

**Overcoming Odds: Success Stories of Immigrant  
[Sub-Saharan African] University Students: A Well-being Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of sixteen Sub-Saharan African post-secondary students, and how they were able to succeed in spite of tremendous odds. The study was also designed to investigate ways to enhance educational attainment among recent immigrant students in Canadian schools and universities. The study was dedicated to advancing the understanding of recent immigrant students, from Sub-Saharan Africa, who had faced life challenges and multiple traumas. With a focus on their well-being, the development of this new knowledge will help policymakers and educators to develop strategies to enable culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse students to reach their potential in their new country.

The students selected for the study were resilient individuals who were seen as successful. Success stories of immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa who had overcome turmoil in their lives were investigated. These were newcomers to Canada who had succeeded against all odds both in Africa and Canada. This study was based on the premise that in a community all individuals may have access to the same resources, but unlike others, some individuals manage to overcome the problems that confront others (Pascale et al., 2010). These individuals are unique in their communities and their outcomes have deviated in a positive way from the norm (Pascale et al., 2010).

The practices and insights of sixteen Sub-Saharan African students that had proven to be the key to their resilience and success were described from in-depth interviews. Further understandings were derived from structured narrative analysis.

Using a qualitative research approach, this study developed insights into: the factors that hinder or enhance educational attainment and well-being among students; the perceptions of those students and the practices used by those who influence, support and educate them; and understanding of the practices that stimulate interests and contribute positively toward enhancing the education attainment and well-being of Sub-Saharan African students. The factors that enhance educational attainment and well-being among students were investigated through the use of support structures. These identified support structures were parental support, the social support they received from friends and social networks, religious/spiritual support, the support they received from their communities, physical support, financial support, the motivations or inspirations they received from teachers, school/university support, and career support.

The findings of this study expand and enrich both local and international literature on issues relating to youth or students who have experienced turmoil in their lives, and some of the factors that contribute to their resilience and well-being. These findings further shed light on the topic of enhancing education attainment and the subject of well-being of ethnic minorities and, in particular, Sub-Saharan African immigrant students who have experienced turmoil in their lives. While this topic has been gaining interest in recent years, the formulation and implementation of strategic educational practices to promote educational attainment and well-being for African or Sub-Saharan African students is in its infancy in Canadian. Hence, the new knowledge and insights presented within this study will help policymakers, support persons, and educators to develop strategies that will enable and encourage such students to thrive and flourish.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

Educational attainment has become a priority for many communities and countries worldwide. Communities are working hard to discover new ways to adequately educate their increasingly diverse youth population. Regardless of political system, level of economic development, or educational ideology, there has been an increase in momentum toward educational attainment directed at raising educational performance among diverse and multicultural school or university age population in countries around the world (Samoff, 2007). Specifically, improving student attainment is a priority for the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report, 2010). Educators, stakeholders, parents and the communities, and ministries of education across Canada, such as the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan, have been examining different approaches that can be used to improve education outcome for every student in the increasingly multicultural society, with the common goal to prepare all students for success in their regions (Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report, 2010).

A major hindrance to overall educational efforts for all countries who have embraced multiculturalism has been the widening gap in educational attainment between the mainstream students and the rapidly growing population of ethnic minorities and, especially amongst certain groups of immigrant students. The increasing population of ethnic minority students in Canadian schools has arisen because of the gradual change in the makeup of those immigrating. For instance, Statistics Canada (2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2010) stated that unlike in the past, recent immigrants to Canada are mostly members of ethnic minority groups. In the first half of the twentieth century, most immigrants came from Europe to forge a new life in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007). However, towards the second half of the century, the demographic makeup of the country began to change as “non-Europeans started arriving in large numbers as economic immigrants or refugees, or family members of previous immigrants” (Statistics Canada, 2007). As a result, many school districts and universities across Canada have continued to experience significant challenges associated with the rapid growth in the number of minority students, as schools and universities become more culturally and linguistically diverse (Howard, 2007). Many ethnic minority and recent immigrant students are socio-economically disadvantaged, in comparison to their mainstream counterparts. The socio-economic gap between them and their

mainstream counterparts remains wide. Fullan (2010) argued that if the gap between low-income and high income students were narrowed, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would be higher than present.

According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), “results in all countries where the percentage of low performers decreased between 2000 and 2009 – socio-economically disadvantaged boys performed [worse than] other groups” (PISA in Focus, 2011). As a key member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and a country proud of its multicultural status, Canada is one of the countries experiencing the challenges described above. For instance, despite efforts toward education equity, the challenge for school systems in Canadian provinces, such as Saskatchewan, has been high-rate of school drop-outs among ethnic minorities, and low levels of educational attainment among new immigrant students in the province. Enhancing the educational attainment of recent immigrant or ethnic minority students has been one of the major concerns for the province. Providing recent immigrant or ethnic minority students with a quality education has been regarded as the best way to narrow the gap and to integrate new immigrant youth into the mainstream Canadian society (Howard, 2003). These increasing concerns have been accompanied by significant changes in the way schools with significant numbers of ethnic minority or recent immigrant students are governed and managed. The reason for these significant changes is that, like most regions in the world, Saskatchewan needs an educated population across the board to become one of the most productive provinces. Key economics and education reformists agree that human capital is an important factor in development (Bernt & Terrell, 2007; Fullan, 2010). It is one of the main reasons why developing new strategies that can enable every student to thrive and flourish in the increasingly diverse society has become a key factor.

As mentioned earlier, most ethnic minority students living in multicultural countries, such as Canada, face numerous challenges. Many come from low-income families; some of who are orphans and others come from war zones. Many of these ethnic minority youth have been exposed to loss or traumatic events at some point in their lives (Bonanno, 2004). For instance, some have faced numerous obstacles including extreme poverty, confronted with the deaths of close friends and relatives, parents with alcohol or drug use, physical and sexual abuse, and divorce. However, not every one of those ethnic minority youth copes with disturbing events in the same way. Some continue to experience acute distress from which they are unable to

recover. Acute distresses cause many to drop out of school (Bonanno, 2004). There are some who seem to recover quickly but then begin to experience unexpected health problems or difficulties concentrating or enjoying life the way they used to.

Nevertheless, there are individuals within the group that have experienced these upheavals who are able to recover quite quickly from hardships without acute distress, long-term health problems or difficulty. This group of individuals is referred to as being resilient. Those who are resilient are able to endure the temporary upheaval caused by loss or potentially traumatic events remarkably well, with no apparent disruption in their ability to function at work or in close relationships, and seem to move on to new challenges with apparent ease (Bonanno, 2004). These traumatic events would have been enough to debilitate them. Instead, they use these as inspiration to work harder toward gaining a better life and the rewards overcoming affords. Throughout their lives, these resilient young individuals learn to see everything as a learning opportunity instead of obstacles. They know they cannot change what is happening around them, but they have the power to change what is happening within them. They develop the ability to bounce back from frustrations and to recover from setbacks. They learn to adapt to change, stress or problems and are able to take things in stride. The result of bouncing back is a feeling of success and confidence. They are determined not to become victims of their environment; they stand firm in their mission to succeed, no matter what. Those succeeding against the odds are characterized by their positive approaches to life and learning, or increased self-confidence or interest in education. Resilient individuals have the personality trait of hardiness. Bonanno (2004) stated that:

A growing body of evidence suggests that the personality trait of hardiness helps to buffer exposure to extreme stress. Hardiness consists of three dimensions: being committed to finding meaningful purpose in life, the belief that one can influence one's surroundings and the outcome of events, and the belief that one can learn and grow from both positive and negative life experiences. Armed with this set of beliefs, hardy individuals have been found to appraise potentially stressful situations as less threatening, thus minimizing the experience of distress. Hardy individuals are also more confident and better able to use active coping and social support, thus helping them deal with the distress they do experience. (p. 25)

Given the increasing numbers of ethnic minority students coming from non-European countries, the government, parents, educators and all stakeholders are faced with the increasing challenge of educating all young people, with different racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, well-being, and psychological backgrounds. The research investigated ways to enhance educational attainment among struggling recent immigrants or ethnic minority students.

Thus the stories, knowledge, practices and experiences from the 16 Sub-Saharan African students who have succeeded in spite of tremendous odds will help educators, universities, schools, parents, policymakers and other stakeholders in education develop strategies that can reverse poor education performance among low-income students, including those with despite odds against them. The sixteen students had developed resiliency. They are individuals who were able to recover quite quickly from hardships without acute distress, long-term health problems or difficulty. They refused to give up on education. They learned to survive these circumstances, and overcame adversity to become productive members of society (Cause et al., 2003). They had found ways to get on with their lives as adolescents or young adults in a new country with impressive competence. Adding some of the findings in this study to the development and implementation of new education attainment strategies can assist students facing significant life challenges become full members of a free and democratic society, and so contribute positively toward the province and country's effort to remaining competitive in the rapidly changing global economy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore why some Sub-Saharan African post-secondary students in Canada have succeeded with respect to educational attainment and subjective well-being despite significant hardships.

### **The Researcher's Story**

The researcher's story offers an understanding of how or why this topic was developed. My (the researcher's) life story is one of overcoming adversities and embracing challenging circumstances that many may consider unsolvable or insurmountable. Despite these odds, I am now on course to attain a significant educational achievement and, hopefully, a good life.

I was born to a father, a teacher who graduated from a teacher college, and an illiterate, but peace-loving and caring mother in Tombura, a small town in Western Equatoria State, South



Sudan. I am the seventh of eight children. In 1988, I was separated from my beloved parents and most of my siblings whom I never saw again because of the war. My parents and most of my siblings died. It is worth noting that I have never been back to the region of my birth since separating from my parents and siblings in 1988.

When in South Sudan during the civil war, I witnessed numerous brutalities and abuse of power. I was captured and tortured by armed groups. I witnessed the killings of innocent civilians, including women, children and the elderly. I call myself lucky because, unlike most of those who were captured, I am alive today to talk about those dark moments. After completing my high school in Khartoum, Sudan, I was forced to flee the country empty-handed. After three months of difficult journey, I managed to cross to Eritrea and then Ethiopia and then Kenya where I spent seven years of difficult refugee life in the semi desert and hot climate of north-eastern Kenya. In short, it was simply seven years of hell on earth. I experienced extreme hardships that I thought I would never survive. I barely had enough to eat; I suffered from numerous illnesses from which I narrowly survived; we the refugees suffered from armed robberies by bandits crossing the border from Somalia to our camp in north-eastern Kenya. There were times I had no soap to wash myself and my dirty clothing; there were times I could go a year without holding a cent in my hand; there were times I could feel completely powerless, confused, helpless and no one to turn to for comfort. I had no room to call my own. I had no bed to sleep on. I was sleeping only on a single blanket and my pillow was a piece of wood. My skin was hard and dry because of extreme hardship. At night we were always visited by scorpions. It was extremely hot, dry and dusty, both day and night. When it rained it could flood with floating dirt and human feces. It was also the period of multiplication of malaria carrying mosquitoes. Health risks were highest after rain and flooding, especially when chickens, goats, sheep, or donkeys belonging to Somali refugees died of cholera and there was no one to collect their decomposing carcasses. There were vultures everywhere fighting over the carcasses. The sight and stench were often unbearable. This was also a favorable condition for disease carrying houseflies to multiply into millions. They were responsible for the spread of cholera, diseases, illnesses and deaths in the refugee camp. There was also high rate of malaria and other infectious and noninfectious diseases. Frogs enjoyed the flood waters. They were everywhere and were a nuisance throughout the night. Candle lights and kerosene lamps attracted them to where we lived. They could rest in people's shoes, even under blankets. There

were times I barely had clothing to put on my back or boots to wear while walking on an empty stomach in those dusty, dry and thorny bushes and with the hot sun burning my skin as I was searching for wild food and firewood for survival. There was a time I suffered from night blindness because of what they said was lack of vitamin A.

To make matters worse, armed bandits visited our camp one night when I had the night blindness. I could not run or hide because I could not see. I survived because, for whatever reason, they decided to go back just before reaching the place where I was. Today, I can call that divine intervention. The bandits shot and killed one person and wounded several others not far from where I was that night. There were some days that I almost lost hope when everything seemed insurmountable. I believe in God, but I did not feel His presence. The more I prayed the worse things seemed to become. I wanted to die. I prayed for death but it never came. I cannot remember how many joyous moments I experienced in the camp because each minute there seemed like hell; in fact, I lost several friends to suicide who decided to quit because they could not bear that difficult situation any longer. If it were not because I was afraid of going to hell after death, I would have also committed suicide just like some of my friends did. I developed psychological problems, anxieties, and hopelessness. I also suffered discrimination from the locals in the region simply because I was a refugee. They called me a smuggler of illegal guns and a criminal, though I had never held a gun in my life nor committed any crime; my only crime was fleeing my country because of a senseless war, something I had no control over. In fact, the list of my sufferings is long. But, to cut the story short, I managed to survive those ordeals.

It is only now that I can recall and understand what helped me along; it did not seem obvious then. There was no end of my sufferings in sight until I got the opportunity to come to Canada in 2002 as a refugee with permanent resident status. The first thing I did, less than a week after my arrival in Saskatoon, was to submit an application to the University of Saskatchewan. It was a joyous moment, for me, when I received the acceptance letter from the university three weeks later. I immediately registered for my undergraduate classes and applied for a student loan. Although the courses were challenging at the early stages, I worked hard and graduated with an honors degree in International Studies in 2006. One of the major challenges I encountered at the early stages was the use of computer and lack of skills in research and writing. The kind of life I had in Africa had prevented me from having contact with a computer. That was why its use was a challenge I had to overcome. For me, an undergraduate degree was not

enough. So I applied to pursue a master's degree in the School of Public Policy where I graduated with Masters of Public Administration in 2009. I knew that I could find a job with that master's degree but my ambition while in Africa was not to stop until I obtain a PhD in Canada. It prompted me to submit an application to the Department of Educational Administration where I gained acceptance as a PhD student in 2010. I would not have enrolled in or completed the PhD program without vital help of the department and some wonderful professors and staff who fought for, provided and assisted me with scholarships, bursaries, and grants. Although my life journey has been extremely difficult, it has been very fruitful, at least academic wise.

The adversities I have been through have taught me about the mysteries of life. I have learned that there are different ways that individuals like me choose to respond to life's circumstances. Many of the people I knew in the refugee camp chose suicide. Others chose violence or took part in unproductive practices that were not helpful for their future. Others chose shortcuts that simply turned into ashes. But only few took the long and tedious route of education after they left the refugee camp for life in western countries. During my life journey so far, I have learned that life may be hard, but we do not always have to be negative or give up to it. I have learned that, while we may not choose our circumstances, we do always have a choice. If we choose the way that leads toward the goals we have set, we should also get prepared for unexpected unpleasant experiences we may encounter that might seem to go on forever. For instance, in the face of setbacks, disappointments, frustration, depression, rejection, pains, and hardships, we can choose whether we succumb to defeat, self-pity, victimhood and despair, or we can learn to be resilient, persistent, and goal-oriented while relying on the human spirit that is already within us.

It was these experiences and the possibilities that emerged after I chose to focus on what I could do, versus what I could not do, in the midst of what appeared to be insurmountable challenges that the idea of this dissertation topic was developed. I was not the only individual in the refugee camp who encountered tremendous challenges, nor was I the only one who got the opportunity to come to the Western world. There were hundreds of others in the refugee camp who also got the same chance to go to Australia, New Zealand, United States or Canada. But, despite the enormous educational opportunities that have been available to us in our new countries, only limited numbers of us have managed to enroll in post-secondary education.

Others have taken various routes that have been less productive. The choices that many of us made have put us in direct collision with the cultures, rules and regulations of our new countries. Most of the young people I was with in the camp who relocated to western countries have failed to be productive members of their societies.

This made me begin to wonder why so many of us have taken such negative or unproductive routes. I knew many in my refugee camp who were more intelligent than I was. I thought they would succeed in life quite easily the moment they set their feet on Western soil. Yet their lives have been filled, not with hope, but absolute misery and hopelessness. Only few have become goal-oriented. Some of the questions I asked myself were: What makes some individuals goal-oriented and overcomers of situations that others may consider unsolvable or insurmountable? What makes some individuals resilient and allows them to discover and make use of the human spirits that are already within them to overcome obstacles and attain a significant life achievement? Looking at myself, I am not what some may consider smart or intelligent. I see myself just as an average guy with average intelligence. But what I know about myself is that I do not give up on something once I commit myself to it. I see myself as a survivor or an overcomer. I am resilient and goal-oriented. I like taking risks. I am a positive and compassionate person by nature. I hate violence and divisions. I hate making excuses for my failures in life. I am a God fearing person who trusts and fears God in good and bad times. I learned to trust in God from my parents, especially my father who was one time a deacon and was on his way to becoming a priest when other responsibilities forced him to quit. I am a determined individual who developed a vision of obtaining a PhD when I was in an elementary school and had persisted, no matter what. I often ask myself, why have I and others become resilient while some of my smarter friends, with whom I lived in the refugee camp, have not? What motivated me and what discouraged them? Why do few individuals often see what happened to them in a positive way while most others under similar circumstances continue to view their situations negatively?

Those were some of the questions that piqued my interest in exploring an explanation of what make some people resilient and goal-oriented than others. With the help of my supervisor, I managed to develop a topic and research questions that would lead me to these findings. I wanted to find some answers to those questions. Based on my experience, resilience and the ability to overcome challenges is something that is learned. I do not believe that I was born a

resilient person. There were periods in which I felt completely hopeless and demoralized. But something happened that enabled me to rebound. I believe that something is what helps us develop resilience and become goal-oriented. For instance, though I suffered alone, I have never been alone. There were plenty of spiritual and academic books that I read that kept me sane, positive, and strong in the midst of what seemed to be an endless hell on earth. Although I was separated with my parents/family years back, I did not forget the vital life lessons I learned from my parents. I exploited those lessons the best I could. I also received support at critical moments from various sources that kept me moving forward. There also have been numerous role models from whom I have learned in my life's journey. I believe that the various supports I have received have been instrumental in helping me to become resilient and goal-oriented. These supports have led me to become positive and be able to accomplish my goals.

My life experiences and those of the people I interviewed for this study have taught me that no one possesses unique abilities to overcome odds. Resilience is something that can be learned and developed. I have also learned that some key support structures can enable individuals to overcome odds to succeed. Like some of the participants, there were times that I faced trauma and anxiety. Like the sixteen participants, my life changed because of something positive. If resilience can be learned then it is possible to learn what make people resilient. Some researchers have found that individuals achieve resilience through positive adaptation and development despite the significant hurdles or adversity (Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000). They negotiate, adapt to, or manage significant sources of stress, anxiety or trauma by taking advantage of the assets and resources within and the support structures that the environments facilitate (Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000; Windle, 2011). Thus, the society can learn by studying resilient individuals who have overcome adversities and the support structures that facilitated those so that the lessons learnt from them can contribute toward developing strategies that can be of great benefit for helping individuals experiencing similar problems.

### **Problem Statement**

Saskatchewan and Canada want all students to have high educational attainment, without major hindrances to their best possible academic performances. Governments seek to create environments where educators, policymakers, parents, students, universities, and schools are well informed of the problems affecting ethnic minority and struggling students' educational attainment, their well-being, and what needs to be done to have best outcomes. Unfortunately,

many ethnic minority and Sub-Saharan African students cannot complete school or university because of the difficult life challenges they face, including those that affect their well-being.

Many African students come from low-income families, some are orphans, some come from war zones, and some have faced numerous major obstacles including extreme poverty, suppressive culture, health issues, and life with parents with alcohol or drug use, family breakdown, loss of the family members and friends, physical and sexual abuse, and divorce (Hrabowski et al., 2002). Although many of this group of young people do not perform well in school or give up, there are some resilient ones who, despite the tremendous odds against them, succeed. There are many definitions of resilience. For the purpose of this study, resilience is referred to as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. Resilience means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences” (American Psychological Association, 2015). This study’s author also agrees with Bonanno’s (2004, p. 1) definition that referred to resilience as “The ability of [individuals] in otherwise normal circumstances that are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning.” People who are resilient are ordinary and not extraordinary individuals who have experienced difficulties and stress (American Psychological Association, 2015). But the major difference is that they are overcomers (American Psychological Association, 2015). The tremendous challenges, family, and personal hardships those young overcomers have faced in their lives might have been enough to debilitate them. Instead, they used these as inspiration to work harder toward attaining a better life, and the rewards follow them. Such young persons are exceptional individuals or outliers in their communities. Throughout their lives, these exceptional individuals learn to see everything as a learning opportunity instead of obstacles. They know that they cannot really change what is happening around them, but they have the power to change what is happening within. They develop the ability to bounce back from frustrations and to recover from setbacks. They learn to adapt to change, stress or problems and were able to take things in stride. The result of bouncing back is a feeling of success and confidence. They are determined not to become victims of their environment; they stand firm in their mission to succeed, no matter what. They are characterised by their positive approaches to life and learning, or increased self-

confidence or interest in education. We can learn from these outliers in order to promote new understanding that will enable key actors in Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada to help youth succeed in life, through education and support.

Educational attainment among ethnic minority students, especially those experiencing difficult life challenges continue to lag behind that of mainstream Canadian students. With many dropping out of school or university altogether, the government, parents, educators and all stakeholders are faced with the increasing challenges of educating all young people with different racial, ethnic, cultural, social, economic, well-being, and psychological backgrounds. If we ignore these problems, Saskatchewan and Canada may miss the opportunity to train the much needed labor force that would help narrow the income gap between low-income and high-income population, and increase the GDP than it is at present (Fullan, 2010). Saskatchewan and Canada need to assist recent immigrant ethnic minority students, especially those struggling and or have tremendous odds against them, succeed and become full members of a free and democratic society, and so contributing significantly toward the province and country's effort to remain competitive in the rapid changing global economy.

### **Research Questions**

The general questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. To what do Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students attribute their success? What has helped them overcome tremendous odds and roadblocks?
2. How did external support structures contribute to the resilience, well-being and success of Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students?
3. What do these post-secondary students believe could be changed to provide more effective support for the success of immigrant students (school/post-secondary) from Sub-Saharan Africa?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study shows that overcoming barriers to life and educational attainment is possible. The study contributes to the advancement of knowledge in educational administration. The study serves as a valuable tool for the government who wants to help its young, multiracial and multicultural citizens to achieve their potential, as well as for parents, counsellors, stakeholders, teachers, and educators at all academic levels. The study provides students, parents, schools,

universities, policymakers and other education stakeholders with insights into what enables socio-economically disadvantaged students to fulfil their potentials. This study will also be helpful to practitioners in training.

The study was dedicated to advancing the understanding and teaching of recent immigrant or ethnic minority students facing tremendous challenges and their well-being. Applying this new knowledge to helping policymakers, schools, and educators develop strategies that will enable culturally and linguistically diverse students thrive and flourish and reach their full potential to become full members of a free and democratic society. This will also enable these students to contribute positively toward increasing the GDP and the province and country's effort to remain competitive in the rapidly changing global economy. Given that insufficient research has been conducted within this area, the research makes a contribution toward the development of new knowledge about the practices of resilient students and its application in enhancing the lives of the increasingly diverse Saskatchewan and Canadian students and of the schools and communities in which they live and will work. The research findings encourage policy shapers and government leaders to promote a new understanding of ethnic minorities, recent immigrants and those with tremendous odds against them. The findings also provide an understanding of the well-being of recent immigrant children, the support structures and instruments necessary for their well-being, and can promote dialogue that reshape discussions on the best ways to educate culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited in ways that included those set by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study.

1. The study was delimited to the analysis of a data base obtained through interviews of selected group of Sub-Saharan African post-secondary students who have overcome odds.
2. Given the time constraint and nature of the study, the research did not go beyond the purpose and scope outlined. Though the findings advance our understanding of the resilient students who have overcome barriers to educational attainment and personal well-being, future studies are needed to determine how these new findings might be incorporated and implemented for specific populations and contexts.



3. This study focused mostly on exploring positive explanations for why some students have succeeded despite difficult life challenges, rather than what they lacked.

### **Limitations**

This study had some limitations:

1. The study was limited to the exploration of the well-being and educational attainment of recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa perspectives; and given that all respondents involved in the study were located within a particular geographical region, generalizability outside of students originally from the Sub-Saharan African region is unknown.
2. The respondents did not represent a variety of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups beyond Sub-Saharan Africa. The respondents were selected to represent a regional (Sub-Saharan African), and socio-economic groups.
3. The study was limited by the participants' perceptions of overcoming barriers to educational attainment and subjective well-being.
4. The researcher was not able to make direct comparisons between immigrant groups.
5. The researcher's ability, as an interviewer, was limited with respect to his ability to definitively interpret the perceptions of the respondents regarding factors influencing the education attainment and well-being of the students under study.
6. The lack of reflection on the topic by some of the respondents had a weakening impact on the data and the findings.
7. The biases of the researcher are acknowledged as possible limitations affecting the interpretation and use of the data to produce findings.
8. The wide range of topics dealt with may have limited the depth of presentation of findings in some respects.
9. Booker Typologies of stories was a convenience choice. His approach to plots resonated with the researcher and seemed useful to this dissertation. The researcher acknowledges that there may be possible limitations affecting the categorization of the participants stories based on the Booker's method used.

## **Assumptions**

In this study, I assumed that:

1. Canadians generally aspire for every student to achieve their highest level of educational and personal well-being possible. Low levels of educational attainment and well-being among many recent immigrant or ethnic minority students in Canadian schools compel policymakers, schools, and educators to develop strategies that will enable struggling students to thrive and flourish.
2. The perceptions of all stakeholders are valuable for constructing a model for enhancing educational attainment and well-being of recent immigrant students in Canada.
3. The questions asked of participants were sufficiently comprehensive, reliable and valid for respondents to describe accurately their perceptions of educational achievement and well-being of students.
4. Perceptions of students reflect the reality and ideals of enhancement of education attainment and well-being of students.
5. The data collection and analysis procedures did not introduce a bias to the research such that erroneous results were reported. Each participant was satisfied with their narrative as presented by the researcher.
6. The study was based on a conviction that certain themes do indeed resonate across the wide diversity of cultural dimensions found among ethnic minority, religious groups and recent immigrant students. Furthermore, identifying themes which may resonate across nationalities and cultures, educators may be better able to prepare course materials, adopt teaching strategies, and develop social structures and instruments that will enhance the learning experience, the well-being, as well as the personal and career development of ethnic minority and recent immigrant students in Canada.
7. For the purposes of sense making and organizing the Booker Typologies of stories serves the purpose of differentiating and showing commonalities in the plots of stories told by the participants.

## **Definitions**

***Educational attainment:*** Refers to individuals who have completed secondary and postsecondary education without dropping out of school. They have excellence in all academic disciplines, in class as well as extracurricular activities, including excellence in sporting,

behaviour, confidence, communication skills, punctuality, assertiveness, arts, culture, and the like. They are also among those who have developed to be among the highest household income earners and wealth and have high levels of well-being (Howell, 2009; Rath & Harter, 2010).

***Enhancing educational (academic) attainment:*** Although there may be disagreements about what it means to enhance educational attainment, what it means in this study is improving education effectiveness for students to be able to develop both academic skills and positive attitudes about themselves and about the value of positive education. Students must generally have excellent grades, high levels of well-being, and be able to graduate, be able to find a job and have good life (Humphrey et al., 1999).

***Good life:*** Refers to living life free of trauma or worry. Good life consists of being positive, healthy, confident, having positive relationships, being happy, being able to acquire what one needs in life, or being able to live a satisfactory life.

***Recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa:*** The researcher's reference to recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa in this study includes foreign-born immigrant children from Sub-Saharan Africa as well as the native-born children of Sub-Saharan African-born parents.

***Resilience:*** “The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences” (American Psychological Association, 2015). Bonanno (2004) defined resilience as “The ability of [individuals] in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning”.

***Sub-Saharan Africans:*** Refers to the people who come from the geographical area of the African continent that lies south of the Sahara Desert (Millennium Development Goals, 2012).

***Success:*** In this study, success refers to the accomplishment of one's goals. These can be educational attainment, attainment of wealth, or attainment of position or honor in the society.

***Turmoil:*** The researcher adopted the Merriam Webster online dictionary definition of turmoil in this study. Merriam Webster defined turmoil as “a state or condition of extreme confusion,

agitation, or commotion.” It also refers to traumatic events that the participants in this study have experienced.

**Well-being:** In this study, well-being refers to the positive condition of an individual that includes the presence of positive emotions; it enables an individual to realize his/her aspirations, satisfy his/her needs, cope with the environment, develop resilience, have positive functioning, judge life positively, be satisfied with life, and live a long, productive, and fruitful life (Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014). Well-being integrates mental and physical health (CDC, 2014). Individuals with high levels of well-being are associated with a range of positive outcomes, including resilience, effective learning, high educational attainment outcomes, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behaviour, and good health and life expectancy; individuals with high levels of well-being are also associated with open-ended happiness to satisfaction with different domains, while the ones with low well-being are associated with negative happenings (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010a; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009b; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Huppert & So, 2013). The factors that help individuals to have high levels of well-being include parental support, community support, spiritual support, physical well-being support, financial support, teacher support, school/university support, social network support, and career support.

### **Outline of Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters and an appendix section. Chapter One provides an abstract, a brief introduction of the dissertation topic, problem statement, purpose of study, research questions, the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study, as well as definitions and outlines. Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature. Chapter Three describes the research methods how respondents were selected, the forms of data collection, how data were analyzed, the strategies used to increase the trustworthiness of the study, ethical considerations, and the role and background of the researcher. Chapter Four presents and highlights the results of the data analysis. In this chapter, the 16 stories of the participants are presented. The data describes in great detail along with the themes that emerged from the data collected. The themes presented are accompanied with quotes from participants. Chapter Five categorizes the stories into seven basic plot structures, discusses the support structures that the participants said enabled them to overcome challenges to succeed and the participants’ advice. Chapter Six offers summary of the study, and discusses the findings of the

study, the cross-analysis representing different perspectives, and the implications. Chapter Six ends with concluding remarks and is followed by the references section. The dissertation closes with an appendix that includes the list of the interview questions that the researcher used in the data collection process.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

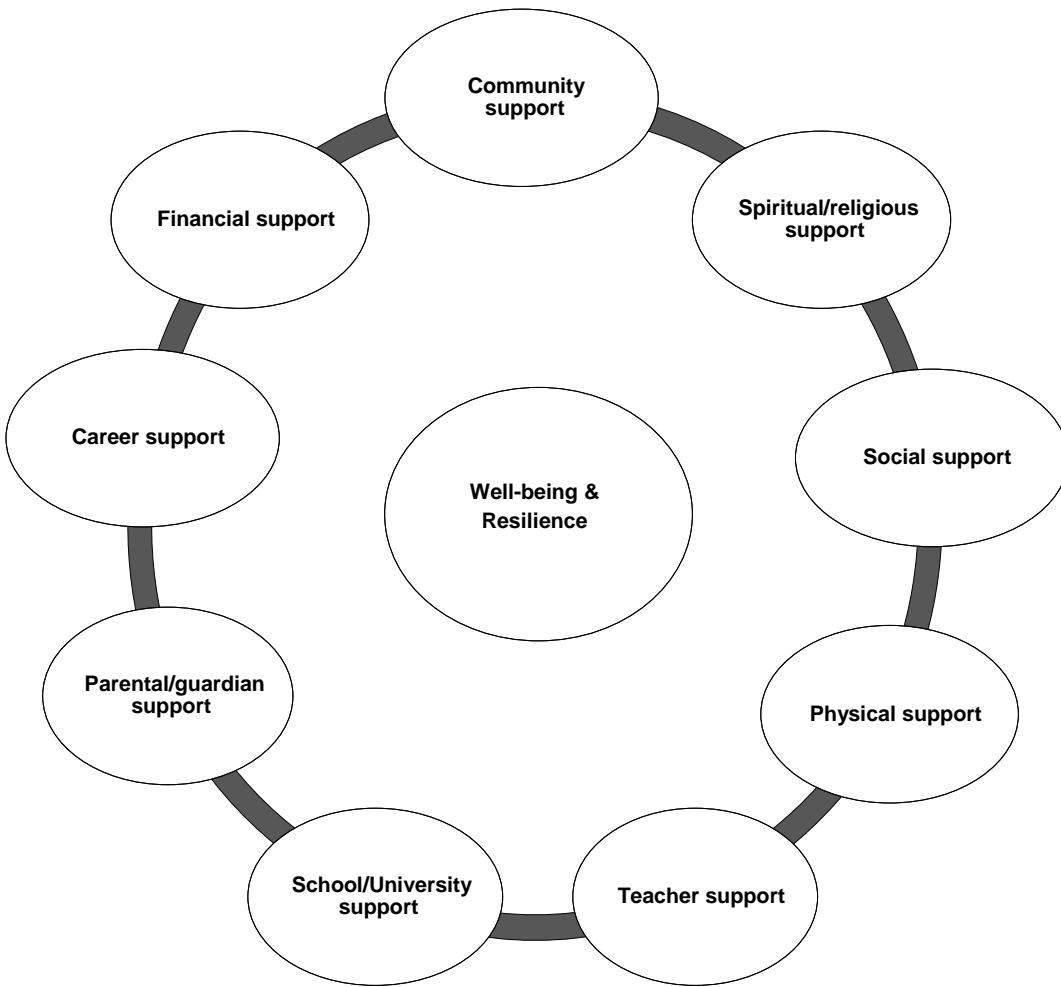
### **Literature Review**

The issue of education improvement has become a priority worldwide. Regardless of political system, level of economic development, or educational ideology, there has been an increase in momentum toward educational reform directed at raising school performance in both developed and developing countries (Samoff, 2007). Like any ministry of education in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and emerging economies, improving educational attainment for every student is a priority for ministries of education in provinces across Canada. Together with educators, stakeholders, parents and the community, Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education, for instance, is examining different approaches that can be used to improve education outcomes for all students, with the common goal to prepare students for success in the province, Canada, and the world (Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report, 2010).

Although there have been significant attempts by educators, policymakers, economists, and other stakeholders to improve student performance among the increasingly diverse students, neither the restructuring processes nor PISA, Assessment for Learning (AFL), and Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) have produced the results their proponents desired (Fuhrman, 2003). According to PISA in Focus (2011), socio-economically disadvantaged majority of whom are ethnic minority students continue to perform well below other groups in all countries where the percentage of low performers decreased between 2000 and 2009. This is especially a major challenge for countries with increasing ethnic minorities and immigrant population such as Canada. Recent immigrant population is mostly members of visible minorities coming from nations, such as Sub-Saharan African countries that do not have Canadian official languages (English and French) as their first languages. Many come from war zones, have survived massive trauma of wars, adversities, and experienced loss or witnessed atrocities outside the realm of normal human experience. Despite living in advanced countries, many continue to suffer from low levels of well-being as well as long-term symptoms of trauma associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Luthar, 2003). Across Canada, many school districts are experiencing rapid growth in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students from low-income families (Howard, 2007). Many of these students suffer from low self-esteem, hopelessness, and are unable to perform well in school. The low academic

performance among recent immigrant minority students presents formidable challenges to Canada and Saskatchewan's effort to improve education outcomes for every student and prepare students for success, so they can enable the nation to compete internationally.

As Canadian communities are committed to developing strategies that enable every student to experience educational attainment that accords with their potential, many wonder why many ethnic minority students continue to have lower levels of educational attainment than their mainstream counterparts. The major reasons why many ethnic minority students continue to have lower levels of educational attainment than their mainstream counterparts maybe that despite all the policies that have been developed and implemented over the years, many ethnic minority and recent immigrant students, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa, have continued to face difficult life challenges compared too many of their Canadian peers. The major life challenges they continue to face are yet to be addressed. There is a growing body of literature that has offered different theories and alternative strategies that can help every student reach their educational goals, especially ethnic minorities, recent immigrants and those experiencing difficult life challenges. An increasing body of literature identifies resilience, high levels of well-being, and support structures as what every student needs to have the educational attainment he/she needs to succeed in life. Resilient people succeed despite odds against them. Given that this study explores explanations for why some Sub-Saharan African students succeed in spite of the odds against them, the current literature review allows an exploration of the explanations for why these students succeed. More specifically, the literature review will explore the role that well-being and resilience play in determining the success of individuals who have experienced trauma. More emphasis will be put on the reasons why resilient people succeed despite tremendous odds against them. The literature will explore several elements or factors that work together to increase the levels of resilience and the general well-being or self-esteem of an individual. These factors help individuals perceive the world in a more positive way and increase their chances to succeed in the goals that they have set before them (Howell, 2009). These factors are summarized in Figure 2.1 bellow.



**Figure 2.1 Well-being and Resilience in Context: Patterns of External Influences**

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the major external support structures for well-being and resilience emerging from the literature were parent/guardian support, school/university support, teacher support, physical support, social support, spiritual/religious support, community support, financial support, and career support. From the literature, there were powerful relationships evident among the prevailing conditions and the nature of external support, psychological responses, well-being and resilience.

The concept of well-being and resilience will be analyzed in this section, including the elements of well-being, the characteristics of resilient people, negative impact of trauma on Sub-Saharan African adolescents, and the support structure needed for the development of well-being and resilience in every individual. Given that this study focuses specifically on recent immigrant youth from Sub-Saharan Africa, who are among the segment of recent immigrant population



experiencing rapid growth, the literature review will begin with the examination of the immigration trend and demographic changes occurring in Canada.

### **Demographic Changes and Visible Minority Growth**

Many medium or large urban centers in Canada, such as Saskatoon and Regina, are experiencing rapid growth in the number of minority youth, who are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. Many come from low-income families, and many have experienced tremendous challenges in their childhood to adolescence (Howard, 2007). It is worth noting that over the past century, Canada has received more than 13 million immigrants from around the world, making it one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world (Statistics Canada, 2007). In the first half of the twentieth century, most immigrants came from Europe to forge a new life in Canada. From the second half of the century, however, the demographic makeup of the country began to change drastically as “non-Europeans started arriving in large numbers as economic immigrants or refugees, or as family members of previous immigrants” (Statistics Canada, 2007). According to Statistics Canada (2007; 2009a; 2009b; and 2010), in recent decades visible minority population in Canada has been growing at a much faster rate than its total population.

Demographic change is occurring because of several factors, including low fertility and aging among the Caucasian population, and less people from European decent immigrating to Canada (Statistics Canada, from 1971 to 2001). According to Statistics Canada (2009a), between 2001 and 2006, Canada’s visible minority population growth was 27 percent versus five percent in the general population. This statistic shows that ethnic minority population growth rate has now surpassed that of the general population. The growth was largely due to increasing rate of immigration from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America and the Middle East (Statistics Canada, 2009a). According to the federal report, in 2006, about 70 percent of the visible minority was born outside Canada (Statistics Canada, 2009a). In 2008, 247, 200 immigrants were accepted to Canada. This figure represented a rate of eight newcomers per one thousand people (Statistics Canada, 2009a). This rate has been on the increase in recent years. For instance,

From 2001 to 2006, almost 60 % of newcomers to Canada came from Asia (including the Middle East). This contrasts with 35 years earlier, when Asians accounted for 12% of the newcomers. Following the Second World War, most immigrants came from European

countries [to Canada]. The proportion of immigrants from African countries was more than tripled from 3% in the late 1960s to 11% in the early 2000s. (Statistics Canada, 2009a)

Canada's population reached 33.3 million in July 2008, an increase of 10 percent from 30.2 million in 1998 (Statistics Canada, 2009b). This increase was largely because of international immigration (Statistics Canada, 2009b). International immigration is expected to contribute even more to Canada's population "growth in coming years as the number of deaths is expected to increase with the aging of the baby boomers ... [and] Canada's fertility rate of 1.6 children per woman is well below the replacement level of 2.1" (Statistics Canada, 2009b). Canada's population is aging and living longer. For instance, "from 1956 to 2006, the median age of the Canadian population went from 27.2 years to 38.9, a gain of more than 10 years over a span of half a century" (Statistics Canada, 2009b); and in 2005, life expectancy for males was 78.0 years and 82.7 years for females (Statistics Canada, 2009b). As Canada's population continues to age and the fertility rate continues to decline, it is the visible minority children who are expected to occupy schools and contribute to the country's economy in future years. It is projected that by 2017, about 20 percent of Canada's population, or between 6.3 and 8.5 million people could be visible minorities, with about half coming from South Asia or China (Statistics Canada, 2007). The population of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa is also expected to increase.

The demographic trends in Canada represent the rapid changes occurring in all the provinces. For instance, following decades of decline, Saskatchewan's population began to increase in 2007 (Saskatchewan Education Indicator Report, 2010). It is estimated that in 2010 the province's population was at its highest level of the past 60 years (Saskatchewan Education Indicator Report, 2010).

Consistent with Canada's trend, the proportion of Saskatchewan's population under the age of 20 years has decreased 14.2 percentage points between 1971 and 2009 (40.5% to 26.3%). Even so, Saskatchewan's proportion of children and youth remains among the highest in the country. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 11)

The demographic changes happening across the country are also reflected in Canadian schools. The demographic changes and multiculturalism happening in the society and schools across Canada are a growing reflection of the nation's vibrant, multifaceted society (Valentin, 2006). According to Saskatchewan Education Indicator Report (2010), the increasing

immigration population contributed to the increase in student enrolment in 2009-10. For instance, “2,424 immigrant children and youth (aged 19 and under) landed in Saskatchewan in 2009, over 700 more than in 2008” (p. 14). The majority of these children settled in the cities of Saskatoon and Regina, and that is consistent with the nationwide trend for immigrants choosing to settle in large urban centers (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). Of the 2,424 children who settled in Saskatchewan, 1,566 had no knowledge of either official language (English or French) of Canada upon arrival (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). They had low levels of educational attainment, well-being, and require support to learn either of the official languages. It is this group of young people who are bringing new challenges to Canadian educational systems and communities.

### **Negative Effects of Low Levels of Well-being on Individuals**

The major demographic changes happening in schools across Canada are causing new challenges to the traditional educational systems in so many different ways. These have increased the demand for major policy changes in Canadian schools and educational systems (Banks, 1993). This is of particular concern because not all racial, ethnical, cultural, or regional groups are performing well in education. According to PISA, most students from low-income families lag behind in education attainment. Most low-income students are ethnic minority, such as recent immigrant youth from Sub-Saharan Africa. As the demographic trends and the recent PISA results show, however, diversity in a nation and nation's schools can be both an opportunity and a challenge (Banks et al., 2001). Relative underachievement among ethnic minorities remains a major problem (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Minority students are yet to share equally in the increasing rates of educational attainment (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

Numerous studies have concluded that there are low levels of well-being, low levels of educational attainment, and high levels of trauma, poverty, social exclusion, and lack of role models among black teenagers than their non-black counterparts (Assibiy-Mensah, 1997; Burke, 2005; James, 2007; MacDonald, 1997; Murray, 1996; Stephenson, 2007; Womack, 2007). Studies conducted on Black Caribbean students in Britain, for instance, concluded that Black pupils were over three times as likely as Caucasian pupils to be permanently excluded (Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Stephenson, 2007). The study also found that only 25% of African-Caribbean boys attained good grades compared with 51% of the population as a whole. Black men were also found underrepresented in the traditional professions of law, medicine, finance

and teaching (BBC, 2004). The study found that, unlike their Caucasian counterparts, the children of Britain's non-Caucasian population occupied a marginal role in education, employment and other parts of the country's socioeconomic life (Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Stephenson, 2007).

When faced with such a huge, insurmountable barrier of disadvantages, it is no surprise to see many black youth turning to crime as a way of life. Many have less interest in education, some drop out of school, and others emulate negative and violent lifestyles popularized in some forms of urban black subculture such as black music (rap) and films, the love of guns, drugs, and violent crimes (BBC News, 2006; 2007; Black Youth Empowerment, 2007; Burke, 2005; Mortimer, 2005). Subcultural theory can explain more about black youth subculture. The theory states that adolescent offending behaviour is not based on the race of an individual or a group but it is part of a lower working class subculture (Burke, 2005; Wilmott, 1966). It states that lower working class adolescents (teenagers) see crime as a way of passing time, shared activities, or fun and togetherness (Burke, 2005; Wilmott, 1966). Thus, given that most black youth come from lower working class families, it is not surprising many are involved in adolescent offending behaviours that are related to the lower working class subculture. Cassidy (2002) stated that black youth violence and gun crime in urban cities is the bitter harvest of low educational attainment and exclusion.

There are other reasons why many Black (African) youth continue to fail in life in their new countries. One of the major reasons, for instance, that is affecting Sub-Saharan Africa youth, in particular, is that most come from war zones. Those who come from African countries that have been affected by violence "have survived massive trauma of wars, adversities, and experience loss and witness atrocities outside the realm of normal human experience. Many of these youth suffer long-term symptoms of trauma associated with posttraumatic stress disorder" (Luthar, 2003, p. 9). In addition to that, most of the Sub-Saharan African youth who immigrate to the Western world are adolescents (Saskatchewan Education Indicator Report, 2010). Adolescence is defined as "a protected space between childhood and adulthood" (Cause et al., 2003, p. 344). According to Cause et al. (2003),

Adolescence, a time of rapid biological, emotional, and social changes, brings with it a heightened developmental risk. This risk maybe highest for adolescents growing up in poverty within our country's inner cities. In addition to the normative stress of

adolescents, poor inner-cities face multiple stressors and adversities included crowded housing, poor-quality schools, inadequate nutrition, and presence of violence and drugs in their neighborhoods. These factors, in turn, have been linked to a host of negative outcomes. (p. 343)

This is the particular group that policymakers, schools, universities, and educators have been struggling to develop strategies that can enable them to thrive and flourish and reach their full potential to become full members of a free and democratic society, and so contribute positively toward increasing the GDP and the province and country's effort to remaining competitive in the rapid changing global economy.

African youth and their parents/sponsors also come to the western world with cultures that are different from that of their new countries. When in the western world, Sub-Saharan African adolescents work hard to fit in (Hrabowski et al., 2002). They try different life strategies, both negative and positive. Because most are in adolescent age – a period of rapid learning and rapid biological, emotional, and social changes – most are attracted to the influence of peers and the media. This often does not help, especially as their immigrant parents are always at work and have no time to teach them important life lessons. Increasingly, it is mostly their peers, the social media such as the Facebook, YouTube, and TV entertainers that send them mixed signals about who they should aspire to become as they move towards adulthood (Hrabowski et al., 2002). Oftentimes, the images depicted in the media are “unflattering, at times degrading, focus on a culture that is excessively influenced by glamour, sex, and violence” (Hrabowski et al., 2002, p. 4). These powerful influences of peers, social interactions, social media, magazines, “advertisements, music, television, and movies” shape the adolescents' definitions of themselves (Hrabowski et al., 2002, p. 4). The fashion industry is also one of the great beneficiaries from this (black) culture. For instance, black fashion that includes saggy jeans, hoodies, and equates acquiring material goods such as jewelry with success has allowed the fashion industry to maximize its profit (Hrabowski et al., 2002). It is this culture, and not educational attainment, that is prominent amongst most black youths. Many black youth equate acquiring these material goods as the real sign of success. These influences can be noticed when walking in a neighborhood, or through a high school and observing how adolescents are dressed, their behaviours, the music they listen to, and their conversations (Hrabowski et al., 2002). One cannot help but notice the enormous influence of their peers and the social media and

entertainers on black youth (Hrabowski et al., 2002). It is then not a surprise that many black youth resent education; drop out of school and those already violent get involved in more harmful activities and subcultures that have negative impact on them and the society in which they live.

### **The Outliers among Black (African) Youth**

When we read or hear about Black (African) youth in our society, we often do not hear of success. But we always find that the emphasis is on problems – from gang violence, crimes, drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, to welfare and teenage pregnancy, just similar to what is described in the preceding section. Rarely do the media focus on the success of African youth in schools, universities, or Africans in professional careers. The emphasis on African youth problems has largely created and reinforced the belief that it is difficult or perhaps impossible for most African youth to succeed in life; it is a fact true that many African youth are in deep trouble, many are gang members, and many unwed mothers (Hrabowski et al., 2002). It is also true that many black youth (including those from Sub-Saharan Africa) become involved in crimes and negative practices that attract media attention (Hrabowski et al., 2002). But there are some among them who continue to succeed despite the enormous challenges life throws at them. Those are the overcomers or outliers among Sub-Saharan African youth who despite being under the same circumstances as others, and with the same resources as everyone else, have chosen to follow different routes that parents, policymakers, schools, educators, and public and private sectors should pay attention to and learn from.

