

# EDUCATING CULTURALLY DISPLACED STUDENTS WITH TRUNCATED FORMAL EDUCATION (CDS-TFE): THE CASE OF REFUGEE STUDENTS AND CHALLENGES FOR ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, AND COUNSELORS\*

Athanase Gahungu

Olive Gahungu

Florah Luseno

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## Abstract

From 2006 to 2008, refugee resettlement agencies brought 4018 refugees to Chicago, Illinois. Using the example of the challenges faced by 14 refugee students from Burundi in adjusting to the U.S. school system, the authors call the attention of schools to the distinction between educating English Language Learners (ELL) and Educating Culturally Displaced Students with Truncated Formal Education (CDS-TFE). These authors also question the appropriateness of social promotion practices by which these students with truncated formal education are placed several grade levels above their actual educational attainment in U.S. schools, regardless of their school interruptions or limited school readiness. Principles and strategies for responsive integration of CDS-TFE in the U.S. educational systems are also explored.



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## 1 About the Authors

Dr. Athanase Gahungu and Dr. Florah Luseno are associate professors in the College of Education at Chicago State University. Dr. Olive Gahungu is the Director of the Teacher Development and Reading Center in the College of Education at Chicago State University.

## 2 Sumario en español

De 2006 a 2008, agencias de reasentamiento de refugiado trajeron 4018 refugiados a Chicago, Illinois. Utilizando el ejemplo de los desafíos encarados por 14 estudiantes del refugiado de Burundi en el ajuste al sistema escolar de EEUU, los autores llaman la atención de escuelas a la distinción entre educar a Estudiantes ingleses de Idioma (ELL) y Educar Cultural Desplazó a Estudiantes con Truncó Formación académica (CDS-TFE). Estos autores también preguntan la conveniencia de prácticas sociales de promoción por que estos estudiantes con truncó formación académica es colocada varios niveles de grado encima de su logro educativo verdadero en escuelas de EEUU, a pesar de sus interrupciones de la escuela o la prontitud limitada de la escuela. Los principios y las estrategias para la integración sensible de CDS-TFE en sistemas de enseñanza de EEUU también son explorados.

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## 3 Introduction

Imagine that you are a high school principal, and, in October, a refugee resettlement agency brings in two teenagers with the following characteristics to your school. One is a 16-year-old student who was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade in a refugee camp school. The other student is also 16 years old, but, in contrast, has not been in school on a continuous basis. This student attended school until the age of nine, when his family went back to his native country. There, he did not go to school. Though he indicates that he was back in camp the past three years and had resumed school, he has no paperwork to prove his story. In both cases, chances are that you are going to place these two teenagers in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, where, as Abedi (2008) recommends, their linguistic and academic skills will be assessed, and where they will be instructed as English Language Learners (Abedi, 2008). These students are also likely to be assigned to your transitional bilingual education teachers.

While you are still assessing the ethical and educational implications of placing 16-year-old adolescents in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, you learn that their case is not isolated. Indeed, the two youngsters are part of a larger group of 8706 Burundian refugees who, these past two years, are being resettled in the U.S. from refugee camps in Tanzania. Among these refugees, 41% are between the ages of 5 to 17 and are being placed in U.S. schools. However, their statistics are like nothing you have seen in your 20 years in the teaching profession. You learn that as many as 23% of the 5-17 year olds have not attended any school at all. Only 1% of them were in middle school, and about 1% were in high school (Cultural and Orientation Resource Center, 2007). You are shocked when you find out that, from the information provided by the resettlement agency, of the adult population 18 years of age and over, 29% never attended any schooling, and 38% did not go to school beyond the primary level. What seems even more conceptually overwhelming is the realization that only an estimated 20% of the group can read and write in their own language.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ncpeapublications.org>

Based on these statistics, you are not sure whether to celebrate that you made a difference for these two 16-year-old adolescents by placing them in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, or you set them up for failure. As you scramble to find assistance for these two youngsters, you are faced with the realization of a dearth of literature on best practices for serving such education-deprived population effectively. At the same time, you question whether it is appropriate to send these two youngsters to 9<sup>th</sup> grade as you are not sure whether they are really just English language learners (ELLs) who will be able to transition to regular content instruction after they have learned English. There does not seem to be any doubt that, by placing the two youngsters several grades above their entry level, and mistakenly teaching them as if they were ELLs, you are setting the students up for failure. Unless some more responsive intervention is implemented, within one year, the two youngsters will be 17 years old, and by the provisions of the Illinois School Code, they will likely be dropped from school for poor academic performance.

There is plenty of research about the poor qualifications and understaffing of English as a second language and bilingual education teachers (e.g., Batt, 2008), in addition to information pertaining to how to teach ELL with disabilities (Kuschner, 2008), or issues in assessing content information for English language learners (ELLs). Furthermore, researchers such as Decapua and Marshall (2011) confront the issues of teaching students with limited and interrupted formal education (SLIFE), in particular, refugee children resettled in US schools. However, there is scarcity of literature about (1) the appropriate education of students displaced from their culture and whose formal schooling, if any received, was disrupted several times; (2) involving illiterate or semi-literate parents in their children's education; or (3) addressing the issue of societal responsibility when such children are not enrolled in schools due to their old age or truancy. To add to these challenges, these students come traumatized by war and violence, may lack literacy in their first or second language, and have limited knowledge and understanding of how school works. In this paper, the authors thought that the definition often adopted for characterizing these students (e.g., DeCapua and Marshall, 2011)—students with limited and interrupted formal education (SLIFE)—was limiting. Instead, the researchers are proposing to classify these students as “culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE).” In this perspective, to further explore the need for effective integration of such students who come from different cultural contexts, information discussed in this paper will describe the case of Burundian refugee students resettled in a large metropolitan school district. The authors will also highlight practices and strategies that could help teachers and support service professionals in effectively integrating CDS-TFE in U.S. Schools.

