From Angkor to Aotearoa: A study of how Khmer refugee-background people's experiences during secondary education in New Zealand have influenced their post-secondary outcomes

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how experiences during secondary school shaped post-secondary outcomes for Khmer (Indigenous Cambodian) refugee-background people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Refugee-background enrolments in New Zealand schools continue to rise, yet research often ends at the completion of compulsory schooling, leaving limited knowledge about how experiences during this formative time influence later pathways. This study addresses that gap by focusing on four Khmer participants who resettled in Aotearoa as children or young people in the 1980s.

Semi-structured interviews were analysed using Moustakas' phenomenological analysis method, guided by van Manen's four lived existentials and Ungar's socioecological theory of resilience. Findings show that both schooling and out-of-school experiences shaped post-secondary lives through an ongoing process of resilience-building. Resilience was influenced by access to supportive systems such as family, peers, teachers, community organisations, and the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. These supports enabled participants to navigate challenge, rebuild a sense of normalcy, and pursue future goals in ways that were culturally meaningful.

Across the lived existentials, resilience took different forms:

- Lived Body: memories carried in the body through loss, disruption, and change became a source of adaptation.
- Lived Space: school and home environments were places of belonging and displacement, shaping identity across Cambodia and Aotearoa.
- Lived Time: intergenerational stories and past experiences informed future aspirations.
- Lived Relationality: relationships with family, peers, teachers, and community networks created opportunities for belonging and direction.

The study suggests that schools are not only educational spaces but also social and relational spaces where identity, agency, and belonging develop. Access to culturally and emotionally responsive support systems can influence the capacity of refugee-background students to thrive beyond secondary school. These findings offer insight for educators and policy makers seeking to strengthen transitions into further education, training, and employment for refugee-background students in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Anna Khun

Chapter One: Introduction

Researcher Positionality

I am a first generation, Aotearoa New Zealand-born Khmer Cambodian. For many centuries Cambodia was known for its glorious temples and palatial structures (Ayres, 1999). This quickly changed when dictator Pol Pot and his guerilla fighters, the Khmer Rouge, took over Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. Millions of citizens lost their lives at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Many others, as a result of the war, succumbed to starvation, extreme working conditions, illness and disease (Ayres, 1999). Khmers (Cambodian person/s), the largest ethnic group from Cambodia, were forced to work the rice fields under a communist state known as Year Zero where Khmer culture and traditions were abolished (Chandler, 1979). Pol Pot believed, with everything stripped away, he could begin rebuilding Cambodia to be great once more. Khmer people like my father were fed only a few grains of rice soaked in water each day (Chandler, 1979). He would forage the fields looking for rats because he was so hungry. After spending eleven years in Khao I Dang, Thailand's Red Cross refugee camp, my parents migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand with my older sister in 1987 for a better life. In 1988, my parents sponsored my grandfather, aunt and uncle to settle in Aotearoa New Zealand under the family reunification programme. I was born in New Zealand that same year, my two younger brothers were born in 1996 and 1998.

Education has always played a major role in my life. My father taught English in the refugee camp, a skill he held onto even after starting a new life in Aotearoa New Zealand. His uncle and cousin both have a history as teachers in Battambang, and my younger brother and I are both secondary school teachers. One of my first memories of school always involves my sister and my uncle (who is three years older than me). It was always us three. My uncle and sister would drop me off and pick me up from class when school finished. We always played together and of course we spoke Khmer to one another. For me, I was determined to fit in, so I did this by learning English. My mum tried to be involved in our schooling; however, she spoke no English, so this made it hard for her. My dad spoke English well but as he was the only person in paid employment in our household, he could never make it to school events. My three siblings and I have all completed university degrees, and my parents say this is their greatest achievement.

My uncle's education story was a bit different. He came to Aotearoa New Zealand with my grandad (his father), and he describes a completely different educational journey. My uncle faced many challenges before and after his arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand. My uncle did not complete his secondary education, leaving well before graduating his secondary school qualification. I cannot remember my grandad ever participating in my uncle's schooling. There is clear tension in the trauma my grandfather carried, which he passed on to his child. My grandad lost his wife, his preschool-aged son and countless family members to the Khmer Rouge. This immense loss left my grandad with unresolved trauma. These traumas passed on from my grandfather to my uncle impacted my uncle's integration into Aotearoa New Zealand, and his experience of education.

My personal, professional and cultural experiences have shaped both who I am as a researcher and how I approach this study. I acknowledge that my Khmer Cambodian heritage may influence my perspectives, potentially introducing biases or assumptions about certain issues. To address this, I engage in reflexive practice and phenomenological bracketing of my own experiences during the analytical process, to focus on the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2017). This approach helps ensure that the findings remain true to the lived experiences of the four participants.

Refugee and Education Studies

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 120 million displaced people in the world, with refugees and asylum seekers making up nearly half of this (UNHCR, 2023). Refugees are those who have fled their homes and crossed international borders for fear of persecution and war and are unable to go back to their homes without jeopardising their safety (UNHCR, 2023). Within the Aotearoa context, there are three categories of refugees. *Quota* refugees are those who enter Aotearoa New Zealand under the formal quota programme. Under this programme, Aotearoa New Zealand can accept up to 1500 new refugees every year (Bellamy, 2020). The *family reunification* category refers to refugees who enter as family members of recognised New Zealand based refugees. Finally, *asylum seekers* are those who are seeking asylum in another country due to persecution (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2024).

Many refugees escape their home countries to refugee camps in other countries where they may romanticise a better life. The idea of refugee camps is to offer support and assistance to refugees while waiting for relocation; however, camp life can be as harrowing as the trauma

refugees have left behind in their home countries (Morais, 2023). Refugee camps can be rife with abuse, rape, poor sanitation and overcrowding despite the best efforts of humanitarian agencies (World Vision, 2024; Lipman, 2020). For many refugees, they can spend years, and even decades in refugee camps before they are resettled into their new homes. Such trauma requires recovery, with each survivor requiring individualised support, which can in turn place additional demands on resettlement systems, including education.

Recovery from such experiences continues long after resettlement, and education plays a central role in this process. Access to schooling, however, is determined by many factors including displacement, language barriers and host-country policies (Ungar, 2012a). For refugee-background students, educational journeys often carry both resilience and pain, reflecting the multiple layers of trauma they have endured (Anderson et al, 2023; McBrien, 2022; Sampson, Marlowe, de Haan & Bartley, 2016). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre offers a six-week orientation programme for quota refugees upon entering Aotearoa New Zealand. This is often the beginning of recovery from their past and marks a turning point in healing from past traumas. It is important to note that refugees are a diverse group of people, and their experiences are unique; no single person’s experience is the same (Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Mathieson, Loewen & Moore, 2000; Sampson et al., 2016). Recognising this complexity is vital to supporting educational outcomes and ensuring that resettlement systems respond to the unique needs of each refugee.

While there is substantial research on refugee-background students and their experiences in mainstream education (see: Anderson, Mostolizadeh, Oranje, Fraser-Smith & Crampton, 2023; Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Mathieson, Loewen & Moore, 2000), much of this work focuses on diverse refugee groups without specific attention to Khmer Cambodian refugees. In particular, the connection between secondary school experiences and post-school outcomes for this community has often been overlooked.

This study addresses this gap by asking: *How have experiences during secondary school influenced post-secondary school outcomes for Khmer Cambodian refugees?*

Using a phenomenological methodology and through Ungar’s resilience theory framework, this small-scale qualitative research invited Khmer Cambodian participants to reflect on, and make meaning of, their experiences during their secondary school time, and how these experiences influenced their later life.

In doing so, the research contributes to theoretical understandings of refugee education and resilience, while also offering a focused perspective on the transitional stages from schooling

into adulthood. By placing Khmer Cambodian voices within broader discourse on refugee education, this study highlights the importance of designing support systems, policies and practices that respond to and center the unique needs of refugee-background students.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, outlining its scope, research field, and researcher's positionality.

Chapter Two reviews the existing literature on refugee studies, including refugee experiences of resettlement in Aotearoa New Zealand and within education, both globally and in Aotearoa.

Chapter Three discusses the two key theoretical frameworks used to underpin this study: phenomenology and resilience theory.

Chapter Four details the research design and methodology, including ethical considerations. It discusses phenomenology as the methodological approach, the relevance of resilience theory, and the suitability of both frameworks for a qualitative study of refugees. The chapter concludes with a description of Moustakas' six-step phenomenological analysis model, which guided the analysis of findings.

Chapter Five presents the findings from the interviews and discusses these in relation to the literature and theoretical frameworks. The findings are organised into four sections based on van Manen's (2014) phenomenological framework and Ungar's (2012a) resilience theory. The four sections are:

- *Lived Body: Embodied Resilience*
- *Lived Temporality: The influence of past, present, and future on resilience*
- *Lived Space: Resilience experienced across Cambodia and Aotearoa New Zealand*
- *Lived Relationality: The socio-ecological dimensions of resilience*

Chapter Six concludes with a summary of key contributions, limitations of the study, directions for future research and closing reflections.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Refugees: Understanding the Term

In the aftermath of the Second World War, millions of people were displaced with no home to return to, prompting world leaders to establish international structures to provide protection and support for those forcibly displaced persons. This led to the creation of the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2025), which remains the foundational human rights treaty for refugees. The Refugee Convention provides the following definition of the term *refugee*: "A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, 2025, p.3). However, challenges arose from the Convention, which narrowly focused on Europe and the affairs of European refugees, thereby excluding refugees from other regions.

During the Cold War era (1947-1989), shifting patterns of displacement required world leaders to reconsider the 1951 Refugee Convention to extend aid to those not only from European nations affected by the Second World War, but also from other regions. The 1967 Protocol was introduced, which lifted the geographical limitations from the previous documents. Refugee status and protection became applicable to all people meeting the Convention definition, regardless of when and where their displacement occurred (UNHCR, 2025). The most current definition of the term *refugee* is: "people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. They are unable to return to their own country due to feared persecution because of who they are, what they believe in or say, or because of armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder" (UNHCR, 2025, p.1).

Together, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol provide the legal foundation for defining who qualifies as a refugee and what protections they are entitled to under international law. These instruments established a shared global framework that informs how states and organisations respond to refugee needs. Such definitions are also shaped by the local contexts.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2025) plays a key role in guiding refugee policy and practice. Aotearoa New Zealand is one of 27 countries who actively participate in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

programmes, policies and continual housing for refugees. According to Immigration New Zealand (2018), the Reunification Strategy defines refugees as those that cannot return home because of fear of persecution because of their “religion, race, nationality, membership of a particular group, or political opinion” (p.1).

Since July 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand has committed to resettling 1500 quota refugees each year as part of its humanitarian responsibilities (Immigration New Zealand, 2022). Additionally, the Family Reunification visa allows a further 600 family members of refugees already living in Aotearoa to gain residency annually. Refugee status is also granted to asylum seekers once their claims are approved, and then they are formally recognised as refugees and protected under New Zealand law (Immigration New Zealand, 2022).

While the term “refugee” is commonly used, the term “forced migrants” is also employed in literature (Marlowe, Malihi, Milne, McLay & Chiang, 2024). Forced migrants are people who leave their homes due to life-threatening factors and the term “migration” refers to the process of moving to a host country (Massing, Ghadi, Kikulwe & Nakutnyy, 2023). The key distinction is that refugees are formally recognised under international law, specifically the 1967 Protocol, which confirms legal status and protection (UNHCR, 2025).

In this research, I use the terms *refugee* and *refugee-background student* to acknowledge the lived experiences of the participants, as well as their families and their ancestors. Even when the participants themselves cannot recall specific stories from their time in Cambodia, the term honours the direct links they share with their history and highlights the connection of the past to present day (Massing et al., 2023). Within the field of education, the term *refugee-background student* is commonly used to describe students with refugee status (Davis, 2024; Ghadi, Massing, Kikulwe & Giesbrecht, 2019; Kikulwe, Massing, Ghadi, Giesbrecht & Halabuza, 2021). For this study, the term refers to people residing in Aotearoa New Zealand who entered the country under the quota refugee programme, family reunification or protection status (asylum seekers), and who have completed a minimum of two years secondary education in the Aotearoa New Zealand school system (Anderson et al., 2021).

Understanding who is included within the term *refugee-background student* is only one part of the picture; equally important is recognising the broader refugee experience that shapes their lives and education. The following section outlines the challenges faced by refugees before, during, and after resettlement, with particular attention to the ways trauma and displacement continue to influence opportunities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Refugee Experience

Migrants with refugee status often have ongoing challenges that extend beyond initial settlement, including barriers to education, access to stable housing, and employment (Marlowe et al., 2024). Many refugees have experienced severe hardships, such as prolonged stays in refugee camps where conditions can be unsanitary, overcrowded and where different forms of abuse may have been prevalent, despite the best efforts of humanitarian aid (Lipman, 2020; World Vision, 2024).

These experiences can result in complex trauma that may cause cognitive and post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety and depression, often requiring professional support (Kromják & Karamehić-Muratović, 2024; Sellars, Imig & Fischetti, 2022; Tatz, 2020).

Such impacts, especially if left untreated, can be detrimental to refugees as they may be less reluctant to trust the systems in host countries, consequently delaying refugee resettlement. Violations of trust may stem from their experiences throughout their journey from their home country to the refugee camps and with other institutions that promise to help. This in turn causes refugees to be more reluctant in trusting institutions (Anderson et al., 2023). As Anderson et al. (2023) highlight, “the emotional impacts of trauma, self-doubt and anxiety can make invulnerability impossible” (p.270). If left untreated the trauma from forced migration has both physical and mental effects, particularly in children they will have higher rates of mental illness and mortality (Ahidniya, Hasani & Kamali, 2024, p.22). Forced displacement has wide-ranging effects on both children and their families. However, resettlement offers the possibility of rebuilding life in safer conditions (UNHCR, 2025), marking both an end to immediate dangers and the beginning of long-term recovery.

For many, resettlement offers hope and is the start of a redefining period in the lives of refugees. In Hayward’s (2007) study, participants shared their experiences and feelings of arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants described this transition as making them feel “whole again” and able to “fly again” (Hayward, 2007, p.12). One child illustrated this journey by drawing a “split red heart in the centre of a bright yellow sun and a large black smudge” (Hayward, 2007, p.12). She explained that the image reflected the sadness she had left behind in her home country and the happiness found in Aotearoa New Zealand. The country places a strong emphasis on meeting refugees’ immediate needs upon arrival, with acclimatisation considered the first stage of successful resettlement’. This is when refugees learn to adjust and begin to feel comfortable in the new society, they become familiar with the climate, shopping and their surrounding communities. Then, refugees then need to learn to adapt to their new surroundings, which requires cultural, behavioral, emotional and psychological adjustments.