For instance, despite the tremendous odds against them, these outliers refuse to follow the easy and negative path or follow the low-income youth subcultures. They are succeeding academically where most are failing. Unlike others, they “strive every day to overcome what appear sometime to be insurmountable odds, ranging from peer pressure, focus on sex, drugs, and violence to messages that permeate society and discourage achievement, particularly among minorities and women” (Hrabowski et al., 2002, p. 6). Unlike others, they have refused to give up on education. They have learned to survive these circumstances, and are overcoming adversity to become productive members of society (Cause et al., 2003). They have found ways to get on with their lives as adolescents or young adults in a new country with impressive competence. For instance, they go to school/university, make new friends, and are “well on their ways to become successful in their new countries” (Luthar, 2003, p. 9), despite all odds.

The examples of these two groups (the overcomers and their opposites) show that every individual is remarkably adaptable, and that every individual can become accustomed to most things, including the culture or paths each one chooses or is led to follow in his/her life (Graham, 2011). This also shows that the study of some Sub-Saharan African resilient students can teach us lessons that can contribute toward advancing the understanding and teaching of students facing what appears to be insurmountable challenges. This new knowledge can help policymakers, schools, practitioners, and educators develop strategies that would enable struggling students thrive and flourish and reach their full potential. It can help those who have accomplished their academic dreams find employment and have good life. This will then enable them to become full members of a free and democratic society, and so contribute positively toward increasing the GDP and the province and country's effort to remaining competitive in the rapidly changing global economy. There are important reasons we should learn about why some of these youth overcome all odds in their lives and are succeeding in a new country with impressive competence. For instance, when we study this resilient group we will discover what they have that those who fail do not have. Some of the key things that the literature points to have helped resilient individuals succeed where many fail are discussed in greater detail below.

### **The Correlation between Well-being and Educational Attainment**

A growing body of literature indicates that high levels of well-being are good for individuals and for society and it is the key reason why most people succeed in life (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010a; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert 2009b; Huppert & So, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). High levels of well-being have been associated with a range of positive outcomes, including effective learning, high educational attainment outcomes, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behaviour, and good health and life expectancy (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010a; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009b; Huppert & So, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Other researchers who have conducted studies in search of the reasons some individuals develop resilience and succeed while others perform poorly, fail or give up have also found high level of well-being as a possible source of resilience and success while low level of well-being is associated with poor performance or failure in life (Abrahamson et al., 2000; Baker, & Staught, 2003; Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Compto, 2005; Diener et al., 2009; Fredrickson, 2013; Graham, 2011; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Howell, 2009; Huppert & So, 2013; Huppert, 2009; Keyes,

2003; 2005; 2007; Kesebir & Diener, 2009; Krovetz, 1999; Layard, 2005; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Parks, 2000; Peterson, 2006; Rath & Harter 2010; Snyder, 1994; Thomsen, 2002; Wirtz et al., 2010). This can be interpreted that the experience of a young adult with high well-being is positive and has educational attainment potential, while the one with low well-being can be associated with negative happenings that affect his/her chances of succeeding in school and life (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). There are also other studies that have examined well-being and found correlation between educational attainment and well-being among college students; specifically, examining “whether students higher in well-being reveal a more adaptive profile on achievement-related measures compared to students lower in well-being” (Howell, 2009, p. 1; Keyes, 2003; 2005; 2007). Some studies that focused on the assessment of the psychological well-being of students found that there was a correlation between positive self-evaluation, including satisfaction with one’s achievements, the viewing of oneself as having a purpose in life and growing as an individual and better educational attainment (Howell, 2009, p. 1; Keyes; 2003; 2005; 2007). However, “additional research is required to determine the extent to which positive effect and the broader state of flourishing enhance academic functioning, and the mechanisms by which such influence operates” (Howell, 2009, p. 9). Given that fact, the study of the correlation between well-being and educational attainment is crucial as the presence or absence of well-being can have significant impact on young adults’ academic performances, especially on ethnic minorities or recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa who are facing what appear to be insurmountable challenges.

### **The Self-determination Theory and Well-being Theory**

Given that well-being is more holistic and broad in context, the Self-determination Theory and the Well-being Theory can be used to define or explain well-being in a way that makes it more relevant to this study. Self-determination Theory is a theory of motivation concerned with our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theory states that for an individual to be productive, creative, or have a feeling of competence, or relatedness, his/her behaviour should be self-motivated and autonomous. Some researchers believe that natural or intrinsic tendencies, as well as psychological needs, self-reward, self-motivation and autonomy can be sustained over a long term (Deci & Ryan 2000; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Teixeira et al., 2011). The Well-being Theory is



a theory of positive psychology that has five measurable elements – positive emotion; engagement; relationships; meaning and purpose; and accomplishments (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011). The Well-being Theory is built on Self-determination Theory as it states that an individual needs the five elements PERMA to motivate him/her to have the natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways (Deci & Ryan 2000; Forgeard et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky 2008; Seligman, 2011; Teixeira et al., 2011).

### **The Definitions of the State of Well-being**

The important connection between the Self-determination Theory and the Well-being Theory can help with the definition of the state of well-being. Graham (2011) referred to “subjective well-being” as “a term that encompasses all of the ways in which people report their well-being, from open-ended happiness to satisfaction with different domains, such as work, health, and education, among others” (p. 6). Similarly, Rath and Harter (2010) stated that “Well-being is about the combination of our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contributed to our communities” (p. 4). Well-being emphasizes the presence of positive emotions and life satisfaction and the quality of one’s orientation toward others and events, including positive views of others and believing that one is making a positive contribution to one’s community (Howell, 2009). These definitions demonstrate that the presence of well-being has positive impacts on individuals while its absence has negative impacts. These definitions can be used to explain that deprivation, abject poverty, hopelessness, unhappiness, and the inability to succeed in life are examples of the absence of elements of well-being in an individual (Graham, 2011).

### **Elements of Well-being**

Well-being is multi-dimensional in meanings and composition. It has several elements that work together to increase the levels of the general well-being or self-esteem of an individual that help him/her perceive the world in a more positive way (Howell, 2009). Rath and Harter (2010) mentioned five broad essential elements of well-being: (1) - *Career Well-being*: How one occupies his/her time or simply liking what he/she does every day; (2) - *Social Well-being*: Having strong relationships and love in one’s life; (3) - *Financial Well-being*: Effectively managing one’s economic life; (4) - *Physical Well-being*: Having good health and

enough energy to get things done daily; and (5) - *Community Well-being*: The sense of engagement one has with the area where he/she lives (p. 6). Huppert and So (2013) mentioned competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality as the combined aspects of well-being.

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) and Rath and Harter (2010) argued that the relationship between the essential elements of well-being is reciprocal. For instance, if an individual struggles in any one of these domains, it damages his/her well-being and wears his/her daily life (Rath & Harter, 2010). But, if an individual strengthens his/her well-being in any of these areas, he/she “will have better days, months, and decades” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 6). However, an individual cannot get the most of his/her life unless he/she is “living effectively in all” key domains (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 6). Governments are increasingly taking keen interest in the measurement of subjective well-being, focusing on several elements of well-being, “with a view to measuring progress more effectively, improving their policy decisions, and increasing the well-being of citizens” (Howell, 2009, p. 885). They have recognized that, for instance,

If a population group is high on some features of well-being such as positive relationships, but low on others such as engagement or resilience, it is clear where interventions should be targeted. Some economically-driven surveys might include only one or a few subjective well-being items, but the future lies in developing a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of well-being, how they are influenced by socio-economic factors, cultural values, secular shifts, and policy impacts. And above all, this deeper understanding of well-being and its determinants will allow us to develop effective approaches to the promotion of well-being and the enhancement of flourishing in the population. (Howell, 2009, p. 885)

Enhancing of the general well-being of students with such interventions will be useful as well as a means to examine the impact of well-being on students’ academic performances and outcomes (Howell, 2009). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) studied well-being and its positive affect on numerous outcomes, including work performance, health, personal relationships, and creativity and problem-solving. As mentioned earlier, they found that the relationship between the elements associated with well-being is reciprocal (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Thus well-being can allow a learner to flourish and flourishing itself enhances:

The levels of awareness and interest within the learner, such that opportunities and possibilities are considered and sought that would otherwise go undetected. The pursuit of such opportunities may promote further development of skills and abilities which in turn enhance future functioning. For example, students in a state of well-being may be more alert to an impending deadline for a challenging paper and may believe that with significant effort they can succeed on the task. They may set-out with vigor to seek the required resource materials, and may find more interest in those materials and apply useful strategies for comprehending them as they delve deeper into the subject matter. They may be open-minded to various forms that the paper's thesis could take and may think divergently about various arguments that could be included. They may be diligent about initiating and completing the paper without succumbing to tempting alternative activities. (Howell, 2009, p. 9)

Rath and Harter (2010) stated that the five elements of well-being: *Career Well-being*; *Social Well-being*; *Financial Well-being*; *Physical Well-being*; and *Community Well-being* "are universal across faiths, cultures, and nationalities" (p. 7). Despite this universality, people take different paths to increase their well-being. In this section, eight elements of well-being: *Career Well-being*; *Social Well-being*; *Financial Well-being*; *Physical Well-being*; and *Community Well-being*; *Cultural Well-being*; and *Spiritual Well-being* are examined.

### **Career Well-being**

Rath & Harter (2010) argued that fundamentally, most individuals need something to do. Every individual needs something that he/she can look forward to, when he/she wakes up every day. Whatever one spends his/her time doing each day shapes his/her identity, whether one is a student, parent, volunteer, retiree, a sportsperson, an entertainer, or any type of worker (p. 15). We spend the majority of our waking hours during the week doing something we consider part of our identity. It can be an education, a career, occupation, vocation, or job. Career Well-being is so important to the society that "When people first meet, they ask each other, "What do you do?" (p. 15). Rath and Harter (2010) also stated that if one's answer to that question is something they find fulfilling and meaningful, they are likely thriving in Career Well-being. By contrast, we do not thrive in Career Well-being if we find what we do unfulfilling and meaningless. Rath and Harter (2010) further considered Career Well-being as the most essential of the elements of well-being. For instance, if an individual does not have the opportunity to regularly do something

he/she enjoys, “the odds of your having high well-being in other areas diminish rapidly. People with high Career Well-being are more than *twice* as likely to be thriving in their lives overall” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 16).

For a student, for instance, “school or university” represents career well-being. If an ethnic minority student, for instance, finds school fulfilling, welcoming and meaningful, he/she is likely thriving in Career Well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010). But he/she cannot thrive in Career Well-being if he/she considers school or university unfulfilling and meaningless. Like bad workplaces, bad school or university classrooms cause stress in students and additional workloads. For instance, if a Sub-Saharan African student is performing an education task that is frustrating to him/her, his/her stress hormones rise increasing the risk of anxiety and depression (Rath & Harter, 2010). Thus, career well-being increases among students who are engaged in their classrooms, and their happiness and interests throughout the day are significantly higher. Rath and Harter (2010) stated that individuals who find their Career Well-being unfulfilling and meaningless have stress levels that are substantially low. Thus for students who find their schools or university unfulfilling and meaningless their need for happiness is increased outside the school environment. Stress levels, hopelessness, and unhappiness increase among students who are less engaged in their school life. Such students are likely to drop out and their levels of Career Well-being diminish even further. A number of studies have also suggested positive associations between school/university and well-being outcomes for students, including improved emotional adjustment, better academic- related achievement and behaviours, and fewer psychosomatic symptoms (Bru et al., 2001; Natvig et al., 1999; Wentzel, 1998). Murdock and Bolch (2005) also found a positive link between school belonging and well-being outcomes among children and adolescents. After academic accomplishment, finding a dream career can contribute to the subjective well-being of an individual.

### **Social Well-being**

Like Career well-being, Social well-being is important in enabling us to live fulfilling and meaningful lives. Extensive literature emphasizes the importance of ‘social capital’ for individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Camfield, 2012; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Putnam (1995) defined social capital as “the collective value of all ‘social networks’ and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other” (p. 66). We are social beings by nature. We instinctively interact with the people we come in contact with. Keyes (2002) argued that the

measures of social well-being, like the measures of psychological and emotional well-being, should be viewed as indicators of an individual's mental health status. Studies have found that adults with complete mental health are flourishing socially and have high levels of well-being (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002). They are flourishing, are filled with positive emotion and functioning well psychologically and socially (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002). Those with psychological problems or incomplete mental health had lower levels of well-being. They are socially isolated, have emptiness and stagnation, live with/in quiet despair and describe themselves and their lives as “hollow,” “empty,” “a shell,” and “a void” (Keyes, 2002, p. 210). Studies have also found that people directly around and even friends’ network or relationships have great influence on an individual’s well-being (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002; Rath & Harter, 2010). Thus our well-being depends “on our *entire network*” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 36). The social networks that we have influence our well-being. For instance, Rath and Harter (2010) conducted a study that found that “having direct and frequent social contact with someone who has high levels of well-being dramatically boosts one’s chances of being happy. The study also found similar effects for secondhand association. For instance, if “a friend of your direct connection is happy, the odds of your friend being happy increases by 10%” (p. 36). Rath and Harter’s (2010) study also found that “People are embedded in social networks and the health and well-being of one person affects the health and well-being of others” (p. 35). Thus the well-being of friends and relatives can be a more effective predictor of our happiness.

Some studies have also concluded that black youths who are socially deprived, deprived of leisure activities and opportunities, and with weak social bonds have low levels of well-being that make them more likely to commit crimes or drop out of school than those who possess strong social bonds (Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Muncie, 2004; MacDonald, 1997; Stephenson, 2007). By contrast, black youths who are involved in more social activities, attend school or even not excluded from school have high levels of well-being and less chances of involvement in criminal activities (Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Muncie, 2004; MacDonald, 1997; Stephenson, 2007).

### **Financial Well-being**

Although money may not be the answer to everything, at the same time, it or the lack of it has direct impact on the levels of our well-being. For instance, although money does not guarantee happiness, being in a wealthy country where one can increase his/her income can

certainly increase one's odds of well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010). Money is valuable for everyone because it does a lot of good, including buying food for people and their families, putting a roof over their heads, and funding education (Rath & Harter, 2010).

In countries with lower income such as those in the Sub-Saharan African region, lack of money or poverty is a leading cause of suffering and low levels of well-being. In countries with poor healthcare systems, for instance, people suffer or die because of lack of affordability of basic healthcare. Having money to pay for basic healthcare can improve well-being through the alleviation of poverty and physical pain. Most young people in extreme poverty find it impossible to fulfill their academic dreams. Thus, for a great number of people around the world, money is absolutely essential for meeting basic needs and their well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 52).

In middle to higher income countries, for instance, the differences in well-being levels can be explained by the daily enjoyment and comfort afforded by money. Generally, individuals who have a lot of money can do what they want when they want to do it. Money can increase their short-term happiness by giving them more control over how they spend their time, "whether that means a shorter commute, more time at home with family or additional social time with friends" (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 52). Having money can enable us to have more time for social interactions with family and friends or get the education we want, so increasing the levels of our well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 52).

In addition, economic advantages or disadvantages we have affect our well-being in general. For instance, negative economic conditions have significant negative effects on child development. According to Amato and Keith (1991), a lack of economic resources increases the risk of a number of developmental problems in children. For instance, economic hardship may negatively affect children's nutrition and health, especially children of poor or single parents. This is because poor and single parents with limited sources of income are unable to afford private lessons, educational toys, books, home computers, and other goods that facilitate children's academic success (Amato & Keith, 1991). Economic disadvantages may also force families to live in poorer neighborhoods in which education programs are poorly financed, services are inadequate, and crime is rampant. In addition to that, living in poverty may be stigmatizing for children and may facilitate the entry of adolescents into deviant subcultures that can have negative impact on their well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991). Thus, income matters

most for the well-being of individuals, for instance, Sub-Saharan African immigrants with low income. Money can enable them to obtain food, shelter, better location, and basic needs that are necessary for their general well-being (Diener et al., 2003).

Most recent immigrant Sub-Saharan African students and their parents/sponsors come from a continent that has a vicious cycle of poverty, including poor education, poor health, malnutrition and stagnant economic growth (Adepoju, 2008). Decades of economic crisis have translated into deteriorating health and education conditions in communities in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Adepoju, 2008). These conditions have negative impacts on the well-being of adolescents. In addition to that, many recent immigrant Sub-Saharan African adolescents come from traditional family systems of controlling, monitoring, protecting, and supporting the young that may have broken down because of the economic crisis caused by lack of money (Adepoju, 2008). The poverty that those adolescents go through may also have damaging effects on families and communities. It often causes depression that can lead to alcohol or drug abuse. Thus, poverty and lack of resources such as clothing or pocket money can affect children's well-being and social and educational participation of adolescents (Camfield, 2010).

In sum, a lack of money causes poverty which keeps individuals in a state of deprivation through lack of access to economic, education and social resources. This is "manifested in illiteracy, lack of access to basic needs, poor housing and declining purchasing power" (Adepoju, 2008, p. 14). Low-level of "education, poor health, poor nutrition, low incomes, large family size, and food insecurity are among the factors that contribute to poverty" among African families (Adepoju, 2008, p. 14). In Sub-Saharan Africa, "poverty is so widespread and deep-rooted that access to adequate food, clean water, safe sanitation, reliable health care, decent housing and a basic education constitutes a dream yet to, but one that must be, achieved" (Adepoju, 2008, p. 14). These socioeconomic factors continue to contribute to low-levels of well-being among Sub-Saharan African youth.

### **Physical Well-being**

Another key element is physical well-being. Health experts have concluded that physical activity is a key behaviour affecting the health and well-being of individuals (Human Recourses and Skills Development in Canada, 2013). They advised that if individuals were to become involved in physical activity there can be increased levels of well-being and reduced risk of heart attack, obesity, other diseases, and stress (Human Recourses and Skills Development in Canada,

2013). Physical well-being also addresses physical security. What we eat or do to our bodies have direct influence on our general well-being. For instance, some studies have concluded that healthy food, moderate exercise, and good sleep increase the levels of our well-being, while unhealthy food, lack of exercise, and lack of enough sleep decrease the levels of our well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010). Rath and Harter (2010) stated that

New research suggests that a single meal high in saturated fat reduces our arteries' ability to carry enough blood to our bodies and brains. According to NYU's Gerald Weissmann, M.D., this "high-fat hangover" could slow us down and impair our thinking: "A long weekend spent eating hot dogs, French fries, and pizza in Orlando might be great for our taste buds, but they might send our muscles and brains out to lunch... If we choose a balance of good and bad foods, paired with a moderate amount of sleep and exercise, our body runs closer to average. But if we make substantially more net positive decisions about what we eat and drink, coupled with a good night's sleep and vigorous exercise, our bodies will run much more efficiently. Throughout the day, we make small choices whenever we decided whether or not to add creamer to our morning coffee, to snack on the pasties at afternoon meeting, and to choose water or a sugary soda with dinner. (pp. 71–72)

It is also worth noting that malnutrition during adolescence can affect physical well-being for generations. For instance,

Studies suggest that if you were malnourished during adolescence, your children and your grandchildren will be more susceptible to heart disease and diabetes. Experiments with animals show that epigenetic changes could be traced several generations downstream in certain species. So as an added incentive for improving your own health for the next few hours, weeks, and months, consider that your lifestyle choices might also influence the health of your children and grandchildren. (Rath & Harter, 2010, pp. 74–75)

Given that some immigrant students from Sub-Saharan African come from poor countries where they and their parents experienced malnutrition during their younger years, there is a possibility that some have malnutrition effects that can be traced back to several generations. This affects their general well-being and has negative impacts on the levels of their education attainment as well.



In addition, Health Canada (2013) stated that lack of physical activity can cause premature death, chronic disease and disability. Individuals who integrate physical activity into their everyday life at home, at the university, at school, at work, or at play have high levels of well-being (Health Canada, 2013). Children and adolescence who are regularly involved in physical activities have healthy growth and development. Physical activities also allow daily tasks to be accomplished with greater ease and comfort and with less fatigue (Health Canada, 2013). Regular physical activities also maintain strength, flexibility, balance, and coordination, and can help reduce the risk of poor health (Health Canada, 2013). Being physically active strengthens the body of an individual and makes him/her feel better (Health Canada, 2013).

### **Community Well-being**

We live in communities and community well-being also contributes significantly to a good life. According to Rath and Harter (2010), community well-being starts with some basic supports, such as the quality of the water we drink or the air we breathe, good security where individuals can feel safe when walking alone at night in their neighborhood and having confidence that they will not be harmed or assaulted, and the availability of beautiful parks, trails or playgrounds (Rath & Harter, 2010). Unfortunately, in parts of neighborhoods where most ethnic minorities or recent immigrants such as those from Sub-Saharan African live, people report that they do not have this security. In Canada, in some of the world's wealthiest countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and parts of Western Europe and Australia, there are many people who do not feel safe walking alone at night where they live. In some neighborhoods, residents have serious concerns about safety, air pollution, and other environmental contaminants. When these needs are not met, it is difficult for youth, students, and adults to thrive in well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010, pp. 93–94).

There are sections of neighborhoods in large cities that have more violence than others. Most ethnic minority or immigrant students live in neighborhoods where they do not feel safe while walking in the dark because of violent crimes. The race of those accused of violent offences suggest that the majority of those who are held responsible by police for gun crimes, drug possession, robberies and street crimes, for instance, in predominantly black neighborhoods, are black youth living in the same neighborhoods (BBC News, 2007; Black Youth Empowerment, 2007; Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Muncie, 2004). Crimes committed in such neighborhoods are mostly intra-racial, for instance, black on black. That is why black men

are disproportionately the victims of violent crime in most western capitals with large black neighborhoods. The numbers of youth under age 18 getting into trouble with the police in those neighborhoods are mostly blacks as these youngsters are lured into gang culture through peer pressure (BBC News, 2007; Black Youth Empowerment, 2007; Cashmore & Troyna, 1982; Muncie, 2004). Many of the youth committing crimes in low class neighborhoods are school drop outs with low self-esteem who find life to be unfulfilling, hopeless, and meaningless (Black Youth Empowerment, 2007).

### **Cultural Well-being**

Some studies have stated that there is a strong link between culture or cultural participation and the general well-being of an individual (Bourdieu, 1983; Everingham, 2003; Matarasso, 1997). Respect and recognition of individual differences, cultural participation and activities can be linked to the social well-being (Bourdieu, 1983; Everingham, 2003; Matarasso, 1997). An individual who participates in cultural activities has the ability to secure benefits through memberships in networks and other social structures. Culture can be seen as a tool that promotes cohesion through the creation of a common language and practices that are essential for the development of human potential and creating opportunities for social networking, social order and cohesion (Bourdieu, 1983; Everingham, 2003; Matarasso, 1997).

Cultural differences and attitudes about personal success or achievement, including social mobility and opportunity, also affect the levels of well-being in society. Recent immigrants coming to Canada from non-western countries often discover that western culture differs a lot from the non-Western culture in which they grew up and this affects their well-being. For instance, the Western individual effort versus African collective responsibility plays a significant role in the levels of well-being (Graham, 2011). Western culture places emphasis on individual effort while African culture “typically place more stock in collective welfare arrangements” (Graham, 2011, p. 45). When in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, most poor Africans often tend to be happier than poor Westerners because of the collective welfare arrangements. Graham (2011) elaborated further on that; he argued that while rich westerns and Sub-Saharan Africans are equally happy, poor Africans are happier than poor westerners – “perhaps in part because of the greater emphasis placed on collective responsibility and the availability of” social safety nets that results in less stigma associated with income poverty (p. 46). As a result, the unemployed, uneducated, or poor in Africa are less unhappy, when there are more fellow unemployed, poor,

and uneducated around them. They have social support and social stigma is often absent among them. While in Africa, they have high levels of well-being. But this changes for them when they immigrate to Western countries and encounter the different culture of individual responsibility and social stigma.

There are also similar studies that have concluded that cultural differences affect personality and well-being in different ways (Diener et al., 2003; Oishi et al., 2001; Okazaki, 2000; Suh et al., 1998). In some studies, for instance, cultural differences parallel international differences that have been observed within the United States across different ethnic groups. According to Oishi (2001), for instance, European Americans are significantly more satisfied with their lives than Asian Americans. Okazaki (2000) found that Asian Americans had higher levels of depression and anxiety than did European Americans. These studies demonstrate that “there are differences between nations and between ethnic groups within nations” (Diener et al., 2003, p. 411). This is largely because of the same reason discussed earlier that immigrants coming from collectivists’ societies have hard time adjusting to individualistic (Western) society. It becomes even worse for individuals with mental illness. According to Diener et al. (2003),

Marginal individuals such as those with mental illness or mental handicaps might have a harder time in individualistic societies than in collectivist ones, whereas people with a large number of strengths and resources might enjoy the individualistic lifestyle more. It is also possible that people who fail to achieve happiness in individualistic nations are more likely to commit suicide because they feel like failures and are less constrained by normative expectations. (p. 11)

In most individualist (Western) nations it is assumed that listening to oneself gives one answers, whereas, in collectivist cultures, particularly in African and East Asian collectivists’ cultures, it is assumed that paying attention to social norms and engaging in collectivist activities is important for the well-being of an individual (Suh et al., 1998). These cultural differences make most non-Western immigrants, such as those from Sub-Saharan Africa; feel alienated, hopeless, and depressed.

### **Spiritual Well-being**

Multiple studies have also revealed that faith in God or spiritual connections also increases the level of well-being (Johnson, 2008; Kesebir & Diener, 2009). Some studies have found that people who are connected to God or the spirit tend to be happier than those who are

not. For instance, “participation in religious services, strength of religious affiliation, and relationship with God,” a form of spiritual connection, “and prayer all seem to contribute to” high levels of our well-being through hope (Kesebir & Diener, 2009, p. 69). The comfort and insights that come from daily prayer and meditation, for instance, increase the levels of an individual’s well-being and help them recover from trauma. Whether one needs a little extra hope or help working through a particularly tough challenge in life, daily prayer or meditation are instruments of support and sustenance. Through prayer or meditation, individuals continue to discover comfort, hope, and inspiration, especially during traumatic times. An example of that can be a recent immigrant student from Sub-Saharan Africa who has survived massive trauma of wars, adversities, physical or psychological abuse and has experienced loss and witnessed atrocities outside the realm of normal human experience; but through prayer and meditation, he/she continues to discover comfort, hope, inspiration, motivation, resilience, and high levels of well-being (Kesebir & Diener, 2009; Johnson, 2008).

In sum, the preceding discussion on elements of well-being demonstrated, that the important elements of well-being are within everyone’s control. Individuals possess the ability to improve each element of well-being. But, “the single biggest threat to our own well-being tends to be *ourselves*” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 7). Human beings often, because of ignorance or lack of commitment, allow short-term decisions to override what’s best for their long-term well-being. For instance, most individuals believe that education is the key to success, but many still drop out of it to seek instant pleasure. Many people hold that managing money wisely is important, yet instead of saving, they spend it on less important but instantly appealing. The laws of the land specify that getting money through illicit means, including the sale of narcotics, robbery or corruption is illegal, yet many continue to engage in these behaviours, even in knowing that drugs and alcohol are bad for one’s health, people consume them in abandon. Physical exercise is better for our health, but we skip it and consume sugar and junk food that is bad for our health. There are so many options to improving our well-being, yet many continue work against the best interests of the body to momentarily gratify the desires of the self (Rath & Harter, 2010). That is why the lessons we learn from a study of overcomers can help us learn, understand, and develop the skills, coping strategies, or resilience needed to succeed.

## **Individuals with Low Levels of the Elements of Well-being Reactions to Traumatic Events**

With so many elements of well-being and the options discussed above being available to assist individuals to succeed in society, there are still significant numbers of adolescents who are yet to benefit from these elements. Most of these adolescents are those who have limited or no access to those elements. They are those who have given up or on the verge of giving up because of what appears to them as insurmountable challenges. Many have low levels of well-being and find it difficult to recover from some forms of trauma as well as from their pre and post migration experiences. Many adolescents in our society with trauma, low levels of well-being and social exclusion are black (African) youth (MacDonald, 1997; Stephenson, 2007). Their traumas, low levels of well-being and feeling of social exclusion cause them react to life challenges differently. The society continues to wonder why they have that kind of anti-social lifestyle. It is worth stressing that many ethnic minorities or recent immigrant Sub-Saharan African youth and their parents have experienced some forms of trauma in their lives, especially in their countries of origin. Numerous studies detailing various kinds of trauma have shown that some people who have experienced tragedies such as an abuse, the loss of loved ones or closest friends, witnessed atrocities, or being diagnosed with a life threatening illnesses often experience distress that can linger for years post-trauma (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Nolen-Hoeksema (2000) said “Traumatic events such as loss can create true developmental challenges by confronting people with new situations and issues they have never faced before” (p. 118). These prevent many black youths with low levels of general well-being from reaching educational attainment and good life.

In the wake of acute challenges, many people with low levels of well-being become depressed, violent, fearful, or confused. They may find it difficult to concentrate on the daily tasks of living, and they may not be able to sleep or eat well. Some have such intense and long-lasting reactions to a trauma that they are unable to return to their previous (“normal”) selves for many months or even years (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 150).

Developmental scientists have recorded the list of damages trauma can do to the development of child (Fredrickson, 2013). The list of damages of trauma includes:

Long-lasting deficits that can derail kids well into adolescence and beyond, first, in their use of symbols and other early forms of cognitive reasoning that undergird successful academic performance, and next, in their abilities to take other people’s perspectives and

empathize, skills vital to developing supportive social relationships. (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 34)

People with low levels of well-being who suffer from trauma, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, loneliness, or low self-esteem perceive threats far more often than circumstances warrant (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 19). Research also shows that trauma can compromise nearly all aspects of children's development, including their cognitive and social abilities, and their health (Fredrickson, 2013). For instance, research was conducted on Romanian orphans that found a stark and pervasive deprivation experienced by Romanian orphans. The study revealed a "painfully long shadow cast by early emotional neglect (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 33). The research also showed that "even among those orphans adopted and raised by loving Western families, developmental problems can persist for decades" (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 33).

Nevertheless, some researchers conducted studies on youth and adults in developing countries and concluded that there are some among them who have adapted well to adversity (Appadurai, 2004; Clark, 2007; Small et al., 2010). They studied the psychosocial processes of individuals who have the capacity to recover from, adapt to, or remain strong in the face of traumatic events and described them as resilient (Appadurai, 2004; Clark, 2007; Small et al., 2010). Some key characteristics of these overcomers or outliers are discussed next.

### **Positive Effects of High Levels of Well-being**

Recent studies have shown that people who have experienced traumatic events can recover and become resilient (Fredrickson, 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). It is worth noting that the science of resilience is a new phenomenon. It became popular within the last decade (Fredrickson, 2013). According to Fredrickson (2013), the surge of scientific interest in the topic has caused a fundamental shift in how resilience is viewed. Before, experts believed that resilience in the face of adversity was a rare human experience; but recent research findings have concluded that, "in the context of a well-functioning emotion system, people's levels of resilience are not in stone, or DNA. The potential to recover from (most) adverse experiences appears to be universal (Camfield, 2012). Masten and Coatsworth (1998) described how "resilient children do not appear to possess mysterious or unique qualities; rather, they have retained or secured important resources representing [...] fundamental systems that generally foster competence in development" (p. 212). Masten (2001) stated that "resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes" (p. 227). Masten (2001) also stated that

Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of basic human adaptation systems. If those systems are protected and in good working order, development is robust even in the face of severe adversity; if these major systems are impaired, antecedent or consequent to adversity, then the risk for developmental problems is much greater, particularly if the environmental hazards are prolonged. (p 227)

These findings demonstrate that lessons learned from resilient people who have overcome trauma can play a critical role in helping those who are having negative reactions to traumatic events bounce back. It also shows that resilience can be developed or “improved through experience and training” (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 78). Some “people experience traumatic events as opportunities to grow and learn more about themselves and the world” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 107). They prosper despite the difficult challenges they encounter in their lives. People who prosper despite traumatic experiences are resilient.

Bonanno (2004) defined resilience as “The ability of [individuals] in otherwise normal circumstances, who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning.” Camfield (2012) defined resilience simply as the capacity to bounce back from adverse experiences. Resilient people, despite experiencing traumatic events similar to that of their peers, strive every day to overcome what appear sometime to be insurmountable odds, ranging from poverty, loneliness, physical or psychological abuse, family breakdown, loss, peer pressure, focus on sex, drugs, violence, and messages that permeate society and discourage achievement, particularly among recent immigrant or ethnic minority youth (Camfield, 2012; Hrabowski et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

When resilient people are confronted by traumatic experiences, developmental and emotional challenges, or new situations and issues they have never faced before, they adapt well to the new challenges and these situations do not always create long-term distress to them (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 107). Since resilient individuals have fewer material resources and less security, their response to their situation seems paradoxical (Camfield, 2012). One of the key reasons why they react to challenges differently is their positive nature. Unlike non-resilient people, resilient individuals experience positive emotions in the face of adversity.

One way resilient individuals experience positive emotions in the face of adversity is by finding positive meaning in every event and within the adversity itself (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, 2000). According to Fredrickson (2013), resilient people are emotionally agile:

They neither steel themselves against negativity, nor wallow in it. Instead, they meet adversity with clear eyes, superbly attuned to nuances of their changing circumstances. This allows them to effortlessly calibrate their reactions to their circumstances, meeting them with a fitting response, neither overblown nor insensitive. When circumstances warrant, they can be moved to tears or shaken. They don't defend themselves against bad feelings like these. Yet neither do they overly identify with them. Rather, their negative emotions rise up, like the ocean wave, and then dissolve. Strong emotions move through them, which allows them to move on in their wake. Their agility stems from their steady diet of positive emotion. Resilient people come to better register and appreciate the larger contexts of life, which allows them to respond to emotional upsets with more perspective, flexibility, and grace. Good feelings nourish resilience. (p. 78)

Furthermore, resilient people have positive emotions that add up to reshape their lives for the better, making them more knowledgeable, more resilient, more socially integrated, and healthier (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Fredrickson, 2013). The positive emotions that resilient people have developed can set off upward spirals in their lives and self-sustaining trajectories of growth that lift them up to becoming better versions of themselves (Fredrickson, 2013). Resilient people also have positive changes in their personalities as a result of their trauma. They often feel that the traumatic events have made them "become more tolerant, more sensitive, more patient, and more loving with others" (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 110). They feel they have become "less controlling and more willing to take life as it comes" (p. 111). Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) stated that:

The effects of positive emotions should accumulate and compound: The broadened attention and cognition triggered by earlier experiences of positive emotion should facilitate coping with adversity, and this improved coping should in turn predict future experiences of positive emotion. As this cycle continues, people build their psychological resilience and enhance their emotional well-being. (p. 172)



The optimism that resilient people have contributes to the development of “more adaptive coping strategies, namely more positive reappraisal, more problem solving coping, and more use of positive distraction (e.g., hobbies and exercise)” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 122-123).

Although resilient people often experience trauma as challenging their coping skills and pushing them to the limit of their strengths, their positivism enable them to realize personal strengths that they previously had not discovered, or develop new strengths altogether (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 113).

According to Snyder (1994), the key to resilience is hope. Snyder (1994) defined hope as “the sum of the mental willpower and way-power that you have for your goal” (p. 5). Snyder (1994) described Willpower as “the driving force in hopeful thinking. It is the sense of mental energy that over time helps to propel the person toward the goal” (p. 6); and “Willpower reflects the mental plans or road maps that guide hopeful thought” (p. 8). Waypower “shows the route through which the person must travel over time toward the goal” (p. 8). Resilient people have normal amounts of “willpower” and “waypower” that motivate them to “continue their quests for goals even when they encounter obstacles varying in magnitude from minor daily hassles to major life traumas” (Snyder, 1994, p. 30). Resilient people are optimists who, Snyder (1994) argued, think about bad outcomes on three critical dimensions: First, as optimists, resilient people

Place the blame for bad outcome on factors outside of themselves, rather than concluding that the reason for failure resides internally. Second, the optimist evaluates the failure by whether or not it will continue in the future. More specifically, the optimist concludes that setback or problem is just a temporary thing. Third, the optimist concludes that failure only happened in one performance arena, instead of overgeneralizing that failures also would occur in several other unrelated arenas. (p. 16)

Unlike those with no hopes, who have given up, or find life meaningless and unfulfilled when in the midst of adversities, resilient people keep their goals clearly in mind and constantly are thinking about ways to obtain them. Resilient people interact easily with other people and are willing to take risks to get what they want. Resilient people are very active in their thinking. Resilient people also almost always believe that options are available to their goals (Snyder, 1994).

Another factor that works in favor of resilient people is that they have problem-solving abilities that become especially evident during times when they are experiencing difficulties. Under such difficult circumstances, they “become very task oriented and turn to alternative ways to get what they want” (Snyder, 1994, p. 45). They enjoy working hard and gaining a sense of mastery in what they do. They appear to enjoy the process of testing themselves and their skills against others (Snyder, 1994, p. 46).

When it comes to physical health, resilient people are better at taking care of themselves. They are more willing to consult health professional. They are aware of behaviours related to health problems (e.g., smoking, drugs, unprotected sex, lack of enough sleep, and junk food). They have “more ideas for taking care of themselves should they get sick. In other words, resilient people are concerned about their health because they know that if they are not healthy, they are not “able to pursue the other goals of life” (Snyder, 1994, p. 63). Resilient people are also more likely to exercise than people with low-hope. Part of the benefit resulting from exercise is that it provides a time for them to clear their minds, provide more physical energy, and enhance their thinking abilities and general well-being (Snyder, 1994).

Studies that have been conducted among resilient people have also found that they are more religious or spiritual (Baker & Staath, 2003; Parks, 2000). They pray and meditate often. They have hope in the higher powers that direct them through their challenges. They also see prayer or meditation has a means of increasing their mental energy and thoughts that can help them find pathways to their goals (Snyder, 1994, p. 61-62). They believe that prayer and meditation provide a day-to-day renewal that is important in helping in the rigors of coping with their challenges (Parks, 2000; Snyder, 1994). Prayer and meditation help them especially when things get difficult, or when some sort of roadblock appears as they pursue their goals (Snyder, 1994, p. 55).

Socially and financially, resilient people are not lonely. They are often attracted to other people and enjoy interacting with them. They “have a social support network they can call on in the good and the bad times” (Snyder, 1994, p. 60). The comfort and contact offered by other people in times of strain, distress, and trauma is one of the most effective coping strategies that exist for them. Social support gives them hope, makes them happier, less anxious, less depressed, and increases the levels of their well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2007). They are happier and tend to use humor to cope with the challenges of life. They are able to laugh at the things

happening around them, and perhaps more importantly, they are able to laugh at themselves. Being able to laugh at themselves is especially important at times when they are stuck and trying to find some way to solve a “thorny problem” (Snyder, 1994, p. 61). Good laughs energize resilient people and allow them to put things in perspective (Snyder, 1994). Thus, one can argue that resilient people have positive deviance in the society. Positive deviance is based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviours and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges (Positive Deviance Initiative, 2014).

### **Support Structures for Well-being**

Many studies of resilience have suggested that resilience and higher levels of well-being cannot happen without external support structures (Camfield, 2012; Carrey & Ungar, 2007; Chu et al., 2010; Masten, 2001). Carrey and Ungar (2007) and Camfield (2012) stated that if either the resources or support structures are absent, individual strengths such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, or resilience are unhelpful. Results from various studies of resilience suggest that resilient individuals receive support (including financial support) from different support structures such as parental support, social support, support from teachers, support from universities, and community and spiritual support (Camfield, 2012; Carrey & Ungar, 2007; Chu et al., 2010; Masten, 2001). These support structures help individuals to develop resilience, intellectual functioning, positive self-perception, self-realization, better educational attainment, and pro-social behaviour that are necessary for their success in life (Camfield, 2012; Carrey & Ungar, 2007; Chu et al., 2010; Masten, 2001; Todis, 2001). This section will discuss some key support structures that the literature say can play greater role in increasing the levels of the well-being, resilience, and success of individuals. It includes parental support, social support, university support, support from teachers, support from community, and spiritual support.

#### **Parental Support**

Many studies have emphasized the importance of parental support in children and adolescents’ development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Steinberg, 1990). Parental quality is an important factor in the development of resilience and well-being in children. Many resilient students are blessed with effective parents support structures. In fact, parents are the first

teachers of a child, they understand their child better and often work to develop him/her into a successful adult, and their child needs their vital support. Casue et al. (2003) stated that

Effective parents alter their actions on behalf of a child, depending on the nature of the threat, their knowledge of the child, and their judgment about what needs to be done given the situation at hand to achieve a desired outcome. A parent might intervene in different ways to promote resilience in a sibling, or for the child in a different situation, or for the same child at a different age. (p. 15)

Effective parents have the abilities or skills to nurture or raise their children to become successful adults as explained below.

**Common Characteristics of Parents of Resilient Children:** Resilient students have some common characteristic with regard to parents. For instance, the parents of resilient children are relatively successful; they are goal oriented, independent, autonomous, resilient, and happy. They appear to be models for hope in their children (Snyder, 1994). Their children often learn the art of resilience from them. According to Snyder (1994), resilient children describe their parents as being successful at what they do. These parents have high self-esteem and have positive images of themselves (Snyder, 1994). Another key characteristic of the parents of resilient children is that, they take care of their health and exercise often (Snyder, 1994). That means that most resilient children learn about resilience, life, health and exercise from their parents.

**Lessons Taught to Children by Parents:** Effective parents teach resilience to their children. One important resilience lesson that parents give to their children is instructions about how to handle obstacles (Snyder, 1994). For instance, they teach their children “when-things-get-tough lessons” (Snyder, 1994, p. 106). Effective parents are consistent in supporting their children during hard times, and give them ideas about how to handle the difficulties they encounter (Snyder, 1994). Their children recognize that obstacles are inevitable in life (Snyder, 1994).

**Lessons Taught to Children by Mothers:** Although resilient children may live with both parents in one home, some findings have revealed that it is often one parent that is more effective in discipline development than the other. According to Snyder (1994), most resilient children

always attribute the vital life lessons they learnt mostly to their mothers (Snyder, 1994, p. 106). It is mostly their mothers who offer them special lessons, including encouraging them to set goals; and the importance of taking care of their health (Snyder, 1994). It is their mothers who deliver the discipline and giving the punishment in a consistent fashion. Mothers often establish boundaries for appropriate behaviour and also foster autonomy in the children (Snyder, 1994). Their mothers use “an open communication style for teaching these lessons” (Snyder, 1994, p. 107). It is because of these characteristics that mothers are perceived as the ones who spend time with and are interested in the children than fathers (Snyder, 1994.)

Thus parents of resilient children have a lot to offer to their counterparts who are with limited or without key parenting skills. In our society today, there are parents who do not have such skills to pass to their children. Parents with little or no such skills need easily accessible resources to help them prepare for the challenges of parenting their children. These include offering them information on communication strategies, counselling, as well as on how to monitor youth behaviour, the importance of being role models, optimism, consistency in setting and enforcing limits, and following through with consequences (Todis, 2001). The important roles that parents of resilient students play show that the family is the key social institution for promoting the well-being and resilience of children (Amato & Keith, 1991).

However, the biggest challenge in parents support structures is the increasing change in family structure. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the two-parent family is a better environment for children's development than the single-parent family (Amato & Keith, 1991). This is based on numerous studies that have “examined the implications of parental divorce for children's scholastic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social competence, and relationships with parents (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 26). Many studies have found that children from divorced families experience lower levels of well-being than do children from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 26). For these reasons, children of divorce parents often experience a decrease in well-being because of a decrease in parental attention, help, and supervision (Amato & Keith, 1991). This decline in parental support increases the likelihood of problems, such as academic failure, low self-esteem, and misbehaviours. Additionally, the lack of parental models in the household may result in the inadequate learning of social skills necessary for success in the larger world (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 26). It becomes a greater challenge, particularly, to a single immigrant mother from

Sub-Saharan Africa who is struggling to raise her teenage children in neighborhoods where they are vulnerable to crimes, drugs, and other delinquent behaviours.

Some studies have revealed that large numbers of black children are growing up in a single-parent household with no father figure (Assibiy-Mensah, 1997; Slack, 2007). The absence and disengagement of fathers have negative impact on young people's development (Slack, 2007). With the absence of positive male role models many young black men choose to emulate negative and violent lifestyles popularized in some forms of black music, such as rap, films, and peer pressure (Assibiy-Mensah, 1997; Slack, 2007). In addition to that many black single mothers are either powerless or afraid to take action against unruly children (Slack, 2007).

### **Social Support Structure**

In addition to parents support structure, the social support structure also play essential role in the well-being of an individual. Cohen (2004) defined social support as the provision of both psychological and material resources with the intention of helping the recipients to cope with stress. Cohen and Wills (1985) stated that social support structure is an important source of well-being. Social support structure offers positive emotions, a sense of belonging, “a sense of self-worth, and predictability in life; it also functions as a stress buffer by reinforcing self-esteem, self-efficacy, and problem solving behaviours” (Chu et al., 2010, p. 624). Social support structure provides an individual with an opportunity to expand social networks.

Interactions and the life lessons young adults get from friends and adults in the society are mostly through social structures. Such interactions are most helpful, especially interactions that demonstrate love, caring, altruism, health, exercise, education, moral behaviour, as well as self- control (Todis, 2001). Social support structure is particularly important for those whose parents are absent, raised by a single parent, or whose parents are neither emotionally available nor effective at enforcing limits (Todis, 2001). Social support structure provides opportunities for them to socialize and increase their levels of well-being. Socialization and the ability to live in groups that are provided by social support structure are highly adaptable and youth can adapt easily (Compton, 2005). According to Layard (2005), socialization and relationships with others allow people to “have better hormonal balance and better health, and are of course happier” (p. 66). Through socialization, “many people adapt and adjust to life in highly creative ways that allow them, and those they come in contact with, to feel good about life (Compton, 2005, p. 8).

The absence of social support structure can have negative impact on an individual, particularly of ethnic minority groups or recent immigrant youth, as many of them often turn to entertainment media or gang members for life lessons and role models. Several studies have found that young people who watch one to three hours of television daily are “almost four times more likely to commit violent and aggressive acts later in life than those who watched less than an hour of TV a day” (Mestel, 2013). A study has also shown that girls and boys who watch violence on TV exhibit increased aggression, including involvement in violence and drug use in their neighborhoods (Mestel, 2013).

Entertainment media also aspire the youth (both boys and girls) to emulate their idols. The TV and magazine images tend to be mostly unflattering at times degrading, and focus on a culture that is excessively influenced by glamour, sex, and violence (Hrabowski et al., 2003). When the social support structure is weak and ineffective the powerful influence of the media takes over in helping boys’ and girls’ shape the definitions of themselves through television, movies, teen magazines, advertisements, and music, making it difficult for them to adapt to a lifestyle that can lead them to success in real life (Hrabowski et al., 2003). Thus, our entire social network affects our “health, habits, and well-being” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 39). Given that fact, it is critical for us to do what we can to have social support structures that can help youth, especially those vulnerable to crimes in poor neighborhoods; and strengthen the social network that can contribute toward their well-being and good life (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 39).

### **Teacher Support**

Some studies have shown that there are positive associations between teachers’ support and well-being outcomes (Bru, Murberg, & Stephens, 2001; Natvig, Albreksten, Anderssen, & Qvarnstrom, 1999; Wentzel, 1998). The benefits that a student gets from positive teacher’s support include improved emotional adjustment, better academic- related achievement and behaviours, and fewer psychosomatic symptoms (Chu et al., 2010). According to Chu et al. (2010), in terms of sources of support, the support that a student receives from teachers and school personnel has the strongest association with student’s well-being, followed by the support from family members, friend support and other relationships. Similarly, Krovetz (1999) stated that

Human relationships are the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any

method of teaching literacy, or science, or math. When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike in inner city and rural areas. (p. 57)

A good teacher is someone who can motivate a student, especially an ethnic minority or a Sub-Saharan African immigrant student who have experienced some form of trauma in life.

