arranged. Establishing a trusting relationship with participants is crucial to conducting ethical research on refugee populations (Halabi, 2005; Spring et al., 2003) and was thus afforded much attention throughout the study. Implementing measures to ensure the research was conducted in an ethical and culturally sensitive manner created evaluative and procedural rigour.
Prior to data collection, the researcher attended three weekly playgroup sessions as a volunteer for the primary purpose of building trust and rapport with the African refugee women. A secondary aim of the researcher’s visits was to observe, and take notes on, the ITaV program, in order to better understand the context of the women’s playgroup experiences. At these times, the cultural worker explained to the refugee women the purpose of the research, and the mothers were provided opportunities to ask any questions. During this phase, focus group and interview protocols were also checked with playgroup staff to ensure questions were culturally appropriate, non-invasive, and unlikely to cause any distress for the women. The researcher also planned the provision of a meal for the mothers at the time of the focus group, as this was advised by staff as being culturally appropriate, and a means of further establishing rapport and demonstrating a level of respect which could help to engage the women.

As requested by staff, the focus group was first conducted to build rapport with the women and explore their experiences in a highly supportive environment. The focus group involved the African refugee mothers and the playgroup’s bilingual cultural worker. It is acknowledged that the use of an interpreter who was a staff member of the playgroup, may have impacted on the mothers’ willingness to share certain information. Wallin and Ahlstrom (2006) posit that using a known interpreter may cause issues surrounding confidentiality of information. Known interpreters may also be selective in the way they translate information due to a sense of responsibility to protect the interviewee from any potential harm (Wallin & Ahlstrom, 2006). However, Wallin and Ahlstrom (2006) also highlight the view of other cross-cultural researchers, that interpreters should be well-known and trusted by participants, as this can result in a more relaxed and trusting atmosphere in which interviewees can share openly and comfortably. Considering the vulnerability of the mothers in the present study, the playgroup’s bilingual cultural worker, who was known by the women, was used to create a
sense of comfort as participants shared their personal experiences. This also helped in establishing a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants.

The focus group and interviews with the mothers took place at the ITaV playgroup site, as this location was suggested to be the most comfortable and convenient for the refugee women and staff. The playgroup was safe and familiar to them, and their children could be supervised by playgroup employees during data collection. On the day of the focus group, the researcher, mothers, and staff firstly shared in a meal provided by the researcher. Subsequent to this, the women were given an information letter and consent form which provided details of the study aims and the participants’ rights. The cultural worker translated these documents, and established that the women were willing to consent to their involvement in the study. Importantly, the voluntary nature of the study was highlighted, and confidentiality of the data was reiterated. After establishing the women had no further questions, the focus group discussion began, and continued for approximately 60 minutes.

Upon completion of the focus group, the women were thanked for their participation and were verbally invited to partake in an additional interview to further explore the topic. Subsequently, the researcher conducted interviews with four of these women over the following two weeks. An additional three women also volunteered their participation in individual interviews. Like the focus group participants, these women were informed of the research during previous playgroup sessions, via the cultural worker. They could not attend the initial focus group, but still desired to be part of the study. Interviews ran for approximately 40 minutes, and the cultural worker remained present. The interview protocol guided discussion, and probes such as “can you tell me more about that?” were used to gain more in-depth information. Saturation of the data obtained from the mothers was evidently satisfied upon completion of the seventh interview, whereby the addition of new information
ceased to substantially contribute to the generation of new understanding (Liamputtong, 2009).

The advantages of including both the focus group and interviews were that it provided the opportunity to build a stronger rapport with the women, and allowed for more in-depth, and sometimes different, information to be obtained in the interviews. While focus group discussion provided a more general depiction of the collective experiences of the women, interviews allowed for more flexibility in pursuing diverging ideas in more depth (Gill et al., 2008). For example, in the interviews, the researcher was able to obtain more detail about the individual education histories of the women, and how this impacted on their experiences and meaning-making.

Subsequent to obtaining informed consent, interviews were then conducted with two ITaV staff members at the playgroup. This allowed the researcher to validate the experiences of the African refugee women in relation to children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten. Information gained from these individuals was used as a form of triangulation that increased methodological rigour of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Following this, playgroup staff facilitated contact between the researcher and a local kindergarten teacher, who was also interviewed as an allied stakeholder. Information gained from this informant was further utilised to validate the women’s experiences and increase methodological rigour (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

From the commencement of the study, and throughout data collection, the researcher recorded any relevant thoughts and reflections in a journal. Final themes and sub-themes were checked against these notes as an additional form of triangulation used to validate interpretations. The notes appeared to support findings. This reflexive process also allowed for the consideration of the influence of the researcher on any interpretations of the data. In this way, it contributed to methodological and interpretive rigour of the study, whereby
credible interpretations qualifying the women’s experiences were produced (Kitto et al., 2008).

Audio recordings, transcripts, and journal notes remained in the researcher’s locked cabinet throughout analysis of the data. Upon completion of analysis, audio recordings were erased, and the interview transcripts were stored in a secured filing cabinet. Transcripts will be stored here for a period of five years following thesis publication. Subsequent to this time frame, the data will be destroyed.

Analysis

Data analysis for the present study was loosely based on Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2008) steps of interpretive phenomenological analysis [IPA]. This approach focuses on the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences in particular contexts (Smith et al., 2008). Employing IPA to analyse the data was thus well-suited to the present study’s aim of examining the meanings ascribed by African refugee mothers to their experiences of their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten.

Analysis of the data was a recursive and inductive process, and progressed from being descriptive about experiences, to more interpretive about the meaning of these (Smith et al., 2008). Firstly, the focus group and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis was initially conducted on the focus group, and subsequently, the individual interviews. The researcher proceeded to read and re-read the transcripts to familiarise herself with the text and gain an overall ‘feel’ of the data, as suggested by Smith et al. (2008). Any thoughts and observations which emerged at this time were noted. This dynamic and continual process of reading and reflecting on the data helped the researcher understand the ‘rhythm’ and flow of the transcripts, and ensured sustained focus on the participant (Smith et al., 2008). The researcher then highlighted and made detailed notes on key words, sentences, and statements that reflected the experiences and ascribed meanings of these for each of the African women.
Utilising these exploratory notes, emergent themes were subsequently developed by identifying patterns, connections, and deviations across the data, and pertinent quotes were extracted from the transcripts to illustrate and support interpretations. Possible connections between themes were then explored.

The researcher continued this process of reading, reflecting, and annotating in analysing interview transcripts of the staff and kindergarten teacher. Key words or sentences that helped to explain the African mothers’ experiences and ascribed meanings were highlighted as potential prototypical statements for excerpts in the report, and consistencies and discrepancies were subsequently considered. Final interpretations of the data were checked with the researcher’s journal notes, as a means of methodological triangulation to further validate interpretations of the women’s experiences and ascribed meanings (Kitto et al., 2008). These notes were found to support the identified themes and sub-themes.

Two additional methods of validation and verification were undertaken to enhance the methodological and interpretive rigour of the study. Firstly, researcher triangulation was undertaken, whereby transcript extracts, themes, and sub-themes were examined and discussed with the supervisor and one other peer researcher. This process enabled the consideration of different perspectives and possible interpretations of the data (Kitto et al., 2008). Secondly, a process of member checking was performed. This technique has been regarded as one of the most crucial methods of establishing credibility in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This process involved checking the main themes and sub-themes with several refugee women and staff members to ensure they accurately reflected the mothers’ experiences. Member checking took place at the playgroup, and the mothers and staff were both satisfied that the researcher had reflected the women’s experiences accurately. At this time, one mother took the opportunity to reiterate that she did not feel that the school were helpful when her child started kindergarten, and that she didn’t think they were prepared
to accommodate the needs of refugee families. Following this, the researcher re-checked her findings to ensure the women’s experiences surrounding school support were accurately and sufficiently explained. These validation methods contributed to the interpretive rigour of the study, increasing the credibility of research findings which qualified the women’s experiences.