Over time, refugees may become an integral part of their new communities, which is a testament to a successful integration and resettlement (Hayward, 2007).

Building on the experiences of resettlement and integration, it is important to examine the policies and interventions that structure how refugees and their families are supported in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Policies and Interventions for Refugees in Aotearoa

Policies are important in mobilising refugees, refugee-background students and their families (Anderson et al., 2023). However, in New Zealand, North America, and parts of Europe, policy frameworks frequently frame refugees as isolated individuals, ignoring the community and family networks that shape their lives. This disconnect is compounded when policymakers and policy enactors are far removed from the realities of refugee communities, leading to outcomes that are misunderstood or less effective at the local level (Anderson et al., 2023).

In Aotearoa, the Refugee Resettlement Strategy created by Immigration New Zealand, is the key document that outlines the expectations for support of refugees (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2024). The strategy outlines five goals intended to foster successful resettlement:

1. Belonging and Acceptance
2. Health and Wellbeing
3. Access to Housing
4. Education, Training and English proficiency
5. Employment opportunities (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2024).

Quota refugees come through the Refugee Centre in Mangere, which is the central facility for refugee arrival and orientation in Aotearoa New Zealand (Immigration New Zealand, 2024). At the Centre, families participate in a five-week (McBrien & Hayward undertook these studies in 2022, it has since been updated to six weeks) resettlement programme where they attend English school and partake in everyday activities related to their new lives, while also connecting them with their destination communities (McBrien & Hayward, 2022).

While the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre provides an important foundation for quota refugees, differences in the level and duration of support across refugee categories raise significant challenges for long-term resettlement. The Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre

also offers 12 months of ongoing support to help refugees integrate into their host communities (Immigration New Zealand, 2024). However, refugees require varied support, sometimes spanning a lifetime. Among the three refugee categories in New Zealand (quota, family reunification, and asylum seekers), most resources and funding are directed to quota refugees. Despite this, data from Immigration New Zealand (2024) indicates that quota refugees receive the greatest assistance, despite this, their earnings and schooling are comparably the lowest of the three classifications. Furthermore, asylum seekers and family reunification refugees are not offered the same level of support. As stated by Marlowe, Malihi, Milne, McLay & Chiang (2024), "it is important to remember that family reunification refugees and asylum seekers generally have not had any access to this orientation and initial support because they do not go through the Mangere Resettlement Centre" (Ministry of Education, 2016, p.7). It is then left to other structures and institutions (such as schools and community groups) to ensure these refugees are given the support they require to successfully resettle. Recent recommendations have called for the Refugee Resettlement Strategy to extend support to all refugee categories and increase the duration of resettlement services from one year to five years of resettlement (Marlowe et al., 2024).

Beyond the Refugee Resettlement Strategy, there have recently been additional interventions to increase the number of refugees resettling in Aotearoa New Zealand and improvements to support refugees in their successful integration. For example, in 2018, the Government introduced the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) visa, which enables New Zealand-based community organisations to sponsor refugees for resettlement into Aotearoa New Zealand (Host International, 2024). This programme operates alongside the annual Refugee Quota Programme (1,500 people per annum). Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship allows for an additional 150 refugees over 3 years to be eligible to enter New Zealand. A further 600 places are available through the Refugee Family Support visa, which prioritises close family members such as partners, spouses and children under the age of 24, with community sponsors assisting their integration (Host International, 2024).

The New Zealand Red Cross also plays a significant role, having supported more than 7,500 refugees in their resettlement into Aotearoa New Zealand through a network of 130 trained staff and 1,000 dedicated volunteers. Their work covers day-to-day support, education, housing and help in accessing work opportunities and other pathways refugees may need for successful integration (New Zealand Red Cross, 2024). While such interventions demonstrate a growing commitment to humanitarian responsibility, investing in individualised and tailored support for refugee communities every year remains essential. Despite such progress, there is

still considerable work to be completed to ensure equity and meaningful inclusion for refugee-background communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

While government and community interventions provide important foundational support, successful integration also depends on addressing language acquisition, cultural adjustment, and access to education, which are all factors that are critical for refugee-background students.

English proficiency has a crucial role in successful refugee integration through the attainment of education and future employment prospects (Ministry of Education, 2016; Wycoff, Tinagon & Dickson, 2011). Before arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand, many refugees may have spent prolonged periods in refugee camps with limited access to education. English may not be their first language and in some cases, they may have never learned it prior to resettlement (Anderson et al., 2021; Boua, 1990).

In addition to English language barriers, refugees experience difficulties in resettlement related to learning new cultures, customs and protocols (Hamilton et al., 2000). For example, Khmer Cambodians are used to a community-oriented culture where families support each other across generations. It is common for adult children to support their parents and grandparents, in addition to getting married and raising their own children. Loyalty, protection and responsibilities are often discussed as a community (Hamilton et al., 2000). Refugee Khmer Cambodians resettling in Western countries are faced with a “Western” way of life while trying to balance the act of preserving their own Khmer ethnic identity and culture (Liev, 2008).

For many refugees entering Aotearoa, there is a great deal of guilt associated with resettlement and acculturation to a new culture (Eisenbruch, 2006). Eisenbruch (2006) expresses the term ‘cultural bereavement’ to explain this phenomenon experienced by refugees. According to Liev (2008) and Eisenbruch (2006), refugees often maintain strong connections to their past, reflecting on their previous way of life. While holding on to past experiences can sometimes complicate resettlement, it also provides continuity and meaning. It is therefore important for refugees to mourn and honour their previous life while navigating a new cultural context (Eisenbruch, 2006; Liev, 2008). Among Khmer Cambodians in Aotearoa New Zealand, some have embraced aspects of their life in their new environment, negotiating changes and challenges, while others continue to grapple with balancing their home culture and their experiences in Aotearoa. Policies and communities should support refugees in navigating these challenges, enabling them to participate fully and find their places within their new communities (Liev, 2008).

Education is central in the resettlement experience for refugee-background young people. As they navigate the challenges of life in a new country, schools often are spaces where

they find a sense of belonging, identity and support. How schools and educators respond to their needs can significantly influence academic progress, resettlement and well-being. In the following section, the focus turns to refugee-background students in schools, exploring how educational experiences can support trauma recovery, social integration, and the development of resilience.

Refugee-Background Students in Schools

While communities and policies provide important support for refugee-background people as they navigate life in a new country, schools often serve as the first structured setting where children and young people encounter routines, relationships, and learning opportunities that can influence their adaptations and well-being. For young refugees, the first schooling experiences in host countries are major milestones in their trauma recovery. Schools are often the beginning of resettlement for refugee children and young people (Herman 1992; Montgomery, 1998). Schools and teachers can positively influence integration and healing through responsive pedagogies (Hayward, 2007). When working with refugees, Hayward (2007) suggests that using recognisable language, tools, and systems can help support newly arrived refugees, as even the most minute differences will be unknown and unfamiliar to them (Hayward, 2007).

"Finally, students' references to the impact of trauma, self-doubt, and anxiety highlights the need to simultaneously foster kinship type networks within schools and tertiary institutions that promote safe access to informed and appropriate support and advice" (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 271).

Refugees must heal from their trauma to ensure integration into host societies and a successful resettlement, which can further education and employment opportunities. Teachers thus need to be trained in "teaching traumatised children, knowledge of symptoms and triggers of emotional relapses and confidence in referring students to appropriate services (when available)" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.92).

In McBrien & Hayward's (2022) research undertaken in the United States and New Zealand a refugee-background student took cover under the table during a routine fire drill and refused to come out as it reminded her of the war she had escaped (McBrien & Hayward, 2022, p.140). The New Zealand based study by Hayward (2007) described a similar narrative of refugee-background students being triggered by recurring school alarms. It required a

substantial amount of time for these students to be reassured they were safe (p.20). Such case studies demonstrate the complexity of trauma for refugee-background students and, if not sufficiently supported, it can act as a barrier to student learning and resettlement for refugees.

Refugees are faced with many challenges throughout their resettlement, particularly past traumas that they must overcome. Additionally, another significant challenge upon arrival into host countries is bullying and harassment which result in immense isolation. One in five ethnic learners have experienced harassment and bullying in New Zealand schools (The Education Review Office, 2021). Refugee-background students are more susceptible to these attacks, often occurring within the confines of schools, whether from teachers, or from students (Moore et al., 2000). Bullying is an expression of power through anger and violence, it can be one or more students antagonising students less powerful than themselves on purpose, making the targeted student feel powerless. (Karaman, 2021; Olweus, 1993). Further to this, studies conducted in Australia by Headspace (2016) suggests that many suicides, self-harming and self-destructive behaviours in children have been attributed to bullying.

Bullying can be observed in different forms both physical and verbal (Karaman, 2021). “Bullying threatens school health, student achievement and social adjustment” (Karaman, 2021, p.66). Bullying often disguises itself within a culture of ‘joking with each other’, however, to others being bullied it is not joking around, it can be quite serious and devastating. This can leave the victims paralysed and unable to defend themselves (Karaman, 2021). Identifying bullying behaviour can support resettlement into host countries.

Bullying reinforces marginalisation targeting individuals or groups who are perceived to be different. Marginalisation is a theme that emerges in research projects about refugee-background students (Anderson et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2000; Humpage, 2001; Marlowe et al., 2024; McBrien & Hayward, 2022; Sampson et al., 2016; The Education Review Office, 2021;). Marginalisation of refugee-background students manifests itself in various forms in schools, such as exclusion, lack of accessibility to education and poor integration into host countries (Anderson et al., 2021). Parents of refugee-background students who could speak English were at an advantage compared to parents that did not speak English. This is because they have access to information that is not accessible to parents who are not proficient in English. Furthermore, studies showed refugees did not have equal access to career and tertiary pathways that were available to them as they were often directed into career pathways that were not of their choosing (Anderson et al., 2021). Their study highlighted refugee-background students' experience of marginalisation:

> I just want to say one thing.. Usually in schools for us, like Syrian or mostly refugees, when you go and ask teachers like topics like this (education pathways), the main thing they just said is like. 'Don't worry about this kind of stuff; focus on your English first', which is annoying cause like you know…(Anderson et al., 2021, p.260).

The excerpt may suggest subtle marginalisation in education pathways. Encouraging learners to speak in their native language can help refugees navigate their identity and cultural capital in resettlement (Sampson et al., 2016). Furthermore, by supporting refugees in the resettlement process rather than marginalising refugees will facilitate them in moving forward with their resettlement journey. Being able to value their own language and culture in host countries will ensure successful resettlement journeys and greater navigational esteem. This ensures host countries recognise cultural differences and the importance of this, allowing refugees to feel proud of their culture (Anderson et al., 2023).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there seems to be limited formal professional development for teachers of refugee students. Sampson et al. (2016) suggests employing experienced workers in the Ministry of Education and other areas to navigate resettlement with the education space. By bringing cultural knowledge and experience of working with refugees, these workers have the potential to support refugee-background students to feel empowered through both their own culture and that of the host country. Relational engagement supports identifying issues and challenges faced by refugee-background students and their families (Sampson, 2016). Current Education policy offers minimal support for refugee-background students. Policy enactment differs across schools. In Sampson et al. (2016) school programmes and policy were found to be lacking in responsiveness and personalisation to the needs of refugee-background students and their families. McBrien's (2022) research supports this claim and suggests there is little support in the management of trauma for these students in schools.

According to Hayward (2007), schools should facilitate interventions to support refugee-background students who are navigating complex social and emotional challenges. However, these interventions rely on schools to secure government funding and additional support, putting additional pressure on schools to organise support for refugee-background students. There is funding available in the Refugee Flexible funding pool for non-English speakers (ESOL) to access support for translators and tutors. Apart from this there does not seem to be any additional funding to support refugee-background students in other areas particularly trauma relief (Mitchell, & Kamenarac, 2021).

The New Zealand Refugee Resettlement strategy outlines that at least 67% of refugee-background students should gain National Certificate of Education (NCEA) Level 2 or equivalent (McBrien & Hayward, 2022). This goal is for those that have attended a minimum of five years of consecutive secondary schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand (McBrien & Hayward, 2022). In 2022, 77% of refugee-background students gained NCEA Level 2, down from 78% in 2021. However, of those that had been in New Zealand for less than 5 years, 47% did not achieve NCEA Level 2 (Immigration New Zealand, 2024). The data suggest this limits job prospects and potential access to tertiary education for refugee-background students (Anderson et al., 2021). Government policy unintentionally marginalises refugees in pursuing tertiary education which requires a minimum of NCEA Level 3 attainment to attend. Furthermore, O'Rourke (2011) suggests that policy writes off refugee-background students, making tertiary education unattainable. Tertiary education has a strict criterion on acceptable levels into tertiary education, prerequisites for university entrance in New Zealand are 10 literacy credits (5 in writing and 5 in reading) and 10 numeracy skills (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024). Those who have completed their secondary schooling overseas find it especially difficult to achieve university entrance requirements in Aotearoa New Zealand (Anderson et al., 2021; Morrice et al., 2019).

The university application process itself is inequitable for many migrants, as English proficiency is assumed of them. Tertiary education has both intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes. By undertaking tertiary education and further studies after secondary school, refugees can feel empowered, have a sense of hope and possibly gain access to more employment opportunities to further their resettlement journey (Anderson et al., 2021). According to the data provided by L. Pura-Watson from the Ministry of Education (personal communication, April 15th; 2024) there are more than 2211 refugee-background students across Aotearoa, New Zealand schools. The Ministry of Education devotes six consultants to support students from migrant and refugee backgrounds (as cited in Sampson et al., 2016). This looks to be highly disproportionate.

Refugees in Post-Secondary Education

Refugee-background students experience various outcomes of post-secondary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Successful outcomes largely depend on their ability to integrate into the host country and the host country's ability to implement policies and support for refugees (Morrice, Tip, Brown & Collyer, 2019). Kuzhabekova and Nardon (2023) state that successful transitional pathways are influenced by schools, social groups, and the home environment among other positive relationships. These relationships demonstrate a clear correlation between post schooling outcomes, career and university pathways: "The faster

integration might, in its turn, lead to better educational outcomes, a higher ability to develop and diversify own social networks and to make better informed career-related decisions compared with the more disadvantaged and less integrated youth" (Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2023, p.508). Those that integrate faster are in a better position to achieve favorable outcomes than those who take longer to integrate.

However, some refugee-background students are further disadvantaged at the tertiary level as they are limited in accessing funds for tertiary education. Refugee-background students may attain tertiary acceptance through traditional methods, however, their pathway to education may be met with periods of time where school has not always been accessible, and if accessible, not usually inclusive of their strengths and needs. For example, education may have been disrupted by long periods of displacement or time spent at refugee camps where access to education was limited (Baker & Irwin 2019; O'Rourke 2011). Challenges in securing tertiary education can contribute to uncertain employment outcomes and a more prolonged resettlement journey for some refugees (Baker & Irwin 2019; O'Rourke 2011).