### 3.1 Refugee Children in the American Educational System

This realistically made-up dilemma faced by the principal could have happened in any of the many school districts in the U.S. that became the new homes for refugees resettled from all parts of the world. Indeed, the United States of America has always been a land of immigrants. However, the resettlement of some groups of refugees, as in the example about the 8706 Burundians, presents unprecedented, additional challenges, especially regarding their integration in the U.S. educational system. Today's resettlement initiatives bring refugees from diverse countries with disparate educational structures. Therefore, the task of resettlement and educational services to accommodate the basic educational needs of such refugees, especially those of school age, can only be very testing. For instance, within two years and a trimester (Fiscal Year 2006, Fiscal year 2007, and July-September of Fiscal Year 2008), the city of Chicago alone became the new home for as many as 4018 refugees from 43 different nationalities as shown (Table 1) below.

#### Refugees Resettled in Chicago by Ethnic Group since FY 2006, by Selected Countries of

### Origin

Country of Origin	SFY06	SFY07	SFY08 (July-Sept)	Total
Burma	26	213	575	814
Somalia	370	224	193	787
Russia	409	109	4	522
Iran	133	110	50	293
Burundi	6	127	144	277
Liberia	133	71	9	213
Ethiopia	116	43	19	178
Eritrea	43	30	77	150
Iraq	21	14	102	137
Cuba	71	55	2	128
Sudan	71	24	4	99
Vietnam	48	15	13	76
Dem. Rep. Congo	10	33	17	60
Ukraine	18	20	4	42
Rwanda	7	26		33
Moldova		32		32
Congo		23	7	30
Belarus	16	11	1	28
Sierra Leone	16	11	1	28
(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)	(...)
TOTAL	1557	1227	1234	4018

**Table 1:** Source: International Rescue Committee, Chicago

While some of these groups come from places that have educational systems that are somewhat similar to the ones that refugees find in the U.S., a good number of them come from countries where education is an incomparably scarce commodity, and where refugees receive truncated, or no formal education. To make the school system even more challenging in the U.S., as DeCapua and Marshall (2011) explain, these refugee children bring pragmatic knowledge shaped by years of exposure to war, survival and resiliency, group interdependence and relations which may not easily concerts into the types of knowledge that the U.S. school system values. According to DeCapua and Marshall,

#### 3.1.1

Because SLIFE are generally members of collectivistic cultures, most of these learners are accustomed to group interdependence and with fostering and maintaining group relations. In addition, because their lives have been shaped by pragmatic learning, the wealth of information SLIFE bring to the school setting is generally not the knowledge valued in formal education. (p. 37)

(...) SLIFE generally come from collectivistic cultures and as such prefer group learning and shared responsibilities; being an independent learner and individually accountable for their learning is not common

nor highly valued, in contrast with the assumptions and expectations of U.S. educators. (p. 39)

Therefore, the challenge for counselors, teachers and administrators can only amplify if one considers that most refugee children come from countries where, even without civil wars, education is already a scarce commodity. Because of the pragmatic processes of learning these children have perfected of their years on the run, it appears that their immediate learning needs—survival, immediate relevance of the curriculum, etc.—are not primarily addressed in the curriculum. In addition, because of the improvised and rudimentary nature of the schools they attended in refugee camps, coupled with the limited quality of the tools of instructions, it is clear that what is demanded of these children in U.S. schools—individual accountability for academic tasks new academic conventions and homework—is new.

Take for example Burundian refugees who have been resettled in the U.S. from Tanzania, another collectivist country. As described above, nearly 9000 Burundians who left their country in 1972 fleeing a civil war were resettled in the U.S.A. between 2006 and 2008 (Cultural and Orientation Resource Center, 2007). According to the Cultural and Orientation Resource Center, only “an estimated 20%” of the Burundian refugees “can read and write in one or more languages” (p. 6). Even more challenging, among the ones who reported being literate, the only education they had was at the primary school level. When such a population comes to a city or state, and no matter how skilled the transitional bilingual education staff are, they need more remediation in English. The presence in a school of 16-year-old boys and girls who never attended any schooling may be a totally new phenomenon for educators and service providers. Not only do the states, school districts and resettlement agencies not have adequate resources to provide the kind of remediation that such a group needs, but the influx of 18-year olds and above without even an elementary education background could present social and economic security problems.

The case of the Burundians is hardly isolated. Similar to the Burundians, refugee service providers reported that “many recently arrived Liberian refugees have little or no formal education” (Dunn-Marcos, Kollahlon, Ngovo, & Russ, 2005, p. 39). Refugees from Burma are also another challenging group. According to Barron, Okell, Yin, VanBik, Swain, Larkin, Allott and Ewers (2007), Burmese children who are being resettled in the U.S. may have attended very limited schooling. As Barron et al (2007) found out, a number of these resettled individuals did not go to school beyond age 10 because “all members of the family may be required to help with farm chores, so children’s education may stop at around age 10” (p. 8). Then, the Somali Bantu from Somalia could as well be a testing group to appropriately integrate in the US educational system. Resettlement reports indicate that while “some [Somali] Bantu children in the refugee camps attend primary and secondary school, only an estimated 5% of all Bantu refugees have been formally educated” (Van Lehman & Eno, 2003, p. 22).

These low literacy and school attendance rates can be understood on three levels. First, refugee life is not stable; children and their families move from camp to camp, from camp to countries of origin, and back to camp, thus missing school. Second, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that administers refugee camps may only fund the primary level of education. Thus, for Burundians in refugee camps in Tanzania, UNHCR only funds free primary education. Third, even among people who did not flee their home countries, schooling may not be a national priority to the level that it is in more developed countries. According to United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2008), there is such a substantial discrepancy in school life expectancy among the countries of origin of resettled refugees that one must question how resettlement and educational services determine grade placement if they base it on previous educational attainment alone. For instance, as Table 2 shows, children in many countries around the globe do not go too far in their schooling as illustrated by their school life expectancy. School life expectancy represents the expected number of formal education from primary to tertiary education. In those countries, including Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Liberia, and Pakistan, a child who begins school at any time can only expect to complete fewer than 10 years of primary, secondary and tertiary levels combined. In most developed countries such as the USA, school life expectancy is 16 years or more.