**Findings and Interpretations**

Five major themes were identified: meaning of school readiness; preparing for school; mothers’ experiences of children’s transitions to kindergarten; perceived supports; playgroup support. Within these themes, a number of sub-themes emerged, as shown in Table 1. Findings will be discussed in relation to these themes and sub-themes, and relevant quotes from the focus group and interviews will be included to support findings and interpretations, alongside existing literature.
Table 1

*Themes and Sub-Themes of African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of their Children’s School Readiness and Transitions to Kindergarten*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<td>Meaning of School Readiness</td>
<td>Value of Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Awareness of School Readiness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Evaluations of Child’s School Readiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing for School</td>
<td>Cultural Concerns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meaning of Playgroup Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers’ Experiences of Children’s Transitions to School</td>
<td>Separation from Child</td>
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<td>Meaning of Language Difficulties</td>
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<td>Isolation in School Community</td>
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<td>Cultural Conflict</td>
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<td>The Meaning of Practical Difficulties</td>
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<td>Perceived Supports</td>
<td>Caseworkers</td>
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<td>Playgroup Support</td>
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<td>Sense of community</td>
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**Meaning of School Readiness**

Three key sub-themes were identified in regards to the overall meaning of school readiness for the refugee women. These were the value of education; whether the mothers were aware of what it means to be school-ready; and the basis on which they made their evaluations of their children’s preparedness for starting kindergarten. Impacting on the overall meaning of school readiness was the women’s own prior education experiences. These will be discussed in relation to the three key sub-themes identified.
**Value of education.** For the mothers, what school readiness meant depended on how they valued education generally, including its role in shaping future outcomes. For example:

*It is important because, when I see the children are studying, it’s very important to me and them aswell. So in the future, they may have good life if they start first. So if they have a good life, I may have a good life aswell... So I think it’s important for them – to see them get ready for school, I think it’s very important.*

Education was found to be valued by both educated and uneducated mothers in the sample, as a means of bringing future well-being and prosperity for the wider family. This value of education for the mothers was further supported by playgroup staff and the kindergarten teacher. One staff member reported, for example: “*Education and making sure that the kids are going to school are really important and [the mothers] make sure that that happens.*”

This finding converges with previous research by Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2009) and Atwell et al. (2009) which has also highlighted the importance of education for migrant and refugee populations.

For the mothers who had completed schooling prior to migration, the importance of education for their children was discussed in relation to their own past experiences. These women had completed several years of school in refugee camps prior to relocating to Australia, and they acknowledged the high value placed on education by their families of origin. These women discussed in detail, the value of preparing children for kindergarten as a means of promoting academic success at school. For example:

*...we value education more than anything, so for them - I do some - like with my daughter now, I do some ABC with her, I do some writing. I want her, when she get [to school], then she can write.*

Their context meant they naturally wanted to begin preparing their child for school.

Uneducated mothers also valued education; however they revealed motivational factors that were focused on their child, rather than schooling in general. These women, having never attended school, talked about this as a contributing factor to the difficulties they were facing in Australia. For example:
I always question myself, if my parents take me to school when I was little, if it would be better for me, because now, I have children, I have house, stuff for the house – so many things to worry, and maybe if I goes to school nothing goes like this... I told my husband, I did not go to school, so [child’s name] has to go to school...

For these mothers, their lack of schooling was a negative experience, and thus they had strong desires for their own children to be educated.

**Awareness of school readiness.** Although the educated women indicated some prior knowledge of school readiness and its importance, they talked about how their understanding of this was developed through their experiences at playgroup. For example, one of the educated mothers described how, through the playgroup, she had learnt additional ways that she could prepare her child for school, such as teaching them how to follow routines, and reading stories together at home.

For the uneducated women, they reported having little knowledge of schooling processes and expectations in Australia prior to their involvement in the ITaV program. Only subsequent to starting at the playgroup could they reflect on, and confidently evaluate, their children’s readiness for starting school. One woman reported, for example: “Now I know...by the time he started kindy I think he was ready. I knew he was ready.” ITaV staff supported this shift in the women’s understanding of school readiness, attributable to the playgroup:

*I think there’s been a shift from prior to, and when they start, coming to the playgroup. Umm... they perhaps wouldn’t start with such a strong awareness and understanding of school readiness...and what has been nice is to see that change over time... I think through the playgroup, we’ve been able to open their eyes up to this whole world of play that the children can engage in, and how beneficial that can be in preparing them for school... and the parents are becoming more aware of the importance of school readiness.*

Interestingly, through their awareness of school readiness and its importance, the uneducated mothers experienced increased conflict in wanting to be more involved in preparing their children for school, but feeling like they did not have the personal abilities and resources to do so. In particular, they felt that they did not have the knowledge or
experience to help children develop the academic skills which they now believed were
important in making a child school-ready:

I myself as a mother, I’ve never went to school. How can someone expect me to make
my child ready for school, because I don’t really even know how to be ready to go to
school...I don’t even know how to hold pen!

The mothers had become more aware of the importance of school readiness, but now realised
that they lacked confidence in their personal ability to facilitate this. Thus they talked about
largely relying on the support of the playgroup in facilitating children’s preparedness for
kindergarten. For example:

There’s no way I can help him and teach him to be ready for school, so that’s why I
come to the playgroup. I know they can help get him ready for school.

Evaluations of child’s school readiness. The women showed their understanding of
being ‘school ready’ by evaluating differences in readiness between those of their children
who had attended playgroup, and those who had not. For example:

For [daughter’s name], she didn’t know what was going on around her, but for [son’s
name], he’s been coming to the playgroup since he was a baby, and so he knows what
is expected – he know to sit, listen to story, he has to share everything – everything
belong to every child, not just him. So, that’s why it’s different.

They described playgroup as a causal factor in their children’s readiness. Below, one woman
suggested that those of her children who had not attended playgroup, did not participate in
school-like activities that would prepare them for school:

I don’t think she was ready, because she don’t know what was going on around her. I
don’t think she was ready because we not read anything and we not going anywhere
for activities or doing anything like that.

Conversely, the mothers talked about those of their children who had attended the
playgroup as ready for starting school, emphasising children’s academic skills, such as their
ability to count, as strong indicators of their readiness. Refugee parents in Tadesse et al.’s
(2009) study also emphasised the importance of young children’s academic ability. However
this differed from the perspectives of mainstream parents in Wesley and Buysse’s (2003)
study, who de-emphasised the importance of these skills in describing a child who was ‘ready’ for school. This highlights social and cultural diversity in the way the concept of school readiness is perceived. Additional measures of readiness described by the women included children’s proficiency in speaking English, interest in going to school, children’s confidence, the ability to follow instructions, and children’s ability to share with others.

**Preparing for School**

Reflecting on their experiences prior to their children starting school, the women spoke about their concerns surrounding the cultural differences between Australia and their homeland. The mothers also talked about the meaning of playgroup assistance at this time. These two sub-themes are discussed below.

**Cultural concerns.** The women talked about the concerns they experienced prior to the start of school in relation to culture. They feared that their children would adopt Australian norms that may be considered offensive in the family’s culture of origin. Practical aspects of preparing children for school were discussed in this context. For example, one mother explained her discomfort in organising uniforms for her daughter, with the short length of the skirt. She was concerned that through exposure to Australian culture at the school, her daughter would become comfortable dressing in this way:

> I mean, that’s another cultural thing that we just, you know, don’t fit in doing that... And then you don’t want to – you know, because if I start dressing her like that, then she’s going to feel more comfortable dressing like that, and we have cultural things and all that.

There was fear attributed to getting children ready for school, whereby the women were concerned that they would be reprimanded by others in their community if children were not raised according to what was considered culturally acceptable:

> And I would be blamed. They would blame me for that. Because, for us, the child doesn’t just belong to you, it belongs to the whole family, especially if it’s a daughter. So you have to be very careful. She belongs to the father’s family, so if anything happens, they’ll – they’ll blame me for it.
This woman talked about her huge sense of responsibility to her husband’s family in raising her daughter according to traditional values, and her desire to evade chastisement from them. Findings in the present study are similar to existing research on migrants (Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005; Sanagavarapu, 2010) which found that these parents were concerned over children losing their original culture upon exposure to western values in the school environment. Additionally, refugee parents in Atwell et al.’s (2009) study also feared shame from extended family if children were not raised in line with traditional values.

**Meaning of playgroup assistance.** Talking about their concerns of not being able to adequately prepare their children for school, the women discussed the importance of playgroup assistance in the pre-school period. Similar to Jackson’s (2011) study, the mothers perceived the playgroup to have a dual function in assisting both their children and themselves prior to starting kindergarten: “playgroup help myself, and my child as well.” By helping prepare children for kindergarten, the playgroup was found to benefit the mothers. For the uneducated women, who felt that their lack of education disabled them from making a significant contribution to preparing their children for school, the playgroup was particularly significant in the pre-school period. One mother described the playgroup as an available resource which she utilised at this time.