In addition, when refugees enter host countries, they may face barriers in the recognition of their qualifications. They may also have limited relevant work experience, which often results in being able to only access 'survival jobs' (Marlowe, 2023). According to Marlowe et al. (2023), as many as 40% of quota refugees, even after many years of resettlement, still rely mainly on the government as their main source of income (Marlowe et al., 2023; Lumley-Sapanski 2021). The research suggests policies need to better support refugees in achieving sustainable employment and financial independence (Anderson et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Refugee-background students are more at risk of underachievement in schools, with experiences of marginalisation, harassment, bullying and trauma having significant effects on the students, prior to arrival and well after resettlement. Resettlement between different generations differs and the effects of trauma continue to affect particularly parents and older cohorts who arrive in Aotearoa. While organisations such as the Red Cross and HOST International Aotearoa are contributing important initiatives in this space, there is more to be done, with only 1% of displaced peoples being resettled around the world (New Zealand Red Cross, 2024).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is a growing body of research exploring education and refugee-background students. However, much of this literature focuses on compulsory schooling, with less attention given to long-term outcomes beyond the classroom. As Morrice et al. (2019) note, "..there is a dearth of literature on the longer-term outcomes for refugee youth…the majority of current research is school based and ends when compulsory education finishes" (p.389). In particular, there is limited research exploring the transition from secondary schooling into employment and further education or examining how secondary schooling experiences shape later opportunities for Khmer Cambodian refugees.

This study addresses that gap by exploring Khmer Cambodian refugees' retrospective accounts during secondary schooling, the ways participants make meaning of these experiences, and how such experiences influence their post-compulsory education and life trajectories. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences, interventions, and programmes that may best support refugee-background communities in Aotearoa New Zealand beyond secondary school.

Chapter Three: Theory

Phenomenology

This study is underpinned by a phenomenological methodology as it seeks to understand the lived experiences of the participants; specifically, their experiences as refugee-background students in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools, along with their meaning-making around how these experiences may have impacted their post-school pathway. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach concerned with understanding lived experience and subjectivity (van Manen, 2014).

Phenomenology seeks to capture a phenomenon by attending to the embodied experiences of individuals, recognising that experience may be constituted through diverse modes of appearing, being, and definition (Bevan, 2014). As Creswell (2007) explains, phenomenology explores how individuals encounter a phenomenon, focusing on both *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced. Central to this approach is the recognition that meaning arises through the relational and contextual nature of lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Rather than privileging external interpretations or pre-existing knowledge about a phenomenon, phenomenology prioritises the individual's immediate and conscious engagement with it. Reality, in this context, is understood as that which is directly perceived and experienced, rather than that which is constructed or imposed by others (Creswell, 2017).

There are three known branches or orientations towards phenomenology, and they are attributed to three key theorists. The first is transcendental phenomenology through the foundational work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl is renowned for being the father of phenomenology, the philosophical study of consciousness and experiences. Husserl (cited in Rich, Graham, Taket & Shelley, 2013) focusses on intentional consciousness in those experiences and meaning making are directed at an object, idea or experience. Husserl is interested in how the experience appears for the individual rather than making assumptions. By doing this, the essence of the phenomenon is uncovered (Rich et al., 2013). To do this, Husserl’s phenomenology applies epoche (bracketing), which is to suspend any judgements and focus solely on the experience as it appears (Rich et al., 2013; van Manen, 2014).

The second branch of phenomenology is existential or hermeneutical phenomenology through the work of Martin Heidegger. It is said that he shifted phenomenological thinking towards existential questions and interpretive methods. Heidegger, was deeply rooted in

Husserl's ideas, but rather than purely the subjectiveness of the experience he was interested in the practicality of the experience and how it is used, interacted with and its purpose to enhance the experience (van Manen, 2014). Heidegger (1927, as cited in Critchley & Schürmann, 2008) introduced the concept of Dasein, a term that refers to human existence. For Heidegger, knowledge emerges through authentic human experience. He argued that human beings cannot be understood apart from their world, and conversely, that the world is always experienced as a human world: "Dasein means that man cannot be understood without his world, and correlatively that the world is always man's world" (Critchley & Schürmann, 2008, p. 57). Heidegger challenged the idea of a fixed human essence, suggesting instead that being human is shaped by context, temporality, and lived experience. Our understanding of knowledge is therefore influenced by the moment in which we are consciously engaged with the world. Phenomenology here is to do with being and interpretation, how we live and interact with the world, as opposed to Husserl's phenomenology, which is more interested in how things appear in our minds (Critchley & Schürmann, 2008; van Manen, 2014).

The third branch of phenomenology is represented in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty who advanced phenomenological thought by directing attention toward the embodied experience (van Manen, 2014). He rejected the mind/body dualism and instead believed the body is the primary site of knowing the world. His approach sought to explore experience from the perspective of those living it, emphasising the interconnectedness of mind, body, and the surrounding world in shaping reality. According to van Manen (2014), Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is interested in the senses that make up our existence, which determine how we experience the world. Merleau-Ponty (2005) defined phenomenology as the study of knowledge in all its forms whether conscious, unconscious, real, or imagined. He was particularly interested in how individuals' perceptions influence the way they engage with and navigate new environments (van Manen, 2014).

These phenomenology theorists paved the way for its further development and use in a wide range of research areas. One of the more contemporary phenomenologists is Max van Manen whose phenomenological theorising has application in this study on refugee-background students. Van Manen's (2014) approach to phenomenology places particular emphasis on the nuanced and detailed exploration of lived experience as it is encountered by individuals.

This study will draw on van Manen's (2014) hermeneutic phenomenology, which explores "...phenomena as they appear, show, present, or give themselves to us" (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2014) emphasises that by understanding existentialism is to truly understand human experience as our experiences are of body, time, space and relative to

others. Experiences are not in isolation but intertwined with these four dimensions. The research explores van Manen's four existential dimensions: lived body, lived time, lived space and lived relationality as foundational structures for interpreting and understanding the essence of refugee-background students lived experience.

The Four Existentials

Lived Body. Van Manen (2014) describes the *lived body* (or corporeality) as how our physical body experiences the world. It is through our body that we communicate, function, experience and observe the physical world. Van Manen (2014), drawing on Sartre, explains this concept as bodily engagement with the world, emphasising not how others live but rather how "we perceive our own body with our own body in the world in which we dwell" (van Manen, 2014, p.304). The body is a complex system in which individuals perceive, touch, sense and interact differently to different scenarios. These life events can be both physical, emotional, spiritual and virtual (van Manen's (2014). With these events, different emotions and feelings are invoked, such as feelings of sadness, happiness, anguish and anxiety. This is the lived body in that the experience is lived through the body (van Manen, 2014).

Van Manen (2014) emphasises the significance of the lived body, particularly its capacity for secrecy, in shaping bodily experience. For refugees, this aspect of embodiment can be especially pronounced: trauma can be felt and perceived, yet withheld as it may be too painful to articulate. The physical body may choose to resist expressing it. For van Manen (2014), experience is first lived through the body before it can find expression through words, and individuals may equally choose to conceal the lived experience. For refugee-background people, the body thus holds memories in secret to protect against the emotional wounds and scars of past experiences. Though the physical body is there in every experience, it has the power to sustain information and hold secrets from oneself and others, however, it reflects the complex nature of the living body and how one experiences the world (van Manen, 2014).

Lived Time. *Lived time,* or temporality, refers to how people perceive time, rather than the objective measure of time indicated by a clock. Even seemingly straightforward measures, such as analogue and digital clocks, can be experienced differently due to the way time is presented. Time can be understood as physical, cosmic, phenomenological or subjective. Van Manen (2014) is interested in how subjective time shapes moods, emotions and perceptions of the world. Experiences of time vary depending on context and engagement. Individuals and

refugees may experience time when ‘waiting’ differently to time when actively engaging in an activity. For example, time is experienced differently for a child sitting on a plane versus their parents who have been waiting for resettlement and are on the plane filling out paperwork ready for arrival into the new country. Their parents may feel the weight being lifted off their shoulders, hope and relief. Whereas a child may anxiously be waiting to disembark the plane, ready to leave the confines of the small space that surrounds them. Similarly subjective time may feel longer or shorter depending on a person's experiences with time, for refugees who have spent many years in camps, time can feel distorted, repetitive or still, whereas for those that spend fewer years in camps, time may be fast and feel anxious. In both examples, though the objective duration remains the same (e.g. same plane ride or camp life), the experience of that time is subjective and unique to the individual.

Lived Space. *Lived space*, or spatiality, refers to physical, psychological states and emotions aroused by physical and metaphysical space. Space has the power to shape individuals' feelings, perceptions and their way of living the real world. Van Manen is interested in the nuances and intricacies of space in the case of refugee-background students, schools are physical institutes; the buildings themselves represent a physical place; however, schools also symbolise spaces of hope, isolation and new beginnings. Both are attributes of the same place, and both embody space in both the physical and metaphysical world (van Manen, 2014).

To further describe Van Manen’s lived space he regularly draws on the concept of secrets, like trauma as previously mentioned, both can be hidden from physical space and rather they “live in the shadows of everyday life” (van Manen, 2014, p.305). Trauma for many refugees can be of an invisible world, in the pits of the individual's mind which is lived space. It too can be physical and contextualised through material items such as school alarms and bells. Both objects are physical, and the sounds of the objects exist in lived space which can trigger feelings of fear and uncertainty for refugee peoples (van Manen, 2014). Lived space is deeply charged by the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants lived experiences.

Lived Relationality. *Lived relationality*, or human relations, refers to how relationships and connections with others determine how one feels, and how these connections influence the way people perceive their world. As van Manen (2014) explains, relationality involves exploring relationships in relation to phenomena, including connections with community, family, love and intimacy. How one perceives these relationships can have an impact on outcomes and actions, and how relationships are experienced. In van Manen’s framework, these four lived existentials

are interconnected, and examining relationality alongside lived space, time, and body helps researchers understand the meaning of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

Returning to van Manen's (2014) idea of secrets, parents of refugee children may not be aware of their child keeping a secret, however, it has impacted his experiences and through his relations with his parents, his upbringings and their expectations for him, he has learnt to keep this secret. In the case of refugee children, secrets of abuse, bullying and shame may be hidden. Keeping secrets may cause tension and breaking secrets may also cause tension. Holding onto secrets may cause shared intimacy and exasperate the experience or it may not. However, any experience can be relational. As the individual can choose to share the secret to his parents or to someone else. Every experience is a relational transaction, and it is important to understand phenomena (van Manen, 2014).

Phenomenology in Empirical Research

Phenomenology’s application to empirical research can be seen across many fields including health (Kapeller, 2024; Svenaeus, 2022; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025) and education (Bassiri, 2024; Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012; Gaerlan-Price, 2013; Mcphail, 1995). Phenomenology has also been used in refugee studies. For example, Lee, Bailey, Hidalgo, Harrison, & Hill (2024) explore Afghan youth refugees and their experiences of integration into the United States. Gilodi, Albert & Nienaber (2025) investigated refugees’ experiences of resettlement in Luxembourg. Nazli & Culha (2023) undertook qualitative research with refugee students who engaged in distance learning during COVID-19 in Turkey. Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter (2012) explored the experiences of refugees and marginalised people and what it means to be resilient. Their study used phenomenological analysis as part of their analytical framework. Finally, Hinton, Reis & de Jong (2020), using phenomenology to unpack experiences of trauma in Cambodian refugees.

In this study, the use of phenomenology is employed to capture the intricacies in lived experiences for refugee-background students. To complement the phenomenological lens, resilience theory is integrated into this study, to explore how the research participants' experiences are deeply motivated by resilience.

Resilience Theory

In connecting with participants and through preliminary stages of analysis, it became clear that resilience was a core theme across all the participants' narratives. To deepen understanding and support findings, I drew on resilience theories, particularly Ungar's (2012a) socio-ecological resilience framework. This perspective frames resilience as a continuous process and is based on the idea that external systems shape an individual's capacity for resilience. While personal traits play a role, resilience is largely influenced by the broader external factors that surround and interact with an individual's daily life (Ungar, 2012a).

Resilience is a commonly used term to mean an individual's ability in 'overcoming', 'bouncing back' or 'beating the odds' from adversity (Lenson, 2018; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014; Ungar, 2012a). However, this individualistic framing of resilience has been critiqued by scholars across many fields. For example, Lerner (2006) sought an understanding of resilience in the context of the human condition, emotionally and psychologically rather than in a physical sense of overcoming such as climbing a high mountain. Within mental health discourse, resilience is understood as an individual's capacity to adapt positively to challenging events by understanding the influence of external factors (Lenson et al., 2014; Ungar, 2012a).

In education, resilience is often discussed in terms of learners' capacities to develop coping mechanisms, maintain motivation, and engage in problem-solving over time (Masten, 2014). The concept of grit is frequently associated with resilience in academic contexts; while related, grit emphasizes perseverance and stamina over prolonged periods, whereas resilience centers on overcoming adversity (Morehouse & Duckworth, 2016). Across academic disciplines, resilience research varies: psychology often emphasises individual coping and human adaptability (Lenson, 2018; Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013), education and sociology focus on external supports (Masten, 2014; Mak & Wieling, 2024), and biological perspectives consider genetic and neurological contributions (Simeon et al., 2007; Yehuda, Flory, Southwick & Charney, 2006).

Resilience studies have traced back to the late 1940s (Masten, 2001). These earlier studies emphasised individuals as agents of resilience and change (Antonovsky, 1987; Bandura, 1977; Brown & Lohr, 1987; Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Rutter, 1987, 2006; Werner & Smith, 1982). Later resilience theorists (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2012a) highlight the influence of external factors such as family and friends in the development of resilience. Research suggests by focusing on individuals, this only explains the psychological factors of the individual rather than the external conditions related to resilience (Lerner, 2006).

Rutter (1987) offers a child-centred approach to understanding resilience. In his study he observed how children were able to overcome adversity and resume to normalcy in their lives after traumatic events. Rutter argued that children are not passive bystanders, but they too have an active role to play in being resilient (Ungar, 2012a). Rutter (1987) concurs with the latter ideas of resilience, moving away from the individualistic views on resilience to a more adaptable ever-changing social construct of resilience influenced by external factors. Rutter's (1987) theory of child resilience paved the way for further studies and theories in the field of resilience.