### School Internal Efficiency Indicators in Selected Countries

Country	School Life Expectancy 2005	Primary Cohort Completion (%) 2004	Transition from Primary to Secondary General Education (%)
Afghanistan	7	–	
Angola	4 (1999)	–	
Burkina Faso	5	–	
Burma	7 (1999)	70	71.7
Burundi	6	36	32.8
Congo	8	–	58.1
Dem. Rep. Congo	4 (1999)	–	
Eritrea	6	76	88.6
Ethiopia	6	–	85.4
Ghana	9	49	86.8
Iraq	10	68	70.2
Liberia	8 (1999)	–	
Mauritania	8	21	45.9
Niger	3	39	58.7
Nigeria	9	–	
Pakistan	7	48	69.0
Rwanda	8	13	
Sudan	5 (1999)	–	89.5
Togo	9	63	66.6
Yemen	9	–	–

**Table 2:** Source: United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2008).

School life expectancy goes hand in hand with another internal efficiency indicator—primary cohort completion rate (Table 2)—that sets aside many educational systems in developing countries from their counterparts in more developed countries. According to UNESCO (2008), “primary cohort completion rate” refers to “the number of pupils who complete the final year of primary school expressed as a percentage of the number who entered the first year” (p. 393). For instance, when one takes 100 children who start primary education in a given year, in Burundi, only 36% of those children will complete the six years of primary education with their cohort. Similarly, in Mauritania, Pakistan, and Rwanda, fewer than 50% of the children will complete the primary level within their cohorts. The rest of the children either repeat the same grades several times, or never reach the final grade of the primary school cycle. To add to the scarcity of education, UNESCO reports that of the children who eventually reach 6<sup>th</sup> grade, fewer than 50% make the transition from the primary to the secondary education in Burundi and Mauritania, for instance. This low transition rate implies that a large number of adolescent refugees coming to the United States did not make it to the end of the primary education level, and much fewer to secondary education.

#### 4 The Case of Burundian Refugee Children

In the paragraphs below, we provide an example of four families from Burundi to illustrate inconsistencies in the placement and promotion of children resettled in schools in U.S. The four families, named A, B, C, and D

to protect their anonymity and confidentiality, arrived in the U.S.A. from refugee camps in Tanzania in 2006 and 2007 (Table 3). These families were selected to be part of this study because when they left Tanzania, one or more of their children was or were attending school in refugee camps at least at the Kindergarten level. Initially quite a number of families met the criterion. However, many families relocated to neighboring states or to rural areas in Illinois. In fact, according to a case worker in one of the resettlement agencies that serve Burundian families (T., personal communication), out of close to 300 Burundians who were initially resettled in the city, only about 100 have not relocated. Some of the remaining families did not meet the criterion or lived too far from the authors to participate. In the end, only four families were selected. This report is about their children.

Since their arrival in the US, the authors have been visiting each of these four families several times. They also continually make telephone calls to these individuals for the purpose of updating information pertaining to their children's schooling. The number of children per family was, respectively, six in family A, three in B, three in C, and two in D. For each family, data given in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide the date when they arrived in the U.S., the age of each child at arrival, the highest grade each child had attained in the refugee camp, and the grades the children have attended in the USA since they arrived. The authors had no way of verifying the veracity of the information about the highest grades attained by children in refugee camps, so they recorded what the parents self-reported. Regarding children's age at arrival, the parents showed affidavits of birth certificates, which they also used at resettlement agencies.

*Description of Four Burundian Families Resettled in the District*

**Family A Arrived: November 2007**

Child's Age at Arrival	Highest Grade in Camp	Current Age (Jan 11)	Grades Attended in US (Sp08-F10)	Comments
19	N/A	22	N/A	Did not enroll
17	6th grade	20	N/A	Did not enroll
15	5th grade	18	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>	Grades skipped: 5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> , 8 <sup>th</sup> Grades retained: 9 <sup>th</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup>
12	5th grade	15	7 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup>	Grades skipped: 5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup>
8	1st grade	11	1 <sup>st</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup>	Old for 1 <sup>st</sup> grade No grades skipped/retained
5	Pre-school	8	P-2nd	Normal promotion

**Table 3**

**Family B Arrived: November 2007**

Child's Age at Arrival	Highest Grade in Camp	Current Age (Jan 11)	Grades Attended in US (Sp08-F10)	Comments
<i>continued on next page</i>				

9	Kindergarten	12	4 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup>	Restless in 7 <sup>th</sup> grade Follows 1 <sup>st</sup> grade curriculum- Skipped: K, 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup>
6	No school	9	2 <sup>nd</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup>	Placed in 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade at age 6 Skipped: P, K, 1 <sup>st</sup> Retained: 2 <sup>nd</sup> Constantly pulled out to do Kindergarten curriculum
3	N/A	6	P-1 <sup>st</sup>	Normal promotion

Table 4

**Family C Arrived: November 2007**

Child's Age at Arrival	Highest Grade in Camp	Current Age (Jan 11)	Grades Attended in US (Sp08-F10)	Comments
14	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	17	9 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>	Skipped: 5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> , 8 <sup>th</sup> Retained: 11 <sup>th</sup>
12	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	15	7 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>	Skipped: 5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup>
10	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	13	4 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup>	Skipped: 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade

Table 5

**Family D Arrived: September 2006**

Child's Age at Arrival	Highest Grade in Camp	Current Age (Jan 11)	Grades Attended in US (Sp08-F10)	Comments
18	No school	22	Did not enroll	Soon to be married
14	No school	18	9 <sup>th</sup> ; dropped out	Married?!