*And...if I can’t help [my child], I just ask the playgroup staff – “what do you think [son’s name] needs to know before he start kindy?” She tell me and she help me.*

The women valued the practical assistance provided by playgroup staff prior to their children starting school. Their support here helped to alleviate feelings of inadequacy, by empowering the women to feel as if they could make a meaningful contribution to preparing their children for school: “I didn’t know anything, so the playgroup staff has helped me feel I can make her ready for school.”
Mothers’ Experiences of Children’s Transitions to School

In considering African refugee mothers’ experiences of their children’s transition to kindergarten, five main sub-themes were noted across the data: separation from child; the meaning of language difficulties; isolation in school community; cultural conflict; and the meaning of practical difficulties. In general, despite help from staff, the time at which children began school was regarded as a highly stressful period for the women. One mother reported, “that’s when I really start to worry. Lot of stress.” This was further supported by playgroup staff. For example: “They have alot of worry and alot of concern when the kids start school. They say, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. ’”

**Separation from child.** In discussing children’s transitions to kindergarten, some mothers reflected on the anxiety they experienced when they first separated from them. Contributing to the women’s anxiety was the perception of school as foreign and the fact that teachers were unknown “strangers” to the mothers and their children. One woman reported:

> And also building trust between you and the teacher in the first week...The first time – you just feel (pause). I remember when I first take my son, and I stay a while – I stay almost 2 hours, 3 hours, before I go, just to make sure everything is fine. Because I felt like, you know, I wasn’t supposed to go. And that also, you know, the culture and all the barriers. Leaving him with a stranger - person I didn’t know, and [child’s name] is going to be with them all day and I remember thinking, “I never even talked to them”.

This quote highlights the deep hesitations of the participant in entrusting the care of her child to a stranger, which is common to most mothers. Existing literature has highlighted that mainstream parents can also find initial separation from their children to be difficult. In Dockett and Perry’s (2004) study, for example, parents described a sense of loss in initially separating from their child. They also expressed concerns over the safety of their child; however these related more to the physical environment of the school (Dockett & Perry, 2004). For the refugee mothers, however, there was an additional cultural element. These
women described deeper concerns relating to their lack of trust of teachers and other school staff in caring for their children.

Within the literature, it has been acknowledged that refugees often struggle to trust authority figures upon arrival in their new society, and under the rule of former repressive governments, refugees typically learn not to trust people in authority as a means of survival (Hynes, 2003; McBrien, 2011). McBrien (2011) asserts that this mistrust can extend to school officials when education services are first accessed. The women’s experiences of political turmoil prior to migration may have resulted in a sense of mistrust of school staff and in this way, contributed to feelings of anxiety upon separation from their child at school.

The mothers’ worry was also connected to the nature of the parent-teacher relationship in Australia, which they described as profoundly different to their culture of origin. She described this relationship to be contingent on a broader sense of community connectedness in her traditional culture:

*Umm... back home we live in a community, so even the teachers among them, you know them, even before the kids go to school...we know each and every one, and we used to each other... and even if I don’t know that teacher, my friend knows that teacher, or my other friend, or my other family, so it’s more safe. So when you take your child to school, you know you leaving them in good hands. Whereabouts here, you’ve never seen the person – this is the first time. You just drop our kid – and then you can’t even ask any questions because you don’t speak English very well.*

She detailed how teachers are typically a part of the mothers’ close community in Burundi, and therefore known by the family. The perceived disconnection between the teacher and parent which they now experienced, was foreign and unfamiliar to the women, and they talked about feeling anxious about separating from children in these conditions.

**The meaning of language difficulties.** A compounding of cultural factors was extended through language difficulties. In addition to issues of trust and worry over relationships, the inability to proficiently communicate in English was found to be a major problem for all the mothers. As found in previous research on refugees and their children’s
schooling, the implications of not being able to speak to others were significant and pervasive for the women when their children began kindergarten (Atwell et al., 2009). Similar to Atwell et al.’s (2009) findings, language difficulties were associated with low levels of confidence for the mothers. The playgroup staff confirmed that the women did not feel comfortable engaging with others at the school:

...that ability to interact and engage with others at the school. I think it would be great if that was happening more, and unfortunately it’s their lack of confidence in their English that’s restricting that...they don’t feel comfortable in that environment, and I’d say alot of that is due to the fact that they don’t speak much English.

Staff also noted feelings of embarrassment for the women due to their lack of English skills:

They say, “I don’t understand what they’re saying and I can’t ask interpreter...I don’t want to embarrass myself.”

The inability to communicate in English meant feelings of helplessness when children began kindergarten. One mother stated:

I was worried that when she would bring note home from school, and say, “this is for you,” I can’t read it. But she need my help and I can’t do for her. That was my worry – I can’t help her. I feel bad that I can’t help my children...but what do I do? I can’t understand so I don’t know and I can’t help...you want best for the child at the school, but I don’t know, so it’s hard.

Staff discussed how the women felt unable to help their children with practical tasks such as reading notes from school, and associated it with a deep sense of letting their children down, making it harder for them to adjust to their new environment.

The mothers also felt powerless to deal with any issues that arose for the children at school, due to language problems. For example, the women detailed cases where their children were involved in “fights” at school, or were being “teased” by others. Concern was exacerbated by the women’s perceptions of their children as vulnerable because they “looked different”. When such problems occurred, the women reported feeling that their children could not stand up for themselves or seek help, and importantly, that they as mothers could not advocate on behalf of them in discussing and resolving issues. One mother reported:
... I was worried that the other child, if they tease him, or if there’s fight or something, or it’s not their fault, how can they explain. They can’t express themself, and the teachers don’t understand, and they can’t tell. Even if they tell me...I can’t understand what they’re telling me...If it happens, I was always worried about it, or if something goes wrong, what do I do?

The present study therefore supports existing literature in highlighting the language difficulties commonly experienced by refugee parents in relation to their children’s formal education (Atwell et al., 2009). However, it goes further to show the meaning of these difficulties for the women. Basic communication problems impacted on their reported well-being, adding to feelings of inadequacy and guilt in not being able to help their children with school-related matters at a time when they had hoped to be strong for their child.

In this context, the playgroup was found to play an important role in increasing the English skills of the mothers. In the focus group in particular, the women discussed the benefits of the English classes offered at the ITaV playgroup. These classes are a central component of the life skills activities which are facilitated by the program. In the context of children’s transitions to kindergarten, the classes aim to increase confidence and self-sufficiency of the women in communicating with school staff:

Through the life skills classes, alot of our emphasis is on them developing the skills to communicate, and alot of time is spent on, ya know, if the school rings, what do you say, what do you do – you make an appointment. So encouraging that ability to interact and engage in the school.

Through formal English lessons, as well as informal conversations with staff and other mothers, the women reported increased confidence in their ability to talk with school staff. One mother stated:

I can now talk to teacher a little bit and understand more what she says. Still with the language it is hard but I can understand two or three words, and that makes me feel more confident.

The importance of developing English proficiency for culturally and linguistically diverse parents has been previously highlighted as a valued aspect of supported playgroups in Boddy
and Cartmel’s (2011) research. Here it was also found that developing English skills increased confidence for playgroup attendees.

Isolation in school community. The tensions described by the women are important given we know that parental involvement in their children’s school communities is believed to result in a number of benefits for both children and their parents (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). Involvement in school allows parents to establish social networks. Through these, they can learn important information in regards to the expectations, policies, and practices of the school, achieved via communication with both staff and other parents (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). The support of these social networks is believed to help parents navigate issues relating to their children’s schooling and assist in establishing trusting parent-teacher relationships (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). When parents are not involved in their children’s school, however, they do not form these important social networks and can feel uninformed about school, and isolated from support of teachers and other parents.

The women in the present study felt they were missing out by not being able to actively involve themselves in their children’s school communities. Many of the mothers conveyed a strong sense of disconnectedness between themselves and the other parents and teachers, and talked about feelings of isolation from social support in this environment. In considering their relationships with other parents, the women reported limited contact and communication with them:

I just take my child and leave at the class and I come and pick him up in the afternoon. So maybe the other parent talk – I see they talk and smiling, but not me, because I can’t ask anything, so that was very difficult and lonely for me.