Ungar (2012a) states, "Resilience is defined as a set of behaviors which over time reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments" (Ungar, 2012a, p.14). Masten (2014), explains the capacity to be resilient is determined by the interactions by the systems (Masten, 2014). She describes this as 'ordinary magic' it is not a rare occurrence, rather an everyday phenomenon that is encouraged by supportive cultural and biological systems. Children particularly affected by war, will have a protective system such as their parents. How their parents care and advocate for their child will determine the child's ability to be resilient (Masten, 2014). Yehuda & Flory (2007) agrees resilience can be determined by supportive networks, however, argue that the biological genes and brain chemistry have a vital role in resilience (Yehuda & Flory, 2007).

Ungar's Theory of Resilience

Based on this review of resilience theory, I chose to use Ungar's (2012a) socio-ecological resilience framework as it accounts for both the individual and environmental dimensions of resilience. Ungar (2012a) defines resilience in the following way:

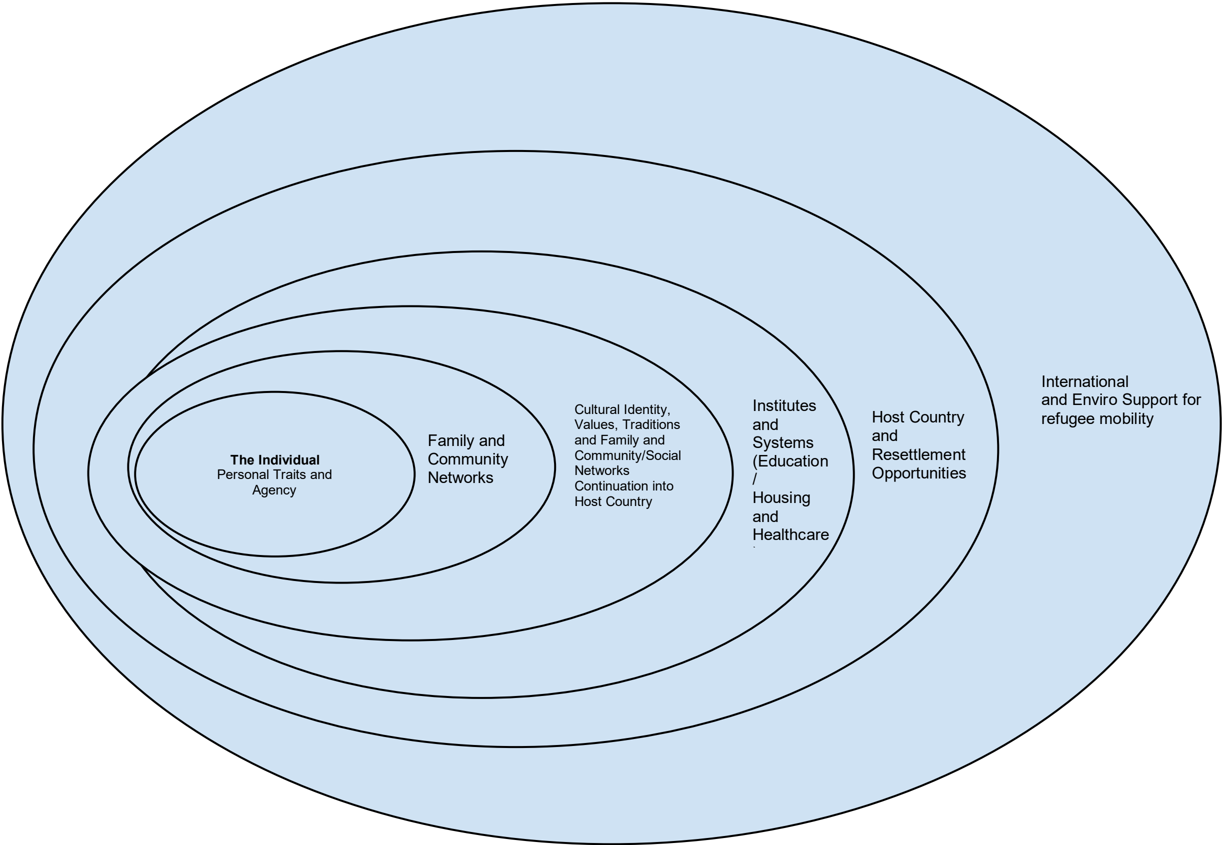
> Resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being, and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (p.17).

Ungar's theory of resilience rests on the relationship between the individual and their external environment. For Ungar (2012a), resilience is not a singular process reliant only on the strengths and traits of the individual; it is a dual result of the ability of the individual's social ecology to cope with, and overcome, adversity, and the ways in which the social ecology demonstrates growth. Resilience is an interactive concept, relying on both the individual and

their community to determine resilience (Ungar, 2012a). As such, Ungar provides the following model (see Figure 1), which frames resilience as a social ecology that includes varying factors of influence from the individual's immediate family and community to their own cultural values, identity and traditions, supporting institutions and organisations, the host country itself and the overall international environment for refugee mobility to support the individual's resilience.

Figure 1

Diagram showing Ungar's social ecology of resilience



Note. Diagram showcasing Ungar's resilience framework influenced by various factors both internally and externally to the individual.

Further to this model, Ungar (2012a) also describes six concepts in understanding a socio-ecological approach to resilience. The first concept is understanding and acknowledging the specific *context* within which a person may have needed to develop resilience. In this phase,

the individual is exposed to situation(s) of adversity. They must navigate their way through any combination of physical barriers, social challenges, and conflicting cultural norms while remaining strong enough to negotiate the resources associated with each of the above to ensure their well-being is being met in a culturally meaningful way. Ungar (2012a) states, "In the context of exposure to (or perception of) significant adversity, resilience is a non-unique combination of strengths and weaknesses of a system that allows it to function normally" (p.58). Therefore, according to this theory, the individual must demonstrate functionality which means they can function according to the norms of the social context they are in (Ungar, 2012a).

The second concept in Ungar's (2012a) resilience framework is *exposure* to a traumatic event and event's interplay with the environment in which it occurred. For Ungar (2012a), the "victim's social environment can affect the consequences of exposure to a traumatic event" (p.416). For example, if the individual experiences a traumatic event, but has a supportive family, the way they react to the exposure may differ from someone who experiences a similar trauma but has less support systems in place, such as family. Ungar (2008) relates these to the refugee experience and explains that external factors such as political unrest in their home country and the host country's support in resettlement, affect the individual's ability to be resilient.

Significant adversity is the third concept and refers to the ongoing challenges and hardships faced by individuals. When understanding resilience and the theory of resilience that is explained in this research. Significance or significant is a singular term and an independent concept from the other concepts (Ungar, 2012a, p.416). Significant adversities are created through challenges and hardships that individuals and systems may face. These communities will need to access cultural norms and practices to overcome resilience. Adversity is not only a one-time event, but it can also be long-term stressors that can continue to affect individuals' lives such as trauma, poverty and discrimination (Ungar, 2012a).

The fourth concept relates to *capacity.* Ungar (2012a) explains capacity as the ability for the individual and the system to be able to internalize, sort, present and process the challenges of trauma exposure and significant adversity. Individuals exposed to significant adversity will have to navigate through the systems and then in capacity will have to negotiate the resources in a culturally meaningful way (p.10). Resilience is based on the supportive community's individuals are involved in.

The *individual* is the fifth concept in Ungar's framework. Ungar (2012a) acknowledges that each individual has the capacity to develop resilience due to their ability to reflect, to process their experiences and to regulate their emotions. However, this concept goes beyond

the individual and acknowledges the role of their family, ethnic groups, school communities and wider social circles in the development of resilience. These groups can influence the development of resilience and the individual's ability to overcome the challenges they experienced and their ability to move forward (Ungar, 2012a). An example of this can be found in Weine, Levin, Hakizimana & Dahnweigh's research (2012a) on Liberian and Burundian refugees residing in the United States of America. According to this research, the family's access to resilience is dependent on the communities' support in finding a new church, housing and shared parenting responsibilities (cited in Ungar, 2012a, p.6)."

The final concept is described as *functioning normally*. Ungar's (2012a) theory is not merely about overcoming adversity. He emphasises the significance of ensuring the entire system (the individual, their family, their wider community) can learn and adapt to a new functioning environment, even if the environment has changed after crisis. The body's continuation and affirmation to function normally as expected is its overarching priority. Plasticity and evolution before and after stress is of less importance (Ungar, 2012a).

In Ungar's resilience framework, resilience is a continual, dynamic process determined not just by the individual but by their system and requires careful negotiation, personal and collective reflection and mutual support grounded in the realities of the past and new environments. Due to its multi-faceted, socio ecological conceptualisation of resilience, Ungar's framework has been used in numerous studies and fields of research, including youth development, community health, mental health recovery, and cultural resilience. His work has supported work within the field of education such as Masten & Reed (2002) who describe resilience through protective systems, Van der Veer (2022) who look to unpack trauma and resilience through culturally sensitive supportive systems and Kessel, MacDougall & Gibbs (2014) offer a look at child-centered educational approaches to support resilience. These researchers have applied Ungar's ideas to understand how educational systems and schools can promote resilience in learning environments that support students, particularly those facing systemic challenges such as racism and bullying. Ungar's theory has been influential in the field of mental health, particularly those looking at post-traumatic stress disorder and recovery. For example, Hobfoll, Stevens & Zalta (2015) adapted Ungar's model in their study on resource mobilisation and mental health recovery in disaster events.

Ungar's framework is especially suitable for refugee studies. In his Social Ecology of Resilience handbook (2012a), he dedicates an entire chapter to the story of Arn Chorn-Pond, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge Killing Fields. Like many thousands of Khmer people, Chorn-Pond escaped to Khao I Dang on the Cambodia-Thailand border where he was adopted by his

Christian American father. He tells of his experiences during these foundational years as a child soldier: “...3 or 4 or 5 times a day they would kill people and force us all to watch. I was forced to push people into graves” (Chorn-Pond, 2012, p.100). For the 2 years he lived at the temple, Chorn-Pond calculated that around 16,000 people had died there, and of the 700 children he came with, less than 60 survived (Chorn-Pond, 2012, p.100). As a former child soldier, Arn Chorn-Pond faced numerous emotional and psychological challenges. However, his story is one of resilience and hope and brings to life Ungar’s framework in a tangible way:

> I think if he’s still alive at all, he needs a person, two persons, or a whole community, or the nation, or the world to just keep looking at who he is, in his heart, and just keep telling him. You are a child, you didn’t do anything wrong, you were forced to do what you were forced to do, or had done to you. We love you no matter what (Chorn-Pond, 2012, p.107).

Chorn-Pond’s story highlights how resilience manifests through supportive networks. Individuals require people and family that believe in the individual and to be resilient requires more than responding to basic human needs of physical safety, water and food. Chorn-Pond shows that victims of a traumatic event and/or significant adversity need community, purpose, and people who will not give up on their recovery; that resilience is not a one-time event, it may span a lifetime (Chorn-Pond, 2012).

Ungar’s framework offers much wider research on the experiences of refugees and the ways in which they may develop resilience. Refugees fight to overcome multiple challenges because of their forced migration and resettlement into unfamiliar host countries (Anderson et al., 2023). Their resilience may be determined by process/institutional supports such as integration processes, education, post-education pathways, and policies, and relational supports such as family, friends and community (Ungar, 2012a). Ungar’s theory allows for a concurrent focus on refugees as individuals (their personal traits, strengths, courage), while highlighting the importance of supportive systems, education, policies, and sociocultural role of Aotearoa New Zealand in fostering an environment for resilience to develop. Engaging with Ungar's (2012b) resilience theory may also encourage governmental and local policies that are culturally sensitive, context-specific, and designed to empower and uplift refugees to ensure successful resettlement.

Critique of Ungar's Theory of Resilience. There is some critique of the studies of resilience (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021; Olsson, Jerneck, O'Byrne, Thoren & Persson, 2015; Ungar, 2012a). Ungar's (2012a) theory predominantly focuses on western cultures, which may lack worth in indigenous cultures such as Khmer culture as their views and culture vary in what they see as resilience. Assuming all cultures are the same may give an oversimplification to the complex nature of culture and identity (Rutter, 2006). Ungar (2012a), does consider variations between different cultures, however trying to define resilience in one broad term may lose the true beauty and richness of how different cultures use cultural capital to cope with adversity.

Secondly there is contestation that Ungar's theory of resilience is nothing more than a masked concept of risk and protection. It has taken the original ideas of these two factors and argued this to be resilience. However, Ungar (2012a) argues that these risk and protection factors analyse group differences and assumes that most individuals will act in the same way in each situation. Traditional risk and protection theorists (Rutter, 2006; Masten, 2001) use this concept to explain why some people do better than others in stressful and traumatic situations. Ungar's theory focuses on varied and ongoing situations of resilience not solely on how external factors such as risk and protective factors affect resilience (Ungar's (2012a).

Lastly, emphasising resilience too much may take away from governmental policies for change and equitable outcomes for refugees and those in impoverished communities that require intervention and individualised support (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021;). Ungar (2012a) overcomes this by promoting the supportive networks in the individual to be resilient, supportive networks such as governments, education and other systems are important in the social ecology of resilience in fostering supportive networks to allow for individual resilience.

Despite criticism of resilience theory, it is meaningful in this study as it captures the complexities of displacement, adversity and resettlement experiences for Khmer Cambodian refugees. This study will apply both resilience theory and phenomenology to add depth and understanding to the findings of this research. Phenomenology attends closely to nuances of lived experiences while resilience theory explores adversity and supportive systems. Together these theories offer richness in understanding refugee-background students' transitional experiences after mainstream education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Resilience Theory and Phenomenology in this study

Both resilience theory and phenomenology offer a way of looking at the uniqueness of the human condition to overcome adversity. Ungar's resilience theory is interested in the subjective nature of humans and their individual experiences along with the communities that support resilience. This is particularly relevant in the studies of refugees who have a large network of both social and cultural capital that they inhabit and call upon in resettlement (Anderson et al., 2023). The study of phenomenology looks at the understanding of experiences of everyone to unpack and make meaning of these experiences. Both resilience theory and phenomenology are based on the nature of human experiences, and the social and cultural connections that shape the individual experience. Phenomenology particularly highlights one common theme, the phenomena which, in this research, is *resilience.* The combination of Ungar's Resilience Theory and Phenomenology provides an inclusive framework for understanding the uniqueness of refugee-background students' experiences and needs in Aotearoa New Zealand. Phenomenology and resilience theory function throughout the study by providing complementary modes of appreciating refugee-background peoples experiences and narratives of lived resilience.

Phenomenology and resilience theory as a conceptual framework: interconnected through human experiences and overcoming adversity. Collectively, this provides a model in analysing how individuals undergo difficulties and develop the ability to overcome, adapt, and maintain normalcy.