Table 6

**4.1 Grade Placement**

As the paragraphs below indicate, the typical refugee student resettled in the school district where he/she is educated is considered an English Language Learner (ELL). The most determinant factors used in making this decision are English proficiency and the student's age. Based on the Illinois compulsory school guidelines, of the 14 children whose families were interviewed, nine were between the ages of 7 to 17 years, and thus, required to attend school. The first issue facing school personnel working in school districts where these students were educated pertained to how to place these children in the appropriate grade level, primarily because in the refugee camps, none of the nine children were educated at the right U.S. equivalent age level. This issue probably accounted for why these children were placed in the following grade levels in the U.S., as indicated in Table 3 above:



- The 17-year-old child (Family A), who was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade in the refugee camp, was never enrolled in school in the US.
- The 15-year-old child (Family A), who was also in 5<sup>th</sup> grade in the refugee camp, was placed in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- There were two 14-year-old children (Families C and D), one of whom was not attending school before the resettlement. Both children were placed in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S.
- The two 12-year-old children (Families A and C) who were both in 5<sup>th</sup> grade in the refugee camp, were placed in 7<sup>th</sup> grade.
- The 10-year-old child (Family C) who was attending 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in the refugee camp was placed in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S.
- The 9-year-old child (Family B), who was not in school in the refugee camp, was placed in 4<sup>th</sup> grade.
- The 8-year-old child (Family A) was placed in 1<sup>st</sup> grade; this child was also in first grade in the refugee camp.
- The most unusual observation is that of the 6 year-old child (Family B) who was placed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade although she had not attended any schooling in the refugee camp.

*Typical placement at the elementary school.* Public school districts place refugee students in elementary classes just as they place other English Language Learners. Refugee students are usually enrolled with the help of their refugee resettlement agency. Parents of these students are usually given the home language survey, an assessment that is designed to identify whether their children speak another language than English. Based on their responses, these students are then given the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) for ELLs, an English language screening tool that helps schools determine the new students' English language proficiency level. Originally, the WIDA-ACCESS acronym stood for Wisconsin, Delaware and Arkansas Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State, a K-12 English proficiency test for English Language Learners. Wisconsin, Delaware and Arkansas were the first three states that originally developed the test; many other states have joined the consortium. Later, the WIDA acronym changed to World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, a consortium of 17 states (Cook, Boals, Wilmes, & Santos, 2008). Based on their performance and age level, these students are then placed in a transitional program designed to provide them with pull-out English as a Second Language instruction. In some cases, when the refugee students speak a language for which a transitional bilingual program has already been established, schools place them in all-day bilingual classrooms.

While the current placement practice can help explain how most children identified for this case study were placed in the grade levels where they are currently being educated, there does not seem to be an explanation of why a little six-year-old child was placed in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, even though she had not attended any schooling before the resettlement to the U.S. Might it either be because kindergarten or first grade were already full when the child arrived in February? Whatever happened, this placement did not help the child or her family.

*Placement of high school age adolescents.* Refugee students at the high school level must go through the process of "transcript evaluation," which is offered through the district, in determining their grade level placement. Those students who have documents proving completion of high school credits tend to be assigned to a grade level based on the evaluation of their transcripts. Students who did not previously attend high school and/or those who cannot provide transcripts are automatically placed in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This practice is questionable on both an emotional and psychological level. While placing these adolescents in 9<sup>th</sup> grade might initially appear to be "a dream come true," it could contribute to low self-esteem and thirst for schooling once the students realize they do not belong in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. On the academic level, educating adolescents who have never attended school, or who have less than a middle school education might be too taxing for teachers. These youngsters may lack too much of a background to be mainstreamed with regular 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. On that basis, instead of identifying the placement of refugee students based on their English language proficiency and/or transcript evaluations, the authors of this paper are advocating for an accelerated literacy program that is not only designed to provide remedial and academic preparation, but is also infused with an intensive vocational preparation program for these adolescents. Such a program

would go a long way in ensuring these youngsters have a vocation or trade to which they can fall back if the academic gap they brought proves to be too wide to fill.

For placement at both the elementary and high school level, the main challenge for academic deans, counselors and teachers involved in academic placement appears to be discerning the complexity of who the children are. Even though some of these children were attending school in Tanzania, an English and Swahili speaking country, they were taught the Burundian curriculum in French and Kirundi. The teachers were, in most part, peer Burundian refugees with doubtful professional credentials, and whose constancy in the classrooms was hardly assured because of the very nature of refugee life—poor facilities, fabricated credentials, vulnerable security, conflict between professional ethics and survival, etc. To make matters worse, even though Burundians lived in Tanzania since 1972, they lived secluded in refugee camps, had limited contact with Tanzanians, and were too far from Burundi to substantively sustain the Burundian culture. In this context, these Burundians' culture is not truly Burundian or Tanzanian; they may not speak current Kirundi or French, and they do not speak English or Swahili. It will require singular patience and compassion from school staff to appropriately and accurately interpret the Burundian refugee children's results on the different English and fundamental skills proficiency tests.

## 4.2 Skipping Grades

As the table shows, some children, such as the 15-year-old child in Family A, the 14-year-old in Family C, and the 9-year-old in Family B, skipped as many as four grade levels. The only child who was placed in the same grade he was in at the refugee camp was the 8-year-old child from Family A. However, it must be noted that the child was already much older for first grade.

## 4.3 Grade Retention

At the end of the first year in the U.S, two of the children were retained in the grade in which they were initially placed—the 15-year-old from Family A and the 6-year-old from Family B. From conversations with their families and the teachers, even the children who were not retained were not learning concepts covered at those grade levels where they were placed either. The 9-year-old student from Family B who was enrolled in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, for instance, was taught concepts covered in the first grade curriculum most of the time he was in school, according to his ESL teacher.

## 4.4 Dropping out of School

The 14-year-old child from Family D, now 18, attended school on a sporadic basis for a while. This adolescent has now dropped out of school altogether and moved out of state. Similarly, the 17-year-old adolescent from Family A was never enrolled in school. This adolescent is currently employed. Based on this sample, the question schools and resettlement agencies ought to answer is whether these youngsters drop out of school because it is not important in their lives and interferes with other social adjustment concerns, and/or because the learning experience is too challenging.