Ryan and Deci (2000) examined key factors that can hinder or undermine self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being of students. One of the key factors examined was human motivation. Motivation has been a central issue in the field of psychology, “for it is at the core of biological, cognitive, and social regulation” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 1). In the real world, motivation is highly valued because of positive consequences it produces (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students need motivations and positive environments to succeed. A good teacher can create such motivation and positive environment in the classroom. For instance, a teacher can create motivation and a positive environment by providing positive performance feedback to students, and connecting with them emotionally. Studies have shown that “positive performance feedback enhanced intrinsic motivation, whereas negative performance feedback diminished it” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 1).

Additionally, students should be taught in a less controlling atmosphere. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), “Students taught with a more controlling approach not only lose initiative but learn less effectively, especially when learning requires conceptual, creative processing” (p. 1). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the more students are externally regulated the less they show interest, value, and effort toward achievement and the more they tend to disown responsibility for negative outcomes, blaming others such as their teacher. Controlling teachers make students with low levels of well-being become less motivated, hate his/her classroom, or drop out of school.

### **University Support**

The university environment plays a critical role in the well-being students. Many universities have the capacity to develop mechanisms that can assist youth to become resilient. The best university should have a support structure that youth can access to have positive youth and adult influences, and develop skills and problem-solving experiences (Todis, 2001). Adopting motivational approaches through words of encouragement from invited guest speakers



from different nationalities on resiliency and overcoming can also build resilience and contribute to an increase of levels of well-being in students. Well-being is about having a university “that is rich in the protective factors of caring, high expectations, purposeful support, and ongoing opportunities for participation” (Krovetz, 1999, p. 35). Universities can build resiliency in students through creating an environment of caring and personal relationships (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Those relationships begin with educators who have resiliency-building skills and attitudes, and an approach that can convey hope and optimism to students (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). However, according to Krovetz (1999),

Schools [or universities] are terrible at being resilient communities. Most [university] and most classes are too large and the school day is too harried for teachers or administrators to know each student well and therefore to care deeply about each student, to set high expectations, to offer purposeful support, and to value the participation of each student. (p. 3). [As a result,] Many students find classroom learning to be irrelevant to their lives, and whereas many alienated students are behind in their academic skills, primarily reading skills, many are gifted students bored by the lockstep nature of classes. They feel shamed by their teachers for not doing homework, for not performing well, and by their poor grades, and attend less and less regularly. (p. 5)

Henderson and Milstein (2003) suggested several steps that universities should take for resiliency building. These include increased bonding; setting clear, consistent boundaries; teaching life skills; providing caring and support; setting and communicating high expectation; and providing opportunities for meaningful participation. Universities ought to be arenas for character-building efforts where “educators can directly influence only their own actions within the university setting” for the well-being of students (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

### **Religious/Spiritual Support**

Religious or spiritual supports are central to well-being and success and can play critical roles in the process of resilience building. According to Johnson (2008), religious institutions such as churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues are well suited to produce the relational networks of social and emotional support that help prevent at-risk youth from participating in negative behavioural outcomes such as crime. Religious institutions help individuals to integrate into a social network or a set of people linked by a variety of positive social relationships (Johnson, 2008).

Most human beings, especially those who are experiencing trauma, seem unable to survive, unless they can have an environment where they can pray, meditate or make meaning of their sufferings (Parks, 2000). Thus religious/spiritual support helps individuals experiencing trauma make meaning to their sufferings. When individuals “wrestle with hope and fear, power and powerlessness, the known and the unknown,” life becomes a mystery to them (Parks, 2000, p. 197). When they witness, for instance, a friend dying at a young age, when they are stressed out, or when their plans and everything are in disarray and nothing seem to be working for them, resilient people usually seek answers from a source that is bigger than themselves (Parks, 2000). They long for a spiritual connection. When that happens, religion or spirituality becomes a way of making meaning (Parks, 2000). Through religious institutions/spiritual support, they develop faith that creates optimism that provides power over their painful events (Baker & Stauth, 2003). Spiritual support help individuals gain insight into the meaning of life. Nolen-Hoeksema (2000) stated,

The theories that target coping note that learning about one’s strength in the face of adversity, or gaining insight into the meaning of life, or the importance of relationships, may help to mitigate the feelings of loss or hopelessness at the passing of a loved one. It may help to preserve or restore the idea that one’s own life has purpose and worth, which may be critical to well-being. (p. 118)

Religious/spiritual support structures provide teachings that help individuals discover that life has purpose and worth (Layard, 2005). This connection is critical to their well-being because when they learn that life is worth living, they become determined to get the best out of it. Because of the connection to a religious institution or spirituality, individuals also find comfort from within (Layard, 2005). Spiritual connections allow individuals to rely on the strength that comes from the deep positive part of oneself, rather than on the efforts of their “conscious ego” (Layard, 2005, p. 72). Individuals who are connected to a supreme being perceive pain differently. For them, “Pain is not ignored but observed in a spirit of peace” (Layard, 2005, p. 72). Through spiritual support and their spiritual journey resilient people discover that sometimes they are unable to help themselves by conscious effort. That is why some find it necessary to seek help from a deep inner positive force within them (Layard, 2005). A religious/spiritual support structure also helps individuals to develop aspects of behaviours

That contribute to forging positive connections to others, including the ability to love, the presence of altruistic concerns, the ability to forgive, and the presence of spiritual connections to help create a sense of deeper meaning and purpose in life. Positive individual traits can include, among other elements, a sense of integrity, the ability to play and be creative, and the presence of virtues such as courage and humility. (Layard, 2005, p. 7)

These positive values promoted by spiritual support structures contribute to the general well-being of an individual. Oishi et al. (1999) suggested that values play an important interactive role in the associations between personality and well-being. They found that “values moderated the relation between specific domain satisfactions and overall life satisfaction and values moderated the effect of daily activities on daily satisfaction” (Diener et al., 2003, p. 416). Thus religious institutions/spiritual support structures can play a critical role in helping a student develop values that can motivate him/her achieve education attainment and good life.

### **Community Support**

Like the other support structures discussed above, community support structure is also crucial for resilience-building and the well-being of an individual. The community to which an individual belongs provides a network of relationships, resources, and safe environment in which to prosper. The quality of the community, however, is crucial to whether an individual makes friends, finds resources for success, or feels safe. Layard (2005) referred to the quality of the community as “social capital” (p. 68). Our well-being depends on the quality of our community. The community structure that can provide support and well-being should provide personal freedom and peace, including “the rule of law; stability and lack of violence; voice and accountability; the effectiveness of the [community] services; the absence of corruption; and efficiency of the system of regulation” (Layard, 2005, p. 70). The ideal community support structure for well-being also must have other important factors that are good for personality, family, interests, and other pursuits. These factors include “naturally beautiful places and availability of parks, trails, and playgrounds (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 95). It should also have places where people, regardless of race, gender, heritage, age, or sexual orientation can meet, spend time with friends, and enjoy the day or nightlife (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 94).

Such thriving community support structure, however, is not possible without active involvement by individuals in community groups, including individuals of all races, faiths, social status, heritages, ages, sexual orientation or organizations. A thriving community is one in which all groups feel included, valued and can access solutions to immediate problems (Rath & Harter, 2010). The youth, particularly ethnic minority or immigrant Sub-Saharan African youth, often belong to groups that they feel are connected to, where they have a wider network of friends or acquaintances. Thus, developing strategies that are culturally diverse and inclusive can encourage community participation programs. For instance, sports programs or helping those in need, will contribute to increasing their well-being and that of their community (Rath & Harter, 2010). A thriving community support structure should make the youth feel connected to it.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the development of resiliency in individuals in the context of well-being. It has analyzed demographic changes in the Canadian society and classrooms, some of the challenges that Sub-Saharan African immigrant students, and the well-being strategies that are needed for enhancing their educational attainment. Educational attainment for students has been a priority for many countries for centuries. Despite efforts by policymakers, universities, schools, and educators to increase overall performance among students, there are some groups that continue to lag behind. According to PISA (2011) the percentage of low performers decreased between 2000 and 2009, but within the same period, low performance increased among socio-economically disadvantaged boys. Most of the socio-economically disadvantaged students were ethnic minority students such as Sub-Saharan African students. Although the current strategies focusing on ethnic minority students are different than they were years ago, current attempts have failed to boost achievement in any significant way for the same reasons as that of the previous. Well-being is looked at as a key solution to the problem that has continued to hinder academic progress among ethnic minority or recent immigrant students, especially Sub-Saharan African students who have experienced traumatic events in their lives. “Well-being is about the combination of our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contribute to our communities” (Rath & Harter, 2010, p. 4). Studies of resilient Sub-Saharan African students who have overcome tremendous odds and are succeeding where those

in similar situations have failed or given up, offer an example of how support structures for the general well-being can be explored as a potential solution to the problems that have been hindering progress among ethnic minorities and recent immigrant students in their new country. Given that human capital is an important factor of development, the strategies and support structures discussed in this section can contribute significantly toward resilience and enhancing educational attainment among ethnic minority or recent Sub-Saharan African immigrant students. This can make a difference in the lives of all in the increasingly diverse student population in the Canadian provinces, increase the GDP, and assist recent immigrants become full members of a free and democratic society.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Research Methodology**

In this chapter I present the research methods and the specific procedures I used in conducting this study. To accomplish this, I provide the research methodology and the rationale for using a qualitative research approach to conduct this study. Further, I provide the research design, participants' descriptions, identify and present all the data-collection and data analysis methods I used, and explain the steps I took to carry out each method. I outline the implications of the choices I made and, in particular, the links between this study's purpose and research questions and the research approach and research methods that I selected. This chapter also describes the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, and the ethical procedures taken.

### **Methodology and Design**

I chose naturalistic inquiry as my methodology for this study. Naturalistic inquiry falls within the qualitative paradigm and is based on constructivism (Altheide & Johnson, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Kuzel & Like, 1991; Secker et al., 1995). In this study, constructivism refers to the knowledge and meaning that participants construct from their life experiences and knowledge. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry seeks to describe, understand, and interpret life experiences. I used qualitative methods to conduct multiple in-depth interviews. This is because qualitative research is “used when little is known about a phenomena, when the investigator suspects that the present knowledge or theory may be biased, or when the research question pertains to understanding or describing particular phenomenon or event about which little is known” (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 10). This inquiry used qualitative approaches to study of perspectives of resilient Sub-Saharan African post-secondary students who had succeeded in spite of tremendous odds against them, to gain clearer and more in-depth theoretical understandings of most of the factors associated with resilience and overcoming odds, in the context of well-being, and to develop a theoretical model of this construct.

Qualitative researchers believe that there are multiple realities that can be studied only holistically; “inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes, though some level of understanding can be achieved” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 237-238). As a researcher, the qualitative research method that I chose helped me to understand and make sense of the phenomena as experienced by participants in the study.

As a qualitative researcher, I used inductive strategies, gathering data through the use of recorded interviews, conversations and my own interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2002). A qualitative paradigm helped me to understand what those interpretations were at particular points in time and in particular contexts (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative researchers believe that meaning is socially constructed through individuals' interactions with their world (Merriam, 2002). My intention was to use the qualitative method to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and the meanings they bring to these, with attentiveness to the themes and language of participants' perspectives. Qualitative research methods were used to describe the realities of the participants with regard to their perceptions of how their resilience developed while undergoing multiple adversities, including the negative emotional and social changes they encountered.

While it is not possible for a qualitative researcher to set out a rigidly structured research design, I did have general guidelines with respect to how the research was to be conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative researchers enter the field of study largely without prior theory or hypothesis; they are unable to anticipate design in advance. The design emerges as the inquiry proceeds. New ideas emerged as the data collection and data analysis proceeded.

I devised a research process that best suited the research purposes, such as helped me to answer my research questions. The most effective and comprehensive way to answer the research questions stated in this study was to use various components of the paradigm that consisted of ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology, and methods.

Ontologically, qualitative researchers believe that there are multiple realities based on one's construction of reality. Therefore, reality is socially constructed; reality is not static, but is constantly changing (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Epistemologically, qualitative researchers believe that there is no access to reality independent of the mind or knowledge (Smith, 1983). As researcher I served as an instrument to collect the research data by using in-depth interviews. Therefore, the researcher and the participant were interactively linked and the findings were mutually created within the context of the situation which shaped the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Furthermore, qualitative researchers believe that reality does not exist prior to the activity of investigation (Smith, 1983). Qualitative research emphasizes on process and meanings. Axiologically, qualitative researchers believe that values affect what they

do and what they value in the results of their researches (Grünberg, 1969). Values also affect participants' perspectives and worldviews (Grünberg, 1969). For instance, religion, culture, the morals that they learned in their communities, their political and social views may impact the outcome of the study (Grünberg, 1969). Methodologically, a qualitative research was chosen to describe and understand resilient Sub-Saharan African students who had overcome odds to succeed, with respect to their educational attainment and subjective well-being. The technique that was used in this study was in-depth interviews with carefully selected participants. The participants chosen were not meant to represent a larger population. In other words, the participants were chosen on the prospect that they could provide important information about Sub-Saharan African students who have succeeded in spite of tremendous odds against them, not because they were representative of a larger group (Reid, 1996).

### **Selection of Participants**

I used purposeful sampling and convenience sampling to select participants for this study. According to Merriam (1988), "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 61). The rationale behind using purposeful sampling is to have specific groups of participants who could provide the researcher with important information about their experiences and how they are able to thrive. The targeted participants were a specific group of resilient Sub-Saharan African university students between the ages of 20 and 35. As the researcher, I was interested in the stories of resilient students who have overcome tremendous odds and succeeded while others in similar situations may have failed or given up.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided characteristics of individuals that can eminently qualify as the instrument of choice in qualitative inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that individuals who can qualify as the instrument of choice are those who are adaptable and can assimilate information from multiple sources simultaneously. They are individuals who view the world holistically and can work concurrently with both propositional and tacit knowledge. They are individuals who can analyze data immediately and can summarize and provide feedback about data immediately. And, they are individuals who can achieve a higher level of understanding of data. Qualitative research method has no fixed rule on the number of participants that can be chosen or the numbers of interviews that must be conducted to yield sufficient data to explore and to document a range of themes (Travers, 2001). Given that fact, I



used flexibility to choose what I concluded as sufficient participants and conducted interviews that yielded the data I needed to explore for a range of themes.

I used multiple approaches to achieve the goal of purposeful or convenience sampling. These included person-to-person contacts, phone calls, and sending emails asking for their help in identifying resilient university students originally from Sub-Saharan Africa who have overcome tremendous odds to be where they are today. With the help of those personal contacts, I managed to identify the sample.

In short, I used a snowball sampling strategy to identify and contact participants (Berg, 2001). Snowballing occurs when an individual or a group of people recommend potential participants for a study (Berg, 2001). I started by contacting key participants and, as part of the initial contacts with them; I then asked them to suggest additional contacts and referrals to other key participants relevant to the study. Each potential participant I contacted suggested new sources of information (Berg, 2001). In total, I selected sixteen respondents for the in-depth interviews.

After identifying potential participants, I had several contacts with them during the period. I then determined if there were enough individuals with the characteristics I was looking for. For instance, individuals who were able to express themselves clearly, completely, had some level of comfort, and who had the traumatic, turmoil, resilience and well-being experiences that I sought. After making contact with those individuals, I explained to them what the study was about, and invited them to participate in this study. After they agreed to participate in the study, each was asked to sign a consent form confirming their willingness to participate in the study. As each signed the consent form, I provided him/her with details of the study, including confidentiality, the research questions, purpose of the study, data collection, and plans for completion of the final report. After giving them the detailed information, we discussed the dates for beginning the interviews.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

My purpose for collecting data was to seek answers to the general research questions addressed in this study. Data collection is defined as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering information to answer research questions (Creswell, 1998). In a qualitative study, data are collected mostly from people, their stories, activities, or artifacts that provide researchers with explanations for the things the chosen participants do, experience, and the meaning they

give to the phenomena in which they engage (Creswell, 1998). In qualitative research, the researcher acts as a human instrument because of his close involvement with participants in the research process. For this study, the data collection method used was predominantly in-depth interviews, while the other methods played a supporting role in gaining a better understanding of the group under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2002) suggested that using multiple sources for collecting data can yield information to provide a researcher with a comprehensive perspective and to validate the reliability and cross-check the findings.

### **In-depth Interviews**

This section provides a description of in-depth interviews that were used in this study as the method for data collection. The rationale for choosing in-depth interviews in this study is that it was the most appropriate tool for collecting important and detailed information about resilient students who have overcome odds to succeed, in the context of well-being. According to Seidman (1998), at the root of in-depth interviews by the qualitative researcher “is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3). For a qualitative researcher, the purpose of interview is to reveal participants lived experiences that go beyond asking simple questions or testing a hypothesis. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) stated that “all interviews are reality-constructing, meaning making occasions” (p. 4). The use of interviews in data collection process allows the researcher to design open-ended sets of questions where the participants can be encouraged to offer insights into their life experiences.

The method of in-depth interview allowed participants to tell their understanding of reality through conversations with the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Jill and Johnson (2010) stated that in-depth interview “seeks *deep* information and knowledge...this information usually concerns very personal matters, such as an individual’s self, lived experience, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or perspective” (p. 104). Similarly, Seidman (2006) viewed an in-depth interview as “[a]n interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of their experience” (p. 9). According to Jill and Johnson (2010), if the research is focused on personal experiences and only a limited information source is available, in-depth interviewing should be used. That was the case with this research.

Seidman (2006) suggested a model for in-depth interviewing in which a series of three separate interviews are conducted with each participant. In the model, the first interview explores the participant's life history; the second interview focuses on the details of the participant's experiences related to the topic or area of the study; and the third interview focuses on having the participant reflect on the meaning of his/her experiences. Although only one interview was conducted with each participant, Seidman's (2006) model of in-depth interviews was used for data collection in this study. For instance, each interview had three parts of questions. The first part of the questions focused on each participant's life history. Participants were asked to narrate a range of stories of their early lives, their families, communities, social environments, schools, economic status, spiritual support structures, and university. The second part of the questions was focused on getting details of participants' lived experiences, including the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to build resilience or to overcome the odds they encountered. Their responses to the specific interview questions gave details of their lived experiences that included multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some activities, events, places, or cultural practices that had significant impacts on their lives (Jill & Johnson, 2010). The third part of the questions focused on participants' reflections on the meaning of their life histories and experiences based on the first two sections of the interview. There was a question that gave each participant an opportunity to provide additional information that they thought they had missed during the interview. The interview questions were designed to cover the three models of in-depth interviews.

Questions were developed to harness answers to the research questions described in Chapter One. They were developed to investigate factors influential in the behaviour among resilient students who overcome odds and succeed where others in a similar situation fail or give up. The questions also consisted of collecting demographic data such as country of origin, gender, family, income, well-being, and education, exposure to loss or traumatic events at some point in their lives, occupational level, religious patterns, support structures, association and sociability, activities during their leisure, residence and race/ethnicity. There were also questions that were specifically designed to allow those resilient individuals to express themselves giving detail about how they managed to endure temporary upheavals, loss or potentially traumatic events remarkably well, with no apparent disruption in their ability to function at school or in close relationships, and seem to move on to new challenges with apparent ease.

Through in-depth interviews, details of participants' lived experiences in multiple environments were collected. The participants' responses to the specific interview questions provided details of their experiences, including their "multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some activity, event, place, or cultural object" (Jill & Johnson, 2010, pp. 106-107). Prior to the interviews, the interview questions were sent to each participant so that he/she can have time to sort out his/her thoughts and prepare himself/herself to have a meaningful interview (see Appendix A).

The general questions addressed in this study included the following:

1. To what do Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students attribute their success? What has helped them overcome tremendous odds and roadblocks?
2. How did external support structures contribute to the resilience, well-being and success of Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students?
3. What do these post-secondary students believe could be changed to provide more effective support for the success of immigrant students (school/post-secondary) from Sub-Saharan Africa?

I developed interview questions based on the general questions listed above. I began the data collection process after receiving ethical approval. Prior to the interviews, I made an effort to get to know the participants. This was essential because Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that successful and detailed data collections often occur when the researcher and the participants are known to each other. This prior engagement helped to build trust between the researcher and participants, help the researcher know the participants better, reduce the sense of intrusiveness of the researcher's research questions, and ensuring that the researcher is sensitive to the participants body language or culture (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The role of the researcher is critical in data collection and interpretation and prior engagement with participants built trust and helped me to have a better understanding of the their perspectives. As the researcher I was aware of all these circumstances. I took steps to meet and engage with the participants prior to the interviews to develop trust and comfort between us. It was during the first meeting that the date and time was chosen by participants for each interview.

**Open-ended questions:** Open-ended questions were used in this study (Seidman, 2006). The rationale for using open-ended questions was that they allowed the researcher to collect detailed data, through descriptive stories, from participants. Open-ended questions were

necessary for use because they were broad and required detailed responses. Open-ended questions also allowed the researcher and the participants to develop trust and were less threatening to the participants, as they allowed participants to have an unrestrained or free response. Additionally, Open-ended questions also had the direct effect of opening up to expanding discussions, broadening perspectives, helped the researcher and participants to see things from a different perspective, and helped to explain the broader context, and making it easier for the researcher to understand the reasons behind participants' perspectives and resiliencies. The sample of interview questions for this study is provided in Appendix B.

Through interviews, I gained an understanding of the participants' beliefs, motivations and behaviours. For instance, the method I chose to collect data from the participants allowed them to share their stories and activities, the things they did, their experiences. Furthermore, the meaning they gave to their life challenges helped me to describe, understand, and interpret how they perceived success, well-being, educational attainment, and good life. It also helped me to describe the policy, systems, and structures that could be changed to provide more effective support for success of students facing enormous challenges. It allowed me to understand and interpret what they said have helped them to overcome odds to succeed and the ways learning environment can make a difference in the performance of socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim into electronic format and printed in hard copy. Once the interviews were completed and hard copies printed, they were coded numerically. The scheduled interviews were transcribed soon after the interviews. This allowed me to review the information gathered, identify any gaps in their responses that might need clarification and further interviews. This process encouraged synthesis of the information and strategic data collection. All in all, this method provided a rich source of data for interpretation.

### **Data Analysis**

Seidman (1998) suggested that a researcher should avoid in-depth analysis until he/she completes the interviews. I heeded this advice and avoided in-depth data analysis until I had completed all the interviews. After the interviews were completed, I used a qualitative method analysis to explain, understand, and interpret the data I collected. By analyzing interview data I identified participants' interpretations of the world, how they viewed their life circumstances, how and why they developed that point of view, how they came to that view, what they had been

doing that others did not do, how they conveyed their views of their situations, and how they identified or classified themselves, their environments, and others in what they did. The process of qualitative data analysis helped me to identify common themes in the group that was studied.

The in-depth interviews I conducted provided rich data that answered all the research questions. I discovered that with open-ended questions, participants went beyond the question itself. The life histories, experiences, and reflection provided rich data for analysis. Analysis of the gathered interview data took great effort. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “data analysis is thus not a matter of data *reduction* ... but of *induction*” (p. 333). Qualitative data analysis is a cyclical and repetitive process. It is through this process that a researcher is able to study, understand, develop theory, or build on ideas as they emerge.

The first step of the data analysis was the codification. To establish patterns in the data that was collected. There was the sorting process from which there was development of themes from which the data was rigorously analyzed for meaning and answers to the research questions. To establish patterns in the data that were collected, I read and re-read the research proposal as well as the data. This enabled me to organize the data topically, from which recurring themes and patterns were identified and formed into categories. Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggested that the researcher unitize the data and identify “units” of information that will later serve as the basis for defining categories. Thus from sifting through the data, I discovered recurring themes and patterns that enabled me to organize the data into categories by grouping stories, experiences and reflections.

I used crystallization method in the data analysis process. According to Ellington (2009), Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, high-lights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them.

(p. 4)

The use of crystallization method was appropriate in this study because it provided the researcher “with a deepened, complex, thoroughly understanding of the topic” (Ellington, 2009, p. 3). Crystallization method manifests “in qualitative projects that: “Offer deep, thickly described, complexly rendered interpretations of meanings about a phenomena or group;” “Represent ways

of producing knowledge across multiple points of qualitative continuum;” “Utilize more than one genre of writing; and include a significant degree of reflexive consideration of the researcher’s self and roles in the process of the research design, data collection, and representation” (Ellington, 2009, p. 10).

With the use of crystallization method, deep and thick descriptions were possible. These were possible because “crystallization seeks to produce knowledge about a particular phenomenon through generating a deepened, complex interpretation” (Ellington, 2009, p. 10). Like every qualitative researcher, I wanted to provide an in-depth understanding of a topic, with thick description and crystallization provided a way of achieving this depth, through “the compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details” (Ellington, 2009, p. 11). Incorporating differing forms of analysis and genres enabled me to identify and provide themes or patterns that were supported by examples and providing a wide-angle view of the stories (Ellington, 2009, p. 15). Given that this study was about ethnic minority students from different backgrounds who had overcome odds to succeed, and the exploration of the factors that contributed toward enhancing their education attainment and subjective well-being, enriching findings through the use of crystallization method with multiple forms of analysis moved me as a qualitative researcher toward fulfilling that goal.

### **Structural Narrative Analysis**

I used structural narrative analysis to analyse the stories of recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan African who have succeed despite the odds the encountered. According to Smith (2000), “Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that takes story as either its raw data or its product” (p. 328). Narrative analysis usually “permits a holistic approach to discourse that preserves context and particularity” (Smith, 2000, p. 327). Because the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity (Reissman, 1993), such as the current study. Narrative analysis provides information that may not be available by other methods (Smith, 2000). For instance, sometimes narrative analysis can reveal inner most thoughts, references, experiences, reaction to situation, and cultural conventions (Smith, 2000). Furthermore, narrative analysis provides “in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of particular individuals or the modes of thoughts and emotion characteristic of different culture” (Smith, 2000, p. 332). Narrative inquiry can also bring to

light things a researcher might not think or ask about (Smith, 2000). It is also able to capture the complexity of human thoughts and behaviour (Smith, 2000).

Smith (2000) stated that personal narratives usually “depend on certain structures to hold them together” (p. 231). Based on that observation, the current study used Labov’s (1972; 1982) structure of narrative analysis to hold the personal narratives together. According to Labov, a “fully formed” structural narrative analysis includes six common elements:

1. An Abstract. It provides a summary of the substance of the narrative
2. Orientation. It describes time, place, situation, and participants
3. Complicating action. It is simply a sequence of events
4. Evaluation. It provides the significance, meaning of action, and the attitude of the narrator
5. Resolution. It provides an explanation of what finally happened (Labov, 1972; 1982; Smith, 2000).
6. Coda. This returns the perspective to the present (Labov, 1972; 1982; Smith, 2000).

With these structures, “a teller constructs a story from a primary experience and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation” (Smith, 2000, p. 232). Thus, in this study, structural narratives analysis was used as a tool to order experiences, construct realities, and creatively make sense of situations (Lempert, 1994).

Booker’s (2004) seven basic plot structures were also used in the narrative analysis process. Booker’s (2004) seven basic plot structures were used as a complementary means of secondary analysis. Booker’s (2004) approach was used a way of making sense and organizing the stories told by the participants. Booker (2004) stated that every story narrated in the world falls into one of seven basic plots: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Booker further contended that every successful narrative is based on one or more of these seven plots. The 16 stories presented in this study fitted into the Booker’s seven plot structures.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor of the Study**

Winter (2000), as cited by Tracy (2010), stated that “high-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundance—in contrast to quantitative research that is more likely appreciated for its precision” (p. 841). Tracy (2010) suggested that a qualitative research is full of theories and abundant data, the researcher’s effort, care, and thoroughness. He also



contended that the care and practice of data collection and analysis procedures can contribute to the trustworthiness and rigor of qualitative study. To demonstrate trustworthiness and rigor, I collected enough data to support significant findings. I spent enough time to gather interesting and significant data that were appropriate to the goals of this study and I used appropriate procedures in terms of interviewing practices, and analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010). In addition to that, I provided readers with the goals of the study, the types of questions asked, the procedures I took to ensure transcript accuracy, and the number of pages of interview transcripts. Trustworthiness and rigor were also “achieved through the provision of an explanation of the process by which the raw data are transformed and organized into the research report” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). These care, transparency, practices, and procedures contributed to the credibility of the study.

The important strategy I used to ensure the construction of credibility of this study was to corroborate different sources of data, such as interview data and the literature. I used the literature review to corroborate interview data with references to qualitative data analysis procedures. This allowed me to compare and discuss relationships between my own data and previous research. Additionally, participants had an opportunity to critique preliminary transcripts thus helping to ensure accurate representation. Allowing the participants to check the researcher’s interpretations of their words was another way of enhancing the credibility of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

This research was approached with an awareness of its contribution to the advancement of educational knowledge. As a result, important steps were taken to ensure academic trustworthiness and quality. Trustworthiness was ensured through following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) steps they suggested a researcher must follow to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability as the issues that must be achieved or addressed. Through my prolonged engagement with the data sources, as well as the data analysis process I followed, and the formulation and interpretations I made sure the credibility of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as research instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I was the key person collecting data from the respondents. I facilitated interaction and contributed to the emotions of respondents. I set respondents at ease, transcribe and interpreted the data collected from the respondents and generated these into meaningful information (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2000). The research can be untrustworthy if steps are not taken to avoid potential threats. As researcher, I was sufficiently prepared and avoided such error, studied and followed every procedure strictly, during the processes of data collection and data analysis. I conducted appropriate interviews and was attentive to the production of accurate information and research approach discussed in this chapter. These steps contributed to the trustworthiness and rigor of this study.

I provided thick description in the research aimed at transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that “it is *not* the naturalist's task to provide an *index* of transferability; it *is* his or her responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316). Thus, in this research, transferability was primarily my responsibility; I worked to enhance transferability by presenting clear description of the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that in the qualitative research, dependability or “reliability is a matter of replicability; a study ought to be repeatable under the same circumstances in another place and time” (p. 247). Given that I used purposeful sampling to select the sample that could eminently qualify as the instrument of choice in qualitative inquiry, their reliability and the rich data I collected from them will add to the dependability of this research. The ways I conducted the data collection and analysis ensured the conformability of this research. For instance, the data were analyzed through reading, re-reading and reflection, for data and themes that emerged and were presented; research questions were also addressed, and interview transcripts were reviewed, confirmed, verified, or clarified by the participants.

In sum, as a researcher and research instrument, I approached this study with an awareness of preconceived biases. Given that I was also an overcomer like the 16 participants and with similar life experiences, I could envision the potential to make an unfair judgment of the participants’ experiences and reactions to certain situations. Being aware of such preconceived biases allowed me, as the research instrument, to take steps toward making fair judgments and decisions to produce stories as they were narrated. I ensured that each participant confirmed my understanding and interpretation of his/her story before proceeding. Thus, the literature review, as well as the review of transcripts, awareness of preconceived biases, and confirmation, verification, or clarifications by participants contributed significantly toward making this research trustworthy. The qualitative or naturalistic approaches that were used in the

study emphasized trustworthiness through in-depth interviews, frequently going back to the participants to elaborate or confirm understandings and interpretations, and through the use of several strategies to make sure that every research question was thoroughly answered (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

### **Ethical Procedures**

When conducting interviews with respondents in qualitative research study, there were many important ethical issues to consider. For instance, a researcher has an interest in personal views and circumstances that can potentially put the participants at risk of exposure and embarrassment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher conducts interviews with intense interest in personal views and circumstances of participants to ensure accuracy of the data. These also involve ethical issues to consider. Thus, in order to protect participants' emotional and physical harm, researchers are required to receive ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee prior to data collection. I received ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee to conduct the study.

Prior to the interviews, consents were obtained from participants and their signatures affixed on the appropriate consent form. Prior to the beginning of interviews, each interviewee was thoroughly briefed on the ethics and the purposes of the study. These were reviewed in detail with participants to ensure they clearly understood their rights, the question to be asked and the possible answers I might expect to receive. Ethical procedures state that participants should have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants who completed the interviews were assured of confidentiality of their names, schools or any other information they required to be kept confidential. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms in references to each participant. Although information about individual participant was collected and exist in transcripts and audio tapes with pseudonym, this information will be securely stored and retained for five years at the University of Saskatchewan, following completion of the study. I took every reasonable precaution to ensure that these ethical procedures were adhered to. During the course of this study, I did not encounter any problems that affected ethics, the quality of the data, or the research results. There were no known risks anticipated or resulting from participation in this study.

## **Conclusion and Summary**

In this chapter I presented the research methodology for this study. I chose to use a qualitative research method. The research approach I used was generally positive. I used a positive approach in this study because such an approach allowed me to seek out what had made the individuals under study resilient, successful, and vibrant, with an attempt to build upon those positive forces to create a positive vision and strategies for helping struggling individuals overcome life challenges and succeed (Bonham, 2011; Troxel, 2002). Every researcher devises for himself a research process that serves his purposes best; one that helps him more than any other to answer his research questions. The most effective and comprehensive way to answer the research questions stated in this study was to use various components of the paradigm that consist of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. The research procedures I devised served the purpose of helping me find answers to my general research questions.

I used purposeful, convenience, and snowballing samplings as methods for selecting participants for this study; these sampling techniques provided me with important information that I hoped to collect from participants' experiences. I used in-depth interviews to collect data. I used in-depth interview in this study because it was the most appropriate tool for collecting important information about the group of participants I selected to conduct this research on. Seidman's (2006) model for in-depth interviewing was used for data collection. I designed open-ended sets of questions where the participants were encouraged to offer insights into their life experiences. Open-ended questions produced rich data, and I used a qualitative method analysis for explaining, understanding, and interpretation of the data.

Structural Narrative Analysis was used to analyse the stories of recent immigrant students from Sub-Saharan Africa who have succeed despite the odds. The use of Structural Narrative Analysis was appropriate in this study because it is a form of qualitative research that takes story as either its raw data or its product (Smith, 2000, p. 328). Booker's (2004) basic plot structures were used in the narrative analysis process as a complementary method of data analysis. Booker (2004) stated that every story narrated in the world falls into one of seven basic plots: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Booker further contended that every successful narrative is based on one or more of these seven plots.

The trustworthiness of this research was ensured through following the steps Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested a researcher must follow to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability as the issues that must be achieved or addressed. I addressed each of these steps in this study. I received ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee prior to data collection. I took every reasonable precaution to ensure that ethical procedures were adhered to. During the course of this study, I did not expect to encounter any problem which would affect the ethical integrity, the quality of the data, or the research results. Thus, there were no known risks that resulted from participation in this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Narratives of Resilience**

To reiterate, the purpose of this study was to explore why some Sub-Saharan African students in Canada have succeeded with respect to their educational attainment and subjective well-being. The study was also intended to postulate ways to enhance educational attainment among immigrant students, especially those who face greater, perhaps even life threatening odds. Through the investigation of remarkable positive stories of overcoming odds to succeed involving recent immigrant university students from Sub-Saharan Africa, I hoped to advance our understandings of resilience through the lived experiences and stories of individuals who have faced life challenges and trauma, overcome these and done well, where most have failed or given up. As well as, I had hoped to contribute new knowledge to help policymakers and educators to develop strategies to enhance well-being such as to enable students who have experienced challenging events in life to thrive, flourish and to reach their full potential as full members of society.

In this chapter, sixteen narratives of resilient university students who, were originally from Sub-Saharan Africa, and who had succeeded in spite of the tremendous odds against them are presented. In this chapter, the narratives are rendered as positive stories of individuals who thrived in the midst of multiple adversities. These were students who were well on course to accomplishing their ultimate dreams. The narratives also describe how these individuals managed to overcome the odds they encountered. These amazing stories were gathered through interviews with the sixteen students selected from diverse backgrounds, gender, marital status, family structures, and countries of origin, socioeconomic status, and education but primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa. Participants' experiences of adversity varied as did their religious affiliations, their cultural backgrounds, their interests and their levels of support. These stories also offer advice and suggestions to families, parents, students, policymakers, schools, communities, and educators to develop strategies that would enable students experiencing similar life challenges to thrive and flourish and reach their full potential to become full members of society.

The sixteen participants included undergraduate and graduate university students with remarkable stories of survival and overcoming odds to tell. In order to maintain confidentiality

and anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The selected participants were university students originally from Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and South Sudan. Of the sixteen participants, seven were female and nine were male students. Each participant believed in the existence of God or a god. With respect to religious adherence, there were Christians from diverse denominations, Muslims and a Jehovah Witness. Of the 16 participants whose stories are presented in this chapter, five are from the same family – Lisa, Suzy, Charity, Tiana and Erick. Unexpected family tragedies forced Lisa to adopt four orphans: Suzy, Charity, Tiana and Erick when she was just 19 years old. The five have overcome numerous odds and achieved their academic dreams.

### **Narratives from the Sixteen Participants**

The brief life stories presented here are highlights of the journey and challenges of the 16 participants as they sought to accomplish their academic goals. Each of the participants' stories is in an abbreviated format.

### **Their Stories: The Journeys and Multiple Challenges**

#### **Louis' Story**

Louis was born in South Sudan to happily married parents who lived together. As a young boy, Louis had great love for both parents and was happy to see them living together. But that childhood joy suddenly turned into misery when his mother's relatives visited his father with a request that was beyond his immediate reach. Louis was five years old when his mother's relatives came and forcefully took his mother, him and his siblings from their home because of his father's inability to finalize payment of the bride price within the allocated time. Louis still remembers the day his mother's parents came to pick them forcefully away from their helpless father. They were taken to live with their maternal uncle. Louis said his maternal relatives did not care about the psychological problems they caused him and his siblings when they tore their beloved family apart. Shortly after, the civil war got worse in South Sudan while they were living with their uncle. This forced them to flee to Uganda as refugees, further separating them from their father. In fact, that was the last time Louis saw or spoke with his father. Though his father is still alive, they have never met or talked since the age of five.

After their arrival in the refugee camp, Louis' mother got married to his alcoholic and abusive stepfather. During this time, Louis and his siblings were living with their maternal uncle. Life was extremely hard in the refugee camp. Louis said:

When you are forced to live with relatives other than your own biological parents, in many African societies, they don't see you like their own. The relatives you are living with give you too much work, regardless of how young you are.

In retrospect, Louis now feels that he suffered a lot from heavy child labor. He was always forced to do more than he felt capable of doing. Some of the work he did while living with his uncle included: farming and harvesting tobacco, taking care of goats, and other difficult tasks. He felt completely powerless to resist. He was always tired, hungry, depressed, and hopeless. Although his uncle allowed him to go to school, he was not allowed to play, make friends or play soccer, a game he loved so much. He would return home from school and be sent to the farm straightaway. He was forced to work hard most of the time and had very limited time for study since the hours right after school were for work.

Upon his return home, he would be required to weed the crops, maybe for an hour or two, and then take shower and then study. The only time he could study was at night. Thus, he learned to use his time in school wisely; especially during the lunch hour. Hence, while his fellow students played, Louis studied hard. Most time, after returning home from school, if there was nothing to eat; he would simply drink some water. He always felt tired. He often felt that difficult situation would never end.

After reaching grade seven, when he could no longer take the extreme hardship of living with his uncle, he decided to move to his mother's place. Sadly, his life became even harder after moving in with his mother. There were days they went by without eating a morsel. Louis remembered when he used to go through the garbage in search of food or anything edible. There were times he and his friends fought over something as little as peanuts that one of them found in the garbage. Even amidst these hardships he continued with his education. He found, the only peace he got was when he was in school. Being in school made him realize the importance of an education as he saw education as the only means by which he could escape the miserable life he was living. His main objective was to get a scholarship since his mother was not in a position to help him financially with his education. He studied hard to pass an exam that could qualify him for free scholarship. Although he got a good mark in his primary seven examinations, it fell



below the grade that one needed in Uganda to get a free scholarship. In order to get a free scholarship for high school, a student had to gain first grade, that was, at least, an aggregate of 10. Given that there was no way out and his mother could not afford school the fees because she was struggling to feed the seven children under her care, he began to lose the hope of continuing his education. After trying to save money toward his schooling and failing twice Louis lost/gave up hope.

He tried to find a job to help fund his education. The first job he found was as a bricklayer. Although he was too young, he managed to lay five thousand bricks. He was hopeful that from that hard work he would be able to save something. But he was shocked when he went to collect his salary; he was given only a basin of rotten corn to go and sell and nothing more for his labor. Although he was demoralized and angry, there was nothing he could do about it. After all, he was only a refugee kid working for a local businessman. The refugees were being exploited because there was no one to fight for their rights.

With no other option to ascertain funding for his fees, Louis and two friends again searched for a job. Finally, they found one. This time it was with a local contractor who was given the contract of filling potholes on dirt roads with gravel. The local contractor was looking for laborers who could dig the gravel, load it onto the lorry and then fill the potholes. Louis and his friends were excited when they were offered the job; they felt that would be enough to pay their school fees. They worked extremely hard. After 15 trips, they completed the job. But when the time came to collect their salaries, each of them was given three blankets in lieu of their wages. They were told to sell the blankets in order to get the monies they needed to pay their fees. Although they knew it was exploitation of the vulnerable, they were again powerless to do anything. Filling 15 lorries with gravel was equivalent to each of them filling five lorries. So Louis dug gravel, loaded it on to five lorries and filled potholes to get only three blankets as his wage. After this, he gave up all hope of continuing his schooling.

Louis returned home to his extended family demoralized and hopeless. He recalled that was the first time he had to think like a real man. He thought either it was going to be the end of the world for him or he had to continue with his education. He went to his room and asking himself the question: “Now I am not going to high school, because my mother could not afford to pay my school fees, does that mean I have to stay at home or must I do something?” He decided there and then that he must repeat primary seven in order to get the first grade that would

allow him to qualify for a scholarship. So he went back to the head master (principal) and said: “Mr. Headmaster, I want to repeat primary seven.” The principal asked Louis how could he repeat primary seven with a grade that could take him straight to high school. He stressed to Louis that he was not supposed to be repeating any class; rather, he was supposed to be in high school. He told the principal the reason he was repeating the class was because his mother could not afford his school fees. Hence, he wanted to repeat primary seven in order to attain first grade which would make him eligible for a scholarship to attend high school.

Louis repeated primary seven while he lived with his mother and alcoholic and abusive stepfather in the refugee camp. He recalled studying really hard. Studying at night was difficult for him and he had to burn bicycle tires to provide light because he could not afford a lamp or candle. He had no money to buy paraffin either. He burned bicycle tires whilst studying unaware that he was slowly killing himself with carbon monoxide and dirty smoke. What kept him going in those days was the knowledge that he did not want to get stuck in the situation that had kept his family in extreme hardship and poverty. He realized that he needed to work hard to get himself out of his current situation if he did not want to see the same things recurring in his family. That was one of the reasons he tried every means to ensure that he succeeded so that he could also help his mother and siblings in the future.

As Louis studied to get better grades to qualify for the high school scholarship, his mother was facing more challenges and their living conditions were becoming more and more unbearable. He also needed transportation to attend high school outside the refugee camp. Unfortunately, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) did not provide money that students could use for transport to schools. Transportation was the responsibility of the parents; they had to find the funds for this. To assist with his transportation, Louis’ mother started cutting and selling grass. Louis then used that meagre sum for transportation to school. At the same time, Louis was lacking basic necessities for school, but going to school was a must for him. Louis said, “If you’re from a poor family, you find going to school really challenging. But you have to find other ways to survive and make that happen.” He knew he was not alone in his struggle. There were some good people cheering for him. For instance, he had friends from his church that motivated him. He said he realized that for someone facing such odds, one of the best ways to survive was to hang around good people. He said he hated being around people who could not motivate him. With his friends, he used to do charity work, like helping poor

women and widows on their farms. He and his friends would help those poor women to cultivate their farms. They also built houses, with roofs of grass for these widows and poorer women because they did not have husbands to help them. For Louis doing these tasks for the women helped to take the focus away from his own problems and kept him motivated. Some of those they helped were families with orphans. It was the youth themselves that came up with this idea of helping people who did not have the things that other people had in order to survive.

At the end of the school year, Louis got the first grade or the aggregate 10 that he needed. So he was given free high school scholarship that allowed him to enroll in the boarding school free for four years. Louis felt happy when he got the scholarship to go to high school. He said that if he had feathers, he would have been flying around that day. He said, “Just imagine a situation where you thought school had ended for you. You’ll never be able to go to school again because no one can pay your school fees. But things change for you in a moment, though after some painful struggle.” The good thing for Louis was that he now had free food and electricity. Unlike before, he could now use those amenities when he studied. When he moved to the boarding school, he kept himself busy with his studies and sports activities. He reminisced,

As you go to play with other kids you forget about the pain you have. You forget about the hard life that you have had with your family in your refugee community. You go and play and have joy with the people you love and feel that life has a purpose and meaning. These helped him cope with the difficult life that he and his family were going through.

Few months after Louis’ completion of high school, the Canadian resettlement agency visited their refugee camp and his family was selected to start the process of resettlement in Canada. It was more than a dream come true for him and his family. After that painful life, he could see a brighter future coming up for him and his family, at last. When they got the chance to move to Canada, Louis became the happiest person in the world because he now had the opportunity to study and be what he wanted to become in life. Coming to Canada played a big role in transforming his hopelessness into hopefulness and optimism. When he came he enrolled in a high school in Saskatoon and after completing high school successfully, he applied to attend the university where he today is still a student. He studied hard in high school because he knew that only better grades could enable him to enter the university and successfully complete a program of study.

Although Louis is now fulfilling his academic ambitions, things have never been easy for him. He still encounters many challenges in his academic journey. There is always the issue of having sufficient funds to make ends meet. To make matters worse, he has been diagnosed with an incurable health issue the doctors advised is a genetic disease. Oftentimes, it brings him severe pain and fatigue. It makes it difficult for him to concentrate on his studies or perform heavy physical activities. But he is determined not to let that prevent him from achieving his academic goal, no matter what. Although Louis has garnered a student loan, it is barely enough and this continues to affect his academic performance as well. But with perseverance and hard work, he is determined to complete his education. Louis also encounters challenges with his courses. To him, some of the courses have not been easy. But he is grateful for the help he gets from teachers, close friends and the university community. He does not hesitate to contact senior student friends, an instructor or go to a tutorial when he has a difficulty in understanding a course or certain concept or assignment. It is this kind of approach that has motivated and helped him to improve in his academic performance. Louis is confident that, after so many years facing numerous challenges, he is now on course to making his dream come true.

### **Peter's Story**

Peter's life has never been one sweet song. Peter was born in an urban area in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Though his parents were semi-illiterate and not rich, Peter said that they were living well by Congolese standard. Both his parents were working and there was income for sustaining him and his siblings. Peter joined a good school when he reached school age. Although Peter was young then, he felt that life was good. He was a happy kid, living with loving parents and had many friends to play with. Congo was a peaceful and beautiful country to live in. But things started to change in the country following the genocide in Rwanda. Soon after, events from Rwanda were transferred to Congo and his beautiful country disintegrated into brutal war. His family life was shattered. People were being brutally tortured and killed everywhere. Congo had suddenly become the most dangerous place to live. His parents decided that they could no longer stay in that beautiful country. They thought the safest thing to do was flee to Malawi. He was in grade two when they left Congo, so he was too young when he and his family arrived in Malawi.

Their journey to Malawi was plagued with difficulties as they walked through the brushes and were exposed to many dangers, including rebels, lions, leopards, and poisonous snakes.

Their journey from Congo to Malawi took them about a month. Peter said,

You can only imagine the difficulties we went through. We experienced all kinds of troubles. We had sleepless nights, sometimes we couldn't eat, it rained on us, and we had to walk in infected waters. I mean, everything was bad. But by the grace of God, we survived and reached Malawi.

When they reached Malawi, it was a completely new life for Peter, altogether. Everything completely changed for him. For one year he could not go to school because life was not easy for him and his family. Everything they had was gone. They had nothing, and were extremely poor. They had to restart their life from scratch. School was the last thing Peter could think of. So he had to stay at home and doing nothing.

Although life was extremely difficult, Peter's father was always there for him and encouraging him. He was thankful to his father for encouraging and forcing him to attend school when he wanted to quit after what they had been through. The journey to Malawi, for Peter, was like hell and life in Malawi was tough. That was why going to school was out of the question for him. Peter's father had learned the importance of an education because he himself never finished school. Back in Congo, he was working as a businessman. He always chided Peter "don't be like me, I never finished school and I know how it's hard to succeed in life without education. I never went to school, so my son please I advise you not follow my footsteps." At the time, Peter was ten so he heeded his father's advice and gave school a try. The immediate problem he encountered was language. He came from a francophone country so he never knew how to speak English. Unlike Congo, Malawi is an Anglophone country. Nevertheless, he joined the third grade. In the school, he started to learn and speak some words in English. He began doing well and things started to get back to normal for him.