Phenomenology as an interpretive lens: the exploration of lived experiences and personal perceptions, while resilience theory helps elucidate the coping mechanisms and behaviours that emerge from those encounters.

Phenomenology and resilience as a sensitising concept: the researcher interprets and focusses with attention and scrutiny on how participants experience and describe events Resilience theory allows the researcher to address, coping mechanisms and continuation of everyday functioning for individuals.

Phenomenology and resilience as an emergent finding: results are emergent and determined by the essence which is elucidated by data analysis process.

Chapter Four: Research Design

This research study explores the key question: *"How have experiences during secondary school influenced post-secondary school outcomes for Khmer Cambodian refugees?"* In other words, what were Khmer refugee-background people's experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools? How did their experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools influence their post-school outcomes? In this chapter, I discuss the design of the study and the methods undertaken. This qualitative, phenomenological study explores these questions through one-on-one interviews to analyse the lived experiences of the study's four participants.

Research Paradigm and Approach

Qualitative research is particularly useful in the field of refugee studies where topics can be sensitive. Such an approach allows for adaptability and flexibility in questions and ensures the phenomena can be explored in depth (Marlowe et al., 2024). This study used a qualitative research approach, which is defined as the exploration and understanding of human and social problems. Within this paradigm researchers utilise emergent questions to examine and interpret participant meaning. Data collection is undertaken in participants own spaces and the researcher synthesises central themes to capture the essence (Creswell, 2019).

Qualitative methods allow participants to express their perspectives, experiences, opinions and narratives, often through open-ended queries in diverse modes of inquiry such as interviews, focus groups, and arts-based methodologies (Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Qualitative research is inherently interpretive with the researcher embedded in the process and engaged in mutual meaning-making with the participants. In such an approach, the researcher must attend to their own bias, usually through critical self-reflexivity and understanding their positionality within the research (Creswell, 2009; Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2007).

This study used an interpretivist research paradigm as it is concerned with understanding people's day to day lives and how these are co-constructed through interactions within social contexts. Knowledge is subjective, created by the narratives of each participant of the research during that time and space. There is no truth outside the experiences shared by the participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews are conducted as partnerships: participants have the flexibility to exclude information they do not wish to share while

researchers help keep the conversations focused on the research objective (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Knowledge is co-produced by both the interviewer and interviewee, making the paradigm particularly useful when dealing with sensitive topics such as in the case of refugee experiences (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Overall, an interpretivist, qualitative approach was suitable for this study because it prioritises meaning making through participants lived experiences. It acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed and co-produced not only by the social interactions of the participants to their experience of the phenomena but also through the interaction between the researcher and participant (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

This study is underpinned by phenomenology as theory and methodology. This study engages specifically with van Manen's ideas on lived experience, as detailed in Chapter Three. Within the scope of the method, I have chosen to work with Moustakas (1994) who provides a workable phenomenological framework, including a six-step analytical process to distill the lived experiences of the participants into an essence. This is outlined in the section below on Data Analysis.

Participants and Sampling

Sampling. For this study, I chose to use a purposive sampling method, which is often used in qualitative and interpretivist research as it aligns with the study's methodology. Further to this, purposive sampling is particularly useful in the study of refugees because the sample selected are specifically informed and have lived experience in the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2017). Purposive sampling is not random selection. Participants are chosen for their specific experiences and ability to contribute meaningfully to the study (Creswell, 2017; Tongco, 2007). Given this study's small sample size, purposive sampling enabled the selection of participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomena.

Recruitment Procedures. Participants were recruited through closed Cambodian Facebook group pages. A researcher profile was created on Facebook and advertisements were posted (with comments disabled) for two weeks. Interested people emailed the researcher and were sent an information sheet about the research to potential participants. Respondents were given a further two weeks to confirm interest. Once respondents confirmed their interest in writing, a consent form was sent to them and returned prior to participation in the study. Interviews were conducted either in person at AUT campus in private rooms or online, with scheduling flexibility guided by participants.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. To ensure participants were suitable for this study, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Participants will have official refugee status (quota, family reunification, convention refugees, asylum seekers).
2. Participants must be of Cambodian descent.
3. Participants must have basic conversational English proficiency as ascertained by the researcher.
4. Have experienced at least two terms (six months) of their secondary school in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
5. Participants must not have been born in New Zealand.
6. Participants will be 18 years of age and over.

Participants who did not meet the criteria were excluded. Family members and relatives of the primary researcher were also excluded to maintain ethical integrity and prevent bias (Romain, 2015). These criteria ensured that participants' experiences were directly relevant to the research objectives and supported the collection of rich data.

Participants. There were four participants in this study. The small sample size is reflective of both purposive sampling and phenomenological research as it requires in-depth, well-explored and personal accounts (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Undertaking recruitment of a large sample may lose depth and essence of the participants lived experience (Creswell, 2003). Van Manen (2014) suggests that the sample size should not be limited to a specific population size; instead, the participants are selected on their "knowledge and verbal eloquence to describe a group or (sub) culture to which they belong" (p.353). Purposive sampling ensured participants were selected based on their lived experience and suitability for addressing the research questions (van Manen, 2014). Further to this, given only 1500 refugees come into Aotearoa New Zealand each year under the quota programme, and with only a small percentage being of Khmer background, the sample size for this study was appropriate. See table below for information about participants of this study.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Pseudonym	Years in Aotearoa	Gender	Biographical notes	Age
One	Heng	Arrived under 5 with mum and dad.	Male	Returned to secondary school in Y14 Enjoyed school, had a lot of friends	40-50
Two	Charlie	Arrived under 5, with brother, mum, dad, grandma and aunty.	Female	Left secondary school prior to Y13 Enjoyed hanging with friends Favourite subject was textiles	40-50
Three	Nardy	Arrived under 5, with sister, mum and dad.	Female	Bullied in school alot Made some good friends in secondary school	40-50
Four	Jason	Arrived under 5, with mum and dad.	Male	Left secondary school just before end of Y13 Enjoyed Accounting Offered some work by Accounting teacher	40-50

Data Collection Methods

Rationale for Interviews. In line with a phenomenological approach, this study collected data through one-on-one interviews with each participant. Interviewing is a common data collection method within qualitative research because it allows participants to share their rich experiences of a particular topic, while allowing for flexibility for the researcher to seek further understanding of questions and investigate other areas through questioning (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Kvale (1996) uses the metaphor of an interviewer-as-miner with their role to "uncover nuggets of truth through interviews to access a seam of knowledge that is out there ready to be gathered up. The miner who embarks upon an interactive and reflective

interpretation of how they came to see and transform" (Kvale (1996) as cited in Edwards & Holland, 2013, p.12). According to Edwards & Holland (2013), there are three common interview structures: structured, unstructured and semi-structured.

Types of Interviews. Structured interviews follow a script with predetermined questions and have less room for flexibility (Edwards & Holland, 2013). They are more often used for quantitative research where analytical data is required from a larger pool of participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 1989).

Unstructured interviews are described as holistic interviews and have fewer prerequisites. The researcher begins with a general indication of the topic. This type of interviewing is useful for narrative and ethnographic studies as discussions are broad and open. This type of interview often requires an experienced researcher, who can guide discussions to ensure participants' insights are well-expressed (Cohen et al.,1989). The researcher may start the interview with one question and flexibility is crucial in this technique, the researcher can use aides and adjust the interview in different directions as emergent themes occur as the interviewee shares their story (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews are a balance between structure and flexibility. This type of interview generates in-depth data through the stories told by the participants. There is room for researcher and participant flexibility to explore emerging themes, however, the interviewer is guided by the objective of the research and some pre-prepared questions to help facilitate the interview, giving the interview direction, as well as the flexibility to explore ideas further, maintaining the space for participants to freely share their lived experiences (Alase, 2017; Galletta, 2013). Conversation can flow organically and naturally as questions act as a guide and there is no restriction as to which order questions need to be asked and exactly what questions need to be asked (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The role of the interviewer in semi-structured interviews is vital to the success of the interview. The researcher is an active participant in the process of semi-structured interviews; they are constantly listening to the participant while the interview is taking place. Bevan (2014) states "the researcher listens actively, which should lead to areas for clarification and probing" (p.137). The interviewer receives, interprets and reflects on the participants answers, to ask further questions and explore themes and further trends (Galetta, 2013).

Choice of Interview Type. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to employ semi-structured interviews. Unlike a structured interview where the questions are pre-determined and

followed like a script *or* an unstructured interview where the researcher is experienced and guided by emerging themes, a semi-structured interview ensures that some questions are prepared in advance to give the interview direction. However, as the researcher, I also have agency to explore ideas that emerge from the interview itself (Galletta, 2013). Semi-structured interviews are a useful method for phenomenological research because they are participant-oriented, offering both flexibility and structure in keeping with the objectives of the research.

Design of Interview Guide. Creswell (2003) states that one to two overarching questions with a handful of sub-questions is sufficient in qualitative interviews. Questions are open-ended and designed to elicit answers to address the research question. Alase (2017) suggests phenomenological questions, should allow participants to openly express their lived narratives. Bevan (2014) states, in phenomenological interviews, it is important to ask respondents to describe specific events and situations rather than their opinions (Bevan, 2014). I have integrated ideas from both Creswell (2003), Bevan (2014) and Edwards & Holland (2013) to create an interview question guide. The semi-structured interview question guide is presented in Table 1 below. This lists questions to support and help facilitate the interviews in line with semi-structured interviews. However, as per a semi-structured interview, this is not a prescribed list. These questions are categorized as orientating questions, questions about their school experiences, and questions about their post-school transition.

Table 2

Semi-structure Interview guide questions

Orientating questions	1. *Tell me a bit about yourself* 2. *What made you want to participate in this research* 3. *Tell me about your journey to New Zealand (NZ), what year did you arrive/how old were you and who did you come with?*
School experiences questions	4. *Were there any significant memories / experiences during your time at secondary school?* 5. *What were they? Describe them? Why did these stand out to you? (You do not need to give a big story or memory something even smaller significant?)* 6. *What do you remember about secondary school looking back?*

Transitional experience questions	7. *Were there any significant memories / experiences during this time transitioning from secondary school into post-secondary school life? What were they? Describe them? Why did these stand out to you?* 8. *Looking back, what experiences during your secondary schooling do you think made the most impact on your post-secondary school life? Why is that? Describe these.*

Interviews. The interviews in this study took place both online and face-to-face at a time and place negotiated and best suited to the participants. Three of the four participants in this study chose face-to-face interviews. In this case, a private room at the Auckland University of Technology South campus was booked. One of the four participants chose to undertake an online interview; this was conducted using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were all recorded for audio only and transcribed using digital Microsoft Teams transcription tools.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

I have chosen to use Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis process, which includes six steps to support the distillation of an essence of the phenomenon. Moustakas elicits a human centered approach to data analysis to describe human experience. The method looks to uncover experiences through deep reflection, reviewing significant statements, creating meaning units and individual textural, structural and composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). I describe each step and offer an example from my study.

Step 1: Bracketing. In the first step of the analysis process, the researcher engages in bracketing, which requires the researcher to put aside any preconceived ideas, their own beliefs and prior knowledge or assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is a continuous reflective process and undertaken throughout the research phase, including throughout the interview process (Creswell, 2007). The researcher must be able to "clearly separate description from interpretation and judgement" (Moustakas, 1994, p.3). In practice, I engaged in bracketing through writing regular research journal entries immediately after each interview and throughout the analysis process. See Figure 1 below for an excerpt from a reflective journal entry.

Figure 2

Reflective journal entry

> "Themes of abandonment, rejection from participants due to parents separating. Noticed compared to my own experiences, these participants came from homes where their parents had broken up during their school years. The two males particularly do not speak to their fathers. One of the female participants had a period where she did not speak to her dad, she blamed him for leaving her pregnant mum at the time. Interestingly, through the findings that separated families during the schooling years are more likely to not finish secondary school, I had a thought and compared my own experiences of my parents staying

Note. Example of bracketing from researcher journal.

Step 2: Significant Statements. Significant statements are described by Creswell (2007) as meaningful statements, statements that stand out from all other statements. However, every statement shared by the participants is treated equally as valuable in capturing fully the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, the researcher reviews the transcripts and listens to audio recordings to familiarise themselves with the tone and essence of the participants' responses. Listening and reading through transcriptions are completed by the researcher thoroughly and reviewed several times to draw out significant statements for each participant. Figure 3 below shows an example of significant statements taken from one participant's transcripts.

Figure 3

Excerpt from Heng's Significant Statements

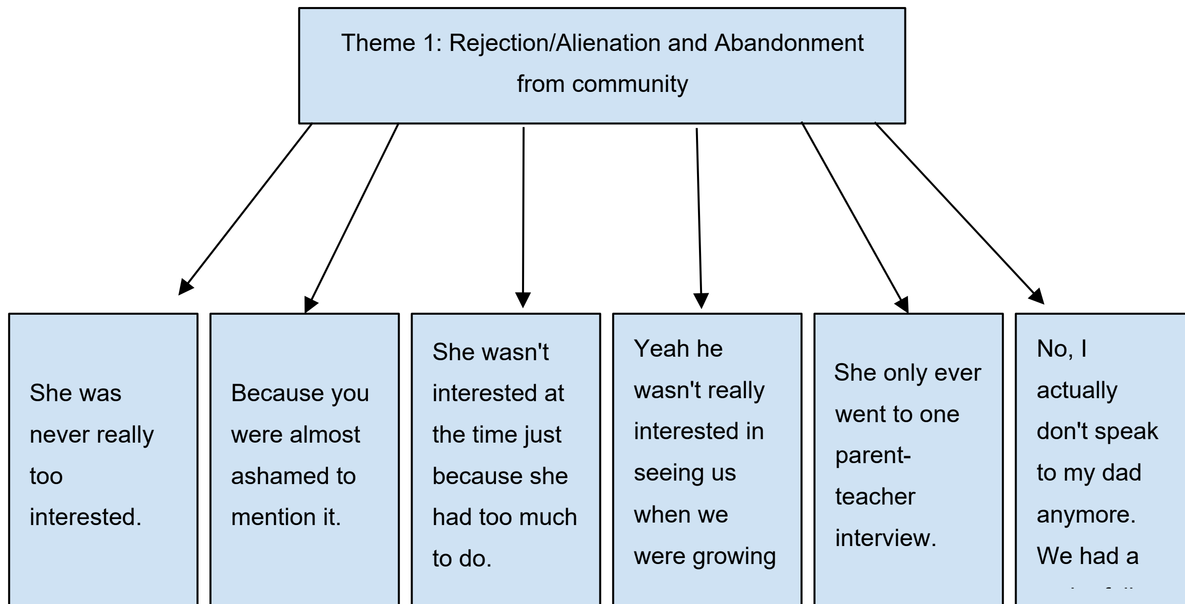
"Lived in Dunedin for the first three years."
"Mum and dad worked quite hard growing up, and they actually ended up splitting, um, while I was part way through primary school."
"So obviously coming here as refugees, there was a civil war in Cambodia in the 1970s. My family had to flee the country"
"Mum and Dad had to leave the country, and they got told one day that they had needed to leave, and so they upped and left."
"They walked as far as they could with groups and groups of people."
"Where they ended up eventually was, uh, Thailand. Yeah. Into a refugee camp there."
"She was telling me stories about, you know, how she used to work in the fields and how little there was."
"I had issues with my health, something to do with my legs and I didn't actually end up, I wasn't able to walk up until I was well after a year old. Because of malnutrition."
"I always found that probably with my culture and my background that I always wanted to try fit in. Yep. Yeah, so I kind of just kept a low grade."
"I didn't really try to stand out too much or anything."
"But, you know, school for me, I think, I really, I struggled a little bit. But I enjoyed school. Yeah. I liked hanging out with my friends, playing sports."
"Yeah. You know, so I was basically there to eat lunch and hang out with my mates. Yep. And play sports."
"Hanging out with your mates and trying not to stand out at the same time. Yeah. I didn't do a lot of studies, but that's probably because my mates didn't do a lot of studies. They were busy playing video games. But, yeah, nah, I've got fond memories of school"
"Mum wanted us to go to university as well, which is great."