In the case of older refugee children, it appears that the Illinois School Code (105 ILCS5/26-2) has several provisions that deny students over 17 years of age school enrollment. A school or school district may deny enrollment to a student 17 years of age or older for one semester for failure to meet the following minimum academic standards:

1. The student achieved a grade point average of less than “D” (or its equivalent) in the semester immediately prior to the current semester; and
2. The student fails to achieve a “D” average (or its equivalent) or better in the current semester.

In addition to non-enrollment for failing to meet academic standards, students 17 years of age or older may also be kept out of school for absenteeism, as long as the following minimum attendance standards are met:

1. The student was absent without valid cause for 20% or more of the attendance days in the semester immediately prior to the current semester.
2. The student is absent without valid cause for 20% or more of the attendance days in the current semester.

As expected, it was very difficult for the two teenagers from Family A and D to meet both the academic and attendance standards during their first year in school. As such, these students dropped out of school.

The real issue, in this case, is not whether the schools violated any law by not enrolling the youngsters when they turned 17 because the schools applied the law. It is whether or not resettlement agencies and schools are concerned that these youngsters still have to receive an education to become informed and responsible citizens in their new society despite academically lagging behind other students. It is clear that these youngsters have been exposed to violence since infancy by way of stories, participation in war, political manipulation, and other forms of rough life. If the purpose of schooling is indeed not just intellectual, academic or economical (Biesta, 2009), it is imperative for school districts to focus on the unique political and social needs of refugee students. If schooling can help in preparing citizens to make the right choices for living in a democratic, inter-dependent world, these teenagers who were resettled in this county need education if they are expected not to succumb to terrorist groups and other manipulative forces soliciting them to wrong causes. With no formal or career training, they have very slim chances of securing gainful employment.

#### 4.5 Enrolling in ESL and GED Instruction

The 19-year-old and the 17-year-old from Family A, now respectively 22 and 20, and the 18-year-old from Family D, now 22, are all enrolled in English as a Second Language classes at a community college. Only the 19-year-old from Family A (now 22) has been able to score high enough on ESL tests to be recommended to study for an associate degree at a community college. To receive the degree, the young man has to take and pass the GED examination. Because this young man has been working to support both his mother and siblings, he has delayed going to the community college.

The story of this 19-year-old, who is now 22, is rather exceptional. According to the paperwork he showed the authors, he was among the very few resettled Burundians who had succeeded in passing both the Burundian national exam to transition to secondary school as well as the Tanzanian national exam. While the school system is not mandated to assist young people in similar situations, it seems that some referral services are needed to support him financially so that he does not have to choose between college education and supporting his family.

#### 4.6 Uneasy Academic and Intercultural Adjustment

One of the challenges of accommodating CDS-TFE such as the 14 Burundian refugee children is how to accurately evaluate their academic readiness. In a typical situation, one expects children to begin pre-school or kindergarten already capable of telling, without hesitation, the time, their name, their age, their favorite foods and colors, and other basic knowledge items supposedly learned from home. Such may not be the case with Burundian refugees. To start with, the concept of first and last name is different for Burundians when compared to the same concept in the Western world. Traditionally, Burundians do not have a “family” name that is shared by parents and siblings. The closest to “family” or “last” name is the “context” or “cultural” name that is given at birth to describe the circumstance and context under which a child was born. After one or several weeks, except in westernized families, the new born is given a religious name. Thus, when Burundians introduce themselves, they give the context name first, followed by the religious name, as in Kabura Jean (a male name for “Kabura, John” translates literally as “John the sixth child”). It must be noted that the mother, father, and siblings of the boy have their own “context” names different from Kabura or Jean. No other sibling can claim to be “the sixth” child—Kabura. In some schools, the boy’s name will be recorded as: first name-Kabura; last name-Jean. Other schools may westernize the order of the names, thus Jean Kabura. In some cases, the schools will also decide to change “Jean” to “John.”

Secondly, Burundians do not tell time in the Western fashion where a day begins after midnight. In the Burundian culture, as is the case in most eastern and central African countries, the first hour of the day corresponds to 7:00AM. Therefore, 4:00AM in western time calling is “10 hours of the night.” Needless to say, teachers are constantly surprised when Burundian children say they start school at two in the morning. Ultimately, it will take a while for these children to fully learn that the “western morning” begins during what is culturally called “deep night hours” (translated in Kirundi as “mu gicugu”).

Thirdly, and no less confusing for Burundian culture is the concept of birthday. Traditional Burundian families do not keep track of, or celebrate, birthdays. As such, some Burundians, especially older illiterate people do not know their date of birth. They only know the year they were born because this is the only information available on their legal documents as service workers arbitrarily assign January 1<sup>st</sup> as the date of birth. For the most part, however, whether the actual date of birth is known or not, traditional Burundians do not celebrate birthdays. As such, schools may be the only place where Burundian children enjoy birthday cake and gift exchanges.

Many other trivial intercultural differences exist. Hopefully, teachers and the schools will be patient and refrain from making a big issue about these differences. Unfortunately, these intercultural variations can be used to determine academic readiness in US schools. Screening tests used to determine if children are ready for preschool or kindergarten often contain questions regarding the child’s age, his birthday, his parents’ names, objects around the house (what is in the garage), or his neighborhood (what do you do at the park or playground), and pictures depicting aspects of western life the child may never have seen. The typical American preschooler can identify a snowman, a fire truck, a teddy bear, or a hamburger in a picture. He can tell his age as well as his parents’ names. He can say that there is a car (or two) in the garage of his house and that his parents take him to the park to play and fly a kite. On the contrary, the typical Burundian six-year old has never been asked his age. He has heard his parents’ names but will never say them because doing so would be extremely disrespectful towards them; a park or kite never existed in his vocabulary or environment, and even after arriving in the United States, he might not yet have been to a park to play because his parents do not know that a park exists, or because child’s play is not one of their main concerns. The typical Burundian six-year old cannot tell what he wants to be when he grows up because that is not a question that appears in normal child-parent or child-teacher interactions. Not knowing these objects and concepts could easily be interpreted as a sign of inferior cognitive ability, a learning disability, or developmental delay.