In the year 2000, Malawi had a political crisis and everything again changed for the worse for Peter and his family. They began to be targeted by locals, who attacked them in the refugee camp, blaming them for everything, simply because they were refugees living in their (local's) country and powerless to defend themselves. During these times, they hardly had food to eat. They depended on the food and aid that was provided by the UNHCR from which they sometimes receive supply for some months and not receive anything for long periods. It was

hard for Peter to study without food to eat and to make matters worse, as refugees, they were not allowed to farm. Peter still found courage in attending school.

Peter and his friends began wondering whether attending school was really necessary. Even when he was in class, instead of focusing on what was being taught, he would think about going home and finding something to eat. There was no food even at home. Peter said,

So you cannot concentrate on anything in class; you are there physically but your mind is not there. But we survived it. Despite that challenge, I continued going to school. When I reached grade five I failed badly. That failure was the turning point in my life. All my friends passed and went ahead of me. I was the only one left behind to repeat the class. I went home and felt like I had lost all my friends.

The suffering they endured made Peter realize that education was his only option out of his current deprived state. He was also motivated to study because of the presence of World University Service of Canada (WUSC) in their refugee camp. WUSC is a program which provides opportunities for bright refugee students to attend universities in Canada. Peter knew about WUSC even before he was in grade five. WUSC often came to their camp to take students who did well to study in Canada. Peter was worried that his friends were all going to leave him behind in the refugee camp. This was why Peter took stock of his life and decided to take his schooling more serious. He shared:

So I took education seriously and started to study hard through the difficulties us as a family was going through. I studied and passed the grade five finally. I also went on to pass grades six and proceeded to grade seven and eight.

In their refugee camp, they had the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), a program that was sponsoring few bright students to boarding schools after completing grade eight. Fortunately enough, Peter passed grade eight well with some As and Bs and went on to boarding school under the JRS sponsorship.

It was the first time he had to separate with his family. This move changed everything for him. It was a new experience for him. He missed his family, but he realized that life was all about making the right decisions, even painful decisions. He realized that if he wanted to succeed in life, he must make the right decisions, including separation from his beloved family. Although he was worried about how he was going to survive without his family, he decided to stay in the boarding school to continue his education. His first year in boarding school was not

easy because he was not a citizen of Malawi. He was bullied in his first year because Malawian students knew that he was a foreigner and a refugee. His life in the boarding school was no fun at all. In Malawi, other students treated first year students poorly. He did not know if it happened like that in other countries. First year students attending boarding high schools were tortured and beaten by senior students. Peter said,

You are a poor refugee sleeping at night and they come to wake you up in the middle of the night to go and wash the washroom used by so many students. They didn't wake me up gently. I was woken up with a painful slap. I and my friends thought of quitting because it was hard to continue when you are woken in the middle of the night to wash the toilet and then prepare early in the morning to go to attend class at seven in the morning.

Peter often felt that life in prison was much better than what he was going through. He reported the matter to the headmaster's office. Although the school authorities tried to end the bullying, it never stopped at the time. It took some time, but at the end things started to change and the beatings and humiliations stopped and life became a bit better for him. Peter began to concentrate on his studies at last and was able to pass the examinations with better marks.

Unfortunately for Peter, JRS decided to discontinue sponsoring students studying outside the refugee camp. Because his parents were unable to pay his school fee and living expenses in the boarding school, he was forced to return to the camp before completing the program. Peter still thanked God because what he learned at boarding school helped him a lot and enabled him to gain a place in a high school within the refugee camp. Through his engagement with boarding school Peter had matured and became a hardworking and dedicated student. He no longer thought and acted like a child. Peter did not know that unlike in boarding school, there were no books in the refugee camp. He discovered that the library was empty, and the teachers at the refugee camp had little experience because they too were refugees with less or equal education. Education within the camp was always a struggle. Unlike Peter's parents, the parents of some of Peter's friends who could afford for their children to study in the boarding school kept them there. His friends were doing better than he was because they were studying in a better environment, where there were books and laboratories. Unlike his friends, they did not have a laboratory at their school in the camp. So in the refugee camp, they were taught the theories but were unable to do experiments in chemistry or physics. Getting school materials was also a big

challenge for Peter. Although he continued to do well at school, Peter was not happy because there were no laboratories, books and other essential school materials.

To make matters worse, Peter could not get proper help from his teachers because most of them did not know much about the Malawian national examination questions. As he prepared for the exam of his life, that could allow him to qualify for WUSC, there was no one he could approach for help. The teachers were even teaching things that were outside of the syllabus, things that would never be tested on in the examination in Malawi. Most of these teachers were untrained and teaching was simply for the money. These teachers were Francophonie, from countries such as Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda and they were trying to teach in English in Malawi. Some were good only in Mathematics. What Peter did to prepare for the national examinations was to connect with the students who were in the boarding school that he had been forced to quit. He begged them to send him their class notes. They would send him notes for every subject. It was those notes that he studied over and over again. Although he had those notes, he attended school like other students and would remain in the classroom after school to study. People started calling him a bookworm because he studied so much. An education became his only way out of his suffering. He said that he knew what he was doing. He wanted to go to study in Canada with WUSC. As he studied by candle light, he began to think “All this black smoke from the candle was going all into my lungs. When I woke up in the morning and sneezed it was black smoke that was coming out.” But he had no option but to continue using the candle to give light while he studied.

Peter was grateful to God for helping him to prepare for the examinations in spite of the challenges he encountered. He tried his best to be ready for the examinations. Unfortunately, there was no examination center in the refugee camp. Hence, Peter and his friends had to travel to a government school in a distant town outside of their camp to write these examinations. Given that his parents could not afford transportation to go to the center, Peter had to wake up very early in the morning to walk there. He shared,

Imagine, going to write an examination that will change your life forever, but you have to walk for about twenty kilometers in June and Malawians know that June is one of the coldest months of the year. It was cold but I had to walk to write a national examination. By the time you reach there, you're tired, you're freezing, and your brain is freezing. How can you write an examination successfully in such a condition? What I did was I



woke up very early to start going. I made sure that I arrived early to have enough rest before the examinations and also to acquaint myself with the environment. I did not want to go later than that because I did not want to arrive late and tired like other students did. When a student runs a long distance to an examination, it is a failure already. You fail when you reach in the examination room tired and when the examinations have already started. No matter how smart you are, when you reach late in an examination room it affects your mind, and the pressure you have cannot allow you reason properly. So I woke up very early, when it was still dark, and people thought that I was crazy. But I knew the reason why I was doing that.

Peter arrived early, and had had enough time to rest and revise his notes. Peter was rewarded for his self-sacrifice. He passed the Malawian national examinations.

With his success in the examinations he finally had the opportunity to apply to WUSC. Peter submitted an application but remained concerned and worried because an overwhelming number of students had applied. He acknowledged that some applicants were more qualified than he. Among the applicants were students from his former boarding school and others who had studied in better high schools than the one he had attended within the camp. He feared he would not be considered because he was competing with students who had better marks, had attended better schools, studied in better environment and had everything. The best thing was that WUSC had different considerations concerning how students were selected to go to Canada.

When the names of those accepted by WUSC were published, Peter's name was not on the list. He became demoralized, hopeless, disappointed and frustrated. Sometime after, he was told that his name was on hold. He did not know what would happen; because the decision could go either way. Peter was thankful to God that they accepted him. It was a great relief for him because after so many years of suffering and hopelessness; he now had the opportunity to travel to Canada to get the education he dreamed of. He was the first person in his family to be accepted into a university. His entire extended family members were so excited, including his parents and siblings. He was overjoyed because after years of suffering, his dream was being fulfilled, at last. It was all about setting a goal and fighting hard to achieve it. Coming to Canada was a giant step toward his dreams to a new reality.

Peter went through all the required processes to enter Canada. When the day of departure arrived, he left his family behind in the refugee camp and travelled to Canada. He never thought

in his life that he would travel in a plane one day, given the poverty and difficult life they endured as a family. He said,

I come from a poor family. So to imagine that such dream could one day come true was not even possible. It was the first time for me to sit in a plane, and all because of my hard work at school. Although it was scary for me to be in a plane, I managed it. I did not vomit though. I sat in the plane pretending to be fine and I arrived without any incident in Saskatoon. After reaching Saskatoon, I joined the university.

Given that he came from a war zone and had experienced war related challenges and difficulties as a refugee, Peter decided to enroll in the International Cooperation and Conflict Program, within the International Studies Program. Peter is determined to help his people. His dream is to contribute toward ending conflicts in Africa. He hopes that one day he will work with the United Nations. Peter said he could not imagine himself doing something else at the moment. Unlike in the refugee camp, Peter has every opportunity to complete his education in Canada. He said that there was no longer any need for him to use a candle to study. Here, there is electricity everywhere that he uses it to study well into the night. There is also food to eat.

Although Peter continues to encounter challenges academically, he uses the same strategies he developed in the refugee camp to do well in his classes. He argued that although the teachers at his current university are better and helpful in so many ways, his strategy remains the same. University teachers may suggest to him books and articles he needs to read and assignments that he needs to do, but it is up to him to go to open that page and study. It is up to him to do that assignment, and it is up to him to prepare for that exam. If he fails the examinations, he cannot blame his instructor. It is simply because he did not plan well or study hard. Peter understands that instructors play a role in helping students to understand things, but it is a very little percentage, according to him. Most of the hard work should be done by the student. To him, teachers do not play a big role in his understanding things, it is he who must go home and fight hard to understand that material. To him, teachers whether in Africa or Canada are just there to direct him. His job is to go home and do the studying and assignments. He has realized based on his experience that a student does not have to depend on a teacher. Back in the camp he had to find notes from friends who were taught by different teachers. It was those notes that helped him pass the examination that brought him here but not what his teachers had taught him. To him, overcoming academic challenges is not about teachers or the university, teachers

or the university are there only to direct you. So it is up to him as a student to go home, prepare himself, make his study plan, study hard, and then pass his examination. He contacts teachers or students only to explain things he does not understand. But he tries to overcome most of those academic challenges by himself. He does not think a student should blame teachers. He is positive and confident that he will finish his undergraduate degree successfully and proceed to do his masters and then PhD.

### **John's Story**

John was born in Rwanda to loving parents. Life was good and everybody seemed to be enjoying it. Although they lived in a community with mixed ethnic groups, they all got along because they were Rwandans first. But the peace and harmony among different ethnic groups they used to enjoy began to deteriorate quite rapidly when the civil war started. There were mistrust and divisions among ethnic groups that triggered revenge killings and culminating in the genocide in 1991. John and his family left Rwanda during the civil war when he was only four. As with most war situations in Africa, John's family fled the country leaving behind all their belongings. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs. Although John was only four years old when they left their home, he recalled that the journey was not an easy one for them. They were running to a place where they could find refuge and Kenya was their preferred destination. When they reached Kenya, however, they could not find a peaceful place where they could find refuge easily. They moved around from one place to another trying to find a peaceful place. They could not find peace because the events happening in Rwanda were following Rwandan communities wherever they went, even in neighboring countries. The same ethnic divisions and conflicts happening in Rwanda were common in every Rwandan community they reached. After moving from place to place, they managed to find a place in which they felt some degree of safety.

Although they managed to find some safety from physical violence, they could not escape from other forms of the pervasive hardships. To make matters worse, negative rumors and bad news going around the refugee camp further denied them peace of mind. There were always rumors of planned attacks by the rival ethnic groups and also bad news about the merciless killings of their relatives back home and also the complete destruction of their beautiful country. Subsequently, a range of psychological problems emerged among these displaced people. This bad news and lack of peace in the camp made most of them sick. Not

only that; numerous influential locals were doing everything to make life miserable for them. Some were saying that Rwandans were trouble makers who were bringing their insecurity to destabilize their peaceful country. Some were calling for the expulsion of all Rwandan refugees from Kenya. Such news was not easy on children like John. It affected them because they could do little else but worry about what would happen to them. They did not know whether they would be alive one day to the next. They always feared that something bad would happen to them. They hardly slept at night because of the constant rumors of imminent attacks. As a result, John transitioned into a state of hopelessness and completely lost interest in school. His parents, however, knew the importance of education and for this John was grateful. His parents tried everything they could to keep him away from situations they thought would discourage him from school and were always encouraging him to attend school. They also did their best to make him happy about school. There were also charitable organizations within the camp that encouraged parents to send their children to school. Some of those organizations provided John's family with school materials such as a writing pad, pencils, and books for him. It was those kinds of things that started to inspire him to go to school. He had everything he needed for school and that made it hard for him to find an excuse for not going to school. Although his family continued to face many hardships, John could not find anything to complain about at school. Had his parents been easy on him, these hardships alone would have made him to drop out of school. The genocide problem that was happening in Rwanda started to brew in their refugee camp and all the Rwandan refugee camps in Kenya. Because of that insecurity, John's parents decided that they should move to Malawi. Their journey to Malawi was not easy. His parents were totally broke. They left all their belongings back in Rwanda and did not know how they could make it to Malawi. But there was no option for them but to move to Malawi. They managed to arrive safely in Malawi and were taken to a refugee camp where they were registered as refugees. Apart from the threat of being massacred by a rival Rwandan ethnic group, John's life did not change for the better in Malawi. They still faced the same hardships that they faced in refugee camps in Kenya.

John resumed school soon after beginning life as a refugee in Malawi. Like in Kenya, he did not like school. He used to go to school because his parents insisted that he do so. He did not understand why he should go to school in the midst of such difficulties. He wanted to stay home and play with his friends. But like in Kenya, his parents were insistent that he go to

school. What started to attract him to school were the gifts he would receive when he performed well in school. Because of that, he started working hard at school just to get more gifts. John continued and managed to complete primary school successfully. According to John, the negative part of the primary school that he completed within the camp was its poor standard, in comparison to the Malawian public schools outside their refugee camp. He said that it was difficult for him to join any public school outside of the refugee camp because it required his poor parents to provide financial support. His parents could not afford to sponsor him. Nevertheless, he managed to complete his primary school in 2004 with a high average and was selected to join a public high school. John said that although his parents could not afford a public high school for him, he managed to get in with an outside help. There was a charitable organization in their camp called the Jesuit Refugees Service (JRS). The JRS is an international organization that was providing high achieving students with four year scholarships to public high schools and vocational trainings outside the refugee camp. John was lucky to be among those who were given a four year scholarship by the JRS for attending the Malawian public high school. So he began the high school in 2004 and completed it successfully in 2008.

After his success in high school, John started thinking about joining the university. But, like before, he and his poor parents could not afford to pay for university. The tuition for foreign students was more than for citizens. As a foreigner and a refugee, it was even impossible for him to qualify for any help provided by the organizations in Malawi for their students. Hence, the chance of joining the university in Malawi for him was extremely remote and unrealistic. Faced with that reality, John started to feel hopeless about his future and dreams. One day, in the midst of that uncertainty, he heard of a Canadian organization called World University Service of Canada (WUSC). He was told WUSC is an organization that sponsors students like him to study in Canada. But they warned him that the competition was tough. Given his situation, he felt that he had nothing to lose. He decided to submit an application right away. He became so excited with the prospect of studying in a Canadian University and leaving behind the endless sufferings.

After submitting his application, John discovered that there were so many students who were also vying for the same opportunity. It was hard for him. Every year there were about 200 applicants and many were more qualified than he. The interview process was rigorous because they could only assist a small percentage of those who applied. The process included examining students' academic performance, conduct and other considerations. Hence, even students with

high marks could be left out because they were not good in other areas. He remembered every time they completed a step in the process, the list of those who were going to the next round would be posted on the board and students would check for their names. But for him, he did not have the courage to check for his name. He did not believe his name could be on the list. He was always afraid of the sad news that he did not qualify for the next round. At that time, he was just trying to focus on his plan B. He asked himself, “What is my future now?” He did not want to check the list because he knew he could not handle it if his name was not on the list. He simply relied on other students who brought him news. One day he was told “Oh you’re on the list and you’re first on the list.” He exclaimed “Oh that can’t happen!” He was so happy to find that his name was on the final list, among the 12 who were chosen out of the 200 applicants for 2013. He exclaimed,

I jump up and celebrated in the way no one had seen before. Maybe people thought I was going crazy. But it was because I felt something within me that I had never felt before. I felt very happy and relieved that my years of relentless sufferings were coming to an end.

After completing a medical checkup and an orientation about life and education in Canada, John and the rest of the group were given the opportunity to fly to Canada in August the same year to join the fall 2013 program. To John, it was a miracle that he made it to Canada after years of unbearable sufferings. Not many people could have such opportunities, especially those facing challenges similar to what he underwent.

As a new student, John is still trying to adapt to life in Canada and get acquainted to the education system; he still encounters some challenges in the process. He has developed some strategies that are helping him. For instance, he likes talking with instructors person to person. This direct contact helps him to understand concepts more clearly and to improve in his academic performance. He also takes advantage of available tutorials for helping students with other subjects. There are also computers and wireless services available. He now has the time and space to do researches, readings, and assignments. These amenities provide him the opportunity to work hard and to achieve the dream that brought him to Canada.

Being a new student in the university, John would like to meet different people and make new friends. With his experience back in Africa, he knows that meeting new people can be very important for his academic and social growth. He is also getting help from other students. He

admitted that one of his immediate challenges is that there are many things he is yet to know. For example, given his reserved nature, he still finds it hard to approach someone when he needs help. Everything is new to him as he tries to adjust to the Canadian culture. The professors lecture with an accent that he is not yet used to. He finds if he does not listen carefully, he can sometimes feel lost. He however feels he is on course to achieving his academic and social goals.

### **Sam's Story**

Sam was born in South Sudan. Like many other South Sudanese of his generation, Sam was born into war. Sam said that he started to experience war right on the day of his birth. His parents had lost everything and were taking refuge in a town that was besieged by rebels who were fighting for the independence of South Sudan. Life was extremely difficult for his family. Their survival was extremely difficult as food was extremely expensive and water hard to get in the besieged city. Sam's family could barely afford a meal a day for them and so there were days that they went without food. Every house was overcrowded owing to the people who were escaping insecurity from the countryside. Sanitation was a problem, making the population vulnerable to cholera and other diseases. People could hardly sleep at night because of constant shelling of the besieged town by the rebels and reprisals by the government forces. The civilian population was infiltrated by rebels and this allowed the Sudan government to start extrajudicial killings of any civilians they suspected to be a rebel. They were also killing those who simply belonged to ethnic groups whose members were many in the liberation struggle. Children witnessed violence orchestrated by the government forces on their family members. There were also constant gun battles between the government army and the rebels on the outskirts of the city and even within the city. There was frequent indiscriminate shelling of the besieged city resulting in numerous casualties that overwhelmed the poor healthcare system. The poor infrastructures in the clinics, hospitals, and mortuaries were always engulfed with chaos. The population was always in a state of panic, anxiety, and resulting trauma. Even stray dogs learned how to take cover from bombs before they landed and exploded. Amidst all these events, Sam's family members were always feeling traumatized. They could hardly sleep at night. Children were scared and having panic attacks, nightmares, sleeplessness, and trauma. After losing so many relatives into war and fearing for his family's survival, Sam's father decided to move his family from the unstable southern part of the country to the Sudan's capital city, Khartoum. The

journey from South Sudan to Khartoum was often a difficult and dangerous process. The first step was to register their names in the list of those wanting to fly to Khartoum. There were thousands on the waiting list. Although money was involved, it was not enough to allow people to fly. Those they knew working at the airport mattered. The common means of transportation was military cargo planes (Hercules). They did not have seats. They could not even think of seatbelts in such situations. People would climb in, sit on the few belongings they were allowed to take with them and pray that they did not encounter any turbulence in the air. Sam could not imagine how a little kid, like himself, could survive such a situation. Cargo planes were always overcrowded. The landings and taking offs were always dangerous maneuvers by the pilots as they would try to avoid enemy surface to air missiles. This always caused panic and discomfort among passengers. After a lot of struggle from Sam's father, they managed to board the plane and headed to the Sudanese capital city Khartoum.

After arriving in Khartoum, Sam and his family immediately discovered that it was completely different from what they had expected. It was different culturally and linguistically. Life was completely different from where Sam grew up. Even though Sam was too young, he could immediately notice that he and his family were different in physical appearance and the people around them were different in most ways. They were in the same country but the environment was foreign to what they knew back in South Sudan; thus they had to try to adjust quickly. They soon discovered that life in Khartoum was no better than in their hometown. They started to face unique challenges that made life difficult for them as a family. There were a lot of challenges that people faced as Southerners in Khartoum. The more they lived there the more they realized that opportunities were not always equal for everyone. Even though they would admit that they were from one country, there was discrimination everywhere, especially against the people who were from the Southern part of the country, who had darker skin color. Even if they overcame one hurdle, they could quickly run into another that was even more challenging. The hurdles they encountered included the educational systems and the employment systems. Sam's family found they had to learn to compete with all these peoples who had many advantages over them. They did not want to make excuses but learned about the system as much as they could and tried to take advantage of the system; meaning that they tried to learn the language, understand the culture and then tried to make their ways through the system. Sam's father tried his best but could not find any job that could support them. Because



his father could not find a job, Sam's family could not afford rent and food was difficult to find, and there was also too much discrimination based on race and faith. Survival and success in life was becoming more and more difficult for them as a family. Even though they were in their own country, they were not treated as full members of the society. They were treated as second-class citizens. Sam's father tried his best to find ways to help his children grow and become successful citizens, but found this quite difficult to achieve. Although he put Sam and his siblings in school, life was tough for them. Finding the finances to afford breakfast and lunch and even the daily bus fare to and back from school was difficult to find. To make matters worse, the authorities were often monitoring, harassing, torturing or even killing some South Sudanese intellectuals if they were thought to be sympathetic to southern rebels. Although his father was not involved in the rebellion, he was often a target of harassment by government officials. When he could take it no longer, he decided to move his family to Egypt with help of some relatives and friends.

So they moved to Egypt when things were becoming more and more dangerous for Sam's father and his family in Khartoum, Sudan. The move to Egypt did not create peace for them either. Sam said,

You can imagine there is always a lot of cultural shock to deal with when you move to a different country that is much, much different from yours. There were a lot of issues that came with our relocation to Egypt. We could immediately notice that it was a place that was difficult for us to fit in. They were even more culturally different than the people we encountered in Khartoum.

There were many difficulties that Sam and his family encountered in that land. One such difficulty for them was language. Even though Egyptians spoke a similar language, there were differences between Sudanese Arabic and Egyptian Arabic. Sam and his family had to also quickly learn that living in Egypt as South Sudanese and black Africans, they would never be considered as equals. They were often considered by most as inferior and foreign. Often, as they walked through the streets derogatory remarks were hurled at them. Even though they became angry, as poor and powerless refugees, there was nothing they could do about it. They just had to endure the pain and walk to their destination without stirring up trouble for themselves. Furthermore, because of their status, Sam and his family did not have any opportunity to succeed or make ends meet. Their life was a daily struggle for survival. It was

also difficult for Sam and his siblings to enroll in a proper school. At his age, Sam could sense the challenges his parents were going through. He experienced fear and hunger. He knew how life was difficult for them as dark skin Africans, South Sudanese and foreigners. He wanted to go to a proper school like the children of other families but was not able to because of their foreigner status. The school they attended was sub-standard and was poorly funded and mainly for South Sudanese refugees. The teachers who volunteered to teach them were untrained fellow South Sudanese refugees. He watched his parents worrying about him and his siblings. He watched them trying their best to take care of them and give them comfort. Although they did what they could, they were always worried that maybe their situation would never change. They thought they would never be happy children. They also thought that they were going to grow up that way, without a proper education. This lack, they thought, meant they would fail in life and never be able to take care of their parents.

During that time, opportunities began to open up for South Sudanese to submit application for resettlement in Western countries through the varied embassies. The resettlement was on humanitarian bases. The countries accepting such applications were The United States of America, Canada, Australia, Britain, New Zealand and some Scandinavian countries. Sam's father submitted an application to the Canadian High Commission. Sam was most excited about his future the day they got news from the Canadian High Commission that their case has been reviewed and approved and they were going to give them a chance for an interview. After completing the interview, they received news that they had accepted them to move to and live in Canada on humanitarian grounds. At that point Sam realized that his future had become brighter. He realized that going to Canada would offer him many opportunities. His family was happy for the first time in their life; because the challenges that they had encountered for years would soon be over. They completed the process and boarded a plane for Canada and were excited to land in their final destination, Saskatoon. Even though they encountered some challenges such as language, culture, and weather, it was nothing like the hurdles that they had encountered back in Sudan and Egypt. What they encountered here was a normal experience for a family moving from a different culture or weather to another.

When they arrived in Canada, Sam determined that given the opportunities available to him, he would do his best to succeed. He understood that not many people had the chance he had. Sam could not wait to start school. He felt so excited and energetic to start making his

academic dream come true. He was registered in a high school. He said that he worked really hard and was always among the best in class. His dream was to become a medical doctor. So he studied hard and completed the high school with a high average. He joined the university with only one thing in his mind, to join the faculty of medicine. He worked extremely hard and graduated with the average required for applying to the faculty of medicine. He applied and was accepted. Sam has been working hard since joining the faculty of medicine and the program has been very interesting. He loves the challenge of competing with the best. Sam is almost done now and will be a medical doctor soon, so fulfilling his childhood dream.

### **Edward's Story**

Edward was born in a small town in South Sudan amidst a brutal civil war. In this war civilians were targeted by the warring groups. The government army suspected them to be the rebel's sympathizers and the rebels suspected them to be government's sympathizers. As a result, many in his town were being tortured, maimed, or killed by both sides of the conflict. Women were also being raped, killed or widowed. Child soldiers were being recruited. Edward became accustomed to hearing gun shots all the time. They would often hide in bushes when there was fighting in their area. Although some in their town were farmers and others cattle raisers, it became increasingly difficult for them to survive as time went on since there was increasing insecurity and looting of their properties and food. This was made worse when anti-personnel landmines were planted along roadways and in the fields. Landmines maimed or killed many persons and cattle. Although Edward was in elementary school, the situation made it difficult for him to study. Sometimes weeks went by without their school opening for classes.

One night, there was an unexpected attack on their town. The consequent massacre caused Edward and his family to flee the town. He and his family were in their cattle camp at the time of the attack. His family scattered in different directions. Everyone ran for their life. Edward ended up with a group of people running toward Kenya. Edward did not know whether his parents and siblings survived the massacre. But he had time to do little else but run toward the border. He discovered that he was the only one of his family in the group of people he had escaped together with. They managed to reach Kenya after several days of walking in the unfriendly bush, with nothing to eat.

They were moved to Kakuma Refugee Camp after crossing the border to Kenya. The camp became Edward's home for nine and a half years. He lived with a group of eight young

men and their female relative who became his new family. The female relative became a mother figure to him. Edward did not hear if his family had survived until several months later. They were all safe in South Sudan. He was registered in one of the elementary schools that were operated by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the refugee camp. Going to school was what every one of his age was expected to do in the camp. He completed elementary school with high grades and was accepted to a high school outside the refugee camp that was operated by the Kenyan Ministry of Education. Almost all students were Kenyans, with only few refugee students. The high school was a boarding facility and therefore expensive for refugee families, who often could not afford the fees for their children to attend. What helped the few refugee students there was the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS). JRS was the agency that sponsored his high school education.

It was in the boarding high school that the pains of separating with his family, the trauma of war, the difficult life in the refugee camp, and hopelessness he felt started to diminish. From then onward, Edward began to have some hope of becoming a successful person in life. He started to dream about becoming successful to take care of his parents and his people. He also dreamed of studying to become someone who could develop the right developmental policies that will promote peace and prosperity in South Sudan. Edward opined that for that to happen, he had to work hard and be successful in school. As a result, he became committed to reading more than ever before. The more he read, the better he performed in school. This motivated him to work even harder. Therefore, it was not a surprise that he completed his high school with high grades.

After completing high school, his next goal was to get into a university. Unfortunately, because of his poor background, it was obvious that he could not afford to enroll in any university in Kenya. But there was an opportunity for those with high averages to apply to the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) program. WUSC is an agency that provides sponsorship to high academic achieving refugee students to attend Canadian universities. Although Edward was aware that the competition was stiff and most might be more qualified than him, he decided to apply anyway. There was something within him that encouraged him to give it a try. There were 138 applicants in total and they needed 18 students of that total. He did the interview and was afraid or not ready to hear the results. He was afraid because he thought he might not get the opportunity, given the competitive nature of the process. The students from

Kakuma refugee camp had a very high probability of being selected because they were on their own with no families or friends. But most of the brightest refugee students who applied were not from the refugee camp. They were living in urban areas with their families and attended better high schools. Edward believed that group had better chances than him.

After the interviews, Edward and his friends talked among themselves about the interviews and did not care about confidentiality issues. Hearing all those other stories demoralized him because, unlike others, his interview was brief. Because of the way each described their responses to the questions asked he already concluded that most people had higher chances of passing the interview than he did. To him, they had better chances because he could sympathize with their stories. He thought that if he were the interviewer he would give them a chance, but not himself. They waited one month for the results. When the results came to the camp, no one called them. The list was simply placed on the notice board in the refugee camp. Edward could not believe that his name was among the successful applicants. He jumped up and down in jubilation. He knew he was on his way to attend a university in Canada and his life would be forever changed. Everyone going to Canada knew they would be in one of the most peaceful and prestigious countries in the world, where they would have a high chance of academic success. Hence those who were not selected to go to Canada were saddened. For those who got the chance, it opened up another page of dreams for them. These were avenues for them to pursue their dreams. They completed the rest of the process and left for Canada where Edward entered the university and obtained an undergraduate degree after hard work and challenges. After completing his undergraduate degree Edward applied and has been accepted to master's program where he is currently a student.

Edward has encountered numerous challenges during his university studies. The thing that has helped him was that he was not afraid to approach an instructor or fellow student for help. Some teachers have been a great help to him and have become his mentors while others are always willing to explain things he finds difficult to understand. He has also received help from some students who know more than him. He also reads a lot. He maintains that his commitment to reading makes things easier for him. He is now hopeful that he will complete his masters' successfully and maybe apply for PhD.

## **Osman's Story**

Osman was born in Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia. Osman described Somalia as a country that has been considered for decades as one of the most dangerous places on earth to live. His parents are uneducated and are unsure of the exact date that he was born, but he was born sometime in the late 1980s. Somalia was a stable country at the time of Osman's birth. In fact, Somalia was relatively stable until 1991. That stability, however, did not mean that Somalia was a peaceful and prosperous country and that the people were living happily and at peace. At the time Somalia was governed by a dictator, Major General Mohamed Siad Barre. Siad Barre was Chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Council and ruled Somalia for twenty-one years until he was ousted in 1991. Osman was so young at the time of Siad Barre's ouster; he may have been two or three years old at the time. Given that he was so young, he could not remember the brutality that occurred immediately following Siad Barre's ouster, which marked the beginning of the collapse of Somalia as a state. Osman was told that many people were killed the day Siad Barre was ousted. Since that day, Somalia has witnessed untold miseries.

Osman could not understand the hardship that people endured because he was so young. As he grew up he started to understand the horrible things that had happened in the country. The city of Mogadishu witnessed frequent bloodshed; people were running away from the city; and older people were dying, among the other atrocities that were occurring at the time. Life was extremely difficult for Osman's family. So they moved to another city outside of Mogadishu. It was there that Osman's sister was born. Fighting followed them there. The fighting was followed by starvation because of the disruption of the people's lives. They had nothing left to eat because the food and little money his parents had run out. Although there was death in Mogadishu, their chances of survival there were better because of the presence of the humanitarian agencies. So they decided to go back to Mogadishu. At the time, there was an influx of international humanitarian agencies that came to Mogadishu to provide food for the starving population of Somalia. Osman's family came to one of the displaced people camps in the city. It was there that they survived because of the food that was distributed by these humanitarian agencies.

Although basic food was available, it was difficult for his parents to find money to meet other basic needs. Osman remembered his father going to some places to do some small jobs that did little to change their situation. Mogadishu was facing enormous problems and fighting

and insecurity were worsened despite the active presence of international agencies, such as the United Nations. The free food they were getting was not enough for their family. Thousands of people would queue for food at food distribution centers in the midst of fighting. Mogadishu was not a safe city in which to live. Sometimes his parents would tell them that it was better for them to leave Mogadishu and die of starvation than being massacred. People felt safer once they were out of the city but they could also die of starvation and diseases. In addition to that, Osman lacked clothing and also had no school to attend. Even if schools were opened, the insecurity could not allow them to function. Koranic schools were the only ones available.

Osman's father was a religious teacher who used to teach Koran to children and used to take Osman with him to the Koranic school where he taught. Although Osman was young, he had a sharp memory. He memorized the whole Koran in two years. He thought he had some talent in that. He started helping his father teach the Koran to students. Osman said some individuals managed to open a school some distance from where he lived. He convinced his father to allow him to attend that school. By the time he joined the school, his father was extremely cautious and concerned because he never wanted his children to go out of the house without him because of the fighting all over the city. Osman said that he started school much older than children normally would because of the fighting. He was already about twelve years old when he started school in 2000.

Osman remembered the first day he stepped into a classroom. It was the 29<sup>th</sup> of May in the year 2000. That was when he first saw the four walls of a classroom and the day he started learning ABCD. It was one of the most exciting days of his life. Actually, his father was resistant to allowing him attending school in such risky environment. Fortunately, some of his father's former students, who already attended school, opened their own school nearby. This school was not qualified to be called a school (by Western standards); it was small and had three classrooms. The group who opened the school was so happy and so was Osman. Those who opened the school were students themselves and they taught Osman basic things, such as English, and they taught him how to read and write Somali language, which was important for him. He said that this motivated him. He was also taught Arabic.

As the fighting continued, people's properties and public properties were looted. There were some people who looted the national library and sold the books from locally made wooden wheel barrows. They could sell each book for any amount of money for survival. Osman used

to buy some of those books with any amount of money secured. He bought books written in Arabic, Somali, and English. He bought any book that attracted his attention. He did not know how to read well at the time. But after some hard work of self-education and the help of those who knew words and meanings, he started to read and became better at it. After some time, his grades started to improve at school and he felt more motivated and happy to continue reading. Those small steps helped in the expansion of his knowledge.

In 2006, things worsened in the city. There was constant fighting. People were being killed everywhere. Survival was becoming impossible for them in the city. There was a new strand of Islam emerging that was declaring war on education. Those extremists were killing students and their teachers. They said that education was un-Islamic. Osman watched one of his classmates being hit by a bullet inside the classroom. The fighting was getting serious that it was becoming impossible to live in Mogadishu that was now divided along clan lines. The Islamist militias were establishing control of areas with weaker government control and started to implement strict laws that were foreign to their tradition. Violators of these laws were severely punished or killed. As war continued to rage, Osman and his family were forced to flee the city. They fled on the April 15, 2006. His family split and fled different directions. He, his sister, and his half-brother fled as a group. They just ran after a group of people they saw running toward Kenya. After several days of journey that was full of numerous hardships, they managed to reach a refugee camp in Kenya. They managed to have contact with their parents and other family members after reaching the camp. Their father joined them after eight months and their mother and two brothers joined them a year later.

The first thing Osman did was to join school, after his arrival in the camp in Kenya. That was the first time that he had hope in his life. It was the first time for him to have relative peace as well. He was born into war and had never lived without hearing a gun shot or seeing dead bodies. Although there were bandits who used to come sometimes to loot food from the refugees at night, he could sleep well all night most of the time. The refugee camp had its own problems, but life was not as bad for Osman as it was back in Somalia.

In school, he was a hard working student. He earned his elementary school certificate and was happy to become a top achiever from the group of one thousand students who sat the examinations. He qualified to join high school in the Kenyan capital city Nairobi. Sadly, the security situation in the city got worse following the 2007 presidential elections. This situation



prevented him from being able to attend the high school of his dreams in Nairobi. He was forced to continue his education within the refugee camp. Hence, he joined the high school operated by the NGOs within the camp. Osman did the high school certificate examinations in 2011 and when the result came, he once again came out at the top. In fact, he led in the whole region.

An opportunity opened for him in 2012 to apply to the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) program. Although the competition was extremely high, Osman managed to get accepted for studies in a Canadian university. His scholarship was approved and he left for Canada in 2013. He considered this the biggest achievement in life so far. He understood where Canada was, how highly regarded it was around the world, and he appreciated the kind of education that this country provides. Joining a Canadian university was something that he could not imagine ever happening to him. He still could not believe it when he walked along the streets in Canada. He often asked himself, “Are you in Canada really? Are you now studying in the university after what you have been through?” He never thought in his life that such a dream could ever come true because when he was back in Somalia, he could not think that one day he could leave Mogadishu alive and would find his way to Canada through an education. His dream came true out of nowhere. But how he managed to achieve this was not easy. As described in his life story, he had to experience so many challenges before that could happen.

Osman’s experience in the university has been positive so far. He views the Canadian society is much different from the one he grew up in. It is a multi-cultural society with many different cultures, religions, backgrounds, races, and different laws. For him, education is not only within the classroom. He is learning both within and outside classroom. He learns from interacting with friends from all cultures, genders, and races. They can teach him about their values and life experiences in their countries of origins. As a result, he now knows more about the world than ever before. He has also become a better person because of his interactions with both teachers and his fellow students.

When he first joined the university, he wanted to do too much because of the many opportunities. But he feared burning out. That was why he decided he could not do everything he wanted. He thought that the university has everything he needed to achieve his dream. He just needed to work hard and never give up. He said that the competitive nature of the university brings out the best in him. But he admitted that the university is also challenging. There have been times he felt he should quit because of the pressure that he faced. For instance, when he

came, everything looked different to him, and the society was strange. In addition to that, as someone who grew up in extreme poverty in a refugee camp, he encountered so many technological challenges. So, at first, he thought he could not make it. He wanted to quit. But what helped him was the target and values that he entered the university with. He recognized the reason he came here and the words of advice and encouragement that he had received from so many people and decided to carry on. It took him time to adapt to the system and for things to start getting better. He thought that having mentors in such kinds of situations has been helpful for him. Having people like him, for instance, has been important because such people listen and understand his problems better.

### **Salwa's Story**

Salwa was born in Somalia; a country that has not experienced peace for decades. Somalia was a lawless country at the time Salwa was born. There were killings and lawlessness everywhere. There was no central authority. Hence, there were extremists who were involved in many atrocities. Rival warlords were at constant war with each other making life or survival nearly impossible for the vulnerable civilian population. These warlords took law into their own hands and were doing anything they wanted to do. The war made it impossible for farmers to produce food and the small amount of food the civilian population did possess was often taken away from them by the warlords and their militias.

As the killings worsened, Salwa's family decided to flee for Kenya. The journey was not an easy one. They left everything behind and walked the long journey in extreme heat with little or no drinking water. Food was also hard to come by in such a dry region. Often people, especially children, would die of thirst or exposure to the extreme heat, hunger, or illnesses. But Salwa's family managed to reach Dadaab Refugee Camp in North Eastern Kenya. Dadaab became Salwa's home as she grew up there.

Life was not easy in the camp where Salwa lived. She was living with her parents and her siblings and they worked hard to overcome a lot of challenges, including diseases and hunger. The region is semi-desert environment. So it was impossible for them to grow crops. Even if it were fertile, the land did not belong to them. So they were unable to have access to it for farming. They had to depend entirely on the humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for food and handouts. With the many refugees depending on humanitarian agencies, the rations of food were not always enough;

therefore, many suffered from malnutrition that made people, especially children prone to illnesses.

The quality of education in the camp was poor. With the hardships they experienced in the camp, education was the last thing that she thought about. Life was extremely hard. Her parents worked hard to provide food for them. Her father would often go to the bush with his donkey and donkey cart, and stay there for days in search of firewood to sell to generate money for food for the family. Sometimes, he came home empty-handed because of the bandits, who preyed on the vulnerable refugee population. There were times that the bandits would command her father bring money to them as ransom for the release of his property. He did not have the money. So he would run through the market asking people to lend him money and when he failed to find money, he would go back and the bandits would beat him and send him out again. He would go return to the market; sometimes he would be lucky to find fifty or one hundred Kenyan shillings. After they released his donkey and the firewood, he would sell the firewood and repay the money he borrowed. He would often arrive home empty-handed because the money ended up in the hands of the bandits. There was no other option for her father but to continue taking that risk. Selling firewood was his only means of helping his family.

Salwa's parents used to tell them that the only way to overcome the life they had was to work hard and put their hearts in their dreams. That was what she did. Believing in her dreams shaped her into the individual she is today.

In Somalian Muslim culture, it is a must for children to learn the Koran before getting enrolled in school. Everyone has to learn the Koran; it matters not if you were boy or girl. Their mother always insisted "you have to finish the Koran; you have to memorize it before I take you to school." Salwa did not listen to that and was often jealous of her elder sister when her mother took her to school. She was so jealous of her sister, that whenever her parents bought her a gift Salwa would cry even if she already had the very thing. Because of Salwa's jealousy and tendency to cry for things, her parents ensured that there were always gifts for both sisters. So if they bought her sister a pair of shoes, they would make sure that they bought something to her too.

It was then no surprise that Salwa wanted to attend school like her sister did. She became angry when her mother took her sister to school for the first time. Truth be told, her sister was older than her and had already completed the Koran and Salwa nowhere close to completing the

Koran. One day Salwa without telling her mother followed her sister to school. Her mother was unhappy with her disobedience and asked her, “So you went to school without my permission and without me?” But later she promised, “I will take you to school but you will have to complete the Koran first and you’re still too young for school.” Salwa defiantly retorted, “No, you took her.” Salwa went to school that first day without shoes or nice clothes. She did not care. She simply wanted to go to school because her sister was attending without her. Her parents did not have money to buy her a pair of shoes and a dress. That was the customary thing to do before taking their children to school. They were not prepared to buy Salwa that because she was not ready for school yet. However with Salwa going to school every day and barefooted, they decided to buy her a pair of shoes and a school dress. She was not used to wearing shoes and sometimes, would remove them while at school hence they were often stolen. Her mother would complain that, “I can’t buy you shoes all the time.” But would buy another pair and if Salwa lost that one she could walk barefooted for some time before they could afford another.

Salwa thought school was fun. She loved school. There was one teacher who was their neighbor so when he saw her on her first day of school, he registered her and gave her two books. Salwa has never looked back since that day. In the school, they would model many things through and was called arts and crafts. They made toys such as a camel or a radio. Salwa brought the radio home and told her parents that she made it. They used to cook food at school in grades three and four. Each student would contribute five Kenyan shillings and the teacher would buy food for them to cook in Home Science class. There was also a music class. The music class was fun.

Although Salwa was so young back then, she used to cook at home sometimes. But after her elder sister stopped school, she became the one who cooked for the family. Her elder sister stopped going to school suddenly for reasons known only to her. Salwa thought maybe her sister found learning difficult. Of course, students learn in different ways. Maybe that style of learning was not her way. There were about one hundred students in class with only one teacher. So maybe her sister could not take that. Salwa thought her sister was smart but that system had failed her. She was the first one to finish the Koran at home but in the school she found it challenging; so she dropped out of school. It was then that Salwa realized that maybe her sister needed a teacher who could act as a tutor to guide her. But there were only few teachers in the

refugee camp teaching large numbers of students. That lack of many teachers made the only teacher available very remote to her. So most of the time, she became the person who cooked for the family.

A major problem that faced students in Somalia was rivalries among clans. Rivalries among clans were the major cause of the civil war that broke out in the country. Hence, there were frequent clan problems in their school and the camp they lived. Clans members from rival groups often turned against each other when there was fighting between clans in Somalia. The refugees would turn also against each other in the camp. In 2002, when Salwa was in grade seven, her life was changed. The camp was divided into blocks. Salwa and her family lived in a block among people most of who came from one clan. There were also sub-clans and minority clans living within the majority clan. Salwa belonged to the minority clan. Her family was the only family that was of a different sub-clan from the others in their block. The sub-clan with the majority population in her block was the very one fighting with her clan back in Somalia.

Her family did not actually care which clans were fighting back in Somalia. After all, it was the continued strife among clans that caused Salwa and her family to become refugees in Kenya. That was not the thinking of most people in the camp and there began to emerge tensions between the majority sub-clan and Salwa's family over fighting that took place, far away, in Somalia. Everyone turned against Salwa's family, even those who used to be their family friends. They did everything to make Salwa's parents angry so that they could instigate a fight against them. Her parents were peace loving people and so provoking or making them angry was difficult. For instance, whenever Salwa or her sibling complained that an older person than they bullied them, their mother would advise "if they smear human feces on your faces, do not react. Do not talk or fight back. Just ignore them and walk away."

As Salwa grew older, she discovered that her mother was right because "revenge does not help; it makes things worse rather than better." So during the time of tensions between their sub-clans, late one afternoon, when Salwa was returning home from school, four girls from the rival clan approached them from behind. They were carrying sticks and machetes. Salwa did not see them as they approached her; she only felt the blow from a hard object from the back of her head and she fainted. It was a machete that hit her head. She lost a lot of blood. She was rushed to the hospital by some passersby. With no cars or ambulances within the camp they used to transport people from their camp to the nearest clinic by either a homemade wooden wheel

barrow or a donkey cart. Salwa was rushed to the hospital on one of those and was taken to the emergency room where she got stitched and bandaged. Although people thought she was going to die, she miraculously survived. She spent several days or months in severe pain; but she was lucky to survive a certain death. Salwa was later told that those girls were looking for her elder sister at the time of the incident. They did not want to hurt Salwa, but they decided to attack her after they failed to find her sister. Salwa's sister was with the head teacher at the time. In fact, her sister had seen them at a distance and realized their plan and she asked the head teacher to escort her home. Her sister was strong and was their protector. But she did not know that those people would target Salwa because she was younger. The story of the incident spread around the camp. Everyone knew those people and the sub-clan that targeted Salwa and her family, even before the attack. That was why the teacher agreed to escort her. Salwa thought maybe they saw her sister with the head teacher and when they realized that they could not do anything, they decided to target her instead.

They were getting ready for mock examinations at the time of attack. Mock examinations were done before the finals to prepare students for the finals. Salwa was in grade seven and preparing to enter grade eight. Grade eight was the last grade for her before high school. The head injury caused her psychological and other health problems. She used to scream at nights. She had nightmares that the rival clan members were pursuing her. The incident changed her life completely.

To make matters worse, the four girls who attacked her attended the same school she did. Yet because they belonged to a powerful or fearful sub-clan nothing was done to them; they were never punished. There were some Somali people who were so bad that trying to punish them would simply start a big sub-clan war that would cause a lot of deaths. These individuals were protected and supported by their elders whenever they attacked or killed someone. The level of corruption was so high that even the police were in on the deal. One could not make a report to the police when attacked because the case would be covered up. The police assisted the perpetrators because they bribed the local police so they would take no action against them. If the victim insisted that the perpetrator be charged, he or she would be the one to be arrested and charged instead of the perpetrator. Even if individuals went to the humanitarian agencies such as the UN or to the school administration, the police would do nothing. Hence, if you were poor and powerless, you became a victim and a prey.

Salwa recalled a thirty year old man once beat her father with his hard shoe. The man was from a powerful sub-clan. The elders from his clan promised that they would do something about it. Although they knew her father to be an honest man, they did nothing about it. What happened was that the man and some elders were trying to take advantage of her father. They promised that they would send someone to repay the money they owed him. He thought they were being honest. But the man they sent to repay what was owed him instead hit him so hard with a heavy shoe and he fell to the ground. He was hit several times while lying on the ground. After the incident he forgave them and did nothing in retaliation.

Because Salwa was at the hospital, she missed the mock examination. She almost missed the examination to progress from grade seven to eight. Although Salwa missed the mock examination, she did manage to do the final examinations. After the final examinations, when they called the names of best students in class, Salwa's name was the second to be called. Many people were surprised because they knew what had happened to her and the classes and mock examinations she had missed. She was not the "best girl," in terms of exam performance, but she was the second best girl. Before the head teacher read her name, he said,

She was in the hospital and this is what happened to her and hey you guys who are in this school must be tough like that girl. Some of you who are here can't even differentiate an 'F' from a 'B' because of what you're doing.