There was a perceived disconnect between herself and the other parents, and the mothers were highly cognisant to compare their situations with mainstream mothers. She saw that these individuals could talk and interact with each other, but she felt unable to engage with them in the same manner. As a consequence, the woman described a relative sense of
disadvantage in considering her inability to form relationships with other parents. The women’s separateness from these other parties was also emphasised by the kindergarten teacher and playgroup employees. The teacher said, for example:

“My sense is that they don’t feel that they have a big role to play [at school] - that they’re quite separate from the school...So they’re not really engaged with it.

Furthermore, the mothers reported minimal communication with school staff and experienced feelings of anxiety surrounding interactions with teachers. For example:

Teacher approach me and want to tell me something that happen yesterday, and I did not understand. So I was always worried... When the class teacher come, and say, “hello [child’s name], hello mum” I don’t know, I just smile but I don’t know what she say... so she just grab the child and show her where to sit, and then I just leave...

This quote highlights the perceived separateness between the mother and teacher, and the ensuing feelings of anxiety experienced by many of the mothers when in contact with staff.

The mothers’ sense of isolation was further illustrated by discussing their experiences of school events. Most of the women described how they were not actively involved in school events, such as sports carnivals. This was confirmed by the kindergarten teacher who commented:

In my experiences with the African families, we don’t have much contact with the mums. Even though the parents are quite welcome to come in, spend time here, they don’t. And you know, I’ll do things like invite the mums in for afternoon tea and things like that, umm... school events...umm... yes, they don’t – they don’t make that step.

The teacher attributed this to language difficulties, but did not consider the underlying tension of the women: “...I think, perhaps they feel a bit uncomfortable because they don’t have the language skills.” Playgroup staff also emphasised the lack of involvement of the refugee women in the school community:

While the mothers are often encouraged to participate at kindy...many of the mothers wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that, because of the language and because it’s an unfamiliar environment.
A sense of isolation was clear, for example, where mothers described previously attending a school event. These were described as being negative experiences which they now avoid. One woman stated:

*I had no one to talk to, because the other parents and the kids, they are friends, and the other parents can speak to each other – they talk to each other, but for me, I can’t talk to them. So I was just bored and sitting and that’s why I feel, “oh no, I’m not coming.”*

Other mothers said they had never attended a school event. They described receiving notes from the school, which they thought could be invitations to such occasions, but did not want to attend because they believed it would be unpleasant: “*I think I get note about it, but I don’t know... the other parent – they have friend, but me...no. So I don’t go.*” Here, this mother highlights her relative disadvantage in not having the same, valuable connections with friends at school that she observed generally with the other parents. She believed that this situation would extend to school event situations, where she would continue to feel isolated in comparison to her mainstream counterparts.

The meaning of the mothers’ avoidance of school events was attached to guilt, whereby they felt “bad” that they were not supporting their children in this way. One mother stated:

*I feel bad... because I don’t support my child. But if I go there, what do I do? I don’t know what it’s gonna be for me. So, I don’t feel happy, I feel bad about it, but I don’t know and I don’t understand. It’s not easy for myself and not easy for the child aswell. Lots of sadness.*

An apparent conflict had emerged for the women, in that they felt guilty for not supporting their children at school events, but wanted to avoid discomfort. In their vulnerable state, they wanted to avoid any additional discomfort or unpleasant experiences, but also wanted to support their child at school.

The women’s lack of engagement with parents and teachers on one level was attributed to language difficulties. The women felt that because they did not speak the same
language as the majority in the school community, they did not integrate well in this environment. For example:

_We feel like we don’t fit. And special – you know it’s because of the language I think...there’s some people who that if I say something, they won’t be able to understand me, so I feel like it’s very hard for me to talk to someone._

Another mother reported how she had lost opportunities for instrumental support: “I can’t speak to anyone, so I don’t ask questions.”

In addition to language issues however, there were differences in cultural norms below this which contributed to the women’s lack of involvement with others. It was found that cultural factors interacted with the willingness of the women to engage with others in the school community. One mother explained that in her culture of origin, it was considered inappropriate for women to speak with people who they did not know very well. Therefore, she felt uncomfortable talking with the other parents at her son’s school:

_I don’t interact with them at all...Especially I think – the culture – I came from a culture whereby women don’t interact with people. Even if I interact with you – I must know you very well. So... I cannot come and start talking to you. Even if my son starts talking to the other kids, the other mums invite me to the birthday and all that, but I just, I don’t know... I can’t go..._

This quote highlights broader cultural tensions at play for the mothers, which they discussed as contributing to their sense of isolation in their children’s school community. Interestingly, this mother described that in the three years her child had attended school, she had not made one friend there. The isolation she experienced when her child began kindergarten extended into subsequent years of her child’s schooling.

Due to the language and cultural conflicts discussed, the women described how they did not feel parents at the school were a source of support they could draw upon when their children started kindergarten. Language difficulties, combined with underlying cultural tensions, resulted in a debilitating sense that they could not interact with others in the school community, and therefore, they experienced strong feelings of isolation. While mainstream
parents are typically able to draw upon parental networks at their children’s school (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008), the refugee women felt a deep sense that they were unable to engage in the same way.

**Cultural conflict.** The mothers described how their concerns surrounding culture, which they experienced in the pre-school period, continued after their children began kindergarten. The women feared that their children would reject values of their traditional culture and adopt opposing Australian values and norms. The mothers felt conflicted in wanting their children to be raised according to traditional culture, whilst also desiring for them to successfully integrate and “fit in” with others in their school community.

For example, one mother talked about the fundamental differences between her original culture and Australian culture in terms of how children communicated with adults. This transferred to views on local mainstream culture. In Australia, she believed children had no respect for their elders in the way they forwardly addressed and challenged teachers without permission. For her, children arguing with adults was described as, “*the worst thing that ever happen.*” The tension was such that, while this mother had observed her child adopt Australian norms in talking to his teacher, she did not want to change his behaviour at the cost of him seeming different to the other children:

> “Whenever he gets in [to the classroom], he doesn’t even say “hello” – because we teach kids, whenever you wake up in the morning, you greet your elders. You don’t talk – only if you’re allowed. And if you want to talk you say, “excuse me, I have something to say.” Now he gets in and he say, “Mr [teacher’s name], blah, blah, blah.” And I can’t stop him now because you know, everyone else is doing it. I think if I stop him, then he will feel like he is different from them, and I don’t want that.”

The conflict experienced by the women when their children encountered western norms and values at school, relates to underlying acculturative stress (Milner & Khawaja, 2010). The mothers felt anxious about the breakdown in culture they observed in their children, but also desired for them to successfully integrate into their new society. This finding supports other research on this possible tension. For example, McBrien (2011) found that refugee parents
felt torn in desiring children to behave in a culturally appropriate manner, whilst also wanting them to acculturate in Australia.

**The meaning of practical difficulties.** Linked to the above factors of communication and culture, the period in which children began school was characterised by a range of adverse practical issues for the mothers. These included difficulties in organising stationery, arranging transport to and from school, and packing appropriate lunches for the children. The women’s experiences were further confounded by language problems, and them not knowing the school’s expectations of children and their parents. Practical difficulties were therefore found to be large problems for the mothers, and they talked about these at length. For example: “Umm... yeah the food. It’s a big, big issue, because what we eat at home is different what they want them to take [to school].” One woman described her concerns surrounding her son and school lunches, whereby he did not want to eat the traditional meal prepared for him because it was different to the types of food his peers were eating. While she wanted to prepare a meal which she believed was appropriate and nourishing for her child, she also wanted him to fit in with the other children in regards to this matter. She stated:

*It’s very hard for me to make a sandwich for my son for lunch – I feel like it’s not enough. I feel like... Or you know... umm... all those biscuits and things – it’s not lunch, it’s not a meal. But he want what friend have, so you want him to have the same.*

Some of these practical issues discussed are not uncommon amongst mainstream populations (Dockett & Perry, 2004); however, the refugee women’s experiences of practical difficulties were compounded by additional stressors such as language barriers.

**Perceived Supports**

In the context of the above, support became a central topic of discussion for the women in most interviews. The support they felt, or did not feel, was attached to the meaning of the women’s experiences of their children’s school readiness and transitions to
kindergarten. With the exception of playgroup, most of the women believed they had minimal other supports assisting them prior and subsequent to their children starting kindergarten. Examination of their experiences of support resulted in three sub-themes: caseworkers; school support; and informal support.