#### **4.7 Academic Support Assistance to Refugee Students**

When this paper was written, refugee students who were enrolled in public schools in the “city” were eligible to receive one-on-one and small group tutoring that was provided to schools through the district’s Office of Language and Cultural Education (OLCE). However, this tutoring service was available in a limited capacity, with funding only allowing for 5-10 refugee tutors who could each work for 10 hours per week. Thus, not all the students in this study received the tutoring. In addition, OLCE offered an after-school program for refugee students, and a refugee summer school program was offered at participating schools. Because of the limited number of tutors, not all children were served, thus explaining why so many of the 14 Burundian children discussed in this paper dropped out of school or were retained for an additional year at their grade level.

#### **4.8 Participation of Parents in the Education of their Children**

*Parental involvement is a new concept to refugee families.* The second challenge facing school instructional and support services is linked to the concept of advocacy and parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Although research consistently shows parental involvement has positive effects on the academic achievement and social skills of students (Constantino, 2007; Schecter, Ippolito, & Rashkovsky, 2007; Stone, 2007), this participation does not happen by accident. It is influenced by a number of factors, including the welcoming environment of the school, a healthy two-way communication system between home and school, the degree of parent involvement in specific academic activities, and the school’s support for home learning.

In addition, some groups of parents, such as those from the four Burundian families, do not participate in their children's education, not because they do not want to, but because of their own lack of education and their upbringing in a culture in which parents do not participate in their child's formal education. As shown in the statistics above, most refugee parents are uneducated themselves. Both the children and their parents are still learning to use the modern amenities and practices available in the American culture, including bathrooms, elevators, and taking the bus to school. Needless to say, these children and their parents will be scrutinized, or ridiculed. As such, McBrien (2003) recommends that teachers and school communities must make efforts to understand the particular difficulties and challenges that refugee students face at school, including discrimination and isolation linked to conflict trauma. McBrien also urges teachers and school communities to identify the reasons for refugee parents' lack of involvement in their children's education.

Furthermore, parental involvement in countries such as Burundi is different from parental involvement in the U.S. Most of these parents are not used to their children bringing homework home. There is a barrier between the language of school and the language of the home. For people from Burundi, parents do not bother to be involved in their children's homework as the language of instruction is French, while the parents speak Kirundi. The educational gap between the family and the children widens even deeper at the secondary school level. During the authors' school years, secondary school was conducted in boarding schools for nine months of the year. At school the students ate food and performed activities that were not common in their homes, thus adding to the cultural divide between home and school. The situation has slightly changed today as the country has timidly built "communal" secondary day schools. Pupils leaving sixth grade are placed in these communal schools if their scores on the national test are not high enough to go to regular, nationally funded, boarding schools. In either case, the parents do not have to know what is going at school. Therefore, asking parents to participate in their children's education may represent a lofty paradigm shift.

*Assistance to refugee parents in the city.* The public schools' Office of Language and Cultural Education, in collaboration with the resettlement offices, is doing a great job of addressing the needs of refugee parents. However, more resources are needed to adequately prepare the parents for all the bits and ends, and expectations of the US educational system. As a result, there is a need for specific academic assistance programs available for refugee parents through public schools.

#### 4.9 Assistance to Teachers of Refugee Children

At the time this paper was written, refugee children were taught by teachers trained in transitional bilingual instruction and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) pull-out services. These teachers hold a bilingual and/or ESL certification or endorsement. According to the Office of Language and Cultural Education, these teachers are offered professional development sessions after school hours, including presentations from professionals in the areas of mental health, English language acquisition, refugee resettlement, etc. Among the Office's plans are professional development presentations facilitated by professionals with expertise in addressing refugee and immigrant families, culture and identity, mental health, and resettlement and language acquisition. These presentations target teachers and administrators.

### 5 Discussion and Implications

The example of the 14 children from Burundi was not provided to question a particular school system; it was provided to highlight how difficult it can be for a country or a school system to create a resettlement process that is comprehensive. The four families described in this paper do not represent all the refugee families resettled in the city concerned, and even less all the Burundian sub-population of refugees resettled in the U.S. Indeed, some Burundian families, especially those resettled in small towns and rural school districts, seem to be enjoying steady, exemplary academic adjustment. However, these four are real families, with real aspirations and dreams of living fully in America. According to DeCapua and Marshall's instructional model for addressing the needs of students with limited or interrupted formal education—the mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP)—teachers and schools must “learn to accept the culturally based conditions for learning, combine their ways of learning with those expected in U.S. classrooms, and teach new academic

tasks, such as classification, and comparing/contrasting through familiar language and content. The same concept applies to culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE).

In this No Child Left Behind age where schools have to ensure English language learners participate in standards-based assessments (Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson & Kundert, 2006, Wolf & Leon, 2009), it seems fair to question why schools make refugee children skip several grade levels only to retain them in these same grades a year later, without any evidence of the benefits of such a practice. Take for instance the case of the 9-year-old boy from Family B who skipped pre-school all the way to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Because this boy is now sanctioned each week for behavioral problems, Family B is currently looking for another school with a smaller population where the child's needs might be better attended. It equally seems fair to question why the boy's 6-year-old sister was placed in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to be retained a year later. For a large school with thousands of students, the problems of these two siblings could pass for isolated incidents. However, the argument the authors are making in this paper is that, although the situation is complex, "leaving behind" these children is not consistent with the nation's efforts to create a better world for tomorrow.