He said "because of her hard work, despite the mistreatment that she experienced, and despite the group of individuals who wanted to kill her, she has become one of the best in class." What the head teacher said that day was mind blowing for her. From that day onwards, she became a different student. She worked harder than ever. She would study most of the night. Sometimes she would pour water into a basin and then place her feet into it to keep her awake when reading at night. They did not have lights at home. But she managed to find a small lamp to study. Her parents used to buy kerosene for her. She said that it was helpful.

One night, while she studied she fell asleep. Her father came and saw her sleeping with her hair just inches from the lamp. If it touched that lamp, it would have caught fire. Her father took her to her nearby bed, and in the morning she found herself there and asked "why am I here?" She studied for days and was tired to the point that someone could move her without her knowing it. That was how hard she worked in order to get to high school because getting there was not easy. There were about one thousand students and they needed only 120 from those one

thousand students for first year high school. Salwa and her friends studied hard as a group. Tears welled up in her eyes when she saw her name among the 120 names posted on the information board. She laughed at the nearly impossible reality that she was now a high school student. She remembered the positive words that were said about her by her head teacher a year before and realized that her hard work had paid off.

Given that they were a poor family with no source of income, Salwa tried her best to find a job to help her parents. She got a contract in the UNHCR as an interpreter. That was one of the most important and emotional periods in her life. It was a well-paid contract, according to refugee standards. She was paid four thousand Kenyan shillings for that job. She said she made more money than anybody in her family had at any time. That was a great achievement for her. The most emotional part was when she brought the money home. She brought the whole amount as a thank you to her parents for their unconditional love and selfless sacrifices for her. With tears welling up in her eyes, she cherished the feeling and the smile on their faces. It was something that she always envisioned; bringing her first earnings to her mother and hear her say, “My little girl is now working.” She gave another part to her father. It was a wonderful and emotional moment for her. She remembered her father saying to her brother,

You know this girl? I never took her to school. She took herself to school.

Don’t look at your father, don’t look at anyone else; but look at your sister who’s only two years older than you. Look at her and follow her. Do what she does and you will achieve what she has achieved. She’s earning four thousand Kenya shillings now. She is also joining high school now.

Salwa’s brother was not interested in school. He was always playing soccer and going out with friends who were also not interested in school.

Salwa’s father knew she was working hard. So when time came for her to start her high school several months later, her parents went to the market and bought her a high school uniform. They did not have money, but they borrowed from a neighbor. They presented the uniform to Salwa and said, “Work hard to achieve your academic dream.” Again, she became emotional.

Salwa joined a high school which had a four year program. She worked hard in those four years. She knew that if she did well she could join a Canadian university. There was World University Service of Canada (WUSC) program in Kenya that was helping bright refugee



students to join Canadian universities. Salwa got her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) in 2003 and joined high school the same year. She then received her Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) in 2007.

She was happy that KCSE examinations scripts were not marked by Somalians because of their biases. They may not know a child's name, but if they knew the clan they could manipulate the grades to the advantage of their own clan members. Salwa conceded that not all Somalians are like this. There were some Somalis who were really good. But bright students who did not belong to powerful Somali clans would not have the opportunity if they were studying in Somalia because of the corruption that was involved. She thought it was good that she studied in a refugee camp Kenya and not in Somalia. After completing her high school she became the first female teacher from Somalia in her refugee camp. That was another great achievement for her.

In order to qualify for WUSC, one needed to achieve certain grades. After grades, the student had to do the test of English as a foreign language. Salwa had one of the best KCSE grades and that qualified her for WUSC. She applied to WUSC and her application was considered. She was asked to do the English as foreign language tests. Her English as a foreign language were among the best. She completed all the necessary procedures and travelled to Canada through WUSC. When she entered Canada, she was placed in a university in Nova Scotia. This was a considerably smaller university and Salwa found that it was expensive. She liked that university and misses it. At that university, she was blessed with a husband. After one year of marriage she transferred universities to join her husband in her current university.

It has been a difficult journey for her up to this point. She was born into war in Somali to a poor family from a powerless sub-clan; she fled her country of birth, suffered, people wanted her to die, she survived, studied hard, travelled overseas to study, got married, had a child and now completing her undergraduate degree. Salwa said that although she finds some courses challenging, her current university has most of the things she needs to make her dreams come true. She is working extremely hard to make that happen. She does not attend many social events because she is so busy with her academic and domestic priorities. For her, being able to have relationships with people from different nationalities and instructors, make it easier for her to get academic help from fellow students and instructors.

## **Collins' Story**

Collins was born in Ghana. He has no good stories to tell about his early life. Because his parents divorced quite early on in his life, he grew up in a single parent household with his mother, who was unable to provide his basic needs. He and his mother lived in extreme poverty. When he was growing up, his mother was the sole breadwinner and usually worked hard every day to make ends meet. To help his mother, Collins would wake up early in the morning to work for the family's survival.

From quite a young age, Collins had to work hard to pay his school fees and living expenses. For a little boy, life was extremely tough for him. He could not remember any time that he had joy or peace of mind as a child. He learned to live with pain from an early age. Collins had to work hard like his mother who would get him out of bed early in the mornings to go and sell boil corn. Other times, he would be awake at 4am to go to the farm to harvest fresh corn, and bring it to the city for his mother to cook it to sell. It was after returning from the farm that Collins would prepare for school. That was how his mother was able to support him and his younger siblings. Collins also brought in some income from doing odd jobs and that helped them a lot. Collins did not enjoy being a child at all because he had to learn to act mature quite early in life.

Collins had to think like a man to find ways to help his family. The only chance he had was to travel to Nigeria to seek an opportunity to travel abroad to where he could find a job to help his mother. Collins left for Nigeria after miraculously completing his high school. He thought it was a miracle that he finished high school because of the impossible life conditions he encountered. Raising money for the trip was extremely difficult. Collins remembered the day he climbed the transport. He said the only money that he had was for travelling to Nigeria and nothing for food or returning home to Ghana. It was a one-way ticket. Collins knew nobody in Nigeria. He described,

Just imagine a young man who has never travelled before, venturing abroad without money in his pocket and alone. How was I going to survive in a foreign land? That was a big question that I couldn't answer. But I still went there anyway.

After arriving in Nigeria, Collins discovered that it was possible for him to travel to Finland. He heard stories there about other Africans, including Ghanaians, who had made it to Finland and

were realizing their academic dreams. He used his high school certificate to apply to a university in Finland and was accepted.

Unfortunately, he was completely broke and with no money for survival in Nigeria, let alone to afford a ticket to Finland. With no job, Collins had nowhere to sleep, and nothing to eat. His hope was that something would happen and get him that chance. It dawned on him that he could die if he did not make the wise decision to go back to Ghana. So he decided to go to the Ghanaian High Commission in Nigeria. It was there that Collins managed to get some money to travel back to Ghana. Returning to Ghana, his situation worsened and his life became hell on earth. He could not find a job and could hardly afford food to eat. After realizing that survival was impossible for him in his homeland, Ghana, Collins decided to go back to Nigeria where he could attempt to get to Finland.

Before he could find his way back to Nigeria, Collins realized that the instructions on the application stated that in order to apply for a student visa to study in Finland one must first write and pass the English Language test from the International Oilfield Training Solutions (IOTS). He decided to write the test before travelling to Nigeria. He did not have the means to register for that test but a Good Samaritan volunteered to pay the registration for him. Even with this help he could not afford the texts and material he needed to prepare for these tests. He visited the examination center and explained his situation and the issues he encountered to the administrators. After hearing his story, they promised to lend him the books and materials he needed to prepare and advised him to return the texts and material after the examinations. He was instructed to collect the books and materials from another office. When he went to that office, the man in charge refused to lend him those materials as promised. At that time, he had already registered for the test and it was already too late for him to get any books or materials before the examinations. With no preparation in place he wrote the tests. Collins had not seen examples of the test questions nor did he know the test procedures prior to the examinations. The tests were challenging for him. But he was successful and was ready to travel to Nigeria.

After arriving in Nigeria, Collins visited the Finnish Embassy and applied for the student visa. He had no flight ticket to Finland and had no money for his survival in Nigeria while he waited for his student visa. But he was determined to succeed, even if he were to die trying. He was no longer discouraged, because he knew that there was no life for him back in Ghana. He believed that his only way of surviving was going to Finland. He had to think and act like a

mature man. After exploring several avenues, Collins discovered a way he could get a ticket to Finland on credit. The experience of travelling to Finland reminded him of his trip from Ghana to Nigeria. He had only a one-way ticket and with no money to return to Ghana and not a dime in his pocket.

Moving to Finland was a major turning point in Collins' life. It was an event that helped him to break free from his predicaments. When he arrived in Finland he had no money. What helped him in Finland was a scholarship he had managed to procure. It was the first time in his life that he had the hope for a better life. In Finland, and for the first time in his life he had a place to sleep, food to eat, money in the bank, and a university where he could study to make realize his dreams. Never in his life had he thought that a poor person like him, could leave Ghana, travel to Nigeria and then arrive as a student in Finland. He could not believe that what once appeared impossible was made possible for him. Collins' hopelessness had turned into hope for a better future for his mother, his siblings and for himself. Education had been Collins' priority and at that point he was a university student and with everything he needed to complete his studies successfully. He studied hard, passed every class, and graduated with an undergraduate degree. After completing his undergraduate degree in Finland, he applied to his current university to study for master's degree and was accepted.

Collins was proud of what he had accomplished, despite all odds. He remembered, during his struggle most of his friends had given up on their education dreams. Some of his friends were imprisoned, some had gotten lost in the world; and some were still living in worsening situations back in Ghana. Many had difficulty taking care of their families. Collins proudly expressed that he had not given in to life's pressures and temptations amidst his enormous challenges. The difficult life he went through made him stronger, more focused and goal-oriented. He was proud and happy that he did not end up in prison or became a poor peasant living in a village somewhere in Ghana. This was an achievement that promised to change his life forever.

For Collins, the main reason why he is in Canada is achieve is academic dreams so that he can succeed in life. He perceived success as being able to accomplish the goals he sets for him. Success for him is living a positive life and not following the wrong crowd. Success is staying focused and able to have what he wants. Collins does not consider success to be riches but being able to provide for his family and having the basic necessities of life. He also wants a

good life. For him, good life is having peace of mind and not worrying about where to sleep, what to eat, or not worrying about how he is going to pay his children's school fees. For him, a good life is true happiness.

As a university student, Collins continues to encounter challenges. The main concern remains finances. The combination of doing odd jobs and studying at the same time has never been easy. But the hope of realizing his academic dream keeps him going. He believes that his past experiences enable him to overcome the current challenges. Professors and all the other instructors in the university have been nice to him. He relies on their wisdom and guidance with his academic work. They have been helpful to him. With hard work and determination, he continues on course to making his dreams come true after years of struggles.

### **Alex's Story**

Alex was born in northern Ghana in a poor family. Unlike the southern part of the country, the northern region is the poorest in Ghana, both economically and academically. This economic and academic gap can be traced back to the colonial era when the British concentrated development in the southern region. Schools, as well as administrative and economic structures, were established almost entirely in the southern part of the country. The schools in the north were mostly for teaching basic communication with the colonial masters. Even though Ghana has been an independent country for decades, this legacy continues to affect the northern part of the country. So it was not only Alex's parents who were poor. It was a general problem in the northern region. Growing up for him was always a struggle. They were basically a peasant family raising cattle. Taking the cattle to graze was Alex's daily routine. The cattle did not belong to one family. He would combine his family's cattle with those of his aunts and uncles. Fortunately for Alex, both his parents had attended school. His father was a high school teacher. However, considering the large size of the family that included four biological children and some cousins, when it came to the end of the month the impact that his father's salary made was barely noticed. When the salary trickled down, it became nothing. So life was always a struggle for survival.

As a child, Alex said that he was denied everything except an education. Education was the only route out of the extreme poverty that he was experiencing. There were many alternative ways always staring him in the face. Those alternative ways led to life of extreme poverty. For instance, he knew that if ended up a peasant farmer or a cattle raiser, then poverty would

continue in his family. Although finding school fees was always a struggle for his father, Alex's hope laid squarely in education. Alex had hope in education because of the motivation he had received after passing an exam. It made him come to the conclusion that education was a path he must follow. He knew that, through education, he could become someone that people look to and say that "this is my role model." His introduction to African literature, which was introduced to him by his father, made a huge contribution on his life and desires. The first African novels that his father introduced to him were *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, by Chinua Achebe and *Weep Not, Child*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Those stories made an immediate impact on Alex. The characters described in these stories made it through, despite the tough times in which they found themselves. Their stories motivated him to seek success like they had experience and to go higher in life. After reading those books, his role model became Chinua Achebe. Alex knew Chinua Achebe's biography and that Chinua Achebe had also begun his life from a humble beginning and that education was what made him successful. So Alex became inspired, motivated and determined to succeed like Chinua Achebe, at least academically. Alex completed his elementary school successfully and was admitted to junior high. Looking back, Alex would say that he was the only sibling in his family who has kept on climbing the ladder of academic success.

Alex passed the junior high school examinations and was admitted to the best high school in the area, the Notre Dame. He said that Notre Dame was one of the best high schools in Ghana. He had to write an entrance exam and only successful candidates would be accepted. Notre Dame High School was established by the Catholic Church and such schools are typically among the best in the country. These schools also have the discipline that most parents admire and desire for their children. Alex could not believe he was admitted to one of the best high schools in Ghana. The expensive nature of Notre Dame High School often discouraged poor students from attending as their parents most times could not afford the costs associated with attending such a school. Alex was one of the more fortunate of the poorer students in Notre Dame. The high school fees were an extreme burden on Alex's family, but most people did not know that. However, the perception of people in the area was that all students in Notre Dame were rich, including Alex. So for the first time in his life, Alex started studying together with rich students and the differences were so stark. He could see the difference between the majority coming from the southern part of Ghana and the lucky few coming from the North.

Alex was shocked the very first day he set his foot into Notre Dame. All the other students brought their big boxes filled with food and other stuff. Alex only had a small empty box. It was a custom in Notre Dame that on the day of your arrival you be assigned a form three student who would orient you to the school and its surroundings. That was the senior you would serve by doing his laundry and other chores. When Alex's senior opened his box, he was disappointed and shocked that he had nothing in the box. Alex said,

In fact, sometimes, it is hard to read poverty just by a simply glancing at a student. Maybe that was why he mistook me for a student from a wealthy family. In fact, I was the poorest of the poor in our dorm. I couldn't even afford to pay small dues. So when he opened my empty little box, everyone was looking at me and asking, "How did you make it here?"

Alex was so poor that he was always looked over when it came to selecting students to participate in public ceremonies because there were some teachers who did not like the way he looked. Some teachers liked students who dressed well and had money. Because of this, Alex never represented his school in any occasion. He was always shabbily dressed and to make matters worse, he did not even have nice boots. On Independence Day, they always marched to town. Although Alex was better at marching than other students who were selected, no teacher even bothered to look toward his direction. One of the teachers who liked him tried to console him one time by saying, "Don't worry about that. Those are the fools we have selected to go to represent the school with marching. You are better than that." One could just imagine the shame Alex endured.

Although it may occur naturally for others to be depressed because of the shame, it only served as motivation for him. He was not the envious type by nature so the lack of material things could not affect his academic performances. It instead inspired him to be the best that he could be. Alex channeled these negative experiences to hard work; studying hard, so a rich student could not beat him in academic performance. He understood that both rich and poor student had access to the same academic teachers and materials. He recognized that if he could make it in Notre Dame, then the sky would be the limit for him. He could not have asked for more, there were many books to read, including literature, geography and many others. He was not doing literature, but he went to the literature section specifically to select lots of African novels that helped to push him ahead academically.

In Notre Dame, he came to face the reality of the disparity between the rich and the poor and the attitudes, experiences, and discrimination that existed. He was treated differently because he was perceived to be poor. Nevertheless, he completed Notre Dame successfully and was accepted to the University of Ghana. The status of being poor and the disparity between the rich and poor followed him to the university. The student population in the University of Ghana was a mixture of rich and poor student. Not surprising, the perception of the poor students remained the same.

Alex's first time in the lecture room in the University of Ghana was an unforgettable experience. When he entered the lecture room and saw the lecturer, it was the first time in his life he was seeing a teacher lecturing without a book and talking about the world without glancing at a note. He was impressed. He could not imagine that a human being was capable of knowing so much about the world. It was a complete shock for him because in the high school, a teacher came to the class with jotted notes and points before speaking to the class. To him, this man was simply working magic. He could just talk and talk. He could answer any question a student asked. Alex thought, "Wow, that's how I want to be." It motivated him and made him dedicate all his life to his studies. He studied hard and completed his undergraduate degree requirement successfully.

Alex wanted to continue with studies after obtaining his undergraduate degree. He searched and obtained a list of overseas universities. He then applied to several of the universities on the list, even without sending an email to any professor. Canada was one of those places. So that was the way he applied to this university and gained acceptance as a master's student. Alex also won a scholarship. The whole family was happy to hear the good news. His father was so happy. His father was one of the few who went to school and became teachers in that region. So by seeing his son progressing past that level took him by surprise. He was surprised because no one in Alex's family knew he had applied to do a master's overseas.

He had gained an admission letter but getting a plane ticket was a challenge. But he managed to afford his ticket after a long struggle. He arrived in Canada and worked hard to adapt to the new culture and education system. He became a better student after his initial struggles with his courses. Alex completed his masters successfully and then submitted an application to read for a PhD. His application was accepted and he began his new program a few months ago. Although he had accumulated loans while studying in Canada, he was in the



process of achieving his academic goals. He already has his family and community looking up to him and he is committed to helping them. His younger siblings—four siblings, two boys and two girls—also look up to him. Alex now has the responsibility of helping them fulfil their dreams since only his father is employed and his income cannot do much.

### **Amina's Story**

Amina's life challenges started early in her life, from the day of her birth. Amina was born prematurely and at the time her country Uganda was going through lots of turmoil, brutal civil war and a change of leadership. Her parents worked extremely hard to take care of her while protecting the family during that turmoil. Concerning the challenges she has been through, Amina said,

Each stage of my life is filled with challenges that have built me to who I am today. Definitely challenges have been part of my life. There are many challenges I faced in my life, even till now. First, being born a premature baby and going through war was not easy. Life was difficult for me and my parents at the time.

Amina is grateful to her parents, both her mother and father for taking care of her at that difficult time. She also chalked up her current station in life to the hand of God. She owed her life mostly to God because she should not have survived at that time but God intervened and she survived. Amina's parents endured so much to ensure she survived. Growing up in Africa, Amina was raised by many people, in addition to her biological parents, and she loved it. Her parents moved a lot because her father was an engineer and would travel from region to region and to different countries offering consultancy.

So Amina grew up with her grandmother and her aunts and these arrangements helped to shape her into who she is today. It was through those socially significant others that she is the person that she is today. She believed that everyone contributed to who she has become. She got her strength from her grandmother, her confidence from her aunt, and her intelligence from her parents.

While some would call what she went through challenges for her, they were blessings because they had shaped her differently. Her belief is that one cannot see a challenge as a blessing while going through it and each challenge comes with specific lessons that differ according to the challenge. There were times when she faced great financial constraints; at such

times people who were also going through similar challenges could not help because they were facing constraints as well. She however found that there were some people who made sacrifices to help her become successful and she is thankful to them.

Amina spent half the time in her fifth year or sixth year of life being with her mother in the hospital. Her mother had difficulty in conceiving and also maintaining pregnancy. Before Amina was born, her mother had already lost two babies who were born prematurely. Amina was also born prematurely but miraculously she survived. She was the only premature baby born to her mother who survived. During subsequent pregnancies with her younger siblings, her mother was admitted in the hospital from four or five months into the pregnancy. Her mother would not return home until she had a live baby.

Amina almost lived in the hospital because she spent so much time there. Being in the hospital with her mother when she was five years old helped her to decide to someday become a medical doctor. Most people do not believe it when she tells them, but by the age of five she already knew she wanted to be a medical doctor and she did not want to do any other thing apart from becoming a medical doctor. When she saw the doctors and the nurses and then she often thought her mother was going to have a baby and she would have a baby brother and he would be healthy and it was the doctors who were helping her mother to have a live baby. It was within that period that Amina decided that was the job she wanted to do; to help mothers to have babies.

So Amina began school with the aim of becoming a medical doctor. The schools she went to were multicultural, from elementary to high school. She went to a boarding high school that was multicultural. Uganda has 46 tribes and all those tribes were represented in schools, either in senior one or senior six, as they call it in Uganda; it is a different grade system in Canada. Living among different people in the early days shaped Amina's ability to live with people who are different ethnically, culturally, and religiously. So from an early age she developed patience, tolerance, and resilience to life challenges. Amina had different excellent teachers in the school. They spoke different languages, and came from different parts of the country. Irrespective of the language they spoke or the region from which they came, they were held together by the unified identity they shared as citizens of the same country. Amina thought this shared identity had shaped her to love and understand other people.

Amina studied hard in high school and was able to achieve the grades needed to enroll in medical school. It was a challenge to bring up or to send a child to medical school but it was a

hurdle her parents and she had to go through, against the odds. She came from a patriarchal culture; hence competing with males was another hurdle that she had to overcome. Competing with men and making sure that her voice was heard was not an easy thing to do. Amina had to be better at what she was doing and so the challenge for her was to make sure she did everything at her best, in order to see a positive result.

By going to medical school, Amina was fulfilling her dream of becoming a doctor to give help back to her people who were exposed to different kinds of illnesses, and who had fewer doctors to treat them. Of course in medical school Amina was exposed to both males and females. Amina was taught by her culture that there are certain courses that females are not capable of taking because they are the activities that females cannot do. However, she found that at the university level, both males and females were studying in all the courses. This fact then gave her an equal chance to compete with men. She said that part of her competitive nature was developed during that time. Amina could compete with males; she did not see why her brain was not the same as theirs. She thought that if they could study hard, she could also study hard. So this experience shaped who she was. She competed with male students and completed medical school successfully and became a doctor; so fulfilling her childhood dream.

But Amina's challenges were not over. In fact, one of her biggest challenges was coming all the way to study in Canada. When she was accepted as a master's student, she was also offered a scholarship which she thought would be enough to complete her studies. Never would she have thought that what she was promised while she was still in Uganda was not exactly what she would receive when she arrived in Canada. Amina said that through her career and her educational life, she found the toughest challenge in the current university. She came here believing that she had a full scholarship for her program. Then after one semester she approached her department and was told "No you do not have a full scholarship, it is only for one year." They promised to get her a teaching assistant position; but as a student she was supposed to get a stipend for her accommodation and for her transport. Amina questioned herself. She had made a decision to leave her job in Uganda to come to Canada knowing that she was going to get more educated. It was a big challenge for her and she asked herself,

How do you start in a foreign land? How can you survive? Where do you get your money for rent? Definitely, as human being, because of such difficult

situation, you cannot do what you came to do perfectly; instead you will simply start learning skills on how to survive in a foreign land.

She observed her classmates having two to three jobs while studying fulltime and it was not easy. That was a huge challenge for her. She tried to balance her life challenges with studies and sometimes it was hard for her to obtain excellent grades in her class. For her to succeed and to survive in the university she needed another source of income and she could only do so much. So that is the biggest challenge for her. Amina happened to have a relative living in the city who offered her a place to stay for free. That was where she stayed and was able to complete her master's degree. She was encouraged by her professors to submit an application for a PhD. She applied and was accepted. She is also doing her medical work in Uganda.

### **Grace's Story**

Grace was born in Nigeria into a culture that prefers male over female children. At a young age Grace noticed the difference in the ways her father treated her, in comparison to her brothers. The other fathers in the community also treated their daughters this same way. She said that in her culture, in most families, male offspring are considered superior to females. She happened to be born in one such family. Because of the cultural stigma her father had difficulties in sending his female children to school. Grace had an unhappy childhood. Anything good she did was not recognized by her father in the same way he recognized the efforts of her brothers. Because of this, Grace started to see herself as a complete failure. She felt invalidated and underappreciated by her father and this caused her to lose self-esteem and confidence in herself. School was always a struggle for her because she felt she was always alone. Because her family believed that school was not for girls, no one cared if she went to school or not. But deep inside, Grace had a desire to pursue her education just like her brothers had. But no one seemed to care. Her only source of encouragement was her elder brother. Grace began to believe in herself and that she could accomplish her academic dreams with or without help from any family member. With help from her elder brother, she persevered, worked hard and performed well in school. She completed elementary school successfully and proceeded to high school. After high school, it was another major struggle for her to get in to the university in Nigeria, but she eventually got into university with the help of her elder brother. Grace has been a reserved person since she was young. She was always quiet and stayed mostly to herself. Throughout her struggle to pursue her education in Nigeria, she did not want to mess

around the way other girls did. She practiced respect because she was thinking and dreaming of a brighter future. She was determined to overcome the hurdles that her culture put before her simply for being a woman. She knew many people in her community did not favor the goals that she was pursuing, but she continued on. Her elder brother assisted her with university. Grace's plan was to complete her degree and get married early. She thought an early marriage could alleviate the cultural and social pressure that she endured. It was difficult for her to concentrate on her studies because she was stressed and depressed all the time. She wanted to find a man of her choice to marry. She wanted whomever she married to be able to help her in her journey toward the career of her dream.

Finally, she found someone she thought met her criteria, someone who understood her and someone whom she understood. But things did not work out between them the way they expected because of her culture. According to her culture, girls cannot choose their life partners. It is up to the parents to choose the man they want their daughter to marry. So when she found love on her own he was rejected by her family. They wanted her to accept the man they chose for her. Hence, the family destroyed her relationship with that young man and warned her and him to terminate the relationship. Her family went even as far as warning his relatives to discourage him from pursuing Grace. The young man's life became a living nightmare because of threats from her relatives. Both of them knew the consequences if they were to continue with the relationship. Consequently, they were forced to end the relationship. Grace was powerless to do anything. She felt upset, hopeless and powerless.

Eventually, her parents found the suitor of their choice and made arrangements for them to get married as their custom dictated. So Grace got married early in her life without even understanding what marriage was or the man she was getting married to. She thought that maybe marriage would be rosy or easy and that she would have a happy life with the husband her father chose. Soon after her marriage to him she was shocked as many unexpected problems began to surface. It began with her in-laws and then her spouse. Her hope was dashed, she was depressed and continued to see herself as a failure. Pressure from all sides made it difficult for her to think well of herself or do the right thing.

Nevertheless, Grace's spouse started to process her visa to join him in Canada. The process took about two years. She was in the university by then. She would be called on for an interview in the midst of her studies, disrupting everything. She was also heavily pregnant by

then. She said that it was a period of uncertainty and confusion for her. She did not know what her future would be. She was worried that she was leaving behind the life and country that she knew and moving to a new country about which she had no idea. These occurrences affected her academic performance because it was an unstable time and she could not concentrate. Soon after the process to move to Canada was completed, she got her visa and eventually moved to Canada.

Things did not improve between Grace and her husband after her arrival in Canada. Life was not easy for her. She started to encounter numerous challenges owing to their poor relationship. No matter how hard she tried to improve things the relationship between them did not progress as expected. She had no peace. To make matters worse, she was in a new country and had no one with whom she could share her pains. It was always a challenge for her, but she tried her best to cope with it, despite the stress that was developing.

During this period, Grace remembered the promise she made to her father when she was growing up. She had promised to surprise him as a female child by proving him wrong and showing him that a female can accomplish as much as can a male. She wanted him to know that what his male children could do, his female child could do it as well, even better. Those were the words on her mind when she got to the university in Nigeria. That was one of the reasons she could not contemplate giving up, no matter the challenges. Although her life was a mess, Grace did not want to end up like other girls in her community back in Nigeria. She needed to succeed academically so that she could be in the position to change the mindset of her people about how they treat girls in relation to boys. She was determined to fight for her success. She wanted to achieve and become a role model for girls in her community. In fact, at that time when she was in Nigeria, during her first year of university, her father started to see the result of that promise. Her academic performance was high and she was just as smart as a male child. She refused to give up at the time her father pressured her to marry. She refused to give up when everything was working against her. She wanted to surprise everybody, including her father with the power of a woman that they did not understand. Grace's mother, like other women in the community, expected her daughters to be reserved and not act like boys. But, unlike other people, Grace's mother knew that Grace was capable of achieving anything she wanted in life. Grace promised her mother that wherever challenges she would encounter in life, she would achieve her academic goal. Grace asked her mother to trust her and to always count on her. She promised her that she would not mess up, but would complete her university studies successfully.

Her mother started to believe in her when she was attending the university. Although life was tough and she was in constant stress because of the happening in her life; Grace did not waiver, but she kept going and going.

In spite of the challenges Grace faced at home, after arriving in Canada, she managed to gain acceptance into the university. This surprised even her husband who thought it was impossible for her to enroll in a university in Canada. Her husband had created many road blocks that could have thwarted her efforts to get enrolled in the university. She worked silently without her husband knowing it and got accepted into an undergraduate program. She had a child so she made sure that she found a daycare for him.

Grace is now in an undergraduate program. Being a mother in a new country, with trouble at home, and a student at the same time has been tough for her, but she is determined to fulfill the promise she made to her parents and to herself. She wants to show to everyone in her community that males and females are capable of doing and accomplishing the same things. She has had many roadblocks to her academic progress, but she has overcome them all and today she is a student at a Canadian university. Grace was brought to Canada to be a stay at home wife and mother who would depend entirely on her difficult, manipulative, and controlling husband for everything.

Grace had suffered stress, control, and humiliation but she expressed determination for good to come from these experiences. She refused to be a victim. She dreamed that she would not end up as merely a woman in the kitchen but as a woman who makes a difference in the lives of others. She spoke of wanting to be a highly educated person and a role model. She wanted to be someone who can be a voice for the voiceless, especially girls in her community back in Nigeria. She wants to ensure that she gets herself established. She does not want her children, whether boys or girls, to go through the stress she had to endure. For Grace, balancing studies, life as a mother and her part-time job have never been easy. But she expressed her determination to complete her studies. She said she studies hard and consults her instructors and fellow students from time to time to explain things she does not understand. She was confident that her academic dreams will be met.

### **Lisa's Story**

Lisa was born and raised on a small farm in the East African country, Uganda. The village where she grew up was poverty-stricken. Lisa's community did not have a kindergarten

or nursery. As a result, she did not attend a kindergarten. She attended a low standard primary school in the area. Life in the village was extremely tough for Lisa. Their patriarchal culture favoured males over females. Girls were forced or encouraged to marry at a young age. Lisa survived an early marriage because of a breakthrough at the age of 15 when her elder sister picked her up from the village and took her to the city so that she could get a better education. Lisa remembered promising her sister that if she took her to her home and paid her school fees, she would do everything for her at home and she would not have to hire a maid. Lisa had seen one of her older sisters getting married at a young age and she never wanted to go through that herself. Lisa was thankful that her sister gave her the opportunity to live with her and she helped out with her sister's children. Lisa's sister was touched with her younger sister's determination to get an education and so she took her under her care in the city and there things started to look brighter for Lisa.

Lisa's dream of getting an education was coming true at last. She was able to attend a good school and her education performance improved significantly. She made new friends and was full of joy. However, that joy was short-lived because a tragedy struck her family when she was 19. Her sister who had rescued her from the village died suddenly leaving her with three nieces and one nephew. When her sister passed away and left her caring for four young orphan children between the ages of three and seven, she thought that her life had ended. Lisa felt hopeless. Her sister died not long after her husband's death. So Lisa became the only loving parent for the four adopted children. She thought she would never survive or complete her dream of getting an education or have a future. Suddenly she was a 19 year old mother of four adopted children, with no resources or any experience of motherhood. This was an extremely tough time for Lisa.

After the passing of their parents, young Lisa was left to care for four orphans. Her life became miserable and she was overwhelmed. Survival seemed impossible to her because she did not have a job to be able to provide enough food for the children. However, Lisa did have little hope left in her. There was a silent voice deep within her that reminded her that this was not the end of her life. She knew that God had a purpose. Why would God bring these innocent children into the world and take their parents away and then leave them with inexperienced Lisa? Lisa had no idea how she could survive alone, let alone how she would take care of four young orphans, with no income. She trusted in God that He was going to take care of them, and He did.



Lisa had to make some tough decisions. She found her only option was to stay focused and trust in God because when one loses hope and loses focus then it becomes tough for anyone to move on with life. So Lisa started looking for a job. With her high school diploma she could not find a job easily. After a long struggle, she landed in place where they hired her. The work was not easy for her but at least it could support her and her adopted children.

Things did not get any better for Lisa and the four orphans. In fact, things had worsened. By her second month on the job the orphans started to get sick regularly and she frequently had to leave work to take them to a clinic. This had an effect on their income. There was a particular private clinic that they frequented that was run by a Canadian doctor, who was treating the children.

One day, the doctor said to her, “You’re so young. How come you have four children? What happened?” Then Lisa told him her story. She did not know why he was asking her so many questions, but that Canadian doctor running that private clinic, after a short while, became Lisa’s husband. After the marriage, their lives suddenly changed, from extreme misery to relief and hope for a better future. Lisa and her husband ended up moving to Canada about ten years prior to our interview. The four orphans she had left behind joined her a few years later. Lisa’s roller-coaster life had now changed for the better. Lisa realized that when one has hope, things can happen, even what may have been considered impossible.

Their arrival in Canada was not what Lisa had expected. The Canadian weather was a complete shock for her. They left Africa when the weather was plus 28 degrees Celsius and arrived in Canada at minus 40 degrees Celsius. So overcoming the extreme winter temperatures together with her stress and depression was another great achievement for her.

They came to Canada as a large family. The four orphans were not the only children in their marriage. Lisa got married at the age of 23. Her husband had four children from his previous marriage and she had four orphans. She later had two biological daughters, for total of 10 children. It was an enormous responsibility for her and she had to wait until the four orphans were in the university before she could join the university herself. At the time of the interview she was about to graduate with an undergraduate degree in Political Studies. Lisa’s mother taught her to take care of the disadvantaged in the society. Her mother took care of many orphans and Lisa wanted to continue with her mother’s dream. Taking care of only four orphans was not enough for her. She wanted to do the same in her home village; so she decided to open

an orphanage in her home village back in Uganda. While a fulltime student, Lisa also ran an orphanage for about 300 children in Uganda. Fundraising to keep the orphanage running had also been consuming her time and energy.

Being in the university was stressful for Lisa. She enjoyed the university life, but it was always stressful, especially during examinations. She had also learned that most of her professors are supportive and encouraging. She talked about taking online courses with instructors who she had never met in face to face settings; yet they had communicated as if they were physically together in the classroom. It has always been a comfort for Lisa to know that students who had tough lives were assisted by professors, even when she could not meet all the assignment deadlines. She could send an email or talk to professors and they would sympathize with her situation. Every professor understood her situation because her life was always crazy. She could go to them anytime for help and they would offer their time to help. What motivated her to stay and complete her studies was that she knew where she had come from and the future for her was here in Canada. Before she started her studies, she knew that it was going to be a hard life for a short time. It took her two years to wait for her transcript to arrive from Uganda. This was yet another challenging process. As it turned out, it did not matter to her that she was not able to attend the university at the age of 19 or 20, but she did determine that she must achieve her dream and in our interview she declared that she was in the process of achieving all she had hoped for.

### **Suzy's Story**

Suzy was born in Uganda. She is the oldest of four siblings: three sisters and a brother. Suzy's parents were the most successful people in their respective families. Everyone in her father's family looked up to him and the same was true for her mother's family. Suzy and her siblings had no concern about their future because their parents, their father in particular, were successful. Her father was chosen as a Ugandan ambassador to the United States. As a family, they were excited when their flight landed in Washington DC. The city was beautiful and they were looking forward to enjoying life in the United States. But months after they had relocated to the United States from Uganda, Suzy's father passed away, suddenly. Suzy said that it was impossible for her to describe the kind of pain and confusion they felt. It was simply unbearable for them and for their mother. Their joy had been but for a moment in Washington DC. Suzy

was five years old and the youngest was three months when their father died. So they had to return to Uganda.

Given that their parents were the only successful people in their respective families, there was no one else who could take care of them but their mother. Suzy's mother was a hard working woman. She provided everything for Suzy and her siblings, and they were living okay when they were back in Uganda. Suzy's mother was a business lady and travelled a lot. Consequently, her children did not get to see her often, but this was understandable. Just few years after Suzy's father's death, her mother also died. Their mother was the only person taking care of them after their father died. After her death, they became orphans with nothing and because they were still quite young, they could do nothing for themselves.

Suzy's mother's younger sister (Lisa) had compassion for them and came to their aid, although she was just young and had nothing herself. With no one willing to take care of them, she took them under her arms and cared for them like they were her own. In fact Suzy's aunt was there with them when they were born and lived with them to the time of their mother's death. Their mother was her big sister and had assisted her through school. She also cared for them when their mother was away for business.

Suzy was five years old when her father died and nine when her mother passed away. Their parents' deaths devastated them. For Suzy it was a very scary occurrence. They did not know what would happen to them and life became extremely tough. Although her mother's younger sister was young, inexperienced, and had little or no means to take care of them, she was always there for them. She was the one who raised them and did her best to provide for them. They suffered with her together. When survival was getting difficult for them, the best friend of Suzy's father offered to put her through school. He said to Suzy's aunt, "I will take the oldest child then; you don't have to worry about her. I will put her through school." That meant that Suzy had to spend more time with that family because they were the ones raising her and grooming her to be academically successful. They took her away from her siblings, which was really painful for her. For her, separating from her younger siblings was simply unbearable. Although she could do nothing for her siblings at the time, she felt that they were looking up to her as their elder sister and she always tried to be there for them. She felt like a parent to them. While the separation from her siblings was intended for her good, it was an extremely painful experience for her. Suzy wished people knew how orphans feel when they are separated from

each other. Suzy and her siblings were close to each other. In fact, they were even more attached to each other after their parents' deaths. So separating them was devastating to Suzy.

Suzy was unhappy while living in her new home. It was hard on her. She wondered why her father's best friend chose to sponsor only her in school; allowing her to have a good life and leaving her siblings in such a terrible situation. Suzy rarely received any news about her siblings and had little knowledge of how they were faring. Her experience at the home of her father's friend was unpleasant. No one cared that she was an orphan or how she felt as a result of the loss of her parents and the separation from her siblings. They simply expected her to do well at school. They demanded that she do house work. No one empathized with her. In fact, they kept telling her "Just because your parents died doesn't mean that you can get away with anything." They were unkind to her. They could force her to do more house work at odd times. Life for her was difficult and painful.

Suzy's aunt got married to a Canadian doctor and her living condition improved. Her aunt was close to them. So she was unhappy when they were separated, but there was nothing she could do about it. Her aunt took it up on herself to care for her siblings at the time that they were separated. Her aunt's husband decided to relocate to Canada. So he took her aunt to Canada and left Suzy's siblings behind under the care of Suzy's uncles. Suzy said that it was another difficult experience when her aunt left them behind. But her aunt kept encouraging them that "We are going to work hard and try to bring you guys to Canada." But Suzy and her siblings never believed her because they felt she had abandoned them. They thought that if she really loved them she would have visited them. But she kept Suzy's siblings in school by sending money for tuition from Canada. Although she would send them money for tuition, life was not easy for them and they were not sure about their future. They thought their situation was hopeless and would never change; because it was years and years of her aunt saying "We going to bring you to Canada. They were just hanging in there.

Their uncles would tell Suzy's siblings, "Don't put your hope in that. You are probably not going to make it to Canada because it is not that easy to travel there. So forget about that and concentrate on school." So they took it like that. But Suzy would tell her siblings that they would travel together. Although Suzy's siblings' tuition was being paid, they had other problems. They were experiencing difficult times and were unhappy. If their aunt did not send money on time, their uncles would threaten to keep them at home because there was no money to

take them to school. It was hard for them. Suzy did not think her siblings could have attended school in Uganda without her aunt's help from Canada. Their mother had left some property but they never received any proceeds from that. Their uncle was named as their legal guardian and took advantage of that role by taking over and controlling everything. He moved into their mother's house and took full possession of the property. He then got married, had his own children and the orphans never received any assistance from him, though their aunt told them that there was money left behind for them by their parents. They never received a dime and because they were children there were no actions that they could take against their uncle.

Despite their uncle's cruel acts they went through school and did well academically. Then at last, their aunt came through with her promise to bring them to Canada. Suzy was reunited with her siblings while going through the process of coming to Canada. It was a joyous moment for Suzy; one that she had been looking forward to. Finally, they could live in one place as one family again. They had missed each other during their separation.

Before they left Uganda, her aunt's husband said to them, "Yes, you are coming to Canada but you have to work extremely hard." He kind of threatened them, "If you don't do well in school, if you don't, if you misbehave, we are going to ship you back to Uganda." So they came to Canada knowing that they had to work hard. He did not need to repeat the threat to them because they realized that Canada was not a place where one can succeed without hard work.

Upon entering into Canada, they experienced cultural shock. Life and everything they knew was completely different. They felt depressed. They found that unlike their home country, it was a lonely and cold place and there were no friends with whom they could socialize. They found that people were not as friendly as they were back home. Even after joining high school in Canada, they found that the students in high school were not that friendly, especially with people who were different from them. They were lucky because they had each other, but they lacked local friends who could help them adjust to their new environment and afford them a sense of belonging. Suzy thought this also had a good consequence because it allowed them to concentrate on school and nothing else. They did well in high school.

They did not forget the situation they had come from, and their purpose for being in Canada; that helped them to stay grounded. They did not lose their values or hang out with friends who could have misguided them; but instead, they stayed focused. They continued to do

well in their studies, had summer jobs, and helped with house work. Their aunt's husband ensured that they contributed toward paying bills with the little money they made during the summer, no matter how small. Suzy thought it was fair because it was her aunt's husband who had brought them to Canada and he always reminded them of that. He also always emphasized that they should never forget to work hard. As indicated, Suzy did well in high school and was accepted to the university. She and two of her siblings have just completed the university and, at time of interview, her brother was almost done with the university as well. Suzy was working and contemplating applying to study for her master's degree. It has been a difficult journey for her to this point. She would not say that she was happy now because she had not settled yet. She continued to feel the pains of the sad events that had happened in her life. But she recalled that it would be a long process toward total recovery. She vowed to continue working hard and hoped to lead a good and successful life eventually.

When she joined the university, she found classes and the system to be challenging. She was on her own as the only black student in her classes. Everyone seemed professional and she was forced to be on her own. She became independent and studied on her own. She knew that students and professors did not know her life story. Yet she competed on the same level as Canadian students. She did her own assignments and research without giving excuses. When it came to group work, she always contributed. There was no feeling sorry for herself or seeking special attention. She competed on the same level and thought that her professors recognized that. She thought that her professors liked her because there were some that she approached to be her references and they helped her. She thought they recognized her potential and appreciated it as well.

### **Charity's Story**

Charity was born in Uganda to wonderful parents whom she lost at a young age. Growing up as an orphan life was challenging for her in every way. She had to adjust to life without loving parents, which was not an easy thing to do. Her only source of survival was owed to the strong bond she shared with her three siblings. Her siblings became her family and were the only people she could look up to. Although they were all young they were the only genuine family she knew.

As an orphan in Africa, Charity thought she was often looked upon as a burden. Although she had other relatives such as aunts and uncles, most could not take care of her like

their own biological children because African families are often large. Her aunts and uncles had many children; hence, the addition of four orphans, might have been a burden for them. Charity and her siblings were sad because they felt like they were a burden to their relatives.

Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do because they were too young to care for themselves. They were being tossed about from one relative to another and from place to place. They could not settle in one place. So their life was full of uncertainty, confusion, fear, sadness, and a feeling of rejection. They were separated because no one relative could take up four children at once. So, one of them went to this aunt, the other to that uncle and so on. Being tossed around and not having a stable home affected them psychologically. They were always living from their suitcases, ready to be shipped to a new place anytime. One day they would be here the next day they would tell them to go to their uncles. They always felt hopeless, powerless, demoralized, and traumatized.

Being an orphan was not a welcomed experience for Charity. To make matters worse, there were some relatives who did not wish them the best and uttered negative things about them, even when they did nothing. These relatives would tell them, “You can’t do anything good,” just to discourage them. Those relatives seemed happy to see them sad, miserable, and demoralized all the time.

While they were going through those overwhelming challenges, there emerged a young aunt. Although her aunt was young she meant the world to Charity and her siblings. In fact, she was a blessing to Charity, who could not imagine how she could possibly reward her for her sacrifices. Her aunt was one of the kindest people that she had ever known her entire life. When everyone was tossing them about from place to place, her aunt came and took them all. One might have thought that her aunt was too young to commit herself to such tough responsibility, but she did so. She had to mature quite quickly as she took over care for the four orphans. She was young, unmarried, immature, and had no meaningful source of income. Despite those hurdles, she decided to adopt all four siblings. Many relatives tried to discourage her from adopting the orphans, but she ignored them. She never gave up on her wards, no matter what happened. She became their great encourager and gave them unexpected chances at life. Charity could not thank her aunt enough and was extremely grateful to her for everything.

Charity’s life began to change because of her young aunt’s unexpected intervention. She started to become motivated and felt she must prove to those relatives that she could do the

things they told her she could never do. She wanted to surprise those relatives someday. She also wanted to succeed to make her young aunt proud. Charity thought she had already surprised them with her academic achievement.

At that time, Charity began to value education and viewed educational achievement as a means through which she could prove those people wrong. She also saw her education as the only thing that could rescue her from her endless life of misery. The major obstacle to gaining an education and proving them wrong was the lack of funds for school fees. There was a point in her life where she had no access to school fees and their uncle told them, “Oh you are going to have to stay at home for the whole semester because there is no school fee for you.” She remembered freaking out because she could not imagine doing that. She could not imagine just sitting at home doing nothing. She felt like she would miss out a lot. She did not want to be left behind. So, education had always been important to her. For her, education was a way of achieving a lot and moving up in life.

Their young aunt got married to a Canadian, moved to Canada and left them behind under the care of their other aunts and uncles. She promised that she was going to work hard for them to join her in Canada. Although life was hard for Charity in numerous ways, she did not give up on school. She continued to study hard. Charity’s aunt kept her promise by working hard for them to join her in Canada. After a few years, they joined her in Canada. Moving to Canada was a big deal for Charity. It was challenging for her to get used to a different culture, weather conditions, and food. It took Charity some time to adjust to life in Canada. She was registered in a high school. She worked hard and completed high school successfully. After that, she applied to the university and was accepted. She completed her undergraduate degree after going through so many challenges, some of which she thought were insurmountable. Although she encountered challenges during her studies, she had a positive experience in the university. She felt that the university was pretty much like another extended family. The students were good. She met so many people from different cultures and she really liked that. The professors were nice too. She talked of her plans to return to the university to further her studies.

### **Tiana’s Story**

Tiana was born to wonderful parents in Uganda. The most difficult experience in her life was when she lost both parents. After her parents passing, the quality of her life changed



drastically. She was only seven years old when she became an orphan. In Africa, being an orphan is something that is viewed as being terrible. She became disadvantaged right away because life was instantly hard. So being orphaned had made life much worse for her than she could ever have imagined. Coming from a fairly well off middle class family to having no parents and no support system was something unbearable for her. The quality of her life changed in a blink of an eye. For her these circumstances were the most pivotal moments in her life.

The loss of both parents caused significant damage to Tiana physiologically, psychologically and spiritually as she began to feel hopeless. What gave her hope and courage was the fact that there were a few relatives who never allowed her to feel sorry for herself, especially her aunt who was living with them at her parents' deaths. Her aunt made sure that Tiana did not feel sorry for herself. Her aunt taught her that no one could impede her. When Tiana walked through the streets of Uganda, she could see many real problems. There was absolute poverty everywhere. There were many people in the streets with illnesses and tumors and so many street kids. When she lost her parents, she thought that those things could actually happen to her and her siblings. She thought things could go worse for them. Yet they were not allowed to internalize that. Tiana and her siblings had people who were there for them emotionally when they needed help most. Those individuals made them believe that the loss of their parents was not the end of the world for them. Tiana admitted that things got worse initially. By initially, she meant that for few years life was difficult and they struggled. Even though they struggled, Tiana knew that things could change for them if they made the right decisions. She often talked to herself saying, "Where you come from will not affect who you are in the future. So just because you are orphaned and don't have a home now doesn't mean that you can't create a home for yourself." It was then that she decided that she was going to create a home for herself through education.