Note. Example of participant Heng and his significant statements, Step 2 of Moustakas' 6 step thematic analysis.

Step 3: Meaning Units/Themes. After the significant statements have been identified, the next step is to create core meaning units (or themes). Moustakas (1994) identifies these as 'invariant constituents.' This process involves the researcher thematically organising the significant statements into primary and secondary themes (Moustakas, 1994). The significant statements are reduced and synthesised into cluster themes and coded into key words to define the essence (Creswell, 2007). Figure 4 below shows how meaning units have been created for participant Heng's story.

Figure 4

Excerpt Heng's meaning unit: Rejection/Alienation and Abandonment from community



Note. Example of participant Heng and his transcriptions separated into meaning unit theme 1 rejection, alienation and abandonment.

Step 4. Individual Textural Descriptions. In this step, the researcher writes textural descriptions for each of the four participants. A textural description is a summary which applies direct quotes of significant meaning units, themes and statements about the phenomena under study. The aim of textural descriptions is to represent 'texture' through the participants firsthand emotions and feelings (Moustakas, 1994). It focuses on 'what' rather than 'why', to capture the lived experiences of refugee-background students. Individual transcripts and individual textural descriptions were sent to the participants for their review to ensure their descriptions were representative of their experiences. Each participant had two weeks to make adjustments to their individual textural descriptions. Figure 5 below, reflects the participant Heng's textural description sent for feedback and/or any changes.

Figure 5

Excerpt Heng's Textural Description

“Heng is a 42-year-old male living in South Auckland and is married with 1 high school aged daughter. He has one sister and one brother both living abroad, his parents divorced while Heng was in primary school. He came to New Zealand as a Khmer refugee with his mum and dad in the 1980s. They spent some time in Khao I Dang refugee camp before being sponsored to New Zealand. He does not recollect many firsthand memories about his migration to Aotearoa. Heng and his family were relocated to Dunedin upon completion of 6 weeks at the Mangere Refugee Centre. They relocated to Auckland when Heng was about 3 years old to be closer to his mum's sister who lives on the North Shore of Auckland. His resettlement into New Zealand is one of resilience. He was not able to walk from malnutrition until well after the age of 1, his mum struggled to learn English, work and continue to run the household as a solo parent, she often worked before him, and siblings went to school and well into the night. He describes how courageous his small 5ft 4inch mother handled a car altercation, her resilience shaped by her past: “And grabbed her by the head and just kind of slammed it back. On the car. And, it didn't really faze mum at all. I'm guessing it's probably the kind of stuff that's happened to her before. Yeah. So, it just didn't faze her. She just carried on.”

Note. Example of Heng’s textural description summarizing his transcriptions.

Step 5: Structural Descriptions. In the fifth analysis step, structural descriptions further support individual textural descriptions. Individual textural descriptions focus on ‘what’ whereas structural descriptions explore the ‘how.’ Structural descriptions investigate structures such as relationships, systems and context of ‘how’ the experience came to be for the individual. Textural descriptions highlight commonly shared themes and codes by participants. By understanding what and how, this brings the researcher closer to uncovering the essence (Moustakas, 1994). In this stage the “phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way” (Moustakas, 1994, p.34). Furthermore, I have incorporated phenomenology into this step as an adaptation to this process to better explore the lived experiences of the participants for this research. Excerpt of structural descriptions described in Figure 6 below:

Figure 6

Example of Structural Descriptions of the 4 Participants

Lived Relationality in Aotearoa New Zealand schools manifested in the social interactions and support fostered through feelings of belonging, inclusion and shared culture for the participants. Strong connections and friendships enriched school experience, overcoming societal expectations and academic challenges. By forming strong bonds this facilitated a supportive foundation in schools to mitigate feelings of isolation and exclusion. The four participants explored resilience in their everyday lives through mutual support, play, eating together to overcome issues of bullying, isolation and educational difficulties.

Figure 7

Example of Lived Relationality meaning units

Participants	Lived Relationality - Belonging/Culture/Friendships
Heng	**Heng describes his purpose in secondary schooling,** "I liked hanging out with my friends, playing sports. I was basically there to eat lunch and hang out with my mates. And play sports." School experience was grounded by friendships rather than academically. Social interactions "Hanging out" "Eat lunch, play sports"
Charlie	**Charlie describes her experience and view on friendships,** "they just wanted to be together. I was like, more or less, everyone, like, follows everybody just to hang out with them." "Hang out" "Together/supportive"
Nardy	**Nardy describes friendships for her after she had such a hard time at school particularly being targeted and bullied for her Asian complexion and features,** "You can just conquer stuff together. I suppose someone supportive and somebody who you could relate to." "Stuff together" "Supportive"

Jason	**Jason describes his one friend whom he met in secondary school and continues to his friend today.** “. It almost feels like it was meant to be. You know even though if we don’t see each other all time, but it just feels the same and we go through the same stages in our life and because we are going through the similar shared experiences it works.” “find the right people to help you succeed in different aspects in life and for you to do the same. I think that’s what school is. They will push you to cross the line and to do well.” “Shared experiences” “Right people”

Note. Examples of participants' transcripts synthesised into van Manen lived existentials.

Step 6: Composite Description. The final step in Moustakas’s analysis’ is composite description. “Interpretation unmasks what is hidden behind the objective phenomena” (Moustakas, 1994, p.10). This occurs by synthesising both structural and textural descriptions of participants to uncover the essence (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is the aim of Moustakas phenomenological research, allowing for the phenomena to ‘speak for itself’. The essence is embedded in the transcripts, individual descriptions and thematic analysis undertaken (Moustakas, 1994). The essence reflects what it means to be a refugee-background student in Aotearoa and the impact this had on the participants' post-compulsory schooling lives. The essence is further explored in the findings and conclusions of this research. The essence was distinguished through data analysis and synthesis of participants lived experiences. Common meanings and shared elements across the four refugee-background students narratives were established. Then by investigating the recurring themes, perceptions and interpretations, the study looks to uncover and explore the essence for the participants of this study (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

As a qualitative research study involving human participants, this study has followed principles of ethical research from Te Ara Tika principles and bioethics principles to ensure tikanga is applied to this research and its participants (National Ethics Advisory Committee, 2025). In this section, I describe the steps I took to ensure the study was ethically responsible.

Voluntary Participation. Voluntary participation is based on respondents engaging in the research of their own free will. It is voluntary, meaning participants are not coerced or deceived in participating in any way (Alase, 2017). In this study, interested parties responded to closed Facebook page advertisements via email. Then a further information sheet was sent to respondents, and the potential participants had two weeks to respond if they were interested in participating in the study. The information sheet outlined the purpose, method, risks and benefits of the research to ensure voluntary participation could be given (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Once respondents agreed to participate, a consent form was sent via email. Participants had a further two weeks to return signed consent forms. Participants were reminded at different interview stages they could leave and stop at any time, and they could opt out of their data being used up to two weeks after the interview (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Informed Consent. Informed and written consent is when participants are made aware of the research objective and intention and then each interviewee provides signed written consent to confirm their understanding (Alase, 2017). “These procedures are intended to safeguard participants from harm, coercion and exploitation” (Mackenzie et al., 2007, p.301). This is a minimum requirement for participants to be informed and to be adequately able to give consent based on the information provided.

Anonymity and Confidentiality. Anonymity is about ensuring participants cannot be identified in this research. Confidentiality refers to the processes to protect the identities and private information of the participants of this research (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs, 2013). In this research, confidentiality has been provided through pseudonyms and the removal of any identifiable descriptors. Original data, digital data and hard copy data are only shared with the primary researcher and supervisor under a protected passcode during the research phase.

Harm Mitigation. Potential for harm refers to the possibility that participants may experience negative effects from taking part in the research (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Given that many refugees have lived through trauma, the consent process was designed to be considerate and mindful of the potentially triggering nature of the research. Special attention was given to language and respect for participants' personal boundaries. Interview questions were reviewed by the supervisor to minimise emotional distress. Throughout the interviewing process, participants were reminded they could skip questions or decline to answer. Contact details for the Mangere Refugee Centre Services were provided on the information sheet and offered before, during and after the interview process. Counselling was offered free of charge to participants. Overall, participation was intended to be a positive and beneficial experience for both participants and the researcher (Block et al., 2013).

Results Communication. Results were communicated throughout the research process and participants were given time to change or make any adjustments where needed (Mackenzie et., 2007). Respondents were sent their transcriptions before it was used in the research. Further to this, their individual textural descriptions were sent to them for review. The participants were provided with two-week time frames to make any adjustments, feedback and comments. The final dissertation will be shared with the four participants of this research upon completion.

Rigour and Reflexivity

Both rigour and reflexivity are important features of qualitative studies. Rigour ensures authenticity and credibility of the findings and the research (Creswell, 2007). Whereas reflexivity ensures the researcher is aware of their own positionality and perspectives. The implications for not undertaking rigour and reflexivity throughout the research process may allow for biases and inconsistencies that can overshadow the validity of the research. In phenomenological research ensuring rigour is at the forefront, it ensures the narratives shared are true to the phenomenon and the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Several steps were taken to achieve rigour and reflexivity in this study.

Systematic Coding. Rigour was established by closely following Moustakas' six-step phenomenological analysis process described above, particularly the coding procedures as consistent with Creswell's (2007) guidance for phenomenological studies. Transcripts were read

and re-read alongside the audio recordings, with data organised into significant statements and meaning units. These were then written as individual textural descriptions and refined into structural descriptions using van Manen's existential themes. Draft transcripts and individual descriptions were returned to participants for verification and feedback. Coding decisions and emerging themes were also discussed with the research supervisor to ensure transparency and consistency.

Member Checking. Member checking is when the participants have the opportunity to check data for errors and corrections throughout the research process (Creswell, 2007). I shared transcripts, individual descriptions and initial preliminary findings with the participants. Where there was any misunderstanding, I asked for feedback and clarification. The findings were adjusted based on the feedback from the participants. This gave participants the opportunity to confirm that their narratives were expressed in a way that was true to their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Reflexivity and Bracketing. Reflexivity was an ongoing process in which I acknowledged and bracketed my own assumptions to be able to focus better on the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing was embedded in the phenomenological analysis process and supported me, as the researcher, in being aware of how my own experiences and perspective may shape the interpretation of the data. In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, being reflective also involved recognising the researchers, underlying predisposed knowledge of the world. By acknowledging these unconscious factors which influence original knowledge construction, thorough, and conscious examination can be undertaken (Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations of the Research Design

The research design offers rigour and is suitable for use in this phenomenological study. However, it is important to acknowledge constraints with this design choice (Creswell, 2007). Predominantly the small sample size and the time lapse of experiences to the present day are subsequent challenges. The sample size can be difficult to represent all Khmer Cambodian refugee-background students. Nevertheless, the sample size allows for deeper engagement with each of the four participants furthering depth of meaning making, which is the goal for phenomenological research. Further to this, as this is a retrospective study it cannot guarantee participants recollections and memory are not without imperfections due to

longitudinal gap of phenomena and these studies. However, although participants recollect memories retrospectively, their insights hold significant value and nuanced experiences of people of that time and space (Creswell, 2007). This research is not without limitations as highlighted above; however, it remains true to its phenomenological grounding in exploring experiences of the Khmer Cambodian refugee-background people that were interviewed in these studies.

Conclusion

This study used a qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews with a small sample of four Cambodian Khmer refugee-background students to explore their unique lived experiences. A phenomenological research design guided the analysis through Moustakas' six-step phenomenological analysis to consider the central question: "How have experiences during secondary school influenced post-secondary school outcomes for Khmer Cambodian refugees?" The research design incorporated various methodological and ethical considerations outlined in this chapter to ensure research rigour. Limitations were also identified to provide transparency and context.

This chapter outlined with justification the choice of methodology undertaken in the research. The following section will now present results and discussion in a combined "Findings" chapter. The chapter transitions from the research process drawing upon major themes uncovered in the phenomenological analysis to an exploration of the lived experiences of Cambodian Khmer refugee-background students.

Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings from the phenomenological analysis of interviews with the Khmer Cambodian refugee-background participants. Their lived experiences were collected through one-on-one phenomenological interviews, which were analysed using Moustakas (1994) phenomenological analysis process and interpreted through van Manen's (2014) four lived existentials. The essence of the participants' experiences could be distilled somewhat simplistically as 'resilience'. However, in unpacking 'resilience' as the participants experienced it through both van Manen's (2014) and Ungar's (2012a) theories, it is clear that this essence is nuanced and complex.

This chapter is divided into four sections, each of which supports a deeper understanding of the phenomenological experience of resilience: Lived Body: Embodied Resilience, which explores each participant's ability to face adversity, accessing their own innate feelings and individual capacities to be resilient; Lived Temporality : The influence of past, present and future on resilience, which considers how resilience is experienced across time; Lived Spatiality: Resilience across Cambodia and Aotearoa, which looks at how participants' experiences are shaped through physical and social interactions; and finally, Lived Relationality, which explores the socioecological dimensions of resilience for the participants.