### 5.1 The Case of CDS-TFE in Perspective

Using the example of the fourteen Burundian students, one can appreciate the challenges that face service providers as they assist these refugees adjust to the US school system. These challenges both stem from the fact that these students are Culturally Displaced Students with Truncated Formal Education (CDS-TFE) and the foundation of education in the United States. It seems fair to suggest that the administrators working in schools where these students were enrolled were not aware of the educational backgrounds of these children. While obtaining information on the debriefings that schools received in anticipation of the school resettlement is not easy, it appears that the placement of these children interfered with their chance of reaching their full educational potential, rather than aiming to remediate and accelerate it. Based on these views, the authors state that:

Firstly, while education as an institution varies from state to state, it nonetheless relies on the doctrine of "*Parens Patriae*," which, as Alexander and Alexander (2009) clarify, establishes that the state, "as a parent to all persons, (...) has the inherent prerogative to provide for the commonwealth and individual welfare" (p. 301). By virtue of this doctrine, states have the responsibility to provide educational and other welfare services to all school-age children who reside in their boundaries, independent of their immigration status. Among the challenges service providers face is how to accurately assess the "school age" eligibility of refugee children who are being resettled to the United States, when such individuals may not have attended school during the refugee years or have interrupted the schooling process.

Secondly, it is significantly important for states and school districts to ensure teachers and other service providers are trained in assessing and serving individuals who may not fit the norms. In the case of Burundian refugees, not only did school-age children come with unusual educational needs, but their families brought with them so complex educational, political and social needs that even the most trained service providers would be overwhelmed. On one hand, service providers must assess their own needs in skills and competencies in planning basic alternative, literacy or vocational programs for these populations. On the other hand, the toughest challenge for support service personnel might pertain to how to develop an effective process for accommodating adolescents and adults with no prior formal education, or with less than primary education, so that they can fully contribute to their new land. By law, the state of Illinois, and any other state, has the responsibility of educating all school age students. However, the educational infrastructures for preparing for 15-year olds, 16-year olds, and 17-year olds without Kindergarten-through-6<sup>th</sup> grade education may be not only underdeveloped, but inconsistent. As such, states cannot assume their role of "*Parens Patriae*" if they cannot attend to all the basic needs of all who come to their shores.

### 5.2 Past Initiatives to Educate Refugee Children with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

*New comer curriculum.* Large influxes of refugee children are not new to public schools. In 1999, public schools opened an International Newcomer and Refugee Center, hereafter referred to as the Newcomer Center,

at one school, designed to provide a crash course in English and other subject areas to refugee students who were at least 14 years old and who had been living in the US for less than one year (Ortiz, 2001). The second Newcomer Center opened in 2000 at another school. Children were required to attend these centers for two years and then go to regular bilingual programs at other high schools or go to work. The criteria for entrance into these Newcomer Centers were as follows:

- Age 14-17 (students must be this age as of September 1<sup>st</sup>; students 18 years of age or older may be considered for placement at the Centers on a case-by-case basis)
- Less than 12 months of residence in the US
- English language learner (ELL)
- Academic skills three or more years below level
- Lack of familiarity with US culture and schools
- No school documents

These International Newcomer Centers were discontinued for lack of funding after the US experienced a decrease in immigration. Over 140 students had benefited from the program. While the Centers were well conceived and their program was well designed, their outreach was limited.

*Other grant programs.* In addition, the city's public schools' Office of Language and Cultural Education recently had a grant from the Office of Refugee and Resettlement that focused on newly arrived African refugee children and their families, particularly the Somali Bantus. With the grant, the office created two welcoming centers designed to serve the Somali Bantus and provide professional development for teachers and administrators, in addition to after-school and summer school academic and acculturative enrichment programs for children and families. This grant was not renewed, either.

The challenges the grant programs and the Welcoming Center Office faced highlights serious areas of concerns that have not been addressed by resettlement agencies and public schools, including issues of service coordination, information sharing, and referral arrangements between schools and social agencies. All the refugee children resettled in the U.S. ought to be comprehensively and "patiently" screened regarding their schooling or lack of school, in the countries where they lived. It appears that collaboration with university-based researchers with ties to the countries of origin might be useful in comprehensively addressing the educational and emotional needs of these children.

### 5.3 What Else Can Be Done?

The educational experiences of culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) who not only come from countries such as Burundi and other developing countries, but also come from collectivist cultures and areas where education was not a commodity, must be guided by the following principles:

*Teachers and the school community as a family.* Efforts must be made to ensure schools, teachers, parents, and community work collaboratively as a family in assisting refugee students. For this to happen, teachers must demonstrate genuine concern for the emotional and cultural needs of resettled students. If needed, these children can be the spokespeople for their families regarding contact with administrative authorities, health service agencies, and in establishing relationships with schools. These types of responsibilities are not typically what one would expect US children to assume. To the best extent possible, not all teachers should be assigned to work with culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE), even if their command of ESL of transitional bilingual education techniques is excellent.

*A meaningful learning process.* It is true that culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) must comprehend abstract concepts related to content information taught. However, every effort should be provided in making learning as meaningful as possible. Refugee children come from hopeless situations where "tomorrow" is uncertain. Schools ought to stress to these students, from the beginning of their academic career, that learning will make a difference between despair and hope, and between death-affirming and life-affirming attitudes of the refugee camp life. To maintain the momentum of the students in

their process, teachers must ensure these children are given an opportunity to combine their arts, crafts, and other cultural assets with the more cognitively and conceptually challenging processes of academic learning.

*Oral transmission of materials.* Verbal instruction must be infused in these children's learning experiences. Most culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) come from homes where parents are illiterate and do not communicate in writing. Favoring written over oral expression as a method in teaching literacy may take a while for culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) to learn. These students usually learn via their family histories and challenges, and through vital facts stated orally. Before transitioning to written knowledge, teachers need to remember to transmit information orally, during their first encounter with these students.

*Group learning and shared responsibilities.* Based on their encounters with doctors or social workers, culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) and their families are used to, and have learned to receive information and then respond to it through an intermediary. As such, teachers may not realize that primary knowledge transmitters for CDS-TFE are their peers. Thus, what the teacher says, or the attitude the teacher exhibits, is first described to the culturally displaced students with truncated formal education by other students. It would be beneficial if this process of transmitting information was encouraged and developed for the purpose of helping resettled children transition to a more independent learning process. Teachers can train students in their classroom and encourage them to become mentors and coaches for culturally displaced children with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE).