Living and studying in a boarding school gave her hope. She again started dreaming about her future. For her, moving to the boarding school was life changing because it felt like home. At a young age Tiana had lost her home and had forgotten what a real home felt like. Whenever they were on holidays, her siblings and herself were always dispatched to the homes of different relatives. So the idea of a home as a place that she could go to after school was not there. She took this in a positive way and thought that it was an advantage because through this

experience she had learned to thrive under varied conditions and not to be comfortable in any one place where she could not build a life. So she learned how to adjust and to thrive despite her sad situation. Another important thing that she found in boarding school was being able to live with strangers, some of whom were her age and operating with them like a family. In her opinion, the idea of sisterhood or brotherhood was not based on blood. She lived in the boarding school for four years, from 12 to 16 years. Tiana was 16 when she moved to Canada.

It was important for Tiana to have peers in her life. The ability to have friends who were loyal, kind and trustworthy shaped her. She was more attached to friends because she spent ninety percent of her time in boarding school and that this helped her after she moved to Canada.

The happiest and most important life changing moment in her life was when they were adopted by her aunt and then left Uganda for Canada a few years later. She saw the move as a huge opportunity for her to achieve the things that she had always dreamed of. She did not have such opportunity in Uganda because she had no one who could pay for her education. Just making it through high school was a miracle because oftentimes only half of her tuition was paid. They were always being sent home because of lack of school fees and because of that she did suffer academically. Even though her educational performance deteriorated within that period, Tiana knew that it was not because she was stupid, rather, it was because as a child, she had internalized the trauma and tough situations she was experiencing. She did not do well in school also because she spent half of her school time away from school and was often feeling upset and helpless.

So the biggest thing to happen for her was when she moved to Canada and was able to have the education that she had always dreamed of. She grew up disadvantaged and therefore saw education as a way to succeeding in life. That thought was embedded in her mental psyche and it was her driving force after her arrival in Canada. She felt that one of the biggest joys in her life was when she knew that she could now actually achieve her academic goals.

She lived with her adopted parents and they were quite a large group. Hence, she did not want to put her financial burden on everyone and so she decided to do a part-time job to meet some of her basic needs. Because she did not want to be a financial burden she decided to move out and re-establish herself after entering the university. At the time of her interview she lived on her own, although she admitted that living alone was still a huge challenge for her. She had to live on budget because her income was not always enough. She paid her own rent, food and

bills. Beforehand, she did not care about rent because her adopted parents took care of it. She did not take these challenges negatively because she believed such circumstances would teach her to become financially aware. Being financially aware for her was necessary and allowed her to prioritize her expenditure. Altogether, her situation had helped her to stay focused, do what was important, make the right choices and decisions, and stay on track with respect to the direction she wanted to go with her life.

The university has been a beacon of hope for Tiana. Higher education had enabled her to pursue her goals. Through her studies at the university she had become a critical thinker; this was something she felt was lacking in African education. In Africa, she was taught straight fact or basic facts without knowing how to think critically. Hence, her studies in Canada challenged her and forced her to develop critical thinking skills. She took classes that gave her different perspectives. For instance, classes provided different perspectives on the same topic that allowed her to make her own conclusions. The university experience had allowed her to realize that there was not just one story in life, but there are different viewpoints that come together to conclude the story. In addition, the feedbacks from professors on her assignments were useful. It made her improve in areas where she was weak. Professors were always there to work with her and offer help when she need it.

### **Erick's Story**

Erick was born in Uganda, East Africa. He lived in Uganda for the first thirteen years of his life before moving to Canada. Growing up in Uganda was difficult for him. Erick became an orphan at a young age. He lost his father when he was just six months old and his mother when he was four years old. Life became hard for him as a young orphan. He had no permanent home after the loss of his parents and was being bounced around, from home to home. It was a sad period in his life. Being an orphan in Africa was socially alienating for him. He was viewed differently in the society. Hence, it was always challenging for him growing up.

Erick's hardships increased when he reached school age and started attending school. Life as a poor orphan at school was not easy for him. Erick was looked upon in negative ways by his fellow students because of the clothes that he wore. Oftentimes, he could wear the same shirt, pants, shorts, or pair of shoes again and again. There were often giggles about his clothing. They were for the most part old, worn out and old-fashioned. Erick was always looked at differently. He was always lonely with no friends to play with. He felt depressed, hopeless, and

unwanted all the time. He felt like he had no life. As a little child, he would look over his life and wondered what he had done wrong to deserve such negative treatment. He often felt the guilt of being an orphan, though it was not something of his own doing. But most in the society did not understand it that way.

By virtue of his orphan status, Erick felt depressed everywhere he went. He was not a happy kid both at home and school. The feeling of “unwantedness” caused him to shut out everyone and lead a solitary life. Looking back Erick did not know how he managed to overcome this state. It was pretty hard to go through such an experience at a young age. Even his uncles judged him. His uncles thought he would end up with gangs, doing drugs, alcohol, or drop out of school and get involved in negative lifestyle.

Erick spent most of his life in boarding school while in Uganda. Even amidst these difficult conditions, he was always a straight ‘A’ student. He felt that education was the only comfort he had in life. It was education that kept him grounded and going because he had nothing else to do and no one else to turn to. He saw school and education as his only way out.

Erick eventually moved to Canada with his siblings to join his aunt. Once they moved to Canada, it was hard for him to adjust to the new life. Everything was different from what he had been used to back home in Uganda. But he and his three sisters managed to survive the transition. He thought that it was a good transition because he managed to complete high school successfully, and got accepted to the university where he studied engineering. In fact, being in the college of engineering remained a big challenge for him. First, he had to work extremely hard to get into the program, a program which by most standards was not considered easy. He was proud of himself for being accepted into the program. He believed that not everyone has the chance to study in the college of engineering. Erick found the process necessary; and to gain acceptance was both difficult and competitive, but he made it. He had not given up on the pursuit of what he had always wanted, no matter what the cost. He no longer felt hopeless as he once did, back in Uganda. He said he had hope and goals to pursue; that he looked at life positively.

### **Participant Stories: A Synthesis**

A brief synthesis of the characteristics and experiences of the students is provided in Table 5.1.

**Table 4.1: Participants’ Pseudonyms, Genders, and Countries of Origins, Situations and Resilience, and Level of Education**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Life Challenges and Resilience</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>
<b>Louis</b>	Male	South Sudan	Forced to split with dad at age 5, survived war, child exploitation, extreme poverty, hunger, tough refugee life, and other limitations	Undergraduate Student
<b>Peter</b>	Male	D.R. Congo	Survived war, difficult journey, tough life as a refugee, bullying, extreme poverty, hunger, and other limitations and is now pursuing the education of his dream	Undergraduate Student
<b>John</b>	Male	Rwanda	Survived genocide, difficult journey, tough life as a refugee, extreme poverty, hunger, and other limitations	Undergraduate Student
<b>Sam</b>	Male	South Sudan	Survived war, discrimination, racism and numerous hardships in different regions	Undergraduate Degree
<b>Edward</b>	Male	South Sudan	Born into war. Split with parents at a young age, ended up alone as a refugee in a neighboring country, survived numerous hardships	Master’s Student
<b>Osman</b>	Male	Somalia	Born into brutal war. survived clandestine uprisings, bullets fired into the classroom by extremists who forbid education, hunger, split with parents, difficult journey to Kenya, tough refugee life	Undergraduate Student
<b>Salwa</b>	Female	Somalia	Born into war, survived war, and hunger, difficult journey to a refugee camp in Kenya, attempt on her life, cholera, numerous limitations, and suppression of girl education	Undergraduate Student

<b>Collins</b>	Male	Ghana	Grew up with a poor single mother, survived extreme poverty, hunger, and travelled abroad in search of education	Master's Student
<b>Alex</b>	Male	Ghana	Overcame extreme poverty, fear, social exclusion, and numerous limitations and is now working	PhD Student
<b>Amina</b>	Female	Uganda	Born prematurely and into war. Survived numerous hardships and limitations but still managed to become a medical doctor,	PhD Candidate
<b>Grace</b>	Female	Nigeria	Born into a society that suppresses education of girls, was forced to marry quite early to an abusive husband who was also against her education	Undergraduate Student
<b>Lisa</b>	Female	Uganda	Survived early marriage; forced to adopt four orphans at the age of 19 and with no source of income, suffered hardships, but managed to survive numerous hardships with them, after educating them, decided to become a university student running an orphanage at the same time.	Undergraduate Degree
<b>Suzy</b>	Female	Uganda	Became an orphan at a very young age, was unwanted, and experienced numerous hardships	Undergraduate Degree
<b>Charity</b>	Female	Uganda	Became an orphan at a very young age, felt unwanted, was looked down upon, lived an unhappy life	Undergraduate Degree
<b>Tiana</b>	Female	Uganda	Became an orphan at a very young age, was moved from home to home, felt unwanted, suffered numerous hardships,	Undergraduate Degree
<b>Erick</b>	Male	Uganda	Became an orphan at a very young age, was moved from home to home, suffered social	Undergraduate Student

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stigma, felt unwanted, was discriminated  
against, moved from home to home

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### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the stories of the sixteen individuals who participated in this study. Each narrated how he/she had managed to overcome the challenges that he/she had encountered and achieved their academic dreams. Generally, the participants were from diverse backgrounds, genders, marital status, family structures, and countries of origin, socioeconomic status, and education. Most had encountered different yet related challenges. Some had encountered violence, others extreme poverty, family loss, cultural hindrances, health issues, limitations, and other hurdles. What all had in common was that they manifested resilience and had come from different parts of the same region - sub-Saharan Africa. Each individual had experienced significant losses and had encountered traumatic events that at some point in their life. But each survived and was successful despite mounting odds against him/her. The participants narrated how they had reacted to the adversities that they had encountered along the way, often through the use of metaphor.

Metaphors are used to give effect to a statement. Metaphors give the reader a better idea of the depths of grief in the situation such the stories on overcoming adversities presented in this study. The 16 participants were goal-oriented, hardworking, resilient, positive, social and God-fearing individuals. The metaphors or language through which they expressed their thoughts were related to their endurance, hardships, and determinations. Some of the common metaphors expressed were: “Life has never been like one sweet song,” “Life was like hell,” “I was no longer thinking and acting like a baby,” “They called me a bookworm,” and “They were treating and killing people like animals.” Their stories were all positive. They did not see the adversities as the end of the road. Although the adversities they encountered were unpleasant, they saw them in a positive way and used them to their advantages. They tried hard not to allow the negative happenings to stop them from marching toward their goals.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Categorizing their Stories: Seeing Within the Narratives**

This chapter categorizes the stories narrated by the participants into seven basic plots structures, based on Booker's (2004) seven basic plot structures. I have chosen to use Booker's (2004) seven basic plot structures approach as a complementary means to secondary analysis - a way of making sense and organizing the stories told by the participants. The chapter also organizes the narratives into the support structures participants deemed relevant to their survival, resilience, and drive toward goals and overcome odds. The chapter closes by forwarding the advice offered to those experiencing similar life challenges, including a description of those with power to help them.

### **The Seven Basic Plot Structures of the Sixteen Narratives**

Booker (2004) argued that every story narrated in the world falls into one of seven basic plots: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. Booker further contended that every successful narrative is based on one or more of these plots. The reason Booker's structures have been chosen as a complementary means of secondary analysis is because the sixteen stories presented in this chapter may also be situated within the seven plots.

For instance, all 16 participants had to overcome monsters that threatened to inhibit them accomplishing their dreams. Although none of the participants was living the life of his/her dream, for most of them, the stories they narrated told tales of transitioning from rags to riches. In the early years of struggles, most were surrounded by negative forces that suppressed and threatened their progress, but they slowly elevated themselves and at the time of interviews they were in the process of blossoming into mature and successful individuals, on their way to accomplishing the life of their dreams. These participants are involved in the quest to learn as they set out on a difficult journey, seeking better lives. Their pursuits made them wiser and more mature than when they first started. Some participants experienced various kinds of tragedies or encountered villains, dark forces or evil influences that threatened to destroy them. In the narratives, there were also moments of rebirth evidenced as some individuals realized their errors before it was too late for them; for some, their rebirth involved re-engagement in education in Africa and Canada. Experiencing a rebirth enabled them to avoid defeat or failure like some of



the peers they had left behind. Some participants had either made contact with their countries of origin or had travelled back and worked there and sense that their feeling, with respect past context, was more mature than when they had set out. There were also some participants who had reunited with their loved ones and their communities after being kept away from them by the life circumstances they had encountered. The following table (Table 5.1) offers an understanding of these basic story plots as they were evidenced in the major and minor narratives of the participants in this study.

**Table 5.1: Major and Minor Narratives**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Major Narrative</b>	<b>Minor Narrative</b>
<b>Louis</b>	Male	South Sudan	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Parent's split, war, extreme poverty, tough refugee life, and exploitation	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Peter</b>	Male	D.R. Congo	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> War, tough refugee life, poverty, and bullying.	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>John</b>	Male	Rwanda	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Genocide, tough refugee life, extreme poverty and hunger	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Sam</b>	Male	South Sudan	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> War, racial discrimination and poverty	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Edward</b>	Male	South Sudan	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Brutal war, split with parents, hunger and poverty	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life

<b>Osman</b>	Male	Somalia	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Brutal war, clan based conflicts, Islamic extremism, hunger and poverty	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Salwa</b>	Female	Somalia	<b>Tragedy:</b> Machete attack, a journey to hopelessness.	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Using tragedy as motivation to succeed academically
<b>Collins</b>	Male	Ghana	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Extreme poverty, life with a poor single mother	<b>The Quest:</b> For better life and education
<b>Alex</b>	Male	Ghana	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Extreme poverty, life has low class	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Amina</b>	Female	Uganda	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Premature birth, health issues and war	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and better life
<b>Grace</b>	Female	Nigeria	<b>Overcoming the Monster:</b> Patriarchal culture, suppression of girl education	<b>The Quest:</b> For education and culture change
<b>Lisa</b>	Female	Uganda	<b>Overcoming the Monster and Tragedy:</b> Poverty, war, death of a loved one and spiral down into darkness	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Readjustment and reawakening; quest for better life for the family and the pursuit of an education
<b>Suzy</b>	Female	Uganda	<b>Tragedy:</b> Parents' deaths and spiral down into darkness that followed	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Readjustment, reawakening and the quest to pursue education

<b>Charity</b>	Female	Uganda	<b>Tragedy:</b> Parents' deaths and spiral down into darkness that followed	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Readjustment, reawakening and the quest to pursue education
<b>Tiana</b>	Female	Uganda	<b>Tragedy:</b> Parents' deaths and spiral down into darkness that followed	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Readjustment, reawakening and the quest to pursue education
<b>Erick</b>	Male	Uganda	<b>Tragedy:</b> Parents' deaths and spiral down into darkness that followed	<b>Rebirth and the Quest:</b> Readjustment, reawakening and the quest to pursue education

### Overcoming the Monster

Overcoming the monster stories recount the hero's triumph over ordeals (Dutton, 2005; Strathy, 2008). The stories involve a hero who must destroy a villain that threatens his/her life, destiny or community (Dutton, 2005; Strathy, 2008). An escape from the monster ends with a dream, destiny or community being saved (Dutton, 2005; Strathy, 2008). All sixteen stories presented in this study are of individuals who had overcome various monsters that threatened to prevent them from accomplishing their dreams. As they narrated in their stories, participants like Louis, Peter, John, Sam, Edward, Osman, and Salwa faced the monster of war from the moment they were born. They overcame that monster by inner strengths, external forces and by leaving their home countries and embarking on long, difficult and tortuous journeys crossing borders to reach the refugee camps they considered to be safe for them. In addition to the war Louis, for instance, faced the monster of child exploitation and life away from his father. The participants also faced the monster in the form of extreme financial difficulty that threatened their academic future. However, each managed to overcome through individual efforts and external support. In addition to the monsters that most participants had to overcome, Peter also experienced bullying while in the boarding school. The bullying he endured almost cost him his education; but he felt he had to persevere till he was able to overcome it.

For Collins and Alex, the monster they overcame was extreme poverty. Collins' parents were divorced when he was young and he had to endure extreme poverty with his poor mother and siblings. That monster almost ruined his future. He tried to overcome the poverty by farming and selling his produce and when that failed, struggled and finally managed to find his way out of the country.

Alex grew up in a region where traces of poverty were found everywhere, which prevented many young people from pursuing their academic dreams. Although he had two loving parents, extreme poverty prevented them from providing the basic things Alex needed to succeed in life. Alex discovered ways of overcoming the monster when his father introduced him to African literature that ignited in him a hunger for education. Alex's role models became the authors of the many books he read and the heroes presented in the stories. He learned from their stories and was determined to overcome his monster, poverty.

The monsters that Amina faced were her premature birth and the health issues that were associated with being a premature child. She also faced the challenges of war merged together with the roadblocks she encountered in her career choice to become a doctor that was commonly regarded as a man's job. She overcame this latter monster through hard work and determination; she managed to prove to her critics that women could do the same jobs men do and even better.

Grace's monster was the cultural suppression of girls through the denial of an education and early marriage. Even within her own family, Grace's father favoured the education of her brothers over herself. She was determined to overcome that culture by standing up for herself and work hard in school and her studies. Although she was forced to marry a man she was not interested in, Grace never gave up. She was determined to overcome the belief that women are secondary to men and is currently in the process of succeeding and working to change the minds of her patriarchal critics and family members about female education in her community back in Africa.

Lisa was born into a culture that did not promote female education. She also experienced poverty and other limitations. Although she loved school, she was not able to enroll as a student in her village. She had to persuade her elder sister to take her to her home in the city so that she could go to school; but Lisa encountered unexpected monsters when her sister and her husband died leaving her with young orphans at the age of 19. Although the monster of responsibility and

poverty was more than Lisa could bear, she managed to find ways to overcome them and eventually moved to Canada.

Suzy, Charity, Tiana and Erick were the four orphans whom Lisa was forced to adopt at the young age of 19 years old. They themselves encountered numerous monsters, including the loss of their beloved parents, poverty, social stigma, homelessness, mobility from home to home because of being unwanted, hopelessness, loneliness, and other negative experiences. They managed to overcome those monsters through self-belief, determination, and intervention by their selfless aunt Lisa who eventually brought them to Canada.

### **Rags to Riches**

Booker's rags to riches plot involves a hero who seems poor, traumatized, feels worthless, hopeless and miserable but has the potential for success or greatness. The hero manages to fulfill his/her potential and become wealthy, important, successful and happy (Strathy, 2008). Although none of the 16 participants was successful in typical Western terms, their life journeys were taking them from extreme poverty and what appeared to be unsurmountable odds toward good lives. There were some participants who said that they were ridiculed by others or told that they would never succeed in life. Despite numerous setbacks, their determinations to overcome their monsters had been transitioning them, gradually, from rags to riches. As expressed in their stories, their early lives were embroiled in poverty and struggles for survival. Yet through hard work, determination and external interventions, they were slowly being elevated and blossoming into mature and successful individuals who were on their way to accomplishing their dreams. If they all manage to reach the goals that they have set for themselves, the stories of Collins, Alex or Louis, for instance, will fall appropriately into the category of the rags to riches plot structure.

### **The Quest**

Booker's Quest stories involve a hero who embarks on a journey to pursue a dream or to obtain a great prize that is located far away (Strathy, 2008). The hero travels and fights to overcome evil and to secure a priceless treasure (Dutton, 2005). Each of the 16 participants was involved in a quest to travel to pursue a great prize located far away. One of such prize was academic achievement. Each thought that education was the only thing that could save them from their miseries. Wars, poverty, culture, the deaths of loved ones, health problems and other

limitations could not stop them from their quests, as they each set out on difficult journeys in search of academic opportunities. Their pursuits made them wiser and more mature than when they started. Because of that transformation, each may be seen as having had a better chance to leave the past behind and to create the world of his/her dream.

### **Tragedy**

The tragedy plot involves the hero encountering villains with terrible consequences (Dutton, 2005). Some participants encountered villains, dark forces or evil influences that threatened to destroy their lives or chances for better future. For instance, Salwa miraculously survived a machete attack that almost costed her life. Lisa and the four orphans suffered the unexpected loss of their loved ones. These tragedies were the source of pains, tears, sufferings and hopelessness for them. At first, they thought that they would never manage to overcome the impact of those tragedies, but, somehow, they managed to emerge with notable success.

### **Rebirth**

In the rebirth plot, the hero is trapped by the powers of darkness (Dutton, 2005; Strathy, 2008). He or she encounters inner conflicts and is rescued by someone else after their rebirth from within (Dutton, 2005; Strathy, 2008). There were moments of rebirth evidenced amongst the 16 narratives as some participants realized quite early on the need to recover from their state of doubts and hopelessness. They received emotional and physical support from external sources. These supports allowed them to make necessary readjustments to their life strategies before it was too late. Experiencing a rebirth enabled them to avoid defeat, destructive habits, drop out of school or failure like most of the peers they had left behind. For instance, Peter and John did not recognize the importance of an education at first. Their attitudes caused their academic performances to deteriorate. But something happened with them that reenergized their hunger to do well at school and that rebirth motivated them to excel at school. Salwa also had a figurative rebirth after surviving a machete attack. The rebirth and eventual healing of her wounds gave her energy, motivation and determination to succeed academically. Lisa decided to readjust her life and became a student after years away from school. Collins after realizing that his dream of leaving Ghana was slipping away regrouped and developed a new strategy that enabled him to succeed in his ambition to go to Nigeria and find his way to Finland, despite being broke. Louis had a rebirth after being unable to achieve the marks he needed to qualify for

a scholarship. The four orphans' (Suzy, Charity, Tiana and Erick) initial reaction to the loss of their parents and the waves of sufferings that followed was a sense of hopelessness and defeat. They were trapped by the powers of darkness. Fortunately, they were rescued by their young aunt Lisa. This enabled each of them to experience rebirth from within.

### **Voyage and Return**

The voyage and return plot refers to a hero returning home triumphantly after a thrilling escape from dark forces and evil (Dutton, 2005). Although most of the 16 interviewed participants had yet to return to their countries of origin after escaping the dark forces to Canada, they were on course to doing so. Some participants had already made contacts with their countries of origin or even travelled back. Amina's story, in particular, fits well into the voyage and return plot. She ultimately triumphed; she returned home as a far more mature and successful woman than when she had set out. At the time of her interview she was working to make her community and country of origin better. Lisa's story also fits well into the voyage and return plot. After her successful voyage to Canada, she has returned to Uganda and opened an orphanage. As noted most participants were unable to travel back to countries of origin because of their educational pursuits, but they do connect with their loved ones through the internet/social media and by phones.

### **Comedy**

Here, comedy refers to a story that begins with tragedy that ends up separating a family who later reunite. It refers to a tragic story with happy ending. Booker referred to comedy as a story in which confusions, uncertainties, frustrations, and crises reign until the hero and heroine are united or reunited at last (Dutton, 2005, Strathy, 2008). In the Booker's Comedy plot, the hero and heroine were destined to get together, but dark forces prevent them from doing so (Booker, 2004). But the hero and heroine were free to get together after triumphing over the dark forces and strong relationships were re-established or formed (Booker, 2004). The stories of Lisa and the four orphans fall well into this plot. The dark forces separated Suzy and her siblings Charity, Tiana and Erick from living together, despite having a strong bond. However, Lisa managed to overpower those dark forces after working hard to reunite her family with her in Canada. It was a happy ending after years of ordeals. Osman's story also falls under comedy.

There was an outbreak of war in Mogadishu that separated him with his parents. There was confusion and uncertainty. No one knew where each other was. But Osman had to flee to Kenya for his life. It was only after reaching Kenya that his parents joined him. It was a joyous family reunion after each triumphed over the dark forces. Their strong relationships were then re-established.

### **Participants' Drive to Resilience**

No participant pointed out a clear or single factor that contributed to making him/her resilient. According to each participant, several factors contributed toward building their resilience and ability to overcome what appeared to be insurmountable challenges. The common theme that emerged from the data was that all the sixteen participants had experienced multiple adversities or traumatic events, some of which they thought they could never overcome. Although there were times they felt hopeless, they never gave up. They were all positive individuals. They had developed a belief that they could do it and worked hard to achieve the goals that they had set for themselves regardless of their situations. Like most of their peers who had been left behind, these interview participants were demoralized and had less hope for success. But certain events occurred in their life trajectory that energized and enabled them to develop their resiliency, together with the abilities to overcome what appeared to be insurmountable challenges.

The themes that emerged from the stories revealed that the sixteen participants did not appear to possess unique qualities. They were ordinary individuals whose resiliency enabled them to overcome the challenges they had encountered in their lives. Their resilience was secured through the important resources that were presented to them. Based on their stories, they did not possess mysterious qualities that fostered their competences in the midst of the challenges they had encountered. Rather, the resilience they developed emerged from ordinary rather than extraordinary processes or events. Most importantly, most participants encountered significant individuals in their lives. Each participant was positive, optimistic, motivated, and determined to succeed despite the enormous challenges that he/she faced. A major source of their resilience came through internal transformations and the goals that they had set for themselves. In pursuit of these goals participants developed strength, courage and self-realization that no matter how bad the situation, they had to achieve the goals they had set. The categories they mentioned as the sources of their resilience are discussed next.



## **Quest for Education**

Each participant had a quest for an education. They regarded education as the only means they could use to change their life's situations and nothing could stop them from accomplishing their goals. Their drive for an education allowed them to transform the hurdles they encountered into points of motivation. Hence, they could not see the problem; they only saw the goal. For instance, Louis said his hunger for education was his source of resilience and motivation and nothing could stop him from that pursuit. That drive also kept him energized. Louis saw education as the only means by which he could overcome the level of hardship his family had undergone. Because of this Louis persevered, worked hard and refused to give up on his quest. When he looked around in his family as a second born, and saw his mother struggling, Louis often asked himself, "Do I really want to live the rest of my life suffering like my mom?" He believed that he needed to make a big change and he understood that it must come from within. For him, change could only be found through education.

Louis said that in his nature, if things got extremely hard, he would not give up, especially on things concerning education. He knew that if he gave up, his family would continue to suffer or remain in the same situation. That determination was what motivated him and made him more resilient. Amina's resilience was developed through inspiration found in the books she read. She read many books and believed that the only wealth she could have that no one could take from her was the knowledge she acquired. It was through her reading that she learned the many things and was able to deploy her resiliency to overcoming her daily life challenges.

Amina was always open to learning new things as long as it impacted her life positively. So reading literature, such as books and journals became her hobby. For Alex, his introduction to African literature was a great motivation for him. He had come to love books but there was always a problem for him to purchase the books he desired. Hence, most of the books he read were borrowed from friends. He remembered the time there was a book sale at his school. The author came and advertised the book in his class. The author said, "You take them home and read them. Don't rip off the cover. You must pay back if you do. Show the book to your parents; if they like it, then ask them to buy it for you." It was a nice book. But when Alex took it home, his parents could not afford it. Everyone in his class had bought the book, except Alex. He said, "You can just imagine my feeling." Alex had to borrow the book from a friend.

However, that experience had a positive impact on him; making him more resilient and determined to study harder to get the things that he needed in life. He said that his life's greatest motivation had been a determination not to go back to a life of limitations.

### **Hardships**

Another source of resilience mentioned consisted of the adversities encountered by participants, especially war and the difficulty of life as a refugee. For instance, Peter argued that it was the hardships he encountered in the camp that made him more resilient and motivated him to succeed at any cost. Life was unbearable for him. He and his family had little peace or food, neither did they have the comfort of a bed to sleep on. For them, everything was bad and uncomfortable. He decided that remaining in such condition was not an option, so he set himself goals for his life that he knew he must pursue. One of the goals he set was to someday become known in his nation. He believed that he could only achieve that by working hard in school. The hardships he endured forced him to change his attitude about life. He could no longer see life challenges the same way he did before. He began to view the challenges as obstacles that must be overcome.

Once Peter was able to picture himself beyond the hardships, he was able to forget the sufferings, set his eyes on his goals and worked to achieving them. In doing so, he started believing that the sufferings he encountered were the beginning of his success. Peter believed that others facing hardships similar to himself gave him the motivation to develop resiliency. He could not remember one big thing that helped him to develop the resiliency to overcome his sufferings but there were many smaller elements that worked together to bring him to that place. Those little things such as words of encouragement motivated him to set a vision and work hard toward achieving it. Peter believed that it was that vision that was pushing him on and making him more resilient.

Similarly, John said that most of his resilience came from the challenges he faced. Every challenge made him stronger. They made him realize how important an education was. The challenges made him recognize that he could not take life for granted. He recognized that if he wanted a more fulfilling life, it was important for him to make a positive change. It became important to him because he knew how people were suffering, including his parents. Another thing that made him more determined to want to succeed was the constant vision of his home community as a place where life was extremely tough, and where hopelessness reigned. He

wanted to do everything to ensure that he did not live in such a place ever again. To accomplish this, he determined that he must continue working hard to get better grades. He realized that the best way to move away from that life was through perseverance; that was what he needed to do and so he determined to persist until he got his reward.

### **Parents**

For some participants, a source of resilience was their parents. For instance, John's parents played a major role in the development of his resilience from a young age. John grew up with parents who saw his inner potential before he himself could realize it. His parents were the ones who insisted that if John attended school and studied hard, he could become anything he wanted to become. At first he did not heed his parents' advice. It was not until he began receiving gifts at school for his achievements that he began to understand and believe. The presents he received caused him to see that an education could be rewarding for him. He knew that his parents would always be there to support him and he did not want to let them down. Hence, he worked hard at succeeding, even amidst the numerous challenges which helped him discover his inner strength. All these elements worked together to make him more resilient. The positive role that parents played in the lives of participants is discussed more under parental/guardian support. Similarly, Sam had parents who were also there for him all the way. His parents were a major source of motivation for him. Their words of encouragement that guided him and helped him increase the level of his resilience.

### **Available Opportunities**

For some participants, it was the opportunities that presented themselves to them that made them want to achieve, and their resilience was developed in the process. For instance, Sam stated that he was always on look for opportunities and that it was the opportunities he encountered in the midst of his life's challenges that also motivated him to become more resilient. Those opportunities led him to envision success and a better life for both himself and for his family. He believed that if he could take advantage of those opportunities, he would be able to achieve his dreams. Sam saw opportunities and became determined to take advantage of these in order become the person he wanted to become. He refused to pay attention to his present circumstances. He could only see his future from the present opportunities. He put those opportunities and his life challenges into perspective and used them to motivate himself each

time he faced a difficulty. He often stopped to think about those times when life was not as good or the future was not as bright. He said that, anytime he felt down, he spoke to himself, saying he could have been in a worse situation if he were not given those chances.

## **Religion**

Some participants stated that a major source of their resilience was God. Edward credited his resilience first and foremost to God. He said that he was a believer in God and thought bad things happened for a reason. Therefore, he always thought about the reason behind an occurrence and how he could overcome it. Essentially, he believed that negative life situations were short-lived because God would not allow a bad thing to happen to him without a reason. He affirmed that when he got frustrated, he projected that frustration to the invisible God with whom he had built a strong relationship. So he believed that his resilience came mostly from his faith in God, who helped him to see his problems as something that he could overcome quite easily if he relied on God. The role faith in God played in the lives of the participants is discussed further under religious/spiritual support.

## **Hopelessness**

Some participants stated that for them resilience could be described as a slow process of transformation that occurred over time. In particular, Osman stated that the transformation from hopelessness to hope and then resilience was a long process that involved several events. He contended that he did not feel he had hope when he was undergoing his struggles in Somalia. He was born in a war-torn Mogadishu where everything that he knew about life was limited and that he had thought that was how things would remain. He said, “In those days, when you leave your house, your mother would not know whether you were going to come back alive. Every step out of your house was like goodbye to your family.” The only thing Osman could see around him was darkness and a bleak future. There were deaths everywhere around him. He had no hope when he started school in Mogadishu. Things started to change for him only after he arrived in the refugee camp in Kenya and when he started to receive a real education. It was then he began conceive a better life. It was there that he became more alive. His thinking and judgments began to change as he acquired more knowledge. The levels of his confidence and hope also increased. He started to see himself as someone who could have a bright future. He admitted that the camp had many problems but his hope was in education. He knew that if he worked hard in school,

life would be better for him and his family. He hated the state of hopelessness and did everything to get out of it. It was through those moments of struggles that reliance was developed. There were also other factors that contributed to the reversal of the state of hopelessness and the development of his resilience, including friends, teachers, the environment and the community.

### **Tragedy**

Some participants stated that they had developed resilience after a tragedy that happened to them or occurred in their families. The four orphans Suzy, Charity, Tiana and Erick argued that the deaths of their parents woke them up to the reality that their life would be transformed. They had to develop strategies quickly to meet their new realities. Each of them did not want to end up in the street or become a failure. Hence, each used the tragic circumstances as a source of motivation to succeed. They knew that life was going to be tough for them moving forward. They realized that they had to survive in one way or another. The deaths of their parents and the rejection, social stigma, poverty, homelessness that they experienced changed their perceptions about life and the future. These realizations gave them new energy in ways that drove them to want to succeed and pushed them to set academic goals that they worked hard to achieve. Their aunt Lisa also developed resilience from that tragedy. Salwa developed her resilience after surviving a brutal attack on her life. She said,

The major turning point in my life was the attempt on my life. It was after the release from hospital that I became a changed person. I became very determined, worked harder than ever before and surprised everybody when I became second in class. I became even more resilient after the encouragement that I received from my head teacher the day the result was announced in class.

Salwa contended that threat to her life had ignited a strong hunger within her for success and that this had led her to making positive changes in her violent community. These desires caused her to work hard and hold to the belief that she could someday change the world, or at the very least she could change the thoughts of her enemies or people like them.

### **Extreme Poverty**

For Collins and Alex, it was through their experiences of poverty that they became resilient. Alex argued that it was the poverty into which he was born that he was spurred to

become resilient. He faced harsh economic struggles. The reality of extreme poverty was staring him right in the face. He decided to do something about this circumstance, no matter how difficult the process. There were times when Alex would return from school and there was no food in the house for him to eat. Through that experience, Alex determined that he did not want to live his life in this same manner. He truly believed that for some people, poverty could be a motivator, and for others, it could kill their dreams. In his case, poverty was a point of motivation. The fact that there were few people who Alex encountered that had succeeded despite the tough times they underwent also became a point of motivation for him. Through his deliberations, Alex also discovered that there was an internal force that gave him the energy, perseverance and desire to overcome the poverty that pervaded his life. This internal drive he thought made him resilient and more determined to succeed.

Another motivation for Alex as he faced extreme poverty was cattle herding. Alex had decided to become the head herdsman as he took the cattle out for grazing. Cattle were a part of his family system. Even if the cattle did not belong to him but to other relatives, he could take them out for grazing. Cattle had been in Alex's family for generations. So he used to pasture the cattle belonging to his extended family during the holidays. One day, the reality became apparent to Alex through his inner conversation, while in tending the cattle. He said to himself, "Alex, if you don't pass in school, this is what you are going to do for the rest of your life."

Alex said that at times poverty can be a motivation to a person. He said that he could look back and there was no other option for him. Poverty was all around him. So he decided that the only route to get out of poverty was to get a good education, no matter what the cost may be. Education became the only alternative to poverty for Alex from that point onward.

During the time Collins was suffering with his poor mother, he once saw happy people living the good life. He began to think he wanted to be like them. Collins realized he was living in extreme poverty and he became determined to be like the people he saw who were highly educated and driving around in their fancy cars and living good and normal lives. These people had enough money to take care of their children and were living life the way they wanted. He promised himself that someday he would become like those people. This self-promise made him more resilient and goal-oriented. He argued that he was in the process of becoming like those people, or being in an even better state than they. Collins understood that if he fought harder

there could be a light at the end of the tunnel and he could have a better future for himself and his children.

### **Life in the Hospital**

Health issues were a drive to resilience for one participant. Amina was born prematurely. Her being able to overcome that obstacle and survive gave her strong determination to succeed in life. Amina's determination and strong desire to survive and succeed became evident during her time at the hospital. Her mother had suffered several miscarriages and spent most of her time in the hospital each time she became pregnant. Amina was always by her mother's side in the hospital. Amina recognized, even at such a young age, that when she saw many women dying in childbirth those babies may also die because they would not have a mother to take care of them. She needed to do something with her life that would help these people. She became determined that it could never be business as usual. She decided that she had to do something. She had to go an extra mile to succeed.

### **Resistance to Outdated Culture**

For one participant, the culture in which she grew up suppressed the education of girls. This played a major role in her resilience and motivation. Grace pointed out that she owed her strong drive to get an education to the culture she grew up in. When Grace was growing up her father did not send her to school because it was culturally inappropriate to send girls to school. She promised to surprise him and to prove to him that girls could be just as good as boys. She was determined at a young age that she could do it. It was this motivation that most influenced her and caused her to develop a strong sense of resilience and determination.

### **Unexpected and Overwhelming Responsibility**

One participant believed that the major drive to her resilience was an unexpected and overwhelming responsibility. Lisa found she had to become resilient because of the unexpected responsibility that she found herself with, as well as the challenges that followed. She explained, "What I have been through, what I have experienced as a young girl, as a mother and as a student are what have made me resilient." Lisa was forced to adopt four orphans when their parents died when she was only 19 years old without any source of income. For Lisa, the responsibilities that she had and the rewards that she got from her effort also contributed to her resilience and the

ability to overcome challenges. She had no one or nowhere else to turn to for help. She had to rely on her inner strength to move forward.

### **External Support Structures to Overcoming Adversities**

Based on the data collected, the sixteen participants took advantage of different support structures and systems through which their motivation, determination, and resilience were developed and encouraged. These support systems presented the opportunities and encouragement they needed to overcome the challenges they encountered. When analyzed, the collected data revealed that the external support structures enabled participants to overcome their obstacles, which included parental/guardian support, friends and social network support, community support, religious/spiritual support, teacher support, and university support. The table below provides a summary of the support structures that the participants said helped them to overcome their adversities and succeed.

**Table 5.2 (A) Support Structures that Enabled Success**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Parental/Guardian Support</b>	<b>Social Support</b>	<b>Spiritual Support</b>
<b>Louis</b>	Mother	Friends	Faith and church.
<b>Peter</b>	Parents	Friends.	Hope in God
<b>John</b>	Parents	Friends and university students	Faith in God
<b>Sam</b>	Parents	Friends.	A higher power.
<b>Edward</b>	Parents & Family.	Friends	Faith in God and church.
<b>Osman</b>	Parents	Friends and other people	Religion
<b>Salwa</b>	Parents	Friends and	Religion



community			
<b>Collins</b>	Mother and father	Friends	Trust in God
<b>Alex</b>	Parents	Siblings and Friends	Faith and trust in God
<b>Amina</b>	Parents	Friends	Faith in God
<b>Grace</b>	Parents, brother	Friends and hardworking people	Faith and trust in God
<b>Lisa</b>	Parents, elder sister, husband.	Friends and social network.	Christian faith, church.
<b>Suzy</b>	Parents, aunt, siblings and father's best friend	Not many friends	Faith in God
<b>Charity</b>	Parents, aunt, siblings and father's best friend	Friends	Faith in God
<b>Tiana</b>	Parents, aunt, siblings.	Not many friends	Faith in God
<b>Erick</b>	Parents, aunt, and siblings.	Not many friends	Faith in God

The summary of the support structures that enabled success in the 16 participants continued in Table 5.3 (B) below.

**Table 5.3 (B) Support Structures that Enabled Success (Continued)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Community Support</b>	<b>Teacher Support</b>	<b>University/School Support</b>
<b>Louis</b>	Moral, emotional and physical support,	Books, mentorship, motivation and encouragement.	University facilities and instructors
<b>Peter</b>	Academic support and motivation	Did not rely on teachers much.	University facilities
<b>John</b>	Encouragement and financial support, peaceful environment	Mentorship and parental support	Facilities and academic support from instructors
<b>Sam</b>	Guidance, motivation and support, social activities that increased the level of his well-being.	Motivation, mentorship	Financial and academic support.
<b>Edward</b>	Sense of belonging, food and other vital necessities.	moral support, mentorships and gifts that motivated him to excel	Academic Guidance and Volunteering opportunities.
<b>Osman</b>	Faith and taught him patience and how to see things	Mentorship and parental support	Equality, positive environment, academic support

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positively.

<b>Salwa</b>	Love, care and motivation	Motivation, mentorship and encouragement	Self-discovery, self-confidence
<b>Collins</b>	Support	Mentorship and life skills	Financial support
<b>Alex</b>	Discipline and global citizenship	Mentorship and motivation	Self-expression academic environment
<b>Amina</b>	Discipline and global citizenship	Motivation and leadership skills.	Financial assistance and academic mentorship
<b>Grace</b>	Love and care	Motivation	Good academic environment
<b>Lisa</b>	Support	Flexibility and support	Empowerment through good academic environment
<b>Suzy</b>	Love	Support, care and motivation	Career opportunities
<b>Charity</b>	Bond of love	Motivation and encouragement	Academic family
<b>Tiana</b>	Support and comfort	One teacher became a motivation, care and counsel	Hope and academic support
<b>Erick</b>	Warmth and welcoming	Motivation	Support and volunteer opportunities

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The external support structures that were available to the 16 participants are discussed in greater detail in this section.

## **Parental/Guardian Support**

The sixteen participants believed that they would not have accomplished what they had without the vital support they received from their parents/guardians during their difficult times. A number of the participants contended that their parents/guardians were there for them and taught them the value of hard work. Their parents/guardians gave them the protection they needed and fed them when they needed food. Except for Grace whose father did not encourage nor help her much with school, others had parents who inspired, motivated, or encouraged him or her to pursue an education. For instance, in Peter's case, he thought it was unfortunate that his parents never finished school; yet they gave him valuable advice about the importance of school and a good education. Peter claimed he did not get such motivation from his school and was convinced that it was his parents' advice that changed his mind about school and pushed him to study hard. His parents' words made him realize that education was everything. They had never studied, but they made Peter study. In his view, it was because of his parents that he was a Canadian, in the university studying, and was developing into a successful person.

Some participants acknowledged that their parents taught them independence and hard work. They were taught by their parents to believe in themselves and do things that could build them up, instead of doing things that could destroy them and their destinies. Amina outlined the ways that her father had motivated her. Her father encouraged her to do the best she could. He also advised her that in life she had to give her best and work as hard as she could. Her father was a hard worker, himself, and so to him, Amina must also work hard to achieve her goals. Her father was proud of her because she was his only daughter. Amina boasted that her father was proud that she was doing what he had taught her.

Similarly, John conceded that he would not be studying in a Canadian university if his parents had failed to perform their parental duties. John understood that parents were different in his refugee community. There were parents who encouraged their children to go to school and there were others who did not. Life was difficult for everyone, both for young and old, in the refugee camp. John's parents rarely talked about their trying times; they did not emphasize that period of their life. They encouraged him to go to school and they kept him in school even though they faced economic hardships. Other parents focused on the temporary struggles, never on the future, and kept their children away from school. John beamed that his parents were quite special in that regard because they always found the means to keep him in school.

Peter also shared the way his parents taught and motivated him to be goal-oriented and resilient. He remembered his father telling him,

If you want peace you must be prepared to fight for it. Peace can come only when you fight for it; nothing can come without struggle. If you want something good you must fight for it first because if you don't fight for it, you will not have it. If you want peace but someone else doesn't want that peace, then you must fight for it.

Peter admitted that at the time, he did not understand what that advice meant. But he realized later that was what had been motivating him. Peter maintained that his father's advice continued to impact his decisions and helped him to think deeply about things and to consider every action seriously.

Amina explained that her parents taught her the importance of patience, respect for others, helping others, and prayer and reliance on God at all times. Amina described her devout Muslim mother's advice to her,

The first thing is to be grateful to God for these things and all the opportunities He gives you. Even the simplest ones that sometimes we do not think about, such as sustaining life itself, we should be thankful for that. So gratitude is what she taught me. Prayer is what she taught me. She taught me to be patient with every situation because everything has its own time; it is this teaching that has become part of me. She taught me that even in times of adversity you have to be patient and a calm person. So those are the values I have. She taught me to pray and also give respect to others.

Almost all the participants insisted that their parents/guardians taught them to be disciplined and goal oriented. Sam claimed that his parents instilled in him that sometimes the odds could be against him but that should not discourage him from pursuing what he wanted. Sam also saw his parents demonstrating that through their actions and that made him conclude that it was true. His parents taught him to be disciplined in the way he lived. He observed his father trying to manage his time efficiently and making daily schedules for the family. For example, there was a time for doing domestic chores, a time for studying, a time for socializing with friends, the time to be home, a time to sleep, time to go to school, a time for participation in sports, a time to go to church, and times for other activities.

Some parents/guardians were also role models for their children. Just watching their parents/guardians in action, in their daily lives, made them want to do likewise. Suzy was one

such person. She had learned to be helpful and to be a giver through observing her guardian (Lisa) who was always helping other people. Her guardian had taught her a lot through her actions and through the way she took care of them. Suzy also learned from the life of her parents. When they were alive, her parents were the only successful people in their respective families. Members of their families looked to them for assistance. Their willing and helpful nature left a positive influence on her life. Parents/guardians also provided other kinds of support, including financial support, to the participants. For instance, Salwa said that although they did not have much, her parents did everything for her to do well in school. As a result, she had remained a bookworm, even after completing high school. Salwa held that being engaged in her schooling left her little time to participate in social events in the community. There were some whose parents were protective. Osman, for instance, talked about how his father protected him when he was in war-torn Mogadishu. His father was a cautious man. Osman said that in Somalia, if one wanted to live, one had to be very cautious; one had to be indoors, and one had to know how to control his/her tongue. Osman's father never wanted him to run into problems so he never allowed Osman to venture out, especially when they were in Mogadishu. Even when walking in a crowded place, his father was always cautious and not wanting him to collide with people. When Osman walked with him in the crowded market, he was always warning him. As a result, Osman had also become cautious. Osman believed that his cautious nature had allowed him to maintain peace with other people. Because of the lessons learned from his parents, Osman had also become more hopeful, hardworking, and open minded. Osman is also cautious when he makes decisions. He does not rush into things.

The participants also mentioned that their parents had taught them how to pick or associate with good friends who could build them up while avoiding friends who could make them go astray. Their parents advised that picking the right friends could have positive influences on them and could keep them focused on their goals and progress. Lisa's parents, for example, insisted on knowing who her friends and the people she spent time with were. She was advised that it was her friends who defined her as a person. Hence, if she hung out with the wrong crowd then she would be labelled likewise.

### **Friends and Social Network Support**

Most of the participants saw themselves as social individuals who always wanted to interact with positive friends. They wanted friends who could challenge them mentally and who

could be there for them in their times of need. These individuals desired the same interests as they. They wanted to be friends with individuals who could build them up instead of tearing them down. They also needed to have friends who could mentor them and be their role models. Some who were poor favoured friends who were also poor. Alex, for instance, preferred associating with friends who were poor like him. He said it was because poor people understand themselves better and do not judge each other based on poverty. Each participant declared that he/she did not want to be associated with negative friends who were involved in delinquent behaviours such as crimes, drugs, alcohol and things that were not goal-oriented or things that did not contribute toward the creation of better future.

Lisa admitted that she preferred to surround herself with positive people. She believed that when she was surrounded by positive people she had a better chance of accomplishing her life's goals. For her, there was always something that she admired or learned from the people who she surrounded herself with. She explained, "You can imagine being surrounded by negative people and everybody is like "Oh I hate my life, I don't like this weather." Lisa advised her children to associate themselves with friends who could make a positive difference in their lives and from whom they could learn and be impacted in a positive way. She wanted to surround herself with people she could admire. She also wanted to make positive contribution to the society by inspiring others. So for Lisa, social network was her life, and she always loved what she did socially.

Louis had many friends who had made important contributions toward his overcoming the life challenges he had faced. Since Africa, Louis had been associating with friends who were positive and working hard toward achieving their goals. Most of his friends loved education. He saw his friends working hard, some were completing their undergraduate degrees, some were reading for their masters and others were finalizing their PhDs. Louis always admired his friend's commitments and the sacrifices they make to complete their education successfully. This had made Louis want to emulate them. He wanted friends who were making progress toward a better life. He confided that it was the actions of his friends that motivated him to also work hard and achieve his dreams. Many of his friends usually provided him with important advice in areas that he had difficulties, for instance, in his academic work. He found that such friends were able to explain to him clearly and he could understand bothersome concepts more

clearly. This assistance from friends caused Louis to be more confident in doing his academic work well.