**Caseworkers.** Formal supports such as caseworkers were discussed in relation to the mothers’ experiences. This support, being available for only a short period of time, was not always in operation when children began school. Furthermore, the women described feelings of being abandoned and alone once this service ceased:

...when you come here, you only have [caseworker] to show you around for about 3 months or something, and then they all disappear, you’re left on your own. So if you didn’t know anything, then you have to find out about it yourself, and it’s so hard. Yeah, so... we just sit at home, and it’s not good...And then when it comes to the school things, it starts to get very confusing.

**School support.** Similar to findings of Wesley and Buysse (2003), some of the women in the present study talked about the idea of the ‘ready’ school. One mother reported:

I don’t think my child was ready for starting school, but I don’t think the school was ready for us! They knew we refugees and English is not our first language, but they make no effort to draw us closer...I think the school should spend more time trying to communicate with the parent to help understand the school and all that.

The mothers did not find staff very helpful when their children began kindergarten. One mother stated: “…and the teachers are not helpful. They just give you the piece of paper and all that.” Considering the pertinent language difficulties experienced by the women, these notes from teachers were found to be an ineffective means of communication between the mothers and school staff.

Diverging from this, one mother did report school staff to be helpful, and this showed the sort of support the mothers would appreciate:

When [child’s name] start kindy, I put him in nappy, and he was 4, and they told me, “he can’t come to school with nappy”. So they help me toilet train him... And this way, the teacher help me. But it was hard. I just look at the action at what they say – I was not communicating because I don’t know how...
In this case, the kindergarten teacher assisted the mother with broader parenting issues when her child started school. Even though it was difficult to communicate throughout this process due to language difficulties, the desire to receive support was shared.

In discussing the lack of support they experienced from the school, many of the mothers believed that a bilingual cultural worker should be employed to facilitate better communication between teachers and parents. They suggested this would help teachers to understand different cultures, and allow the mothers to learn more about the school system. This finding reflects the views of migrant parents in Sanagavarapu’s (2010) study, who also talked about the importance of increased communication and cultural awareness at children’s schools.

**Informal support.** The lack of informal support following separation from extended family and close friends was found to be a salient issue for the refugee women. For example, one woman reported: “we have no other family or friend here, so it’s very, very hard. They can’t help you, so it’s hard.” In the absence of these important social connections, some of the women sought assistance from pastors and other members of their church in purchasing uniforms and stationery. Other participants also talked about the support they received from their older children in trying to prepare younger children for school. Due to the women’s lack of education, the mothers valued the assistance of older siblings in helping children with school-like activities. These included reading books, writing, counting, and colouring. In collectivist cultures, older siblings are often responsible for looking after their younger brothers and sisters (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). The involvement of siblings in helping prepare children for school could thus be related to this aspect of the family’s traditional culture.

In the absence of extended family, one mother described the practical, emotional and spiritual support she received from her husband:
...he used to, for my daughter when she had some homework, like reading books - sometimes he can help her, when there’s not enough time.... He used to comfort me, tell me that everything is known by God.

However, most other women described how their husbands were not supportive in dealing with school readiness and transition issues for children. Informants provided insight into the way traditional gender roles impacted on the husbands’ lack of support in this schooling context. For example:

Umm... the culture – you know, they are not involved at all. They are not involved with the school. You know, the culture means that men goes to work, provide for the family. You look after the kids and the house and everything. So they’re not involved with the kids’ things... it’s just that he doesn’t know – he’s not sure of what he’s doing, and that’s because of the culture and how he was brought up and all that.

This quote highlights the clear distinctions in the roles of men and women in the mothers’ collectivist culture. While men are considered to be the financial providers for families, women are expected to maintain the house and look after children.

In further exploring the meaning of husbands’ lack of support, critically, some women described their spouses as adding to their concerns when they struggled with schooling problems. For example:

He just pushes me. He wants me to do it, when I can’t do it. So that’s why I have to come to playgroup and ask for help. He doesn’t help, if I’m worried or not, he say, “you’re a woman. You’re a woman and you should know how to deal with school and stress and everything.”

In further exploring how she felt about this, the woman responded:

It’s the culture. We just deal with it. In Australia it’s all, “darling this” and “darling that.” Nothing like that (pause). It’s hard. He expect me to do something with the school and I can’t do it. And if I can’t do it, he say, “why can’t you do it? What kind of woman you are?”

Important for her sense of identity, she contrasts her relationship with her husband to what she has observed of couples in Australia, and sees her situation as one of relative deprivation in her new society. In collectivist cultures, women are expected to be more focused on their marriage relationship and families than their personal needs (Haj-Yahia & Sadan, 2008). For the woman above, she sees her marital relationship to be comparatively worse than what she
has observed in her new culture; however she accepts that her husband’s behaviour was influenced by cultural factors and ‘normal’ in referring to her experiences of traditional gender roles. In this way, school readiness as a general topic seemed to be a catalyst to other deep seated tensions experienced by the mothers.

Excluding the current program, overall, the women described limited support as they negotiated issues relating to their children’s school readiness and starts to school. This discussion lead to wider concerns about their tensions in adjustment, especially their isolation at this time. In African collectivist cultures, a person’s meaning and purpose in life is typically grounded in the relationships and interactions they share with informal cultural and familial systems (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Moreover, their identity is deeply influenced by their sense of belonging to these networks (Stewart et al., 2008). Schweitzer et al. (2006) suggests that the loss of such important social connections can be an ongoing trauma experienced during reintegration. In the present study, there is evidence that the women’s experiences of minimal support when their children began school, further compounded these broader contextual factors relating to separation from the support of extended family and friends.

**Playgroup Support**

In the context of the above, the women talked about playgroup as a ‘saving’ space, and how the program was found to buffer against some of the stress they experienced in relation to children’s school readiness and transitions to school. Analysis of the women’s responses resulted in three main sub-themes here: social support; sense of community; and advocacy.

**Social support.** It was found that the ITaV supported playgroup provided a strong source of social support for all the mothers before and after their children started
kindergarten. Prior to their involvement in the playgroup, the women commonly reported feelings of stress, anxiety and loneliness. For example, one mother stated:

...before my child started school, all I did was sit at home, watch TV, sleep, wake up, and all that. Then I went to see my social worker, and I was stressed and depressed, so she send me to playgroup.

When the women attended playgroup, the support provided by staff was found to be instrumental in relieving these negative emotions:

And [staff’s name] – she really helpful, and anything, I can ask [staff’s name] anything and she’ll just help me. She’ll pick me up and drop me off, and it was nice, yeah (pause). I feel like better, you know? After that, I wasn’t stressed again, or depressed, so...I could talk to people, and have a laugh and not be worried about the school or anything.

Playgroup staff were portrayed as available, approachable, and trustworthy, and their assistance with emotional and practical difficulties was profound and greatly appreciated by the mothers. In terms of the emotional support provided by playgroup staff, one woman commented:

And with the school things...[playgroup staff] used to understand my problem, and they the one people I trust and I can come and tell them my problem and they can sit down with me and say that it’s ok. So if I come inside and I not happy and crying, they just say, “come and sit down” and then I was happy to go home again.

Considering the significant practical difficulties which the women encountered prior and subsequent to, children starting kindergarten, advice and assistance in navigating these issues was particularly meaningful to the women. For example:

Yeah... and also you can ask [staff’s name] for the food, you know, “what can I put in the lunchbox”... Even the uniforms, you know, [staff’s name] she tells me, “you can go to Kmart and buy the same skirt that looks like the uniform one. Just ask the school if it’s alright.” So that’s also really helpful.

The types of support provided through the ITaV program reflect and expand upon current literature exploring the ways supported playgroups can assist refugee families in the context of parenting. For example, the mothers talked about experiencing emotional support, similar to that which was described by participants in Jackson’s (2011) study. Here, the women
discussed the importance of the meaningful connections they had developed with other mothers and staff at the playgroup. This support was highly valued by the refugee women, who felt that the friendships they had made through playgroup helped to reduce feelings of isolation.

**Sense of community.** The mothers also experienced a sense of community through their involvement with the ITaV playgroup. In contrast to the isolation they experienced in school communities, the women felt they could easily communicate and engage with other mothers at the playgroup. The women discussed the commonalities between themselves and other mothers at the playgroup, and felt they related to each other through similar experiences of the difficulties faced in regards to their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten. Furthermore, they shared in the desire to see their children successfully adapt to school, and exchanged valuable advice in collectively striving to achieve this common goal.