These four chapters make up the findings, which will be presented through quotes and stories from the participants, and interwoven with literature and van Manen's (2014) and Ungar's (2012a) theoretical frameworks

Findings 1: Lived Body: Embodied Resilience

> "I'd say it's affected him quite, quite a bit…I think to a point where I'm, I'm quite nervous about asking. About his history." (Jason)

The first key finding in this study is the idea that experiences are felt through the body, both physically and emotionally. For the participants, it is the physical body that experiences the demands of secondary school and post-secondary life, and it is the internal body that feels every disappointment, love, anger and heartbreak (van Manen, 2014). The human body is

central to resilience theory as it is the individual who uses their body to overcome adversity and negotiate meaningful systems (Ungar, 2012a). Both lived corporeality and resilience theory has a meaningful role in understanding the lived experiences of the four participants of this study.

Drawing on van Manen's phenomenological concept of the lived body, this section explores how resilience was experienced and expressed bodily. To describe embodiment, van Manen asks the question "How do we experience our body in illness or health?" (van Manen, 2014, p.325). The body may bleed, bruise easily, and experience aches and excruciating pain. This distinguishes how experiences are experienced both emotionally and physically. Van Manen (2014) also distinguishes between textural (what is experienced) and structural (how it is experienced) dimensions to reveal the essence of a phenomenon. Often, humans experience the physical body naturally without taking any notice of what it is doing. The body moves instinctively and automatically without conscious thought. Sartre (as cited in van Manen, 2014) describes this as "passed over in silence," (p.327) meaning that the body's ordinary functions go unnoticed. It is the consciousness and self-reflection of the body in which van Manen (2014) is interested.

Resettlement for refugees often poses many challenges and conflicting feelings particularly when it comes to education and the start of something new (Marlowe et al., 2024). Therefore, the experiences discussed by the participants are experiences taken from their schooling years, some in school settings and others beyond the classroom. Feelings of fear, anguish and uncertainty are often experienced throughout resettlement for refugee-background students. These feelings are heavily influenced by past experiences such as camp life and supportive networks to encourage resilience (Ungar, 2012). Refugees navigate different landscapes, cultures, and systems from Cambodia to Aotearoa New Zealand while managing a magnitude of ever-changing emotions, which is lived corporeality. The following stories show how participants' bodies became the sites through which adaptation, loss and endurance were lived and expressed.

Jason's journey to Aotearoa New Zealand and life after resettlement has been marked by instability and displacement. This is echoed in his frequent relocating. Jason began his life at Khao I Dang Refugee Camp, then spent his primary school years in Mangere before moving to Paeroa when he was about ten years old. He then moved back up to Auckland for his remaining secondary school years. Jason describes the loss of his mother during this time. "My mum got sick, and she passed away." These few words, along with the rest of his story, convey a vulnerable side to his experience and a deep sadness of a life without his mother. Within these words too, is a hint of unresolved resentment, a void only his mother could fill. The depth and

complexity of this experience is felt through his body (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology focusses on subjective experiences, both loss and displacement are feelings felt deeply through the body. Phenomenologically, these experiences demonstrate lived corporeality; the body carrying sorrow and resilience simultaneously (Bevan, 2014; van Manen, 2014).

Jason then reflects on his secondary schooling: “Like, it sounds rough, but you know, I made some lifelong friends.” Jason describes the importance of friendships for him through the words “I made some lifelong friends” which may suggest his emotional and social connection he felt towards his friends. As suggested by Ungar (2012a), while the loss of his mother signifies a significant loss in his life, strong friendships presented themselves to Jason to help him cope, build resilience and recover from the loss of his mother.

For Jason, his continual uprooting from place-to-place shows that for him resilience was built on adapting and overcoming (Todres, 2007). His experiences were largely influenced by the new schools he went to, the different geographical locations in which he lived and the loss of his mother. It was felt through the body, physically relocating and felt within through the loss of his mother. Jason is a testament that resilience endures not abstractly but as something etched through the body (van Manen, 2014).

Heng, now a builder living in Auckland, described the effects of early malnutrition on his physical body when he came to Aotearoa New Zealand: “I had issues with my health, something to do with my legs. I wasn't able to walk until I was well after a year old. Because of malnutrition.” His delayed walking shows the impact of past trauma and malnutrition on his body as well as his body’s ability to overcome it (van Manen, 2014). Interestingly, Heng expressed that he had “no real memory of Cambodia” as he came to Aotearoa New Zealand at a very young age. Yet, his physical body carries the past in his present body.

Heng’s mother was a strong influence on his education and life beyond schooling. Upon arrival to Aotearoa, Heng’s mother faced many challenges. She had to learn a new language, find paid employment and meet the demands of paying a mortgage as a solo parent to three young children. Heng described vividly a confrontation his mother faced as he and his siblings sat in the car and watched on: “It just didn't faze mum at all. She just carried on.”

For Heng, resilience was not a singular concept; it was role modelled and lived corporally, predominantly from his mother. Despite uncertainty and fear, Heng and his mother endured hardship and adversity together. His body’s early vulnerability and his mother’s visible strength together formed his lived understanding of perseverance, and his lived experience of resilience. (Dowling, 2005). Resilience coexisted through learned behaviour in observations, role modelling and exposure to adversity. Resilience is developed collectively, ensuring one can bounce back

and adapt to overcome adverse experiences. These experiences supported conditions for resilience to manifest in his life (Kondili, Interiano-Shiverdecker & Sabah, 2024). Heng's resilience was extremely personal, influenced by his body, past trauma and experiences (Masten, 2001).

Nardy, is a mother of two and describes herself as very close to her family. Nardy explained that her early schooling years were riddled with bullying and racism: "I didn't have any friends. I was bullied a lot. There was a lot of racism and stuff and nobody stuck up for me." She would walk straight home after school, to avoid being bullied. At a young age, she recalls that her coping mechanisms were to ignore it and walk home. This exhibits Nardy's perseverance and appears to reflect an embodied resilience, as her choice to walk home was her body's coping process to protect from further pain. It was an act of self-preservation. The bodily movement of walking, in this story, operates as a phenomenological expression of agency. These corporeal experiences have had lasting impacts on Nardy, following her into her career pathway as a podiatrist working with priority patients living with diabetes (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014). Nardy's experiences are not isolated. The literature suggests, racism can appear in different settings. However, it appears the outcomes are, for the most part, devastating on the person and their families (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014). Both systemic and institutional racism for refugees can occur throughout resettlement and in educational policies, which builds barriers and lack of accessibility for refugees. By doing so, this can impact on refugees' educational achievement and social integration, embedding further inequalities that maintain status quo and socio-economic gaps (Humpage, 2001). Nardy's walking home and her parents coming into the school were mechanisms of support to overcome adversity, and a process so they could exist in 'normalcy'. Ungar (2012) explains 'normalcy' as a reflective tool which indicates individuals have shown resilience as they can return to their lives carrying on despite it not being as it was. This displays Nardy and her parents taking control, deliberately strategising to protect each other from pain. By doing this, Nardy is allowed to gain identity, recover from trauma and give her hope for a brighter tomorrow (Ungar, 2012a; Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014). This aligns with the research, which suggests that supportive parent-child relationships, families, communities and cultures can encourage vulnerable children's mobility and success in schools (Masten, 2001).

Charlie dropped out of school when she found out she was pregnant at the age of sixteen. Her post-secondary years were often spent alone:

> Everything I did was on my own, and then I had her, and she was very nice. And then I said, I'm going to get myself into health, not necessarily midwifing because I don't think I can handle it, yet something in the lines of working with health. (Charlie)

The words “on my own” and “I don’t think I can handle it” seem to resonate with lived corporeality. Beneath these words are feelings of abandonment, self-doubt and isolation, which is felt through the mind and owned by the body. However, the passage also signals happiness, belonging and inclusion through the words “she was very nice.” Charlie was able to negotiate the supportive systems around her, such as her midwife, to encourage her resilience. She was able to navigate through supportive systems to receive her Nursing degree because of the role her midwife played in her life. The experience is not only felt as a singular occurrence, it is felt indefinitely as lived through body, mind, and spirit (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014; van Manen, 2014). Here, the body’s endurance becomes central to meaning making. Resilience is lived through the intertwined realities of vulnerability and strength.

Charlie’s experience with supportive systems such as the midwife highlights how such systems heavily influenced her resilience. After more than 20 years, the memory of the ‘kind’ midwife is still felt. This shows the body as central to the experience (van Manen, 2014). It may suggest the impact of unsupportive systems when Charlie says “on my own” this refers to her estrangement from her parents during her pregnancy. Ungar suggests that resilience, is framed in individuals being able to ‘navigate and negotiate through meaningful systems’ (Ungar, 2012). Unsupportive systems in Charlie's case prompted her to carve out her own road, work hard to support her young family and receive her degree.

In these bodily experiences, the body acts as a site where resilience can cultivate and grow. Heng’s delayed walking, Jason’s experience of loss, Charlie’s early motherhood, and Nardy’s protective walking home all demonstrate an enactment of adversity living through the body and overcoming it with the body (van Manen, 2014). For these participants resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and thrive in the face of adversity, stress, or change (Ungar,2012a). Their experiences of resilience were embodied experiences, lived through the body. Resilience is exemplified in the social, physical, and cultural challenges they all faced: Charlie’s teenage pregnancy, Nardy’s bullying experience, Jason’s moving and loss of his mother, along with Heng’s delayed ability to walk. Their schooling experiences of bullying, friendships and relational support prepared them to allow agency to apply to prospects in tertiary education, family decisions and career prospects beyond mainstream education. These narratives during their formative schooling years are stories of hope, overcoming and human spirit, the stories

describe the dual process of resilience and lived body. Resilience manifests through the body, we live, feel and move with our bodies through the world we live in (van Manen, 2014).

Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand were foundational in shaping post schooling outcomes for these participants. For Jason and Heng, adjusting to new school environments required social and relational skills that they carried with them into tertiary studies, adult careers and relationships. Nardy's response to her bullying developed her rigor and self-efficacy, which shaped her professional achievements as a podiatrist. Charlie's secondary school experience from finding out she was pregnant with her baby boy, presented her with life-changing kindness from her midwife, something she did not know she needed but gave her life-lasting impact, and fueled determination and fire within her to complete her Nursing Degree and provide stability for her and her family, something she yearned for. The embodied resilience acquired during these secondary school years continued to inspire the four participants into their lives post-secondary school (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014; Ungar, 2012b).

Resilience is not a single trait, but rather a dynamic ever-changing concept adjusting to different landscapes, challenges that may be experienced during resettlement. The lessons learnt in adapting and overcoming during secondary schooling years are lessons that go beyond mainstream educational years, but continue to manifest post-secondary school (Ungar, 2012). These valuable lessons continue to support refugee-background peoples to flourish, engage and manage experiences in their lives beyond secondary school by accessing supportive systems that promote resilience (Prince-Embury & Saklofske, 2014). The lived body determines how resilience is felt through the body and continues to shape the participants tertiary education, employment, and adult life through experiences of change and determination. These personal encounters influenced their educational identities of belonging, and the capacity to navigate life after compulsory secondary schooling with agency, grit and self-assurance. It is important to understand these experiences to better create supportive systems, flexible schooling and other facilities to ensure a prosperous future for refugee-background students.

Findings 2: Lived Temporality: The influence of past, present, and future on resilience

> "He'd come through at the beginning of the year; he was all enthusiastic and stuff. And he was real expressive, he used his hands a lot. You could see slowly through the years, the light in his eyes disappeared. It was really sad, actually." (Heng)

The second key finding in this study examines time, past, present and what is to come, the future. Time can be physical like on a clock, cosmic like in the universe, or physical across space (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2014) explores lived temporality in how individuals experience time relative to their past, present, and their hopes for the future, and how time is experienced in the body and mind. For van Manen (2014) time can be subjective and is experienced differently in different contexts. For example, when waiting, time may seem to move slowly; however, when actively engaged, time may seem to move faster than when waiting (van Manen, 2014). The four participants of this research all recollect significant moments of time in their lives and how these have shaped their identities as a refugee-background people living in Aotearoa New Zealand. This section will discuss refugee-background students' experiences of 'time' across Cambodia and Aotearoa to influence their post-schooling lives.

The experiences of refugees are often shaped by the remnants of war that displaced them, which then shape their experiences of time (Abranches & Janber, 2024). Camp life and living through conflict can harbour a sense of uncertainty, loss and a longing to escape. In contexts of displacement, time can often move slowly rather than feel safe in their new resettlement countries. As identified in Abranches & Janber (2024) studies, trauma can cause refugees to feel unsafe and oppressed. Refugees may experience significant temporal tension during their resettlement journeys. Often, for refugees to move forward, they must recognise their past and where they have come from (Anderson et al., 2023). However, many refugees carry feelings of doubt, fear and post-traumatic stress. Refugees navigate a complex experience of time, whether first-hand or through stories, trauma and intergenerational messages from family members – a lived temporality of experience (van Manen, 2014).

Charlie's story tells one of intergenerational trauma, the story shared about her grandfather is a story of lived temporality:

> When they were walking to the camp, my grandfather passed away. My dad's dad. They didn't have a burial, so they just had to find a spot, dig a hole and bury him there. It is sad that we do not know where he is buried. His body is someone in Cambodia. (Charlie)

The narrative echoes time through three generations: the time of her grandfather, her father and herself in the present day. She continues to be shaped by her grandfather's death

into the present. There is great sorrow in her words. Amid this are temperaments of uncertainty and unanswered questions. When she says she does “not know where he is buried”, this could suggest unresolved tension and a sense of incompleteness that continues to shape her and her family’s narrative today. Further to this, she experiences feelings of resilience, survival and overcoming. Both resilience and lived temporality is reminiscent of time and how time can determine individual capacity to be resilient. Time here can feel distorted, reliving the past, feeling unsafe even upon resettlement (Abranches & Janber, 2024). This reflection embodies resilience built through an archive of family resilience and trauma which influences her capacity to adapt and endure. The story becomes a texture and testament of time, and it is both remembered and embodied, as a story of resilience (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1994).

Charlie’s lived experience encapsulates temporality through her grandfather’s death and sacrifice, her own father’s survival and journey to Aotearoa New Zealand and her own reflection of her present. Her grandfather’s death continues to shape her identity through a structure of “incompleteness”. Among the sadness, loss and uncertainty are also feelings of resilience, survival and adaptation. Furthermore, Charlie experiences gratitude to have survived and be living proof that her grandfather’s sacrifice was not in vain. Charlie’s experiences are temporal. According to Ricouer (1990), author of Time and Narrative, his studies explore how time shapes individual narratives. For Ricouer (1990) resilience continues to shape experiences, enduring across time, generations, and geographies through shared stories and events (Ricouer, 1990). This is evident for Charlie, which can be understood as her own lived narrative continues to be shaped by her and her family's temporal experiences.