*Accelerated learning.* It is extremely important for school administrators and teachers to understand that culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) are totally in a new territory when they move to this country. As such, the concepts they are expected to learn and the process they are expected to use in learning it, in addition to the rules and regulations they are expected to abide by, the academic conventions, the relationships they are expected to build with others etc., are all new to them. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect them to understand the policies, practices, and academic expectations and discourse within a short period of time. It is also likely that American cultural symbols and news have no meaning for them. For instance, when the authors call the school where the 9-year old boy (now 12) from Family B attended to inquire about a discipline violation, the school constantly states that the rules and expectations have been explained and given to the student. However, it is likely that rules such as "keep your hands to yourself," "stop speaking when I say stop speaking," etc tend to be confusing to culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) who probably consider these new practices as part of all the new "stuff" they are expected to learn, are told to remember, and/or are given. It is important for teachers to understand that these students may find it difficult to learn all the information they are expected to, particularly when it does not make any sense for them. The best way to teach such students is by allowing them to learn how to learn and belong, instead of providing them with accelerated instruction.

*Empowering CDS-TFE to explore and connect with the new environment.* Providing culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) with enrichment activities designed to extend their learning experiences is of significant importance. For instance, Friday at Global Citizenship Experience (<http://www.globalcitizenshipexperience.com/><sup>2</sup>) is a "field-based" program in Chicago that is designed to enhance students' learning experience by enabling them to visit national and international cultural sites, universities, visual and performing arts exhibits, and models for green living and sustainability. This program is designed to help schools provide a balance between the amount of material presented to culturally displaced students with truncated formal education during a school day with the quality of material they can meaningfully contextualize. Global Citizenship is a private, for-profit high school. During the 2010-2011 school year, the school had an enrollment of 16 students who paid \$20,000 a year of tuition. While the effectiveness of the programs offered has not been evaluated, it appears that the school uses all the elements of the mutually adaptive learning paradigm (MALP) that the authors of this paper tried to capture in this section. The 12 year-old and 15-year old students from family A discussed earlier in this paper attend Global Citizenship Experience high school. While not all schools can be private or have an enrollment of 16 students only,

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.globalcitizenshipexperience.com/>



it appears that the foundations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy, career orientation and cultural awareness are experiences that all culturally displaced students with truncated formal education need. It must be noted that the authors of this paper are not affiliated with Global Citizenship Experience.

## 6 Implications

Based on information discussed thus far, it is important for schools to consider the following suggestions as they work with culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE). The incorporation of these ideas will have financial, administrative, and human resource implications for school districts as additional funding will be needed for implementing programmatic adjustments and suggestions given. In particular,

1. Teacher certification boards (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, State Boards of Education) and teacher preparation programs should ensure that initial and advanced teacher certification standards include skills and competencies in international and comparative education and development.
2. Teacher preparation programs must develop programs that provide their graduates with additional skills and awareness in teaching in multi-grade, multi-level classrooms where students' proficiencies are inconsistently distributed. They must incorporate in their curricula opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to receive study abroad experiences so they are exposed to the social and political conditions of immigrant populations.
3. Schools district leaders, in collaboration with community and governmental agencies must develop non-traditional educational and career opportunities, such as job-embedded educational programs, for older students who are too old to benefit from traditional programs;
4. School leaders and educational planners at the local and state levels, teachers, and resettlement agencies must be aware that teaching English to refugees and other immigrant children is not enough to compensate for the refugees' profound lack of basic and formal education. For that, additional resources must be allocated for professional development in relation to the adaptation of ELL strategies such as Academic Learning Scaffolding (Gibbons, 2002), Language Experience Approach (Nessel & Dixon, 2008), Total Physical Response Storytelling (Ray & Seeley, 2004), realia strategies (Herrell, Jordan, & Jordan, 2003), and dialogue journals (Peyton, 2000);
5. Instructional leaders, in collaboration with other professional development providers at the national, state and district level must plan and implement professional development for teachers consistent with trends and issues in comparative and global education. It is important for teachers to become conversant with the background culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) come from if they are to accommodate their instruction to their students' needs;
6. School district and school leaders, in collaboration with resettlement agencies and other community leaders must create centers where all the newly arrived children can be provided with extra orientation to the U.S. culture, study skills, and other tools necessary for enhancing their learning skills in their host country. They must invest in additional tutors and facilities where students can do their homework and catch up on other after-school cultural, academic and co-curricular activities, thus allowing children not only to depend on school hours or their parents, but also to use the school as a collective family.
7. To the extent possible, school districts and schools must work with state and federal agencies, resettlement agencies, as well as non-profit organizations to identify and allocate additional resources needed to enable culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) to explore the environment around them through field trips and other co-curricular activities;
8. Principals, counselors and teachers must develop open communication between children's homes and schools through translators. The idea is to enable schools and teachers to understand the children's families, be it through home visits, and/or attendance in cultural celebrations. Such an effort can also enable these schools and teachers to learn about the traditions, values, and norms of the CDS-TFE families. For these visits to be meaningful, teacher must be willing to get out of their comfort zone

and be ready to embrace the unknown. When parents of culturally displaced students with truncated formal education are visited by teachers, they are more likely to visit the school; and

9. Finally, community leaders must be involved in the development of educational programs for parents designed to enable them to learn (in their native language) child-rearing practices in the United States where topics such as school expectations, nutrition, discipline, children's rights, ways to be involved in school, and early-learning activities are covered.

While many of these suggestions require financial resources schools may not have, it is necessary to stress that refugee resettlement, especially as it includes school-age children, should not be left to refugee resettlement agencies alone. Schools must evaluate their readiness to accept the new students in relation to the educational contexts of the countries involved. The efforts exerted will definitely pay off as resettled culturally displaced students with truncated formal education (CDS-TFE) participate responsibly in their futures.

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