These observations are supported in the following quote:

*It helps because I can meet other people and talk to other mums who are from the same country, or others who are experiencing the same difficulty, and so I don’t feel alone, and I can see what all they do to solve problems with the child at school...we share advice...here I really get benefit, because I can talk to the other people and I am happy. I am interesting to hear what people are doing and all that, because everyone has same problem as me.*

The women spoke about how the program provides regular opportunities for the development of meaningful connections with other refugee mothers from Burundi as well as other countries. They valued these relationships, and felt they had an established social network through the program. The importance of these relationships to the women was supported by playgroup staff: “*For them to be happy, and form relationships with other people here...I think the mothers really appreciate that*”.

The experiences of the mothers here reflect ideas of McMillan and Chavis (1986) in their classic work on sense of community. In particular, they reflect McMillan and Chavis’
(1986) concepts of ‘membership’ and ‘shared emotional connection’. The membership component of sense of community refers to the feelings of belonging to a particular group. The women in the present study reflected this sense of belonging through the relatedness they experienced with the other mothers at the playgroup. The shared emotional connection element considers the personal links between group members based on common experiences. The refugee women in the present study were strongly connected through the sharing of broader social factors such as culture and history of being a refugee, as well as difficulties relating to their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten. Through opportunities provided by the ITaV program, the women were able to engage with others they perceived as similar to them, and this resulted in a strong sense of community.

**Advocacy.** Playgroup staff were described as being advocates by some of the women in regards to parent-school relations. In response to the language difficulties and associated low confidence of the mothers, playgroup staff accompanied the women to help them navigate a range of tasks and issues at the school. This included formally enrolling children in kindergarten, as well as working with school staff to clarify and resolve issues. One example was provided by the playgroup’s bilingual cultural worker, who regularly translated for the Burundian women:

*One of the mums who comes to playgroup, her son was getting into trouble at school all the time...and I say, “why don’t we go to the school and find out the problem? It must be something, not just your child – maybe something with the other kids aswell...” She say, “what do I say? If I go, they may say, “no, we kick him out of school.” So I say, “no, we need to go.” Well, we sort it out – we make the appointment at the school, and we find out it wasn’t his fault. It was one of the other kids.*

The staff’s assistance in this way was further highlighted by the kindergarten teacher, who acknowledged their involvement in enrolment processes and open days at the school. Overall the advocacy provided through ITaV staff helped to empower the women and increased their confidence in dealing with school-related issues for their children.
Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of African refugee mothers in relation to their children’s school readiness and transitions to kindergarten. This phenomenon was further explored amongst attendees of a supported playgroup, to investigate how the program assists the women in this context. The study exposed the deep conflicts and tensions the mothers experienced prior, and subsequent to, their children starting kindergarten. These occurred at a time when the women were likely to be psychologically vulnerable, having recently fled war-torn Burundi, and arriving in a new and foreign environment. Some of the difficulties and concerns they discussed were found to be similar to that of mainstream parents; however the refugee women’s experiences were compounded by additional stressors relating to their social context. These included significant language barriers, and issues relating to conflicting norms and values between their collectivist African culture and those of their new individualist society. Importantly, these factors were found to exacerbate anxiety and other emotions encountered at this time, and in the context of these experiences, support was a central topic of discussion for the African refugee women.

Much of the meaning surrounding school readiness was related to whether the mothers felt supported or not, and playgroup was found to be a highly valued, ‘saving’ space for the refugee women. Although the mothers reported difficulties surrounding their children’s school readiness and transitions to school, the support they received from the playgroup was found to buffer against some of the stress and isolation they experienced at this time.

The study is potentially limited in the way it considered the views of only one kindergarten teacher as an allied stakeholder. This individual was included for the purpose of validating the mothers’ experiences; however it may be useful to consider in more depth, the personal views and experiences of several kindergarten teachers. Dockett and Perry (2004)
suggest that including the views of teachers in discussions of school readiness can provide a more complete picture of what is happening in this area, and why.

The present study builds on existing literature exploring the experiences of resettling refugee parents in Australia. Specifically, it helps to address the paucity in current literature examining the experiences of this population in relation to children’s school readiness and transitions to school. This is particularly important, considering the lack of current evidence supporting Government policy in this area. The research also highlights the ways in which experiences of school readiness are shaped by contextual factors, such as being of refugee background, and originating from a collectivist culture. Therefore, the study provides support for further examination of the specific parenting experiences of refugee populations, and in particular, those from African cultures, in which values and norms are suggested to be vastly different to those endorsed in Australia (Schweitzer et al., 2006). The current study also demonstrates the importance of supporting refugee mothers as they navigate parenting issues prior, and subsequent to, their children’s transition to school. Moreover, it expands upon existing research in highlighting ways these programs can meet the emotional and practical needs of refugee families in the context of school readiness.

Additional research is required to further understand refugee mothers’ experiences of their children’s school readiness, and the full meaning of these experiences. This includes additional studies examining the types of issues refugee mothers face in this context, and the kinds of support they need to deal with these. Additionally, research could consider how this support can best be implemented, be it through supported playgroups, or other targeted interventions which consider the unique needs of refugee families. Overall, further research is considered essential in building a stronger evidence base which can inform Government policy in this area.
In conclusion, the present study has aimed to ‘give voice’ to the school readiness experiences of an extremely vulnerable and marginalised group in Australian society. It is important that researchers continue to consider refugees’ parenting experiences from their own perspectives (McAllister et al., 2005). This will provide opportunities for policy-developers to listen to, and learn from, the ‘voices’ of such groups in developing culturally sensitive and effective means of supporting them in our community.
References


Appendix A

Information Letter for Refugee Women
African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of Their Children’s School Readiness

Contact Details:
Chief Investigator: Rebecca New
e-mail: r.new@our.ecu.edu.au
Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle
e-mail: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a study on your experiences of your child’s readiness for starting kindergarten, and how playgroup may have helped you before and after they started school. The study involves a group discussion with other African women, in which the playgroup’s bilingual cultural worker will be present. Then, you may also be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher. Only the cultural worker will be present for this. You can take part in the group discussion and interview as you feel comfortable, answering questions from the researcher, and talking about your experiences. If you choose to be involved in the study, please sign the consent form which will be given to you by the researcher.

Involvement in the study will take about 1 to 1.5 hours for the group discussion. Then if asked to take part in an interview, this will be another 40-60 minutes. It is expected that you may benefit from your involvement in the study. The group discussion will give you the opportunity to talk about your experiences relating to your child’s readiness for starting kindergarten, with other women from playgroup. On the day of the group discussion, you will also be provided with lunch. The study may also result in a better understanding of the issues African refugee mothers face in Australia in regards to their children starting kindergarten.

The group discussion and interview will be audio recorded. Information gathered will then be looked over by the researcher to find common themes that may show the experiences of refugee women. Only the researchers listed on the ethics application will be able to see the information gathered. To make sure of confidentiality, the main researcher will keep all information in a secured cabinet at Edith Cowan University until the research has finished. Information will be kept here for five years following publication of the report, and will then be destroyed.

Findings of the research will be presented in a final report, which will be published soon after the study has finished. This report will be offered at the library at Edith Cowan University, and also given to staff of ‘It Takes a Village’ playgroup and relevant stakeholders. It is important to note that no identifying information will be included in this report, and therefore, confidentiality will be kept.
Please note that taking part in this study is your choice. Also, you may stop taking part at any time, without explaining why. If you choose to stop, any information already gathered from you will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researcher or supervisor for more information. Also, if you have any concerns or complaints about the research study, and wish to talk to an independent person, you may talk to the following person:

Research Ethics Officer  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
JOONDALUP WA 6027  
Phone: (08) 6304 2170  
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

Please note that approval for this study has been given by ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Kind regards,

Rebecca New

Chief Investigator
Appendix B

Information Letter for Playgroup Staff and Kindergarten Teacher
African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of Their Children’s School Readiness

Contact Details:
Chief Investigator: Rebecca New
email: r.new@our.ecu.edu.au
Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle
email: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study exploring African refugee mothers’ experiences of their children’s school readiness, and the role of supported playgroups in assisting the women throughout children’s transitions to school. Your participation in the study requires you to be involved in an interview with the researcher, answering questions in relation to your observations and opinions of refugee mothers’ experiences. If you are willing to be involved in the study, please sign the consent form which will be provided to you by the researcher.

It is expected that participation in the research will take approximately 30-40 minutes for the interview. It is further expected that you may benefit from talking about your experiences in relation to refugee mothers and children’s school readiness. The study provides the opportunity for a better understanding of the issues African refugee mothers face in preparing their children for school, and how your agency and other service providers can effectively assist these women in dealing with concerns.