Amina always chose friends with whom she had similar mindsets. She preferred to associate with people who could give her extra strength and she could return the favour. She preferred people who could motivate her, people who were goal-oriented and who had visions to achieve their goals. Amina's friends and social network tended to be people who were as hard working as her; she did not like lazy people. She wanted friends who could work hard at any given task. She did not try to choose rich friends or poor friends; she did not like classifying people in terms of income. For her, income was not static; income changes when one has a better job or opportunity. Her choice of friends was based on core values. She had a variety of friends coming from different walks of life.

Collins also had friends coming from different backgrounds. He did not have many friends. He chose friends who were like-minded. His friends were among those who were goal-oriented, loved education, knew what they wanted to do with their lives and were focused. Collins preferred friends who were loyal and trustworthy. He did not want to associate with friends who were manipulative and thought they were smarter than everyone else. He wanted friends who were simple and open-minded. He also wanted friends who were positive and could motivate him.

### **Religious/Spiritual Support**

Faith played significant roles in the lives of the participants, especially during tough times. All of the participants in the study acknowledged that they believed in God or a supreme being. Edward admitted that he did not imagine that he could have survived without God or the church. Edward had always felt that there was an innate power within him. He said that he often related his frustrations to the biblical stories and how complete reliance on God helped those people to overcome their challenges. He took examples from biblical characters that had suffered and had made it. Faith also enabled Edward to get involved in church activities. Involvement in church was the first thing that Edward did when he arrived in Kakuma Refugee Camp. He always attended church and participated in church activities. Food was hard to find in their house and when he went to church, he could meet with other people and eat at church. Other church members who were taking care of him saw him as one of their own. People were following the church teachings. The church was teaching them to take care of each other



because that was what God intended them to do. Edward said that taking care of each other was what Christ did. Christ did not just pray and did nothing else. He healed people. He even provided food when they were hungry. So in Edward's community, the church was helping those who were weak or hungry in the society, and that included him. People who deserved the care that they needed were given help. Edward became involved in volunteer work as well. He was among the volunteers who were helping the weak in the church. He was grateful for the support that the church provided him in his time of need. He did not believe he would have received such kind of help anywhere else.

The participants expressed that faith strengthened in times of pain. For instance, for Erick, faith had reassured him to be strong. Although he did not go to church that much, Erick read the bible every night and prayed. Whenever he felt down, he always tried to talk to God. His prayer was in the form of a conversation with God. Such kind of prayer rejuvenated and helped him through his situations. In fact, all the orphans who were interviewed viewed God as a father figure. For instance, Tiana said that when she lost her parents, she needed an assurance from someone who was a parental figure. God became, for her, that parental figure. It was because as an orphan, she always had a void that needed to be filled. So instead of trying to fill that void with other things that were not helpful, as many people in her situation did, Tiana looked for the filling through spiritual parenthood where she could feel that there was someone watching over her and who knew what she was doing and going through. God was like a friend to Tiana because she talked to him all the time. She did not always go down and prayed. She muses that even when she was thinking out loud, she could ask God questions. She could ask, "God, what do you think about my situation? Could you help me with what I am trying to do? Am I doing the right thing?" So spiritually, God played a huge role in Tiana's life. When things went wrong or when Tiana felt disappointed, she always turned to God for direction and comfort.

Osman talked about how his faith had kept him away from crime and delinquent behaviours. Osman was born into a strong Muslim family. He said he received many positives from his religion that had helped him to excel in school and become a better person. However, what Osman did not like about religion was the way people misinterpreted it. He said that Islam stands for peace. It teaches people the right path; for example, to avoid drugs. Osman said that religion teaches basics that shape individuals into good and productive persons. But the misuse of religion was what he hated. Amina also talked of the positive impact of religion in her life.

Like Osman, Amina was also born into a strong Muslim family who taught her important faith-based life lessons that have continued to impact her life and decisions in so many positive ways.

Grace believed that her determination came from her faith. She came from a strong religious background. Her family was religious. She said that being a Christian had really helped because she had always felt it was her duty to represent Christ. For her, being a Christian was being strong and courageous in the face of challenges. Being a Christian meant fighting for the equal rights of the weak and vulnerable in the society; like the marginalized girls in her community.

Sam revealed how his faith had shaped his life. His family had always believed in a higher force that watches over people and provides for them in their troubled times and needs. Sam believed that God had played an important role in his life. The Christian values that Sam learned had helped him to stay focused and appreciate what he had. Because of his appreciation felt he, too, could offer help to people in need. Sam believed that his choice to become a medical doctor would help him to achieve that goal. He wanted to use his Christian values to help others in his capacity as a medical doctor. Spirituality had taught Sam values that allowed him to be there for others when they need him and to understand that there is a higher purpose to life than living for one's self. The understanding of a higher purpose through God helped Sam to look at life differently and to focus only on things that matter. For that, he was thankful to God.

### **Community Support**

Given that the participants grew up in typical Sub-Saharan African collectivist societies that focus on the family or the group over individual or personal ambitions, it is not a surprise to notice that all participants agreed that their communities played vital roles in their lives. Most expressed that they regarded their community members as their extended families who were protective, compassionate, non-judgmental, loving, and caring. Their community members also acted as their mentors, motivators, role models, culture promoters and disciplinarians. What Lisa could not forget was the support that she and her family received from their church, their neighbors and community at the times they needed help most. Lisa and her family realized that even though their father had already passed on, any community member whom her mother reached to for support was always there for them. Lisa concluded that it indeed took a village to raise her because her mother did not have a lot of support when her father joined the army. She had to create support by reaching out to the community. She noted that the community did not

come to them to ask if they needed help; they had to go to the community and ask for help. Lisa's mother reached out to the community at difficult times and that was what helped her to raise Lisa.

Community had also played a big role in Louis' life; especially at the time he and his family were undergoing difficult times. When Louis' mother was frustrated with life, she started to drink a lot. The community did not stigmatize Louis and his family. Members of the community did not say that he was the son of drunken mother. The community knew his mother and people knew her children and understood the challenges that she had, especially the nearly impossible task of trying to provide for her children from nothing. They also knew the kind of person that Louis was and the kind of help he was giving to helpless widows and orphans in his community. They could see how differently Louis reacted to those challenges compared to his mother. The community understood that his mother was acting like that because she was frustrated with the kind of life she and her children were living. Oftentimes, his mother would try to calm her stress with drinking, and that did not help. The way the community reacted and treated them during that difficult time made Louis love his community even more. The community helped and encouraged Louis to grow up as a good person. Louis used to play soccer in his community and was chosen as a soccer leader. This motivated him to keep on going. Even though he was from a struggling family with so many issues, his community valued him even more by choosing for him that role. Members of his community were always there for him and encouraging him to study hard and succeed to help his family.

Amina also had fond memories of the community where she grew up. She said that in Africa, a child's upbringing is not the job of one person only; it is the whole community that brings up the child. So Amina was grateful for the women who, whenever they saw her behaving in an unfitting way, chided her. They would say, "No, this is not how you are supposed to behave!" Amina also thanked her parents for never saying "How dare you discipline my child!" Her parents could simply tell them, "I think what you did to my daughter was good." That helped to shape Amina into the person she became.

Amina's community also played a big role in her life through encouragement and culturally bringing her up aright according to their culture. For instance, the community taught Amina how she should behave as a girl, and how to greet others. In Amina's culture, they would kneel down to greet an elderly person and they do it with all their heart. That is what Amina did

back in her community as a mark of respect to her elders. The community taught Amina her culture; encouraged her; gave her spiritual upbringing; and helped her to create friendships. In Amina's community, when they saw people who were behaving badly, they would reprimand them and those who did not take heed of what was being told the community would discipline them.

John pointed out that back in the refugee camp; his community also played an important role in encouraging children to go to school. John's community always fought for children to attend school. It was the community that fought for sponsorships for refugee students. Sponsorships or scholarships did not come directly to students by their individual efforts; rather support came through the community to the deserving students. Students learned about such chances through the community leaders and then apply for them. It was their community leaders who stood for them and voiced their concerns about the bright young people in their community who needed help to continue with their education. That was what their community did for them. It was their community leaders who went to charitable organization and met with NGO leaders for scholarships and better school conditions for children. It was after those meetings that these organizations developed plans for sponsoring refugee students in their camp. The community fought for the numbers of sponsorships to be increased. Although their community was poor and struggling, it always helped John with his schooling and normal life.

For Sam, it was always a blessing to live in a good community. Based on his experience, the people around him in his community were important, especially those who had been through similar struggles as he and living in the same community. It was always good to talk to such people within his community. Those were the people who had a better understanding of what he was going through, given their shared backgrounds and shared history. They were more likely to understand him than the others people who did not understand him or the problems he encountered. Because they had similar background, and had been through similar experiences, they were in a better position to relate to him more than anyone else.

Although there were many outside of the community with whom he could relate and learn from, Sam learned a lot from the successful people who were living right within his community, especially those who had been through many life challenges. Sam lived in a community where many people had similar histories and came from war-torn countries. Those people were always there for him and helped him in various ways, without being condescending.

Through their stories, he learned about the strategies they used to overcome their challenges and achieved their goals. They related to him in a way that people who had not gone through all of these struggles did not. They shared the little they had with him and his family without humiliating them because they understood the real cause of their misery in a way others could not. Having those people in the community was important because Sam could openly talk to them about his struggles without them withdrawing from him. Whether it was at work or at school or in life in general, those people were able to relate to him. He could share his worries, struggles, or pains with them knowing that they were not going to be judgmental. In Sam's experience, sharing pains with others in his community was a good thing; it gave him peace.

### **Teacher Support**

Concerning the support the participants received from their teachers, each related a story about a teacher or teachers who had impacted their life positively. Based on their stories, the best teachers were those who were inspirational, motivational, and compassionate. There were teachers who were mentors. There were others who were parental figures. There were teachers who shared their rooms with students who did not have a place to live. There were others who provided a place to study and a lamp and fuel to use for study at night. And there were teachers who gave gifts that motivated students to excel.

Lisa believed that she could never have overcome life challenges and be in the university today without the important role that teachers played and continue to play in her life. Lisa had learned key life lessons from teachers and some important people in her life. The most important lessons she learned from them was that hard work pays. Lisa's teachers told her that she had to work hard to succeed in life. They told her, "If you're sitting back and saying you're going to be lucky tomorrow, that will not take you far." Through her teachers' advice, Lisa learned that if she worked hard and believed in herself, no matter what was happening in her life, somebody would step in and make a difference in her life; it had to start with her.

For Edward, one of the teachers who had a positive impact on him was his elementary teacher. That teacher bought Edward a pair of trousers when he passed his elementary examinations. The teacher had told their head teacher that motivation was very important and pressurized the school until they bought the trousers. Edward became the only boy in the entire school who was wearing trousers. He was so proud and excited. He was also motivated and his

self-esteem increased. As a result, Edward became a more committed and hardworking student. That was the work of just one teacher.

Alex's best teachers were the ones who pressured him. The major role that teachers played in Alex's life was when he was younger. The teachers recognized the potential in him and motivated him to work hard to succeed. They knew that he was a shy and quiet student who feared speaking in class, so they did not want to intimidate him. They loaned him their books, called him to their offices, and advised and corrected him. The teacher who pressurized Alex much was the one who he actually liked the most because that teacher gave him more pressure and made him read the books he needed to read. Those were the kind of teachers Alex liked. They pushed him to excel in his academic work. Those teachers were disciplinarians and caned a lot. There were several occasions in which Alex escaped such forms of punishment. It was because Alex was good in their classes. He could commit any crime and they would just say, "Go, go." Alex did not consider that to be negative because when he was pushed hard, he could deliver. He thought that he needed a little bit of push in order to deliver.

For Tiana, the biggest support she received from a teacher was in high school. He was not actually Tiana's teacher but the high school chaplain. He was more like the father she never had. He mentored her and counselled her even after she finished high school. He was the person to whom she went when she performed poorly. Once when she was feeling bad about herself because her friends boasted about how good their grades were she felt like a complete failure. But that high school teacher helped to reshape her perspective on life. He told her, "life is not about how things turn out but it's about how you look at them." He advised her that "We learn through failure" and that "When you reach what you think is the end, don't be discouraged because it is the beginning of something new." He changed Tiana's perspective about life and failure. It was huge for her. He cared for her, especially as an orphaned student new from Uganda studying in Canada. She thought that it was for people like that teacher that she managed to join the university.

Osman also benefited from some of the teachers who taught him. There were teachers he would never forget in his life; these were more than teachers to him. He called those teachers his second parents. There were some teachers Osman discussed personal issues with; he could talk to them about his family and the challenges that they were going through. Those teachers were always compassionate. They motivated Osman in many ways. Some of his teachers took time to

understand him and became his role models. The ways they taught and talked made Osman more determined to work hard to change the society and make it a better place to live in. Those teachers taught things that were beneficial for the society. They did not stick only to the subject they taught but also taught about the right ways for humans to live in the society. What Osman liked about those teachers was the enlightenment that they gave to students who were interested in making a positive change in the society. It was important because Osman's society was mostly ignorant of those positive values. Osman's community was mostly illiterate and could easily be manipulated by wrong people. That was why he found the roles that his teachers played useful for his community. They used their unique style of teaching and taught Osman discipline and punctuality. Punctuality was something that did not work in Osman's community at the time. Those teachers set goals and encouraged Osman and his fellow students to do the same. Those teachers encouraged them to work hard.

For Salwa, the teacher who helped her to become what she is today was a female, Somali Kenyan teacher who taught Salwa in elementary school. She made significant impact on her female students. In fact, Salwa searched for that teacher after completing her high school but could not find her. Salwa was not the only students looking for her, most of the girls she completed high school with did the same. The reason why Salwa and her fellow students loved that teacher was that she would call the girls into a vacated classroom to talk to them, only the girls. She was the biggest feminist that Salwa knew. She gave Salwa and her fellow female students the confidence and strength they needed in their male dominated world. Whatever the teacher talked about gave them strength. She would tell them that they were young girls who were witnessing all the bad things happening in their communities, bad things like the girls being sold to older men, girls being lured into early marriages. Some were lured into marriage even when their parents objected to them marrying older men. It was always women doing the luring. Those teenage girls did not even know what they were entering into.

That teacher advised Salwa and her fellow female students not to accept early marriages. That teacher used to tell them,

Hear me. What I'm telling you today, you will know it when you're grownups. You will know that it was for your good. The boys in your class don't like you because you have been through the school system with them. Many of you are smarter than those boys.

That's why they don't like you. Now think about joining high school. Don't think about anything else. When you're in high school, tell me what's in your mind at that time. In fact, university was what was in Salwa's mind at the time. Salwa was thinking about joining high school. So that teacher was confirming the things that Salwa was contemplating. That female teacher told them, "If you marry today, there's no family planning here. So there is a chance that you may have, at least, ten or fifteen kids and end up looking like an 80 year old woman when you are in your 30s." The boys were watching them through the windows. The teacher warned, "Don't talk to those boys about what I have shared with you because it is for your own good, girls. You are competing with them academically. Talk to them only about academic stuff." Salwa believed that the teacher played an important role in making her think and dream big.

### **University Support**

All the 16 participants recognized that the support the university had given them had been positive. They believed that their university had a positive environment that continued to motivate goal-oriented students to accomplish their academic ambitions. They talked of the university as being a welcoming place. They praised both the professors and students. Some were grateful for the financial help they had received from the university. The university provided different kinds of funding, including bursaries and scholarships. There is also student loan available for needy students. These made it possible for the students to afford university studies. The university also provided opportunities for students to join different groups to learn and contribute positively to the society. They said that some university professors and staff had been inspirational to them. Although they thought there was much academic pressure, the welcoming nature of the university faculty and staff motivated them to persevere and not give up. The university also had an environment that allowed them to make friends with everyone, including faculty, students, and staff. Charity commented that she had a positive experience in the university; she felt that the university was much like another extended family. Charity's fellow students were good people. She had met so many people from different races and cultures and she liked that. The professors were also kind to her.

For Sam, the university had provided him the opportunity that not many people have. The university had provided him with many educational activities that helped him to grow as a person. The university had provided him with scholarships and bursaries and grants that helped



him tremendously. Sam came from a poor background and might not have made it to medical school without such financial support. Sam's aim was to try to give back in the future. During his undergraduate program, Sam was able to relate to some of his professors easily and they were there for him to guide him through choosing his classes and the kind of degree he wanted to pursue. The professors were there for him. The Student Help Center also aided him with preparation for his examinations. For two summers Sam's department provided him and fellow students the opportunity to work in the laboratory when he was doing his microbiology degree. He was grateful for what the university had done for him.

Edward talked about how the university had helped him to discover his real purpose in life. The university was a great community for Edward. On the academic side, it helped make his dreams come true and on the social side, it allowed him to connect with different people and groups with whom he volunteered. The university also helped him to discover what he really needed to study. Edward remembered the contribution of one female instructor who was deeply involved in helping him choose the correct program when he was a new student, in the first year of his studies. The female instructor called Edward after her class one afternoon and asked him what he wanted to do. Edward told her that he wanted to do Environmental Studies. She asked if he was really sure that it was what he actually wanted or if that program went with his personality. He asked what she meant by that. She asked, "Do you know what environmental scientists do?" In fact, Edward did not have any knowledge about Environmental Studies. What was in his mind when he picked Environmental Studies was David Suzuki and what he had read about him. He thought that Environmental Studies was a program that taught about how the behaviours of human beings affect the environment. In fact, he admitted that even the Environmental Studies course that he was taking was not making sense to him. They were all about natural science rather than what he had seen David Suzuki talking about in the documentaries. Thanks to that wonderful professor, Edward ceased doing Environmental Studies and moved on to something he had always wanted to study – Social Sciences. Given his love for doing volunteering work in the community, she felt that he should choose a program that could enable him to become a social worker. He completed his undergraduate degree courses successfully and was accepted to the Public Policy master's program. Edward's area of interest was policies related to social work.

Grace felt that the university had provided everything she needed to make her dream come true. She felt that everything was coming together for her. She was working hard to achieve the dream that she had set for herself while back in her community in Nigeria. The environment in this university was just perfect for her to achieve her academic goals. One of the things Grace liked most about her university was that people were friendly, including the faculty, staff and students. When she needed help, Grace would go to her advisor and everything would be solved. She had seen many students around who came from her country Nigeria; that alone gave her the courage that she was not the only Nigerian in the program and university. This often made her feel at home. The presence of her fellow Nigerian students in the university had given her the reason to be more competitive and maintain the hunger to succeed and achieve the goals she had set for herself.

For John, there were many things that he liked about his university. First, he could talk to his professors at any time. Doors were always opened to him. In case he could not meet the professor in person there was always an e-mail or a telephone. So that had been a positive experience for him. John preferred talking with his professor in person. It had helped him to understand concepts clearly and improve in his academic performance. There were also tutorials available for helping students with other subjects that John took advantage of. The computers and wireless services available were also useful to him as he did his research, readings, and assignments. The fact that they made sure that these things were available was something that John as a student was grateful for. John had the opportunity to work hard and achieve the dream that brought him to Canada.

### **Participants' Advice to Overcome Obstacles and Making Dreams Come True**

The adversities and hurdles that life throws at us are always unpleasant. Adversities can either destroy us or make us stronger. Many individuals who are faced with relentless adversities often find it hard or perhaps impossible to develop and become productive members of society. Many feel powerless, visionless, hopeless, and alone. Some have low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Such individuals often give up on their dreams, altogether, because they cannot see a way out. Some, sadly, get involved in negative activities that are harmful to themselves and the communities in which they live. On the other hand, there are those who have been through similar challenges and succeeded like the participants in this study. These overcomers can speak with confidence and authority to those facing similar life challenges on what motivated, inspired,

or helped them to succeed. Their words can act as advice or encouragement to those facing adversities or life hurdles similar to that which they had experienced, including what they feel need to be in place for them to succeed. The 16 participants provided such advice and some of what they discussed is presented in this section.

### **Take Courage from Small Successes and Never Give Up on Your Dream**

During our interview, Amina stated that she overcame many challenges to be who she was. Amina's advice to young people was that she did not want anyone to give up on their dreams and beliefs. She admitted that life is full of challenges but she offered the insight that the individual going through these challenges has likely already covered a long distance to make it to the point they are at. Amina advised that one simple challenge should not crush an individual's dream. There are small successes within us that we can look at and really lean on. Some of those small successes often go unnoticed. Amina's life experience taught her that sometimes helping someone does not always mean financially, it could be talking to and offering words of encouragement that can empower someone to see the good side of what they believe in and really work hard to achieve.

Amina cautioned that people often give up because they do not have confidence in what they were doing or they lack the courage to take on challenges. She warned that there are different categories of people within the society. Hence, one can advise someone, but if he or she does not have the courage within him or her and are not able to see their goals, how far they want to go or how strong that goal is to them, they will not take the advice seriously. With such people, you might give them everything but they might not take advantage of the opportunity being offered to them. On the other hand, there are those who, when you talk to them they realize their potential and realize this is what they want to do and how they are going to achieve it. To Amina, the latter group is the one that will heed your advice or appreciate your support. They are the ones who will strive and get themselves back on right track. So it depends on the different types of people.

In Amina's university program there were those who thought being abroad meant everything was easy. That was a different perception. She said,

Pursuing your goal is not easy; nothing in life comes easily. You have to work hard for it. So if you decide to wait for life to come on a silver platter then you are wrong. If you advise people who believe that life should be easy, they will shun your advice. Such

people are mostly close-minded. When you approach life with an open mind, you are better able to learn. Learning never ends, but if you are closed to new thoughts then you will give up and go back home, when things do not go your way.

Recognizing small successes, listening to positive advice, be willing to listen and learn and striving to get back on track can help one achieve their goals.

### **Set Goals and Find People with Similar Life Experiences and Passions**

There were many things that Sam had learned throughout his difficulties. The number one thing he had learned was to not use your background, race or the area from which you come as an excuse to renege on the pursuit of your goals for success. In fact, he suggested that you should use your background as a motivation and drive to achieve excellence, rather than seeing it as a disadvantage. Sam always reminded himself that success was not something that he could achieve easily; but it was something that he had to achieve through determination and hard work.

Sam recommended that if one wants to succeed in life he or she should first set goals that are clear and realistic. Second, find people who have similar passion. It is easier for you to stick to your goals and your dreams if you are surrounded with similar people, in terms of personalities and goals. Try to find people in your area who can be instrumental to you, and push you to achieve your success. You can easily associate yourself with them: they push you and you push them. That is how you get ahead. Such people are always there. Do not limit yourself to people of your own race, culture and beliefs, be open to other races, cultures and different people and learn from them.

### **Develop Sound Strategies and Stick to Them, Be Positive, Explore and Enjoy Life**

Suzy's advice to those going through tough times like she did was to develop strategies similar to what she had found helpful throughout her struggles. She offered that a primary thing such individuals needed was a positive attitude even in the midst of challenges. Then, try to develop a plan, have a goal, and know what you want to do. One needs to know where he or she is going in order not to blindly follow anything and get lost. Although education is important, you cannot be only about education and ignore what is happening outside of the academic world because you will eventually to go out into the world after your education. So try to find a balance between the two worlds.

It was important to have a support system in place. No one was meant to be alone in this world, even if he or she believes they are. In her view, one can find a support system when you are good to those around you. Suzy went on to advise that people usually find support through the people they have contact with. One has to learn to socialize with people of different cultures because these are the kinds of people you will work with after education. Learn how to handle different people and relationships and at the same time do well at what you do. Do not restrict yourself; but rather expose yourself to different things. If you find something you enjoy, explore it. It is a blessing if you can make a living out of what you love. You should aim for what you want to achieve and have something else to fall back on.

### **Care and Mentorship**

Most participants stated that individuals who feel that they are caring people and can be mentors to younger people in trouble should not be bystanders. Based on Suzy's experience, most people who go through challenges fail because they are not connected to people who can support them. They do not have positive relationships with caring people and lack mentors in their lives. When left alone, they try to find their own ways and make friends with those they feel love them and so often lose their ways because of lack of connection with the caring world that can help them to succeed. Often, there is no one to advise them about the future until it is too late. They need mentors or advisors to guide them. Those who drop out of school often do not have better alternatives to fall back on. They do not have a plan "B". They claim that education is not for everyone. But the question remains, "What are they going to do next?" That is always a hard question to answer. In life, you have to know what you are going to do next. But they do not know what to do next. What they plan to do next often cannot work and they become rebellious. That is why they need mentors. They need someone who has gone through hard times and has succeeded, or someone who can at least be open minded to listen to them and understand where they are going or what they are going through. They need someone who is nonjudgmental because such individuals are delicate. Those in the position to help them should see where they are coming from in order to be able to get through to them.

Suzy thought that some immigrant parents are to be blamed for their children failure, especially those from Africa or from other parts of the developing world are generally very strict and judgmental. Strict parents alienate their own children by the way they treat them. They

bring children to a society where kids can do whatever they want and then try to be very strict without being flexible.

What do those parents think their kids will do? They simply become rebellious and drop out of school. Although many of the values you were brought up with are good, you cannot force the children living in this society to follow every one of your old ways.

Unlike where you are from, children here know their rights. So try to find a balance. All participants admitted they would never have succeeded without care and mentorships from the people they encountered along the way.

### **Engage Youth in Community Based Activities**

Suzy also advised that the community can also establish some activities that will draw in those children or young people. During such activities youth can be talked to or listened to, such activities aids in building positive relationships between these youth and the community. Youth are often attracted to fun activities. The talk about education should include fun activities. Many youth only need a mentor, someone in their community who can be part of their circle, be their friend and at the same time give them valuable words of advice and show them the way to go. They need someone who cares and can lead them in a positive way after listening to them. If you are friends with the youth, you will know them. If there are community-based activities, they must be activities that they like. They must be fun filled. You set up fun activities to draw the youth in and then make a point to them of the importance of values and education. If you love, care, listen to and entertain young people then they will not feel judged or discouraged but they will enjoy it and learn. This is hard but possible.

### **Welcome a Challenge: Believe You Can**

For Grace, based on her life experience, she believed that she had much to teach people who are going through similar challenges as her. She advised those facing adversities not to believe what others say about them, rather should work hard to prove them wrong. Grace was a young girl when she decided she would pursue an education to prove people wrong about the suppression and marginalization of girls in comparison to boys. She advised, “Do not dwell on your present circumstances; you should try to focus on your future and never give up, no matter the situation.” Education has been Grace’s priority. Her culture, her being a girl in a male dominance society, lack of money, early marriage, or early pregnancy and other challenges did

not stop her from pursuing her dream of academic achievement. She advised those going through similar obstacles to welcome challenges. Grace noted that one of the things that encouraged her most was that each time she encountered great challenges; she knew that there were greater things ahead of her. To Grace, every great challenge had a greater reward. So she suggested that when there is a challenge you are trying to overcome, know that you are paying the price now for something that has a greater reward than the price you are paying at the moment. Grace remembered that there were times when she did not have money. Men would show up wanting to give her money just to get her attention and exploit her. She would look at that money and the person giving her the money and thought about her future and declined their offers. Grace knew that she would make more money in the future than giving in to life's pressure and marry prematurely. So she advises young girls facing similar temptations to make a positive difference in life and react like she did.

### **Moral Support**

Peter felt that there were numerous reasons why many visible minorities, especially those coming from Sub-Saharan Africa do not perform well in education. According to Peter's own observation, most of the visible minorities abandon education because they are left on their own:

They feel that no one cares about them, and many feel they are being discriminated against. Education is hard. When it is very hard for you to study well and you know that someone is pointing fingers at you, you quit because you do not want to be in that kind of situation. They feel like school is evil, so they decide to drop out. Some leave school because their parents cannot afford the costs that come with education. Others believe student loan was a bad idea because "how are you going to pay it back?" Some parents discourage their children from continuing with their education. So many young minority children simply do not know what to do; because they do not have any direction in their life. If they do not have a plan or direction, they cannot succeed in life. Many do not know that they lose out when they do not attend school so most of them are not interested in an education. They feel that they can earn money without an education.

Peter's view was also suggested:

Everyone needs to be educated about the importance of education, starting with parents. Parents should learn how to encourage their children to go to school. Things like inviting parents to attend seminars that discuss those issues could help. It will not hurt to tell

parents and their children what they need to hear. Youth should be made to understand that although school may be seen as a boring and expensive, it will eventually pay off in the future. What the community can do is to organize people who are experienced, who can speak sense to those young people.

Peter thought that could make a positive difference. He believed that if such guidance is in place, it could help struggling young people develop; become motivated and goal-oriented.

### **Have Hope and Avoid Narrow-mindedness**

For Osman, the messages from the different challenges he had overcome might serve as an encouragement for others who are going through similar struggles. His story might help them to believe that everyone can succeed in life regardless of their past or present circumstances.

Osman said that the most important thing in life is to have hope. He admitted that he was not a resilient person until he began to have hope. According to Osman,

If you have hope then everything else stems from that hope. If you are hopeless and you do not have a target in life then nothing good can come to you. You cannot have hope if you do not have a target. It is the target that gives you the hope and resilience needed to pursue it. One cannot have hope if he or she does not have a goal for life. With hope an individual will not view problems as obstacles. Rather you feel that something good will come once you have overcome those problems.

Osman also cautioned that individuals should avoid narrow-mindedness.

Based on his experience, limiting one's mind only to one's cultural beliefs will hinder progress in life. Osman believed he was succeeding academically because of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness enables individuals to be open to new ideas. It allows an individual to be curious to know, learn from and understand others. As someone who grew up among fellow Muslims and countrymen, Osman understood the importance of opening up and learning from people of different cultures and religions. He suggested:

One should be willing to accept good advice from others, regardless of their culture or religion. Think wide, think big and try to think beyond the boundaries of your society and culture. The solution for your issues may come from anyone, regardless of race, culture, region, or religion. Be willing to help others.

Osman shared that he got help through helping others. For instance, he contributed to saving the life of his Christian teacher in the Muslim dominated refugee camp. That teacher was one of the



kindest and nicest persons he had ever met. He sacrificed to save his teacher when no one else dared to. He stated that it came deep from his heart. He argued that every individual can make a difference in the world through his or her heart. He believed that in helping someone in need, one is helping him/herself. But it can happen only after compassion is developed. Compassion can be developed mostly through interactions with people who are different.

### **Narrow the Cultural Gap between Recent Immigrant Youth and their Immigrant Parents**

Alex reiterated that perhaps he would not have survived without the support he received from other individuals. Young people who are going through tough times need support from educators and the public at large. For many recent immigrant youth, such support is being affected by misunderstandings between them and their parents. From Alex's own experience, there is a generational divide between immigrant youth and their parents. Recent immigrant youth, for instance, go to school where they are influenced by friends who come from cultural backgrounds that are different from their own original home cultures and that of their parents. Hence their parents have different views about how the world should be and therefore their children need to live by their own cultural values. On the other hand, the youth want to live by the values of their friends and the new cultures they engage. Thus, there occurs a conflict of values between the younger generation and the older generation, or between recent immigrant children and their parents. Alex thought that one way to help was to first educate the parents about the values of the new society. An understanding of the differences could improve the relationship between parent and their children. When the generational gap between parents and youth is narrowed the chances of the youth accomplishing their academic goals will improve because they will be better able to concentrate on their studies without the pressures of a strained family relationship.

### **Provide Free Counselling Services to Recent Immigrant Parents and Their Children**

Lisa made a case for free counselling services for immigrant youth and parents. She wished there were these counselling services that could be easily accessible because she continued to meet parents in her community who had accepted that they needed counselling services but found them expensive. Lisa stated that she had already encouraged some of these to seek help at the university because the counselling service at the university was free. And for the children in schools, Lisa said that they should have counselling too. But those children do not

use the counselling services because they feel they would be judged. Lisa also suggested that maybe the parents and their children could reach out to churches, because there is always a group of people in every church that deal with family issues. Family Counselling Services are also available in the community and operating at a reduced cost or as part of the Health Services system. But most new immigrants do not know about them. Perhaps the communities could do more in that regard.

### **Intervention by the Community and Support from the University**

Louis admitted that he was disappointed because many ethnic minority youth did not take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them. Louis thought that solutions to this problem ought to come from the ethnic and multicultural communities; “The communities we live in have the power and ability to encourage or discourage us.” Louis suggested that parents and the community should find out why children after leaving home for school later drop out and engage in deviant behaviours. He suggested that parents and the communities have forums where they could discuss these issues and project positive ways to support those children. The youth should be encouraged not to follow the wrong ways. It is important to encourage the youth to persevere in getting an education. Another way he recommended was through sports. Louis thought sports could keep them busy and away from negative influences and thoughts. In his life, Louis was engaged in sports and found that these activities kept him away from trouble when he faced enormous challenges back in Africa.

Louis thought the university could do a lot to help minority youth. One of the things he offered was that the university might help recent immigrant minority youth to adapt to the university system. Some of these new immigrants are facing challenges with culture and language. Hence, they face challenges understanding the milieu and population of the university and in the classroom. These challenges cause many to drop out of school. Others are able to complete their high schools but do not achieve averages that would gain them acceptance into the university.

Louis recommended an upgrade system wherein students could upgrade and improve their grades, enabling them to apply for admission once their marks and their language skills improved. In addition, the university could develop a program for struggling new immigrant students through which they would be able to revise their work with an instructor, to help them

to understand their work more easily. Louis said that if such steps are taken, it could encourage more minority youth to continue with their studies.

As a researcher, one thing I noticed among participants was their omission of the role of spirituality in the advice they had given. Although religion or spirituality had played important roles in their stories, the fact that they omitted it in the advice section showed how quickly they have learned to respect the Canadian culture. For instance, although many Canadians describe themselves spiritual; Canadian culture rejects the imposition of one's faith on others. Salwa's example offers how serious the participants considered this. When I sent Salwa's story to her to read it and then sign a consent that I should proceed to include it in my study, there was one quote she asked me to remove. The quote was, "My story can also help all Muslim women who are going through similar situation to also overcome barriers and succeed." She said that that statement did not sound right. She said that she was a Canadian who loved all Canadians of every race, culture, and religion or no religion. She said that her advice should be for everybody, regardless, of faith race, or religion. Although other participants did not react as Salwa did, I am confident that they also had the similar perspectives. Even though they failed to emphasize the role of faith in the advice section, people of faith who read their story can learn from the important roles that faith played during their struggles.

The summary of the participants' advice is presented in Table 5.4:

**Table 5.4. Summary of the Participants' Advice**

<b>Take Courage from Small Successes and Never Give Up on Dream</b>	Paying attention to small successes or positive steps can give us hope and motivation to work harder and never give up, no matter the cost.
<b>Set Goals and Find People with Similar Life Experiences and Passions</b>	Do not use your race, background and circumstances as an excuse for not succeeding. Find people who have been through similar challenges; learn how to succeed from their stories. Set goals and stick to them. Use

	motivation to drive your success.
<b>Develop Sound Strategies and Stick to them, be Positive, Explore and Enjoy Life</b>	Develop strategies; have positive mindset in the midst of challenges as you pursue that dream. Surround yourself with positive people and find time to enjoy life.
<b>Care and Mentorship</b>	Make friends with people who are more informed than you do; you need people who can mentor and advice you.
<b>Engage Youth in Community Based Activities</b>	Youth are attracted to fun activities. Building trust can happen during such activities.
<b>Welcome a Challenge: Believe You Can</b>	Welcome what life throws at you and work hard to succeed to prove others wrong. Never allow culture to prevent you from achieving your God-given dreams.
<b>Moral Support</b>	Most visible minority youth experience a sense of isolation and feel nobody cares. They need moral support from parents and others.
<b>Have hope and open-mindedness</b>	Be open-minded and willing to learn from people of different races and cultures.
<b>Narrow the Cultural Gap between Recent Immigrant Youth and their Immigrant Parents</b>	Educating parents on how to parent in their new environment would help.
<b>Provide Free Counselling Services to Recent Immigrant Parents and Their Children</b>	Provide access to free counselling services.

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**Intervention by the Community and Support from the University**

The community, schools and university should work in collaboration with parents, recent immigrant youth and other agencies to develop strategies that make change the circumstances the youth find themselves in.

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### **Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter categorized the stories narrated by the participants into seven basic plots structures, based on Booker's (2004) seven basic plot structures. Booker (2004) stated that every successful narrative is based on one or more of seven plots. The stories were categorized by the seven basic plots: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Tragedy, Rebirth, Voyage and Return and Comedy. The chapter also organized the narratives into the support structures participants deemed relevant to their survival, resilience, and drive toward goals and overcome odds. The chapter forwarded the advice offered by the participants to those experiencing similar life challenges, including a description of those with power to help them. As their stories demonstrated, each of the sixteen participants who took part in this study encountered numerous adversities in their life journeys. The stories have also shown that there was nothing unique about each participant. They were just ordinary youth who encountered multiple adversities and became hopeless, depressed, and suffered from low-self-esteem and low self-confidence just like anyone going through tough times. But something happened to stir resilience within them. The presence of resilience made them become goal oriented and they no longer saw the tough times as obstacles but challenges that they could easily overcome. However, resilience alone could not help them to overcome those challenges. There were vital support structures that helped them along the way. Those support structures included parental support, social network and friends support, religious/spiritual support, community support, financial support, the motivations or inspirations they received from teachers, and school/university support. Their stories demonstrate that the support structures they described in their stories complemented each other in helping them to develop resilience, become goal-

oriented; ultimately overcoming the challenges they went through and accomplish the goals that they set for themselves.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Review of the Study, Discussion, Summary and Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore why some Sub-Saharan African students succeed in life and through their academic attainment in spite of the tremendous odds against them, with focus on their well-being. Sadly, it is all too rare to hear positive stories of success coming from individuals who have been faced with multiple adversities or insurmountable barriers. During the tough periods of our lives, it is difficult to focus on our future goals. When confronted with hardships some people become hopeless, demoralized, and give up on their dreams. However, there are stories of individuals who, despite facing such challenges, develop resilience and succeed where others have perhaps failed or given up. As Pascale et al. (2010) mentioned these individuals do not have unique capabilities; they simply work differently with the same resources. These individuals have developed the abilities to overcome the problems that confound others. In most cases, individuals with unique abilities to overcome odds do not think that they are doing anything unusual; rather, it is other people who notice their unique abilities that most do not have to succeed despite enormous challenges. Rath and Harter (2010) argued that the reason, such people succeed despite extreme hardships, is that they have high levels of well-being. Well-being refers to the condition of an individual, for instance his/her social, economic, psychological, spiritual or medical state of being. High levels of well-being is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including resilience, effective learning, high educational attainment outcomes, productivity and creativity, good relationships, pro-social behaviour, and good health and life expectancy (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010a; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009b; Huppert & So, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

There are numerous support structures that enable individuals to develop high levels of well-being. These support structures were discussed in some detail in the literature review (Chapter Two). In order to find that such factors could contribute to an increase in high levels of well-being individuals, the researcher studied carefully the life stories of the selected 16 recent immigrant university students from Sub-Saharan Africa. Each participant qualified has someone who has succeeded despite facing multiple adversities that seemed to be insurmountable. Unlike most of their peers, they were students who have been thriving, flourishing and are in the process of optimizing their potential to becoming full members of the society. The rich data that the

researcher collected met the purpose of this study and answered the research questions and produce a research that could be used for future studies.

This chapter provides the researcher's interpretations, summative analyses, and synthesis of those findings together with their connections to the literature review, and answers to the research questions. To begin this chapter, a brief review of the purpose of the study, the problem statement, the research questions, the methodology used, will be provided then followed by a discussion, suggest implications, and, finally, offer a number of concluding remarks.

### **Review of Problem Statement**

It is desirable for the Canadian population to strive for high educational attainment. In order to achieve such goal, there is a need to create an environment where educators, policymakers, parents, students, universities, and schools are aware and well informed of the problems affecting ethnic minority and students' who struggle with educational attainment, their well-being, and consideration needs to be afforded to discern what needs to be done to help them have best outcomes and success in life.

It is no secret that many students, especially those facing different kinds of adversities often do not complete school or university because of the difficult life challenges they encounter and endure, including those affecting their general well-being. Many students who lag behind come from low-income families, some are orphans, some come from war zones, and some have faced major obstacles including extreme poverty, suppressive cultural practices, health issues, and then there are those who live with parents with alcohol or drug abuse issues, suffer from consequence of family breakdown, loss of the family members and friends, physical and sexual abuse, and divorce (Hrabowski et al., 2002). As a country, Canada relies heavily on immigration. The many persons relocating to Canada in recent years have been from countries whose population continues to be affected by such problems. When these individuals come to Canada, many continue to face similar or worse situations, in ways that continue to hinder their progress towards success in their new country.

Although many do not perform well in school or give up altogether, there have been some who have succeeded. Like most of their peers, the strings of tremendous challenges, family, and personal hardships those overcomers face in their lives would have been enough to debilitate them. Instead, they use the strikes against them as inspiration to persevere and work harder toward having a better life, and the rewards that follow. They develop the ability to



bounce back from frustrations and to recover from setbacks. They learn to adapt to change, stress or problems and are able to take things in stride. The result of bouncing back is a feeling of success and confidence. Such individuals are referred to as resilient. Resilient individuals are characterised by their positive approaches to life and learning, or increased self-confidence or interest in education. It was such resilient individuals who participated in this study. We can learn from their examples, life experiences, and practices to promote new understandings that can enable Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada to assist every youth facing similar adversities to become productive and successful in life.

### **Review of Research Questions**

Presented below are the three major research questions used to guide the data collection and research analysis.

1. To what do Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students attribute their success? What has helped them overcome tremendous odds and roadblocks?
2. How did external support structures contribute to the resilience, well-being and success of Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students?
3. What do these post-secondary students believe could be changed to provide more effective support for the success of immigrant students (school/post-secondary) from Sub-Saharan Africa?

### **Review of Research Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was used to conduct this study, based on interpretivism (Altheide & Johnson, 2005; Kuzel & Like, 1991; Secker et al., 1995) and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The researcher sought to describe, understand, and interpret the life experiences of students who have overcome adversities and succeeded. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to gain a clearer and more in-depth theoretical understanding of various factors associated with resilience and overcoming odds, in the context of well-being, and to develop a theoretical model of this construct. The researcher used positive approach in this study. Using a positive approach was appropriate because this allowed me to look for what had made these participants vital, successful, and vibrant and how each person had developed a positive vision for their future, even if unarticulated until the time of our meeting (Bonham, 2011; Troxel, 2002).

Further, in-depth interviews were used for collecting important information about resilient Sub-Saharan African students who had overcome odds to succeed, in the context of well-being. As a qualitative researcher, I used this strategy to reveal participants' lived experiences, going beyond asking simple questions in order to produce rich data.

As researcher, I used purposeful sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling strategies to identify and select the informants for this study (Berg, 2001; Merriam, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants were a specific group of resilient university students originally from Sub-Saharan Africa. Sixteen persons were selected because they were seen as capable of being responsive to changing contexts; could be adaptable; could assimilate information from multiple sources simultaneously; could view the world holistically; could work concurrently with both propositional and tacit knowledge; could analyze data immediately; could summarize and provide feedback about data immediately; and, could provide a higher level of understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp.193–194).

Structural narrative analysis approach was used to analyse the stories of the 16 participants. This approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination; hence, it was well suited to studies of subjectivity (Reissman, 1993, p. 5). Narrative analysis provided information and allowed the researcher to present stories in ways that may not have been possible by other methods (Smith, 2000, p. 328). The narrative analysis approach provided “in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of “those particular individuals and the modes of their thoughts, emotions, characteristic, cultures, gender, social status or religion” (Smith, 2000, p. 332).

### **Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question One**

*To what do Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students attribute their success?  
What has helped them overcome tremendous odds and roadblocks?*

Research question one focused on resilience: *What the participants said helped them to overcome tremendous odds to succeed.* The questions participants were asked to obtain answers to question one focused on the development of resilience. They were asked about what energized them and how they developed their resiliency. The common themes that emerged from the data analysis process on how the participants became resilient and were able to overcome the multiple adversities are presented in this section.

Although each participant was resilient, no one was able to directly identify a clear or single factor that they were sure of that had contributed to making them resilient. Based on the answers I gathered from each of them, resilience is developed through a slow process of transformation that occurs over time and involves internal and external factors. One of the sources of their resilience was their quest for education. Once that goal was set, each decided that they had to pursue their education at any cost. They saw education as the only means that could change their sad situations. They became resilient, motivated and energized after they developed the hunger for an education. They regarded education as the only means by which they might bring about a better life for themselves, their families and communities. Others credited their resilience to the literature or books they had read. Those books opened their mind to being able to see life and the world differently. Some could relate their hardships or life journeys to the stories or characters in books. They believed that if those characters could make it, they too could make it; and resilience and the determination to succeed were developed in the process. Interestingly, every study participant said he/she was a reader, even amidst of struggles.

Other participants claimed that the hardships they had undergone were responsible for making them resilient. For instance, some mentioned the adversities that they encountered during war and difficult life as refugees. They were vulnerable to death, exploitation, bullying, hunger, diseases, and other forms of miseries. They developed resilience in the process of seeking freedom from those pains. Some who faced extreme poverty saw no other way to go but upward.

There were some who mentioned the unexpected tragedies that had been experienced by them or their families. When those tragedies happened, they found themselves alone with their pains. To make matters worse, some were abandoned or stigmatized by their communities. They realized that it was not time for pity but they had to survive in one way or another. They were also determined to prove other people wrong. So their resilience and determination to succeed were developed. Unexpected tragedies also left one participant with an overwhelming responsibility that made her resilient in the process.

Other participants claimed that it was the suppressive culture in their communities that made them resilient and more determined to fight and succeed so that they could prove their detractors wrong. For instance, Grace, the female participants who grew up in a culture that

hindered female education developed resilience and the hunger to succeed through those experiences.

Amina began to develop resilience quite early in life. She was born prematurely but survived and thrived. She charged that being born in difficult circumstances and surviving made her believe that she could overcome anything. Her early life in an African maternity hospital also made her discover her goal quite early. Amina's mother had the problem of multiple premature births and spent much of her time during pregnancies in the hospital. Amina used to spend time with her mother in the hospital when her mother was pregnant with her younger siblings. It was at that time that Amina began to fall in love with the medical profession. She became determined to study to one day become a doctor to save the lives of babies and their mothers whom she saw suffering and dying in the hospital. Enrolling in a male medical school was not easy for her and it was that determination to overcome anything and to help vulnerable mothers and their babies that made her become resilient.

Parental advice also played a part in building resiliency as some participants held that they became resilient through wise words, discipline, and exemplary lives from their parents. As a result, they grew to believe in themselves and were committed to emulating or simply obeying their parents. Those without parents credited guardians or mentors in their communities for their being able to overcome. The participants obeyed their parents when they were told to go to school, read or avoid certain friends. They believed their parents and were determined to pursue the goals that they had developed. Some participants responded that it was their faith in God that had rendered resilient. They had the belief that the circumstances they had found themselves in had been allowed by God for a purpose. Their faith made them see adversities as a temporary state. Through their faith they were able to remain resilient in the midst of crises. Strong faith was also credited for their becoming positive as they began to see everything that was happening positively. In fact, every participant saw life positively. Each participant claimed it was the events they had described that made them resilient and their strong belief that they were not alone, but that God was there working behind the scenes and would see them through if they persevered toward their dreams.

## **Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question Two**

*How did external support structures contribute to the resilience, well-being and success of Sub-Saharan African immigrant post-secondary students?*

Based on the data collected, the sixteen individuals who participated in this study would never have developed their resilience nor experienced the success they had without: *external support structures*. Each participant relied on external support from different sources to help them become motivated, determined, and resilient in accomplishing their dreams. The external support they received created an environment for them to flourish even in the midst of adversities. The main external support structures emerging from this study included parental/guardian support, social network and friends, community support, religious/spiritual support, teacher support, support from schools/universities and financial support.

Participants who grew up with their parents/guardians maintained that their parents were there for them in one way or the other. It was their parents/guardians who protected and fed them and taught them to work hard. For most of them, their parent/guardians helped, inspired, motivated, and encouraged them to pursue their education. It was their parents who taught them about how to succeed in life. They taught them to be patient and cautious. The fear of God and reliance on Him through good and bad times came through interactions with their parents. Parents taught them to be positive, goal-oriented and to become readers. The parents/guardians also became role models for most participants; people who they looked up to and emulated. Some participants also received financial support from their parents. Their parents/guardians taught them discipline, how to choose their friends and how to live in the community. From their parents they also learned important values and life skills. Some participants gave credit to their guardian for bringing them to Canada.

The social support that some participants had at their disposal was also vital for their success. They tended to have friends with similar interests and who were positive hardworking and goal-oriented like themselves. These friends had become their mentors and sports teammates. They preferred to associate with people who were smarter than them so that they could continue to learn from them. They also had friends who volunteered to help them with their academic work. Some friends were there for them and supported them.

Most participants also mentioned the important support that they had from their community, particularly during their tough times. For many of them, their community was like

their extended family. Members of their community gave them unconditional love and were always there for them, supporting, motivating, mentoring, feeding, and disciplining them. Some received invaluable values that kept them grounded through their community interactions. The community provided for them security, peace and playgrounds. They also had the chance to interact with community members on social occasions and they felt welcomed everywhere they went. Some participants argued that they loved their community members because they were nonjudgmental. The community also fought for scholarships and academic opportunities for some participants.

Spirituality was also credited as a contributing factor toward well-being and success. Some said that their places of worship were sources of survival for them. There they received food to eat, people to interact with, and made contact with people who mentored, inspired and motivated them. In these places of worship they prayed, meditated, and received important values and life lessons. The teachings they received from their places of worship gave them a positive outlook at life and start to view their life's circumstances differently. There they received the faith that allowed them to see the temporality of their circumstances. These experiences allowed them to feel that they were not alone and that God was always there to see them through. It was with and from God that they received comfort, hope and the determination to work hard and succeed. Some of them also became volunteers in their communities through their places of worship.

The support that some participants received from their teachers was also critical to their various successes. For some, teachers were their mentors. The teachers who they considered the best were those who were inspirational, motivational, strict, or compassionate. Some teachers hosted struggling participants, fed them, understood their pains, gave them gifts for their works of excellence, provided school materials for them, mentored them and made them believe that they could do anything. Some teachers became father figures to other students and taught them important values at succeeding in life.

Participants also talked of the significant role the university played in realizing their dreams. The university provided financial support and created a positive environment that enabled them to excel in their academic work. Some praised the roles that their departments, instructors and fellow students played in their social and academic successes. The people at the university made them feel welcomed and gave them a sense of belonging. There are programs at

the university that enabled them to participate in social activities through which they were able to expand their social networks. The university had opened their minds to a new world and they felt they were on course to accomplishing their academic dreams because of the help they received from their university. Some individuals who lived in the refugee camps talked of the support they received from aid agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Thus, external support structures played important roles in helping these 16 participants to overcome odds.

### **Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question Three**

*What do these post-secondary students believe could be changed to provide more effective support for the success of immigrant students (school/post-secondary) from Sub-Saharan Africa?*

Given that the participants had overcome numerous obstacles to achieve their academic goals, they offered encouraging words and important advice to those experiencing similar challenges and also offered suggestions on what should be changed or improved to help those facing similar obstacles succeed in life. Individuals who participated in this study were faced with many adversities. Initially, individuals found it hard or impossible to imagine how they might overcome what they were going through and give room to the hope that they might develop to become productive members of society. But there were internal and external occurrences that spurred them to become resilient and more determined to succeed. They felt that individuals experiencing similar adversities, including those in the position to help them, could benefit from their life stories, experiences, and advice.

The common advice they offered for individuals in similar challenges was to never give up. They believed their life experiences taught them that although things may look bleak in the midst of adversity one need not give up hope but to remain hopeful and positive. It was important to take courage from the small victories that one makes that are often ignored. The interviewees advised individuals to have an open mind and to not limit themselves to certain beliefs. They also counselled that an individual should welcome challenges, especially if you are “a girl living in a man’s world.” One must work hard, fight for his or her rights and prove detractors and naysayers wrong. They suggested that individuals who want to succeed in life should avoid dwelling on present circumstances but rather focus ahead.

Excuses should be shunned and be replaced with the belief that nothing or no one but you can stop you from pursuing your dream. Success is not something that one can achieve quite

easily. It is important for individuals to view their situation positively. Some participants advised that it is important to seek out others who have been through similar challenges since they will be able to better understand the situation and may mentor and guide you through difficult times and towards a brighter future.

They also suggested that one should set goals and stick to them because goals keep you resilient and focused. One cannot move through life without a vision. Setting sound goals and strategies will always be important during their tough times.

What also worked for the participants were the positive roles models that their communities provided. They advised that if individuals face adversities, supportive communities can be instrumental in enabling them to overcoming challenges successfully. They advised that the community may provide mentors and create activities that would attract youth. It is through those activities that the right messages may be transmitted to youth.

Another important support that worked was the financial and moral support that the participants received from various sources. They advised that individuals facing tough times should seek or be offered financial support. Each participant acknowledged that he or she would not have managed to accomplish their academic dreams without financial interventions, big and small.

The participants gave advice directed to recent immigrant parents of troubled youths. Based on their interactions with recent immigrant troubled youths, there is a generational gap especially between the immigrant children and their parents. One of the suggestions was to educate the parents about the values of the new society and help them to use less rigid and different approaches with their children. Another suggestion was also the need for free counselling to parents and their troubled children.

For promising students, they advised that communities could support them and their parents by assisting them to get enrolled in schools or university. The university, on its part, needs to find ways to accommodate recent immigrant students who show the potential for academic success.

### **Facing Multiple Adversities and Hurdles in Life**

As I (the researcher) sought to find explanations for why some Sub-Saharan African students succeed in spite of the tremendous odds against them I had hoped to develop an inventory of strategies that might help those facing similar challenges to overcome their



challenges and achieve their God-given dreams. It is hard to prescribe appropriate solutions to individuals facing adversities before knowing the specific problems they may be facing. In light of this, some of the problems encountered by ethnic minority youth (or individuals in general) that hinder their resilience are presented in the literature review.

As discussed, when faced with adversities or huge, insurmountable barrier of disadvantages, many become hopeless and give up on their dreams. During tough periods, it is difficult for some individuals to focus on future goals. The tendency is to dwell more on the problems and wonder when these will go away. In such situations, those pursuing education see their academic performance decline, and many lose interest and quit their programs of study. As in the literature review section, numerous studies have discussed various kinds of trauma that have shown that some people who have experienced some forms of tragedies such as an abuse, the loss of loved ones or closest friends, witnessed atrocities, or being diagnosed with a life threatening illness often experience distress that can linger for years after the trauma (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Luthar (2003) explained that some of the major factors that affect youth such as those coming from Sub-Saharan African countries result from the massive trauma of wars and violence, extreme poverty, hostile environments, adversities, health issues, exploitation, abuses, suppression, oppressive cultures, neglect, social stigma, brutality, humiliation, racism, discrimination, experience loss and being witness to atrocities.

According to Nolen-Hoeksema (2000), such traumatic events create true developmental challenges by confronting individuals with new situations and issues that they may have never encountered. These kinds of situations prevent some individuals from pursuing their dreams or reaching educational attainment, good life, and becoming productive members of society. Most give up after becoming depressed, fearful, or confused. They find it difficult to concentrate on the daily tasks of living. Some cannot sleep or eat well. Some have intense and long-lasting reactions to trauma and are unable to return to their normal selves for many months or even years (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 150). Sadly, many who are not able to pursue their dreams are forced to engage in negative activities that do not contribute to their building a better future.

Some individuals get involved in anti-social behaviours and activities and others marry quite early. Some give up their future to take up familial responsibilities quite early in life. However, the findings of this study show that traumatic events can affect anyone, but not everyone reacts to these the same way. There are some who, despite facing multiple adversities

are able to recover, become goal-oriented and move on to accomplish their dreams. Such individuals are often called resilient people. As described in their stories, the 16 resilient Sub-Saharan post-secondary students faced similar adversities or traumatic events like their peers in their respective countries. Although many of their peers gave up; they persevered until they developed resilience, accomplished their academic goals, and are on their ways to reaching their goals.

### **The Characteristics of These Resilient Persons**

As presented in the literature review and the stories, resilient people are those who thrive despite experiencing traumatic events similar to that of their peers. Unlike their peers, resilient people are striving every day to overcome adversities, hurdles, or what appear sometime to be insurmountable odds, ranging from extreme poverty, loneliness, discrimination, racism, exploitation, suppression, physical or psychological abuse, bullying, family breakdown, loss, peer pressure, illicit sex, drugs, violence, brutal war, genocide, illness, limitations, and messages that permeate society and discourage achievement (Hrabowski et al., 2002; Camfield, 2012; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). The definitions and examples presented in the literature mirrored the 16 participants who took part in this study. Despite the tremendous odds against them, these individuals refused to follow the easy and negative path. They strived every day to overcome the challenges and worked hard to succeed academically while most of their peers failed or gave up. Just to mention a few examples from their stories, Louis was taken away from his father when he was only five years old, survived war, child exploitation, extreme poverty, hunger, a hard refugee life, and other limitations but managed to pursue the education of his dream. Peter survived war, a difficult journey, tough life as a refugee, bullying, extreme poverty, hunger, discrimination, and other limitations but managed to be on the path to accomplishing his academic dream. Amina was born prematurely and into a brutal war. She survived numerous hardships and limitations but still managed to become a medical doctor, completed her master's studies and is now pursuing her PhD. Lisa survived an early marriage, was forced to adopt four orphans at 19 years old and with no source of income, suffered hardships, but managed to survive numerous hardships with the four orphans, after educating them, decided to become a university student where is now pursuing the education of her dream and running an orphanage at the same time. Erick became an orphan at a young age, was moved from home to home, suffered social stigma, felt unwanted, was discriminated against, but managed to pursue the

education of his dream. Finally, Salwa was born into a brutal war, survived war and hunger, a difficult journey to a refugee camp in Kenya, survived an attempt on her life, cholera, numerous hardships and limitations, and denied an education because of being a girl but still managed to pursue the education of her dream.

As Nolen-Hoeksema (2000) stated concerning the characteristics of resilient people, when the 16 participants were confronted by traumatic experiences, adversities, extreme poverty, hurdles, developmental and emotional challenges, and other new situations and issues they had never faced before, they adapted well to the new challenges. Those new situations did not create long-term distress to them. Like their peers, these individuals had few material resources and little security, but their response to their situation seemed paradoxical (Camfield, 2012). One of the key reasons why they reacted to challenges differently was their positive attitude. Each individual exhibited positive emotions in the face of adversity, although they experienced negative emotions at the early stages of their struggles. They did so by finding positive meaning in every event and within the adversity itself. For instance, Louis believed that hard work and perseverance pays. He had a strong belief that things would change for the better and that he could get out of any situation. Another example is found in Amina's positive perception of the situations in which she found herself. Amina is a positive person by nature. For her, there was no bad life nor is there a good life. To her, life was about how she made the best out of each day. There were many opportunities for Amina and her friends, but it was up to her to identify the opportunities that presented themselves and making the best of them. Challenges could not deter her because of the values and perceptions she had developed. She worked hard to overcome obstacles and pursue her goals. Amina worked whole-heartedly for what she wanted. Whatever she set her mind to, she achieved it. Another participant, Peter overcame his challenges by setting academic goals that he was determined to accomplish. After setting the goals, Peter could no longer focus on life challenges like before, but concentrated on working hard in school. Once he set his goals, he forgot about the sufferings. Setting goals was a turning point for him, because he believed that today's suffering was the beginning of tomorrow's success. For John, challenges made him recognize that he had to take bold steps with his life. Sam reminded himself that success was not something that he could achieve easily; but it was something that he had to achieve through determination and hard work.

As Nolen-Hoeksema (2000) explained, resilient people feel that they have positive changes in their personalities as a result of their trauma. They often feel that the traumatic events have made them “become more tolerant, more sensitive, more patient, and more loving with others” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, p. 110). This was true for each participant I interviewed. The challenges each faced made them stronger. Each person also was optimistic about their future. They believed that things would change for the better if they worked hard for the change. That was why everyone became an avid reader. They would read anything that opened their minds to new worlds of knowledge and opportunities. They had their goals clearly in their minds and they could see opportunities that others could not see. That was what kept them going, despite the challenges they were going through. In fact, every participant said that the adversities that they faced were one of the major sources of their motivation.

According to Snyder (1994), when it comes to physical health, resilient people are better at taking care of themselves. The 16 participants I interviewed were also aware of the behaviours related to health problems. For instance, they were not interested in smoking, drugs and other negative behaviours that could affect their health. Some did not want even be associated with friends who participated in such activities. Most said they took part in physical activities such as athletics, swimming, basketball or soccer. They believed that such activities were good for their minds, energy, and general well-being.

When asked about the role of spiritual connections, each participant stated he or she had a belief in higher powers. They prayed or meditated during good and bad times. This confirmed Baker and Staath (2003), Parks (2000), and Snyder’s (1994) conclusion that resilient people tend to be religious or spiritual. They pray and meditate often and have hope in the higher powers that direct them through their challenges. They also believed that prayer had helped them in coping with their challenges (Snyder, 1994; Parks, 2000).

Most participants admitted that they were social. They liked social networking and making new friends. They said they could rely on their social networks in times of need. This was the same conclusion drawn by Snyder (1994) when he stated that resilient people are often attracted to other people and enjoy interacting with them and can rely upon those people for comfort and social support in good and bad times. Social networking helped these individuals in coping with the trauma, distress, anxieties, and strains that life threw at them.

### **The Elements or Support Structures That People Facing Adversities Need**

As discussed in the literature and stories, there are reasons why some individuals develop resilience to overcome life challenges while others perform poorly, fail or give up their dreams. The literature mentioned that one possible source of resilience is the levels of the key elements of well-being within the individual. The higher the levels of well-being, the more resilient the person becomes. The lower that level is the lower the chance for that person to develop resilience, to become goal-oriented and to succeed in accomplishing those goals (Chida & Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Dolan et al., 2008; Huppert, 2009; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Based on the literature presented and the findings obtained from the interviews, the key elements of well-being (referred to in this section as support structures) that an individual needs to have in order to develop resilience, become goal-oriented, work hard and accomplish the goals that they have set, despite the multiple adversities they face, include parental/guardian support structure, social network and friends support, religious/spiritual support structure, community support structure, physical well-being support, financial support, teacher support, school/university support, and career support.

As Rath and Harter (2010) described, it is difficult to categorize these support structures according to levels of importance. They simply complement each other. They work together to increase the levels of resilience and general well-being of an individual for success to happen. The level of importance one support structure differs from one individual to another. An individual who does not have one particular support structure may need it more than one who already has it. Thus it becomes a top priority for that individual. For instance, if an individual is identified as lacking parental/guardian support structure, then it becomes more a priority for that individual than the person who already has it. These support structures and their importance to the development of resilience and success in an individual are discussed in greater detail next.

#### **Parental/Guardian Support Structure**

The literature showed that parental quality affects the well-being and future of a child (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cause et al., 2003; Steinberg, 1990) because parents are the first teachers of a child. Parents/guardians nurture a child and the types of skills they use in that process have impact on how the child develops and become a member of the society. Parents can become role models for their children and can teach their children important values and life lessons.

Snyder (1994) contended that most resilient children attribute the vital life lessons they have learned mostly to their mothers. However, this evidence was not found among the 16 participants to support this conclusion. Although some said that their mothers offered them vital life lessons, for most of them, their fathers also did the same, or even more. From this study, it appeared that both parents equally offered their children vital life lessons. There were times that it was their mother who played vital role; there were also times that it was their father who taught them these vital life lessons. There were also times that both parents played the role concurrently.

The sixteen participants who participated in this study stressed the important roles that their parents/guardians played in their lives. Each individual was grateful for the positive roles that their parents/guardians played during the tough times. Most grew up in loving and caring homes and felt that their parents loved them unconditionally. This shows that effective parents have unconditional love for their child. According to the data gathered from the participants, parents should love their children at all time and not only when they do right. Hating children when they do wrong only alienates them and gives them the chance to seek love and attention in undesirable places or situations that might hurt their well-being and future. Every participant who took part in this study was fallible. They made mistakes, but their parents forgave them for those mistakes and they loved and respected their parents more for that. A parent may feel that they are disciplining the child, but in a world that is filled with so many temptations, that strategy can often have negative impact on the child. Unconditional love between parent and child can generate mutual trust and can motivate a child to do what is productive. Lisa offered examples of children who were fearful to approach a parent with issues that were disturbing them, or what they might have done wrong because they knew that their parents would do to them.

Some participants preferred the parent who was slow to anger, condemnation and punishment, and who knew how to interact with them. The participants praised their parents for the selfless sacrifices they made to support them during tough times. Their parents used the limited resources that they had to support their families. Parents hardly had money but managed to support their wards while in school, no matter how small their earnings. Those acts instilled in the participants the desire to work hard to succeed for their parents and siblings. Their parents were one of their main sources of motivation.

However, there were parents who were unable to provide for their children, either because of lack of education, unemployment or extreme poverty. In some situations, some of the participants' siblings were forced out of school in order to work and care for their parents and their siblings. For instance, Collins grew up with a mother who was divorced and extremely poor. He had to work hard to help her. Alex suggested that one solution may be to train parents and help them find jobs. This could free their children of adult responsibilities and allow them to continue with their education unperturbed.

Interviews with participants pointed to situations where there were conflicting cultural values, especially involving parents and their children are growing up in the western norms. Often, parents were rigid and expected their children to abide by the culture of their countries of origins. For this, the participants called for flexibility on the part of parents. There arose a need parenting skills training for immigrant parents to familiarize them with the cultural parental skills of the new society. Their lack of knowledge and flexibility alienates their children and causes them to act negatively. One participant sound the call for free counselling services, especially for parents and children that cannot afford the ones that are available.

Seven of the sixteen participants who took part in this study were females. Nothing showed that male participants were smarter than they were. They believed they were equally intelligent human beings who had overcome many hurdles that life had thrown at them and are in the process of accomplishing their academic and social goals, just like their male counterparts. Amina, Grace and Salwa stressed that the culture must change how it views and treats girls in comparison to boys. They indicated that there were parents who grew up in cultures that believed that females should be excluded from achieving an education; education for boys was favored and girls were excluded from education. Those parents do not think that girls can contribute equally as boys to the betterment of their families and communities. The female participants believed that the education of girls must start with such parents and then expand to schools and communities. Such cultures can only change if parents stand up and fight for the educational rights of girls.

Most participants admitted that it was their parents who forced them to attend school and get an education. There were some who detested education initially but pressure from their parents turned things around for them; even parents who had never been to school made sure that their children understood the importance of an education. For Alex, it was his father who

introduced him to reading. He provided Alex with African literature from which he later got his motivation.

Most participants also admitted that their parents were consistent, especially with setting boundaries. Their parents respected them and were not hypocritical. They found their parents were also good listeners. When participants observed how their parents treated other people and behaved in the society they wanted to model their actions. Their parents also set boundaries about their choice of friends. Their parents made sure that they did not associate with the wrong groups. These boundaries impacted the ways they chose friends and their acquaintances, even today. Thus, the roles that parents/guardians play in the life of their children are vital for their eventual successes in life.

### **Social Support Structure**

As mentioned in the literature, social network structure is important as it enables individuals to build social capital that allows them to live fulfilling and meaningful lives (Bourdieu 1986; Camfield, 2012; Woolcock & Narayan 2000). An individual can get material, psychological or emotional support from the people with associates and that enables him or her to cope with stress and also flourish (Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2002). Friends and associates may evolve into mentors who can guide an individual through life challenges. Social networks can help people to learn how to demonstrate love, caring, and altruism in communities (Todis, 2001). They can also teach individuals the importance of good health, exercise, education, moral behaviour, as well as self-control (Todis, 2001).

For those who were interviewed, whose parents were absent, orphans, or raised by a single mother, social support structure was particularly important (Todis, 2001). Their close friends or people with whom they associated supported them in many different ways. Their friends were positive, goal-oriented and people who shared similar academic goals and interests. Most preferred to associate with people who knew more than they, themselves, did, with the hope that they could learn from such people and become better or successful individuals. They preferred to associate with people they regarded as role models or mentors. They were careful about their choice of acquaintances and friends because they believed that one's social circle really affects who an individual is on many different levels, including setting goals for one's life. They chose to have friends who were hardworking, successful and advancing in society. Those were the people they could learn from and succeed in life. They preferred friends who could



help them to achieve their academic goals, like friends they could study with and share academic discussions. They liked friends who were loyal and trustworthy. No one wanted to be associated with friends who were manipulative or arrogant. They wanted friends who were simple open-minded and who could motivate them. They had friends coming from different backgrounds, races, and cultures. They wanted to make friends with people who could provide them important advice in areas where they found themselves less knowledgeable, especially with their academic work.

These results demonstrate that social support structure is an important source to the general well-being and success of an individual (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Resilient individuals enjoy making friends with people who are more successful than themselves. Lisa explained that such friends raised the bar and made her want to do better.

### **Financial Support Structure**

Every participant mentioned the vital role that money played in enabling them to make their dreams come true. Money was valuable for each one because it did a lot of good, including buying food for them and their families, for rent, transportation, meeting personal needs, health care, and for educational purposes. Those who lacked money had stories of extreme poverty, hunger, lack of clothing and shoes, lack of tuition, humiliation, psychological and emotional problems, discrimination, social exclusion, loneliness, anxiety, and the fear of being forced out of school, low academic performance, transportation problems, pains and other limitations and sufferings. They spoke of how many of their friends were forced out of school because of lack of money. Lack of money also forced many of their friends into early marriages, sexual exploitations, child labor, loss of future, or attraction to unproductive behaviours. Some participants said that they themselves were forced out of school briefly because they were unable to pay their school fees. Others were forced to do difficult jobs, with people exploiting them. Some could go days without food because they did not have money for buying food. These negative economic conditions had significant negative effects on them, their future, personal health, and their families, as it deprived them of access to crucial economic, education and social resources. It was only after interventions from charitable organizations, family members, compassionate teachers, community members, university, or organizations such as WUSC that they were able to move toward achieving their academics.

This shows that no matter how resilient one may be, it is difficult for one to succeed in life without some financial support structure. Bursaries, scholarships, student loans, and other forms of financial contributions go a long way in helping students become overcomers through the realization of their academic or social dreams. Many dreams are abruptly halted because of encounters financial limitations. It was these negative economic factors that contributed to the hindrance of academic progress and social mobility among individuals coming from poor background.

### **Physical Well-being Support Structure**

It is difficult for most individuals to accomplish their dreams in the absence of physical well-being. There are several things that contribute positively to the physical and mental well-being and resilience of an individual. These include participation in physical activities, healthy eating, sleep, rest, positive lifestyle, choir, music, and other forms of entertainment. These forms of activities keep the body physically fit, sharp and healthy. They relieve the mind of tension, stress, and anxieties and allow the individual to be more creative. They can also reduce the risk of diseases that result from physical inactivity, including premature death (Health Canada, 2013; Human Recourses and Skills Development in Canada, 2013).

As mentioned in the literature, health experts have concluded that physical activity is a key behaviour affecting the health and well-being of individuals (Human Resources and Skills Development in Canada, 2013). According to Health Canada (2013), individuals who are regularly involved in physical activities have healthy growth and development, are able to accomplish tasks with greater ease and comfort and with less fatigue. The participants in this study were all active individuals. Some played soccer, and others played volleyball or basketball; still others participated in swimming and athletics. There were some who ran errands or did physical jobs that were much harder than sporting activities. Others played with friends and some were choir in their churches. There were some who also took part in some entertainment programs in their communities. All these activities contributed toward their physical and mental well-being.

Rath and Harter (2010) argued that malnutrition can affect physical and mental well-being. The types of food one consumes can also affect physical and mental well-being; eating unhealthy food has negative impact on our physical and mental well-being (Rath & Harter, 2010). Lack of food can also impact an individual's physical and mental health in negative

ways. The individuals who participated in this study told stories of how hunger and lack of food affected their physical and mental well-being. It made it hard for them to concentrate on studies or participate in physical activities. Thus, what the literature and participants about health, physical and status show that the physical and mental well-being of individuals contribute significantly toward resilience, creativities, and the abilities to succeed in accomplishing goals.

### **Religious/Spiritual Support Structure**

Numerous studies have concluded that meditation, spiritual connections or faith in God have positive impacts on individuals who practice them (Johnson, 2008; Kesebir & Diener, 2009). Meditation, prayer, spiritual connection, or affiliations to religious groups help individuals to discover comfort, hope, and inspiration, especially when they undergo tough times. Spiritual connection also helps individuals make meanings of their sufferings (Parks, 2000). When individuals gain insight into the meaning of life through a spiritual connection, optimism increases (Baker & Stauth, 2003). Optimism and hope empower individuals to get over their painful life events (Baker & Stauth, 2003). When individuals feel that they have power over the painful events they go through then resilience becomes possible. This was true with the 16 participants in this study. Each of them felt that there was a Superior Being who was bigger than themselves in control of their destinies. Others said that reading the Holy Book sharpened their minds and helped them perform exceptionally in their academic work. They felt that faith reassured them of God being there for them. The feeling of being able to talk to God in times of struggles always gave them peace and the belief that they were not alone; but that there is someone, somewhere watching over them and guiding them through those challenges.

Religious institutions such as churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues are well suited to produce the relational networks of social and emotional support that help the vulnerable in the society (Johnson, 2008). Those institutions also help individuals to integrate into a social network or a set of people linked by a variety of positive social relationships (Johnson, 2008). Some participants talked about the vital support that they had received from their religious institutions. They talked of how they were fed and cared for in those institutions during their tough times. They also talked about the social connections and solidarities they developed as a result of their connection to those institutions. Religious institutions also had charity programs that provided some with scholarships that enabled them to accomplish their academic dreams.

Some talked also of the mentorship and counselling services that were provided to them by their religious institutions. The values that they learned through those connections also contributed toward helping them avoid wrong groups, peer pressure, drugs, and anti-social behaviours. Those values also helped them to respect others. They became better persons because of those connections. They also learned to become better servants of their communities through acts of altruism. Thus religious/spiritual support structure plays an important role in the resilience, success and the well-being of the individual who is connected to it.

### **Community Support Structure**

The fact that individuals belong to one community or another makes the support that they receive from the community important for their future success. A community provides for its members security, shelter, food, water, sanitation, electricity, sports and recreation centers, play grounds, schools, opportunities to make friends and socialize, transportation, community services, multiculturalism, inclusiveness, motivation, inspiration, perseverance, counselling, mentorship, role models, leadership, charity, resources for success, and much, much more (Rath & Harter, 2010). All these create a safe environment for individuals to prosper.

Most of the participants had positive things to say about their home communities. Those communities provided for them most of what is described above. Some said that it was the community that fought for scholarships for intelligent students living in the community. The community also provided for them a place where they could study. Those who were poor said their communities provided food and other necessities for survival. Some communities could come together to help those in need, including providing security to those who were in danger.

Some communities also motivated students. They felt loved and respected as students and young people by members of their communities. There were also mentors and role models in the communities that they could look up to. Their communities opened schools for them. They were always encouraged by their communities to work hard at school, as they were seen as the future of those communities. Some communities even provided gifts for those who performed well at school. This motivated them and others to take education more seriously.

Those responsible for security within communities also built good relationships with community members, including the youth. It encouraged trust among people, and peace and a sense of belong in the communities. Another important set of contributions made by their communities were the transmission of values and attitudes which made them better persons;

persons who were able to distinguish right from wrong. As a result, they became productive members of their communities, as they developed into law-abiding citizens in their respective communities. The values they developed in their communities contributed to making them exemplary citizens in Canada.

Their communities were also inclusive and always encouraged their full participation in social activities. Being valued as important and productive members of their societies caused them to love their communities more and they were willing to work hard, succeed, return and help in developing the communities in which they grew. Based on this outcome, a community can be a source of resilience, motivation, productivity, and success for its young population if it supports and works with them.

### **Teacher Support Structure**

As explained in the literature and the stories, the benefits that a student gets from positive teachers' support can improve emotional adjustment, better academic-related achievement and behaviours, and fewer psychosomatic symptoms in the student (Chu et al., 2010). It can also motivate a student to become more goal-oriented, focused, hardworking, and more resilient and excited about education. Because the roles of a teacher in the life of a student are similar to those that their parents, friends or other relationships play (Chu et al., 2010), a teacher can also play a parental figure for students whose parents are absent in their life. Krovetz (1999) stated that "Human relationships are the heart of schooling" (p. 57). That means that the relationships that exists between a teacher and a student "can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict" (Krovetz, 1999, p. 57) them in their communities and education. A good teacher is someone who listens to students, understands their challenges and offer motivation or (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The participants talked about the major roles that some teachers played in their academic journeys. The teachers whom they praised were teachers who went beyond teaching them in the classrooms. They were teachers who took time to talk to them or build good relationships with them and guided them through the challenges that they were going through. Some teachers shared their own shelters and food with some. There were teachers who motivated them to work hard and helped them to see beyond their current circumstances. Some teachers gave participants gifts that motivated them to work harder at school. Some participants became motivated because of the hard work and discipline that their teachers gave them. There were

teachers who became mentors and role models that they looked up to for guidance through their tough times. There were some teachers who used their personal money to provide education materials for them. Other teachers fought for the rights of some. There were also some teachers who provided security to those who were in danger. Some teachers volunteered to help them understand their courses and were always there to offer any assistance they might need.

### **School/University Support Structure**

Schools and universities with a positive environment can play a critical role in the motivation and well-being of a student. As was discussed in the literature, schools or universities can provide support structure that students can access to help them develop into positive and successful youth and adults (Todis, 2001). The support structures in schools and universities can also help students to develop vital skills and problem-solving mechanisms (Todis, 2001). Schools and universities personnel can also become a source of motivation for students; these include guest speakers who can become role models for students, particularly individuals with nationalities or race of the targeted group, someone who has been through adversities and has succeeded (Krovetz, 1999). Schools and universities can also create a caring and protective atmosphere. Henderson and Milstein (2003) pointed out that, schools, universities and educators can create resilience, hope, and optimism in students by being caring and developing personal relationship with students. Schools and universities are like a second home to students. So the best school or university is one a student can regard as a large family.

Most participants had fond memories of their schools and universities. They missed their schools or universities because of the supportive, friendly, loving and caring atmosphere. For most, their school or university was like one big family that created an atmosphere for them to learn, be creative, build social networks, discover life purposes, goals, and prosper and achieve their academic dreams.

Participants were grateful for the student friendly atmosphere that their schools and universities created that allowed them to develop and maximize their academic abilities. Some were grateful for the financial support they received from their schools and universities through awards that included bursaries, scholarships, student loans, and additional support that they received from various groups and families. There were others also who benefited from becoming research or teaching assistants.

Some participants also gained from becoming members of associations in their university. Those associations enlarged their knowledge about important causes and helped them to develop skills and relationships that would benefit them in the future. Because of that, they learned how to become compassionate and productive members of the global society. Thus, the support that a school or university provides, especially to struggling students is critical for their general well-being, resilience, creativity, and success in life.

### **Career Support Structure**

In the current society, career has become an identity of most individuals (Rath & Harter, 2010). Career is what individuals aspire to be. Students struggle through years of study so that they can spend most of their waking hours during the week doing what they love (Rath & Harter, 2010). The most important reason most parents/guardians send their children to school and university is to learn and get a good career in life. Individuals who struggle for years through school, college, and university to accomplish their academic dreams also dream of life fulfilling careers, against all odds. In fact, life is unfulfilling and meaningless for individuals without careers. Rath and Harter (2010) described a career as the most essential of our general well-being.

The resilient sixteen participants in this study who, despite violence, extreme hardships, discrimination, racism, oppression, suppression, exploitation, had managed to accomplish their academic goals acknowledged that they needed career support structures after their academic achievements to make their dreams become reality. Each wanted a life-fulfilling career that would enable them to live well and have happy families. They wanted to use their future careers to support their communities and make a difference globally. Some participants wanted to work with their governments; others wanted to work within the private sector. Some wanted to operate businesses of their own; others wanted to operate charity organization such as orphanages; some wanted to provide health care and maternity services in their communities and others had the dreams of doing other greater things. They needed external help to secure employment after academic attainment, especially given that they are recent immigrants and members of visible minority groups lacking vital social connections.

Thus, a joined effort involving the government, the nonprofit and private sectors, educators, philanthropic individuals and groups, foundations, activists, religious institutions, charity organizations and other organizations (“My Brother’s Keeper” Initiative, 2014) can help

develop employment programs that support, train, hire or find life fulfilling jobs for visible minority graduates, such as the sixteen participants who have accomplished their academic dreams against all odds. These may include mentoring programs, funding of projects or loans offered by financial institutions (“My Brother’s Keeper” Initiative, 2014). The disparities that exist among the different races, recent immigrants and communities can be significantly reduced if such public-private partnerships were established (“My Brother’s Keeper” Initiative, 2014). If ethnic minorities who have accomplished their academic goals succeed in finding life fulfilling careers, they can become role models for other ethnic minorities in their communities. This can be a source of motivation and encouragement for more visible minority youths to take education seriously. Such career support structures can enable ethnic minority graduates who have overcome odds and accomplished their academic goals to become productive members of society and contribute positively to the national and global economy.

### **Implications of the Study**

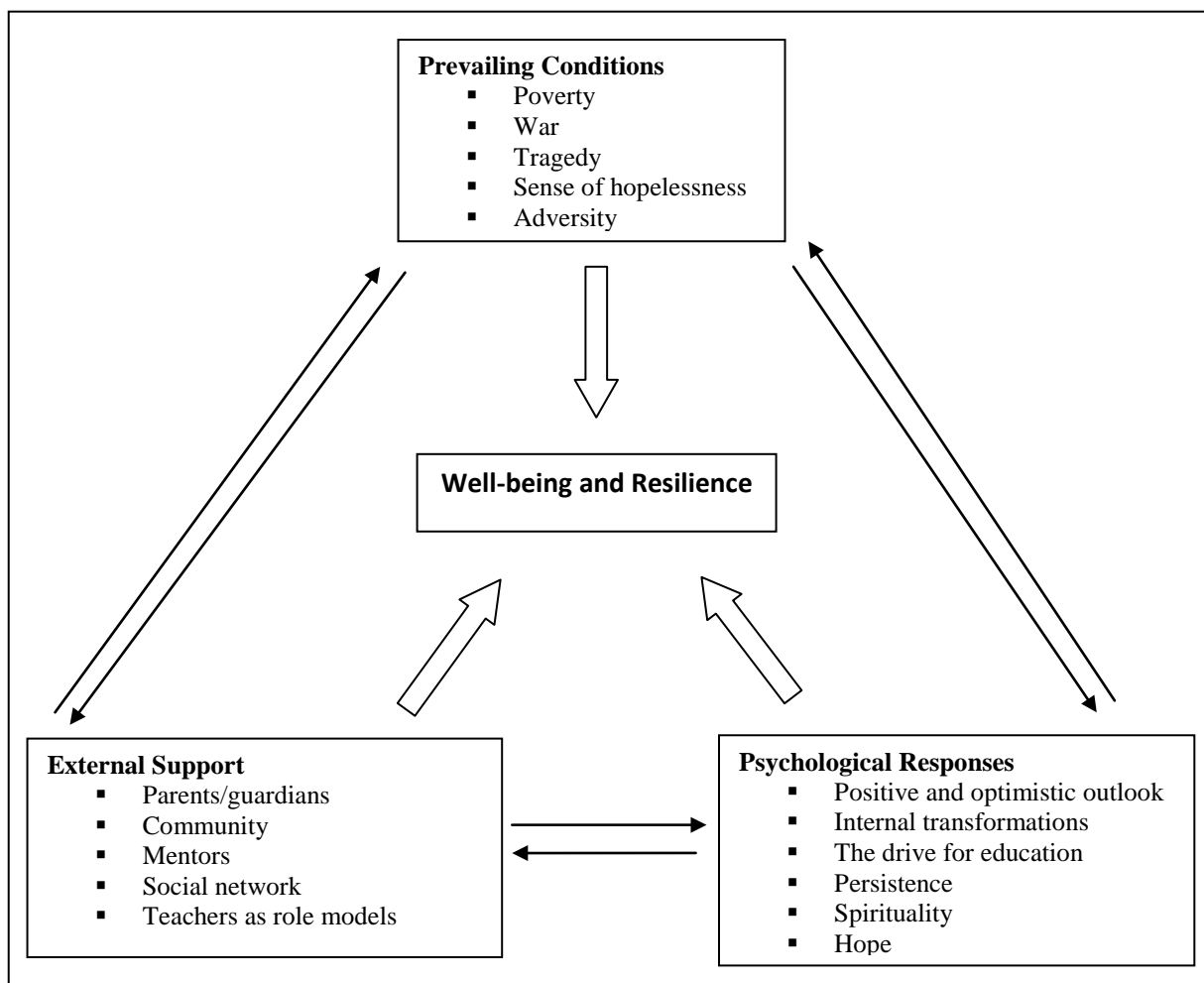
In the section that follows, a number of implications for theory and practice, further research, policy, and persons will be reviewed.

#### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The results and conclusions drawn from this research suggested practical examples and ideas that are likely to help individuals in similar circumstances. Given the increased numbers of school and college age youth immigrating to Canada from regions whose populations are affected by the adversities discussed in this study, the findings underscore the importance of development of effective strategies or practices that could help individuals in these situations overcome their life hurdles. The study has produced the knowledge and understanding through which appropriate intervention programs can be developed.

This was a study of resilience in contexts of adversity. This concept was described in Chapter 2 in terms of the nature of resilience in school contexts. Given the unique nature of the contexts described in this study, I take the opportunity at this point to revisit the resilience concept and its major dimensions as represented in the narratives of my sixteen participants. This is contained in Figure 6.1.





**Figure 6.1 Resilience in Context: Patterns of Psychological and External Influences**

As illustrated in Figure 6.1, the major elements of resilience emerging from the narratives of the sixteen participants were *the prevailing conditions, psychological responses, and external supports*. The most prevalent *conditions* included poverty, war, tragedy, sense of hopelessness, and adversity. The common *psychological responses* were positive and optimistic outlook, internal transformations, drive for education, persistence, spirituality, and hope. The major *external supports* included parents/guardians, community, mentors, social network, and teachers as role models.

From the participants' narratives, there were powerful relationships evident among the prevailing conditions and the nature of external support, psychological responses, and resilience. These were some of the findings that have led me to believe that this study will make a major

contribution toward the development of new knowledge about the nature of resilience in students and its application in enhancing the lives of the increasingly diverse youth population in our communities, many of whom continue to face significant struggles.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Interestingly, one of the challenges to accomplishing the tasks associated with this research project was the minimal research that has been conducted within this area. For this reason the researcher believes that other researchers will benefit from the use of this study. The study may be used in future research as it has produced new data, information and understanding that have not been previously explored. These research findings will also be used by the researcher in several ways. I will use the findings in further research, including in writing books and articles and promote these research findings among policymakers, educators, parents, the youth, advocates, influential members of the public, as well as in schools, universities, non-profit and profit organizations and communities. This will be achieved through speeches and publications. I will also use this study as a base for conducting future research from the gaps discovered.

I did not employ critical theory, social justice, or issues related to racism in this study. The main reason for that was that during the time I was conducting research for the literature review (Chapter Two), I discovered that numerous studies had already addressed the issue of racism in ethnic minorities, as well as the social justice issues related to ethnic minorities. Many such studies used critical theory or social justice approaches. Given that there are already more than enough research studies that have been conducted using these approaches, I believed that using a critical theory or a social justice approach would have produced similar findings. The purpose of this study was to add new knowledge to the existing literature. I believe the approach I used for my study has met that goal.

Another reason for not choosing critical theory or social just in this study was a personal choice. Although the issue of social justice is important, I personally do not consider myself a social justice researcher or campaigner. As a result, I do not see myself using these approaches in my further studies. Philosophy mentions “philosophical midwifery,” inspired by Plato’s *Theaetetus*. In that dialogue Socrates compares his art of helping people give birth to either true ideas or false beliefs with his mother’s art of midwifery” (Grimes & Uliana,1998). As those who fight for social justice see it as their call, I see the art of helping ethnic minorities give birth to

their God-given dreams as my call. I believe that, as individuals, we are all pregnant with ideas and dreams that are waiting to be discovered and nurtured into maturity. My dream is to conduct further research studies and develop strategies that can enable individuals give birth to their God-given dreams. For many of us, we do not know we are pregnant with ideas or we do not know that we have them. For many of us, the life challenges we encounter prevent us from discovering or nurturing the dreams that we already have. Thus, I would like to work as a midwife to motivate and inspire such individuals to re-discover themselves and their dreams, and develop and live to their potential. I would like to see individuals have the moment of “re-birth” and self-realization. I would like to help change their perceptions about life and the challenges they face. I would like to help them focus more on their visions and less on their limitations and life challenges. With my life story and that of my participants, I would like to understand the meaning of suffering, the values that we gain from it, and the techniques or approaches we could use to overcome obstacles and achieve our God-given goals, even those that seem to be insurmountable.

Although racism is real, I believe that people who see it as an obstacle cannot succeed in life because it is here to stay. Racism can be reduced and it can always bounce back when life conditions become difficult for racial groups in multicultural communities. Thus, anyone who believes that they cannot succeed in life until racism is eradicated can never accomplish their goals. Individuals with that mindset will live and die below their potential. I believe that racism exists in every racial group and not only in a particular racial group. I also believe that members of ethnic minorities who see themselves as victims of racism will never progress in life fully until they perceive that with or without racism they can achieve their God-given goals. Although incidences of racism can be reduced, they will continue to exist in every society. I believe that instead of focusing on the issue of racism, more emphasis should be put on helping ethnic minorities discover how to overcome and succeed in the midst of challenges. It is worth noting that although numerous studies have been conducted on racism and social justice, for example in North America, with numerous recommendations published or implemented, the living conditions of ethnic minorities continues to lag behind that of mainstream society. Furthermore, hatred, divisions, and racism continue to exist among racial groups. Given these facts, I believe that focusing on new approaches, such as the one this study provides maybe required.

### **Implications for Policy**

Right policies cannot be developed without research and recommendations. I believe that these research findings will contribute toward encouraging policy shapers and government leaders to make decisions based on research, and promote a new understanding of ethnic minorities and recent immigrants, especially those who have faced adversities. The research findings can also promote the dialogue and discourse that will reshape the way the society talks about educating diverse group, and appropriate strategies that can be used to enable them to reach their God-given potentials. Thus the new knowledge gained from this study will contribute toward assisting policymakers, schools, universities, educators, parents, communities, charities and concerned groups in their efforts to develop policies or strategies that enable disadvantaged students to thrive and flourish and to reach their full potential as full members of the society.

### **Implications for Persons**

This study contributes to our understanding that every person has the potential to achieve his/her God-given potentials, if they have access to the right information and support structures. The stories of the participants presented in this research teach that although one has no control over what happens in life circumstances, a person is responsible for how he or she reacts to the stimuli. Through this study, it is possible to understand why some persons succeed in spite of the tremendous odds against them and help us to speculate about how others, in similar situations, do not. Thus, lessons learned from those who have succeeded can help persons facing life challenges to see their challenges differently, believe in themselves, and become hopeful and goal-oriented. The lessons learned can also help individuals to design strategies that would enable them overcome their adversities, embrace challenges, be encouraged and motivated to work hard toward achieving their goals that they have set and live the lives of their dreams with improved general well-being.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This research has been a positive experience for me as a person and a student researcher. I have learned a lot from the books and articles that I have read and from my supervisor and other instructors; each of whom I cannot thank enough. What surprised me the most was my own transformation because of the interviews I conducted with these remarkable sixteen persons.

Their stories enabled me to ponder past events in my life. There were times when I felt they were telling my own story. When they were sad, I was also sad and when they were happy, I was happy with them. I believe, being in a similar situation allowed me to understand and provide their stories in ways that have made them proud. Some told me that they cried when reading their own stories that I had sent them to check and release to me. This increased my confidence that I had not distorted their stories; they could hear their own voices. I simply delivered their stories as they would have. I have been through similar challenges and so perhaps I should not have been surprised to discover that the sixteen participants used similar strategies I used to overcome my life challenges. I was also surprised to discover that I had similar external support structures that I took advantage of to make my dreams come true. Although the participants were diverse, they used similar strategies and external support structures that helped them achieve their goals. For these reasons I am confident that these research findings will contribute to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in education.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample of Interview Questions**

- 1- Tell me your story. As you think about your life story, what are the highlights for you?
- 2- As you think back to growing up in Sub-Saharan Africa, what are the specific events that became the turning point in life – events that had helped transformed your life and turned you into the goal-oriented and resilient person that you are today? Why would you still remember that story?
- 3- Considering your entire time in your struggles, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your future? What made it an exciting experience in the middle of those pains?
- 4- You have such a strong and resilient personality, what energizes you? What motivates you to keep on going and do what you are doing now?
- 5- What do you think was about you — unique qualities you have – that have contributed to this positive, goal oriented nature? What were the most important factors that helped to make it a meaning to the negative experiences that you went through?
- 6- Your life story and your being in the university show that you have proven strengths and have a history of being able to overcome challenges and succeed in a wide number of areas. In your opinion, what is the most important achievement that you can recall that when looking back you can wonder how on earth did you manage to find the hidden human spirit within you, be your best, overcome the enormous obstacles that were before you and do what you did?
- 7- Considering all of your life objectives so far, what are you proudest of having accomplished despite the significant challenges you have been through?
- 8- Let us consider for a moment the things you value deeply. Specifically, the things you value about yourself; the kind of future that you want to have; the kind of work

- you want; and the kind of world that you want to create for yourself and life in, how do you perceive success, well-being, educational attainment, and the good life?
- 9- As you think of your life today, you have overcome challenges and have obviously made some successes you can be proud of. If your parents were here looking at you right now, what could they say is the highlight? For instance, with regard to what you have overcome, something they thought you would never achieve or the person that you have become?
  - 10- You have positive images about your parents and their positive roles in your life, are there some important life lessons you learned from your parents? Who did you learn from most, your father or your mother? Do you see yourself in them? Do the values they taught you still impact your major life decisions today? Have what they taught you played any role in how you choose your friends or social network, at all?
  - 11- As you think of the challenges you have been through, can you tell me how or if spirituality has helped you?
  - 12- As you imagine with me, right now, the faces of the teachers who have taught you, what can you think of as the key things you have learned from them? What made them special or unique? What were the things you loved about them? What attracted you to them? Why do you still remember them? Why do you want to be like them?
  - 13- As you think about the community that you cannot forget has impacted you in a positive way, what is about it that you cannot forget? What positive support did you get from it? What made you want to participate in its activities? What did you love most about that community? What did you like about the recreational activities you participated in?
  - 14- As you think about people in your relationship with; people whom you had connections or contact with, it can be friends, friends of your friends, parents of your friends, or just people you know (both old and young), what is about them that made you want to connect with them? For instance, what made you want to be friends with them? Want to learn from them? Or want to confide in them? Want to be like them?



- in certain ways? What is about your social network that you like? What is special about that neighborhood or community made you glad you lived there?
- 15- What do you love most about this university? What first drew you here and what has most encouraged you to stay? As an engaged student, there are inevitably high points and low points, successes and frustrations that you have encountered so far. What stands out for you as a high point when you have been part of an outstanding university community effort here? What has inspired you to get engaged in some activities in this university? What do you most hope you can contribute? What is about this university that motivates you and inspires you to want to succeed big in life? What is special about this university as a learning community? What do you consider the core factors that make for excellence in education here?
- 16- Imagine a time in the future when young people facing some of the similar challenges you have been through look to you as an exceptional example of overcoming odds to succeed, and working to develop a thriving, attractive community where citizens of all ages engage and see themselves as owners of their future as well as their community's future. What are some key motivational life lessons you can teach them about overcoming odds? What can you tell them about an attractive university or community? What can you tell them about their social networks or any support network you can think of that have helped you be where you are today?
- 17- What small changes could we make right now that would really encourage more ethnic minority youth to get more interested in education, or engaged with improving our community?
- 18- What do you feel are the most promising areas in which to expand the collaboration between the university, community, and ethnic minority students that would help this group realize their dreams?
- 19- Can you think of what has contributed most to making overcoming challenges to you possible? It could be from what we have discussed or something else we have not mentioned.