Interviews will be audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Information gained in the focus group and interviews will be analysed by the researcher to identify common themes that encapsulate the experiences of participants. Only the investigators listed on the ethics application will have access to the data gathered. To ensure confidentiality, the chief investigator will keep data and recordings in a secured filing cabinet until the research has been fully analysed. Upon completion of analysis, audio recordings will be erased, and the interview transcripts will be stored in a secured filing cabinet at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup. Transcripts will be stored here for a period of five years following the thesis publication. Subsequent to this time frame, the data will be destroyed.

Findings of the research will be presented in a final report, which will be published shortly after completion of this document. This report will be made available in the library at Edith Cowan University, and disseminated to staff of ‘It Takes a Village’ playgroup and relevant stakeholders. It is important to note that no identifying information will be included in this document, and therefore, confidentiality will be maintained.
Please note that participation in the research is voluntary. Furthermore, you may withdraw from participation at any time, without justification or penalty. At this point, any existing data gathered from you will be appropriately destroyed.

If you have any questions regarding the research, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher or supervisor for more information. Furthermore, if you have any concerns or complaints about the research project, and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer
Edith Cowan University
270 Joondalup Drive
JOONDALUP WA 6027
Phone: (08) 6304 2170
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

Please note that approval for this study has been gained from ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Kind regards,

Rebecca New
Chief Investigator
Appendix C

Consent Form for Refugee Women
African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of Their Children’s School Readiness

Contact Details:
Researcher: Rebecca New
email: r.new@our.ecu.edu.au
Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle
email: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

I, ___________________________ understand and agree to the following:

- I have been given an information letter explaining the research.
- I have read and understood the details given to me in the information letter.
- I have been given the chance to ask questions, and these have been answered.
- I am aware that if I have any further questions, I am able to ask the researcher or supervisor.
- I understand what taking part in the research will involve.
  - I understand that I am required to firstly take part in a focus group with other African women from ‘It Takes a Village’ playgroup. This will take about 1 to 1.5 hours, and the playgroup’s bilingual cultural worker will be present.
  - I understand that if I am comfortable, I will also take part in an interview with the researcher, if asked. This will take about 40-60 minutes, and the cultural worker will again be present.
- I understand that all information given by me will be kept confidential, and that my identity will not be given to anyone without my approval.
- I understand that any information given will only be used for the research. Findings may be published in a report, however no identifying details will be included without my approval.
- I understand that I am free to stop taking part in the study at any time, and will not have to explain why.
- I agree to take part in the study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Researcher’s signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix D

Consent Form for Playgroup Staff and Kindergarten Teacher
African Refugee Mothers’ Experiences of Their Children’s School Readiness

Contact Details:
Researcher: Rebecca New  
email: r.new@our.ecu.edu.au  
Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle  
email: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

I, ________________________, understand and agree to the following:

- I have been provided with an information letter explaining the research study.
- I have read and understood the details provided to me in the information letter.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and these have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I am aware that if any further questions arise, I am able to contact the researcher or supervisor.
- I understand what participation in the research will involve.
  - Participation in an interview with the researcher. This will take approximately 30-40 minutes.
- I understand that all information provided by me, will remain confidential, and that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone without consent.
- I understand that any information provided will only be used for the purposes of the research. Findings may be published in a report, however no identifying particulars will be included without consent.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw participation at any time, and am not required to explain why, or incur any penalty for doing so.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature:_________________________________ Date:_________________________________

Researcher’s signature: __________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix E

Focus Group Protocol
Focus Group Questions for African Refugee Mothers

**Research Question:** “What meaning do African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness?”

The interviewer will firstly introduce themself, and ensure the participants understand the purpose of the research. If they have no further questions, the researcher will proceed.

**General opening:**

1) How long have you lived in Australia?
   
   - Have any of your children begun kindergarten in Australia?

**Mothers’ understanding of school readiness and their experiences of preparing children for school:**

2) Was/is your child ready to start school or not, how did/do you know?
   
   - How does this make you feel as a parent?
   
   - How important was/is it that your child was/is prepared for starting school?

3) Can you describe what role you played/play in helping your child get ready for starting kindergarten?
   
   - In what ways did/do you try to prepare your children for school?
   
   - What challenges did/do you face as a parent in preparing your child for school? What was/is hard or easy about this?
   
   - Can you tell me about any worries or concerns you had/have about your children starting school (for the children, and for you as mothers)?

**Transition to school:**

4) What do you think it was (or will be) like for your child going to school for the first time?

5) What was it like (or what do you think it will be like) for you when your child started,starts school here in Australia?
   
   - Can you tell me about any issues or concerns you faced (or think you will face)?

**Playgroup support:**

6) How has the playgroup helped you before and after your child started kindergarten?
   
   - How does it help you to prepare your child for school?
   
   - How has it helped you when your child started school?
Appendix F

Interview Protocol for Refugee Women
Interview Protocol for Refugee Mothers

Research Question: “What meaning do African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness?”

The interviewer will firstly introduce themself, and ensure the participant understands the purpose of the research. If they have no further questions, the researcher will proceed.

General opening:
1) How long have you lived in Australia?
   - How many children do you have?
   - How many children started kindergarten in Australia?
   - How long have you been attending the playgroup?
   - Were you and your child attending playgroup before they started kindergarten?

Mothers’ understanding of school readiness and their experiences of preparing children for school:
2) Do you think your child was/is ready to begin school? How did/do you know?
   - What sorts of things showed/show you they were ready/not ready?
   - How important is it to you that your child was/is ready to start school?
3) What role did you as a mother play in preparing your child for school?
   - Can you tell me any stories about this?
4) Can you tell me about any difficulties you experienced in preparing your child for school?

Transition to school:
5) What do you think was it like (or what do you think it will be like) for your child when they began/begin kindergarten?
   - Can you tell me about any good things or difficulties they experienced (or you think they will experience)?
6) What about you, what was it like (or what do you think it will be like) for you to see your child begin school?
   - Can you tell me about any good things or difficulties you experienced (or you think you will experience)?

Playgroup support:
7) How has the playgroup helped you before and after your child started school?
   - How did the staff or other women at the playgroup support you?
   - How did they help you prepare your child for school?
   - How did they help you when your child started school?
8) Can you tell me about any other people that have assisted you during these times?
Appendix G

Interview Protocol for Playgroup Staff
Interview Protocol for Playgroup Staff

Research Question: “What meaning do African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness?”

The interviewer will firstly introduce themselves, and ensure the participant understands the purpose of the research. If they have no further questions, the researcher will proceed.

General opening:

1) Can you describe your role at ‘It Takes a Village’ playgroup?

What school readiness means to African women:

2) What do you think school readiness means to the African refugee women?
   - How do you think the women perceive the notion of preparing their children for school?
   - What do the women understand about being school-ready?

3) How important do you think it is for the African refugee women that children are prepared for starting school?
   - Why do you think it is/isn’t important to these women?

Preparing children for school:

4) In what ways do the African refugee women try to prepare their child/children for school?

5) Can you tell me about any issues or concerns you think the African refugee women experience in preparing their children for school?
   - How stressful do you think it is for the women to try to prepare their children for school in Australia?
   - How do you think these issues/concerns impact on the well-being of the women?

Transition to school:

6) What do you think it’s like for the African refugee women when their children begin kindergarten?
   - Can you tell me about any concerns or difficulties you think they experience at this time?

Playgroup support:

7) How do you think the African refugee women perceive the role of the playgroup in helping them through their children’s transition to school? (Before and after the children start kindergarten)
   - What do you think is the importance of playgroup for the women?
- How does the playgroup support refugee mothers as they prepare their child/children for school?
- How does the playgroup support refugee mothers when their children start kindergarten?
Appendix H

Interview Protocol for Kindergarten Teacher
Interview Protocol for Kindergarten Teacher

**Research Question:** “What meaning do African refugee mothers in a supported playgroup ascribe to their experiences of children’s school readiness?”

The interviewer will firstly introduce themself, and ensure the participant understands the purpose of the research. If they have no further questions, the researcher will proceed.

**General opening:**
1) Can you tell me about your involvement with African refugee families attending the school?
   - How many of these families have been involved with the ‘It Takes a Village’ playgroup?

**What school readiness means to African refugee women:**
2) What do you think the African refugee women understand about being school ready?
3) How important do you think it is for the African refugee women that children are prepared for starting school?
   - Why do you think it is/isn’t important to these women?

**Preparing children for school:**
4) Can you tell me about any issues or concerns you think the African refugee women experience in preparing their children for school?
   - How stressful do you think it is for the women to try to prepare their children for starting school in Australia?

**Transition to school:**
5) What do you think it’s like for the African refugee women when their children start kindergarten?
   - Can you tell me about any difficulties or concerns they face?
   - Can you tell me about their involvement in the school community?
   - How do you think the issues/concerns they face impact on the wellbeing of the women?
   - How is the experience of children starting kindergarten different for mainstream parents compared with the refugee women?

**Playgroup support:**
6) How do you think the African refugee women perceive the role of the playgroup in helping them before and after their children start kindergarten?
   - What do you think is the importance of playgroup for the women?
7) What do you think would help you improve the service you provide for African refugee women in relation to children’s transitions to kindergarten?
Appendix I:

Extracts from Researcher’s Journal Notes
Extracts of Journal Notes

Day One Observations

I was warmly welcomed to the playgroup on my first day of volunteering/observing. The playgroup appeared to embrace the cultural diversity represented by the attending families. This was evident in the multicultural pictures and figurines placed around the room, the multicultural music playing in the background, and the multicultural songs that were sung with the children. The staff were friendly and engaging, and were also from different ethnic backgrounds. On my first day, I overheard a staff member explaining to a visitor that they try to create a family type of atmosphere at the playgroup, and this is something I observed to be true.

I was introduced to the cultural worker at the playgroup, who was my designated translator throughout data collection. She was friendly, and gave me a big hug. She then held my hand as we spoke about what I was doing at the playgroup. Later I came across some research on African cultures which indicated that is common for African people to hold hands as they converse. Although it felt a little unusual at first, I appreciated the gesture, and knew this was her way of welcoming me into the playgroup.

Today, I spent most of my time engaging with the children as they played. While there was some structure to the morning, the children were mostly engaged in free play. While the children played and were supervised in one area, the mothers participated in English class in another room. Apart from when the mothers dropped their children off, I did not have much opportunity to engage with the African mothers. When they came into the playgroup I greeted them, but engaging them beyond this initial greeting was difficult, and I suspected this was largely due to the language barrier between us. I realised just how difficult it may be to build rapport and communicate with these women throughout data collection. It also reminded me of the importance of building a trusting relationship with them to ensure I proceeded sensitively with them and provided credible and rich information on their experiences. I was determined to get to know them more and was pleased when a staff member suggested that I join in on the English class at my next visit, to maximise my interaction with the women.

Day Two Observations

Today I spent the morning with the refugee mothers as they participated in their English class. I was asked to provide extra assistance for the women, as required, during the completion of designated tasks. The English teacher identified one Burundian woman in the class who particularly struggled with the activities. She could only speak very little English and could not see the whiteboard very well due to her poor eyesight. I later found out that this woman had only been in Australia about 18 months, and was also suffering serious health issues. I became aware of just how difficult her situation was, compounded by the fact that she was in a new and foreign country in which she could not communicate to many others. I admired her determination to attend classes despite her difficult circumstances, and found it encouraging to see her talking and laughing with her Burundian peers throughout the session.
This woman was incredibly shy, and seemed very unconfident in completing lesson tasks. As I sat with her during the class, I took any opportunity to encourage her in her endeavours to learn the English language. This was my first chance to spend some time with the women and attempt to verbally engage with them. I found it extremely interesting to talk with them; however, I was again reminded of the difficulties I may encounter during data collection as a result of the language barrier. The playgroup’s cultural worker and interpreter is going to be key to obtaining accurate and rich information of the women’s experiences. Today, I also spoke to the playgroup staff about providing a culturally appropriate meal for the mothers on the day of the focus group. They indicated the Burundian women “loved their food”, and they thought this would be a way to build rapport with the women and gain their respect.

Day Three Observations

Today I spent another session in the English class with the women. I noticed a few of the African women from my previous visit in the class, as well as some other new ‘faces’. I assisted the women as I did previously, and felt that they were becoming more familiar and comfortable with my presence. During this visit, my focus group and interview questions were also checked with the staff to ensure they were culturally appropriate and unlikely to cause the women any distress. The cultural worker and I then proceeded to talk to the women about my research project and they were provided the opportunity to ask any questions about it. A couple of the women clarified some of the details of the research, and all seemed fairly happy to be involved. I scheduled an appropriate time for the focus group, and confirmed that the staff would be available to supervise the women’s children during both the focus group and interviews.

Focus Group Notes

For today’s visit to the playgroup, I began by spending my time interacting with the children and staff as I had done previously. I made sure the cultural worker was ready to help me with interpreting, following the women’s English class, and prepared bits and pieces for the lunch that I would provide prior to the focus group. Lunch time came and the women seemed to really appreciate the gesture of me providing them with a meal. Although we did not exchange many words, they smiled at me and were friendly. I then proceeded to facilitate the focus group, which I found to be really interesting. Through the cultural worker, the women communicated their understanding of school readiness, and the struggles and concerns they experienced prior to, and during, their child’s first year at kindergarten. Throughout discussion, they also referred to broader factors relating to their resettlement experiences in Australia. I gained a sense that the difficulties they discussed in relation to their children’s transition to school were a small part of many issues they were currently experiencing being refugees in a new and foreign country. Many of the women seemed to communicate with a sense of urgency or panic in telling me their struggles. Language barriers for the mothers and their children was extensively discussed, and was a major issue identified to be affecting the women’s confidence levels and their willingness to engage with, and seek help from, staff and other parents at the school. At times, I was quite surprised as the willingness of the women to share their experiences with me, and felt privileged to be in this position. Overall,
the focus group was an excellent starting point for me in terms of building rapport with the women, and scoping out potential issues I wanted to explore further in subsequent individual interviews.

**Interview with Participant 1**

My first interview with one of the Burundian women happened a few days after the focus group, with Participant 1. As she spoke about her experiences, I was amazed to hear about all the many issues she had faced with her children. Something that really stood out to me in this interview was her lack of understanding about school when her older child in particular started at kindergarten. At this time, she was not attending playgroup. She indicated that she had never experienced formal education herself, and therefore, knew nothing about it when her children began school. She also talked about how much she valued the playgroup when she started attending with her younger child. Her interactions here seemed to bring her relief from the many problems she was experiencing. She felt that playgroup was the only way to really prepare her child for school, due to her lack of education, and inability to speak English. I was also made aware of the loneliness and isolation experienced by this woman, particularly prior to her attending the playgroup, and I am interested to explore this more in subsequent interviews with the other mothers.

**Interview with Participant 2**

Prior to starting the interview with Participant 2, she initiated a conversation with me as we waited for our translator. She spoke about her children - how old they were, how they read books at school, etc. I think she started talking about these things because they were related to the topics we spoke about in the group discussion which took place in the previous week. It seemed that she was keen to engage with me, and continue talking about her children and them going to school. She also mentioned that she gets ‘sick in the tummy’ when she eats sugar, whereby I think she was saying she was diabetic. She then went on to say how the playgroup staff help her with this problem. I think she was trying to say that the playgroup staff took her to the doctor. She said, “I love [staff’s name]” and as she said this, she placed her hand on her heart and smiled. She repeated this several times, and laughed. She seemed deeply grateful for the assistance of the staff. Participant 2 also seemed embarrassed of her speaking only a little English, and I took the opportunity to encourage her and point out the fact that she was able to have a conversation with me, and that she will improve her English with practice. She smiled and nodded.

Language seemed like a major issue for Participant 2 and seemed to influence how she viewed herself and interacted with others. Her inability to communicate with others seemed to impact on her. Consequently, she described how she did not converse with the school teachers, as she didn’t understand them, and was minimally involved in the school community, such as school carnivals. Participant 2 described how she felt that this negatively affected her child, and how she felt “sad” about this. Participant 2 noted stark differences between her children in terms of their readiness for school, and much of this was attributed to her and her children’s experiences at playgroup. She’d only been attending playgroup for 2
months when her older child started kindergarten, and she felt she was not ready to start school, because she did not know anything about school. For her son, however, Participant 2 thought he was ready, and discussed how playgroup played a significant role in this. This seemed to please Participant 2. Although she still felt incapable of personally helping her child transition to school, she appeared grateful for the support she received through the playgroup.