In Heng’s story, his early health struggles arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand speaks of his past. The lengths he went through to fit in and the need to belong in secondary school echoes the present and his desire to belong and succeed implicated in his future. Heng’s dreams and hope for his future were shaped by his resilience. Heng’s mother continues to be a resilient force in his life. Many of his childhood memories more often involved his mother in some shape or form. In his recollection of this past, he says, *“She was telling me stories about, you know, how she used to work in the fields and how little there was.”* This excerpt personifies his mother. She was his hero. “…how little there was”, even though there was only a little, she still survived, she overcame it. She continued to strive in the face of adversity for him and his siblings. His experiences are shaped by time; time here is secular and appears to reflect both how memory and recollection continue to influence lived reality (van Manen, 2014). From this passage, Heng is heard speaking fondly of his mother, he admires her and is grateful for the

sacrifices she made, even today. Lived temporality captures how resilience is shaped by how people perceive time and live through time in different stages of their lives (van Manen, 2014).

Heng also describes a teacher in his secondary schooling years. Through his own retelling, he has been able to understand the passing of time, by saying “beginning of the year”. Then indicates with his words the motion of slowly which shows that he understands the pace of time moving “slowly”. The words “*it was really sad”* evoke the connection Heng has with his past. It also shows the weight of the reflection unfolding into his present life which is lived temporality. However, in Heng speaking of the teacher who occupies part of his socio ecological system, in acting as a supportive teacher and treating each student as an individual. These quotes can be understood as temporality with each reflection and memory unfolding to influence Heng’s lived reality. Furthermore, by reminiscing of the past it shows how time is continually shaping his present and future of self-actualisation, identity and the future (van Manen, 2014).

The following excerpt explains how Nardy’s father escaped war-torn Cambodia to resettle into Aotearoa New Zealand: “Dad starts talking about it and then we're like, oh, we've heard this story before…It's always about him and what he did to survive like he's so, you know, he's so smart, he outsmarted everyone.” Though this passage is remembered light-heartedly and jokingly, it may suggest conflict and urgency to escape war; in Nardy’s use of the word, to “survive”. In choosing the word “survive”, it suggests that Nardy recognises her father as a survivor of war. This also reaffirms her close relationship with her family, particularly her father through the humorous encounter with her father by choosing the words “oh we’ve heard this story before” and “he’s so smart”. It elucidates a fondness and boastfulness for her father and his stories. By reflecting on these stories, they bring the past into the present and future as they internalise and make meaning of these experiences that are lived in a temporal manner (van Manen, 2014). In sharing these stories, experiential time unfolds. It connects both past traumas, to the present-day kinship and family along, with a reflection on the future evokes a future free of war.

By using the words “we're like, oh, we've heard this story before”, it shows Nardy is thinking of the past and making meaningful connections to her present self and future. In Nardy's excerpt, she embodies lived temporality through her words, “…we’ve heard this ..before” meaning it is not the first time the story has been shared. Time is not just passing; it shapes the experiences and feelings she has (van Manen, 2014). Temporality is experienced subjectively and meaningfully across time. The recollection of her father’s stories is an active process of connection, shaping her resilience as she draws upon these stories as a symbol of strength and purpose (Ricouer, 1990).

Jason's father remarried not long after his mother's passing and his father went on to have as he described "their own family." His family did not know he had left secondary school and did not have much involvement in his secondary education. Jason also recounts his father's lived histories: "I can't jump into my dad's shoes, he did have it rough too.… he probably did the best he could. Looking at what, what resources he had." This excerpt hints at a tension with his father, but rather than dwell on the past in resentment, anger and spite, Jason was able to be reflective, grow, adapt and embrace his father's past to re-story the narrative. Whether an old or a new story, the ability to be reflective and to unpack, expand, and develop how and what this new world looks like is important in understanding resilience theory (Ungar,2012a). By understanding what was normal prior to the war, and what is normal now, these two inherent goods have helped Jason to move forward, evolve his sense of self and wellbeing while furthering his connections with his wife and two children (Ungar et al.,2012).

Jason had many challenges in secondary school. His mother's passing had a deep impact on his schooling and post-secondary school life, shaping his life trajectory, the type of parent he is today and the relationship he has with his own children. Further to this, his story illustrates the relationship between forgiveness and understanding. Frank's (1995) concept of the wounded storyteller highlights similar transitions depicted in Jason's life and how people make meaning from their past wounds, illnesses and trauma through their storytelling and narrations. Only through storytelling and reflection can people move past pain and begin to rebuild through their loss and live in resilience (Frank, 1995).

Across participants, resilience was intertwined with the experience of time. Their pasts (marked by displacement, war, and loss) were not distant events but ongoing presences, felt in memory and bodily sensation (van Manen, 2014). The temporal structure of resilience emerged through reflection and adaptation. Participants continually integrated past experiences into present decisions and future aspirations. Resilience was relational and intergenerational. For example, memories of parental or grandparental endurance, such as Heng's mother overcoming hardship or Charlie's grandfather's sacrifice, became frameworks through which participants understood and enacted their own agency. These temporal connections linked generations, creating a sense of continuity while fostering strategies to navigate current challenges.

Across the participants, their lived temporalities revealed that resilience is not static but emerges through ongoing temporal negotiation. Participants actively recalled past adversity, interpreted these experiences considering current circumstances, and projected hope or intention into the future. These processes enabled participants to make sense of their present

and cultivate agency for the future. Temporality structures resilience by linking what has been endured, what is presently negotiated, and what is anticipated (van Manen, 2014).

Despite their challenges, refugee-background students demonstrate remarkable resilience, often developing strong problem-solving skills and a sense of agency in the face of adversity, shaped through temporality. Lived temporality denotes how participants subjectively experience time, connecting their past, present and imagined futures together (van Manen, 2014). The refugee-background participants post school transitions, tertiary education, employment and adulthood were filled with feelings of doubt, pressure and optimism. These feelings all acted as a catalyst to the participants' educational identity. Temporality is explored through Heng's teacher, his mother, Nardy's father's stories, Charlie's family making the death-defying march to Khao I Dang and Jason's recollections of his father. Each participant started their journey in Cambodia, the past by navigating, negotiating, and utilising both the individual agent and contextual surroundings to promote growth, normalcy, and resettling in Aotearoa, New Zealand which is the present and the future. The stories shared are a symbol of temporality in telling their stories; they are very much present and continue to shape their hopes for the future. "Put simply…our present experiences are shaped by past actions and that our present actions inform our future" (Dam, 2023, p.222).

Findings 3: Lived Space: Resilience experienced across Cambodia and Aotearoa

> "They never, ever went to any... parent interview day, or anything like that. No, because they didn't know English, or they're all busy working." (Charlie)

The third key finding in this study examines the significance of space, both imagined and physical in shaping participants' resilience. The participants of this research all recall various spaces in both Cambodia (their past) and Aotearoa (their present and future). This section explores how lived space has shaped their identities, coping strategies, education and career pathways. It will discuss how different environments and spaces such as family, schools and home influence the way in which the participants experienced mainstream education and post-secondary education pathways. Drawing from Ungar's (2012a) theory of resilience, this chapter will investigate how 'spaces' empower and impede resilience.

Lived spatiality as van Manen (2014) describes it is based on how one's environment sculpts both experiences and meanings. Space is not merely physical. It encompasses emotional, cultural and imagined spaces. These spaces can transform the way we live in the real world (van Manen, 2014). Resilience is contextual and socioecological (environment), giving people the opportunity to access supportive systems that could encourage resilience. Secondary schools and tertiary institutions could be such physical spaces that foster resilience. When refugee-background students enter the education system, they must navigate these and other spaces (Ungar, 2012a). Using van Manen's (2014) concept of lived space allows researchers to explore how physical settings such as schools are imbued with emotional meaning and shaped through social relationships for refugee-background students.

In lived spatiality, being able to recollect stories of places and the emotions felt is essential to how people experience space (van Manen, 2014). For the four participants, their knowledge of Cambodia is lived through the stories, culture and trauma carried through their families. It is through the eyes of their family members that they can feel, experience, create and recreate their own lived reality of Cambodia. Research suggests familial links and ties influence the narratives passed down to different family members often unconsciously and unknowingly. Tatz's (2020) research is about Aboriginal youth who lived through genocide. They are too young to remember, he says. Although they "do not quite know the exquisite details, they have absorbed, or rather osmosed, the immensity of lost connections" (Tatz, 2020, p.14). Furthermore, studies undertaken by Kromják & Karamehić-Muratović (2024) highlight the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma and its devastating effects on children of refugee communities.

Charlie's quote reflects the indispensable backdrop of the four participants shared lived experience, it sets the tone of how later school experiences are deeply influenced by a history of displacement and how limited educational opportunities continue to influence intergenerational relationships with formal education systems.

Charlie's family story about crossing the border into Thailand is a story of human strength and courage: "My dad's two other brothers, they drowned. You know so many people just kept dying. Then there was just my uncle, my dad and my grandma." There is pain and sadness behind Charlie's account. The words 'they drowned,' 'kept dying,' and 'then there was just my uncle, my dad and my grandma' emphasise the immense loss. For Charlie, the lived space of Cambodia represents death, trauma, cold, dark and finality. Death plays a vital role in existence and understanding human experience. Death influences 'Dasein', the way in which we live in the real world, as it is inevitable for all people. In Heidegger's phenomenology, 'being

toward death' is vital in understanding human experience as it is always knowing and present that death will eventuate for humans (Shim, 2020). Even though Charlie did not experience death firsthand, her family's past resonates with her and affects the way she envisions her lived reality and her identity. It is deeply felt through her words and continues to shape her reality. Dam (2023) says of his father's spatiality of Cambodia and Aotearoa: "Due to enduring trauma from this period, my father has not returned to Cambodia since arriving in Aotearoa-New Zealand." He credits this country – now his only home – in part for his survival (p.216). This exemplifies lived space. Cambodia here is remembered as a spatial place of loss like in Charlie's recollection. With Aotearoa New Zealand a place of home, sanctuary, safety, security, identity and survival. Charlies' account of Cambodia too, is reflective of survival, overcoming and trauma to be resilient which is lived space.

Charlie's Cambodia echoes a space of sadness. The lived space is remembered as oppressive and inflicted with many past traumas, the death of her grandfather and the drowning of her uncle. Hirsch (2008) calls this "postmemory" which are intergenerational stories and inherited memories carried by second-generation children passed from their parents. It is the collective trauma, validated and relived from parents to children. Furthermore, research suggests moving forward, traumas need to be overcome to ensure positive outcomes, trauma can reduce families' engagement in both secondary and tertiary education pathways, as their capacity to engage in education is limited from their past and confidence to engage in schooling (Herman 1992; Kromják & Karamehić-Muratović, 2024; Montgomery, 1998).

In the following passage, Heng describes his mother's participation in his schooling.

> She was always never really too interested. I remember asking her, maybe when I was in primary to come to a parent-teacher interview, and she wasn't interested at the time just because she had too much to do. She only ever went to one parent-teacher interview, during my intermediate years. (Charlie)

Here, these words do not just highlight his mother not engaging with his education; there are undertones of disappointment. However, Heng understands why his mother could not make it to his parent-teacher interviews: she worked full time, she was a solo parent, and she was not confident in speaking English. Literature states that many refugees often come to Aotearoa New Zealand having never spoken English before and having very limited access to English resources (Anderson et al., 2021; Boua, 1990). Despite these barriers, Heng was internally

motivated to complete his schooling years successfully. His mother drove his determination by role modelling hard work and sacrifice. As the oldest sibling, Heng felt he needed to set an example for his younger sister and brother. School became a place of resilience, hard work, personal growth and familial responsibility. Heng did not withdraw from schooling but was highly driven to take responsibility, especially as the eldest sibling. Secondary school became a symbol of successful lived spatiality (van Manen, 2014), where resilience was enacted daily through ambitions of good role modelling, hard work and discipline. It was within this space that Heng's identity as a student was formed, revealing how adversity can shape both struggle and strength.

Heng went to university as his mother wanted him to go. This shows how both emotional and relational experience of space shaped Heng's views on education and educational outcomes. "Mum wanted us to go to university as well, which is great. But, it wasn't so much to study anything specific, she just wanted to go to university, you know, so I chose to go to university." Heng's mother's thoughts on university acts as an emotional and cultural driver to resilience and Heng's ideologies on experience of space. Despite not knowing what to study at university. It shows his mother's influence was gargantuan, she inspired him to be better. University here, creates a culturally acceptable space of approval from his mother, the person that he admires the most in the world. Approval and acceptance from parents radiated through the participants' interviews as a space that filled their minds and hearts. The need for their parents to belong emanates from three human traits. Fullilove (1996) describes these as attachment to place, familiarity with surroundings, and identity formation (Fullilove, 1996). When a refugee is placed in their new home, it is imperative for systems to support refugees to feel included and have a sense of belonging. By doing so will mean parents are in a better position to support their children in both secondary and tertiary education (Anderson et al., 2021).

When asked about his parents' engagement in his schooling, Jason's story was like Heng's and he cited the reason being a "lack of resources, it's not like they could close up shop, or they didn't have much staff to do this." This was highlighted in the literature review and similar to findings of other research studies on refugee-background students. Participants in other studies cited families' resources as limited and hindering their access to education (Hayward, 2007; McBrien, 2022; Sampson et al., 2016). For both Jason and his parents, the school space was both alienating and foreign. There was very little direct communication and interactions between Jason's parents and his school. This had an impact on Jason's ability to achieve fully in both secondary and post-secondary outcomes.

Jason’s excerpt suggests structural limitations frequently faced by refugee-background students and their families. The idea of earning income outweighs attending parent interviews or other areas of education. This supports the literature (Hayward, 2007; Sampson et al., 2016), which suggests that refugee families upon resettlement face various challenges particularly having to work long work hours to make ends meet. Here for Jason, the school environment is a space of exclusion for him and his parents, where they cannot navigate and negotiate the systems in a meaningful way to foster their resilience (Ungar, 2012a).

For Nardy, the lived school space for the most part hinted at sadness and loneliness, not only through her parents' limited school interactions but also her experiences of bullying: “They were really busy. Like they worked. They had bakeries. So, they work like really late and they missed all our school. Yeah, that was, I suppose it was quite a sad part.” Parent interviews were a space of misery and anxiousness, possibly feeling of ‘…here goes another parent interview - my parents are too busy to come too.’ Nardy uses the words “I suppose”, which softens the tone and underlying emotional hurt she carries. Van Manen (2014) describes spatiality as not only physical but also the feelings of inclusion and isolation. The spatial experience of the bakery acts as a deterrent from Nardy’s school and parent interviews. Her lived spatiality is filled with loneliness and disconnect, the bakery a space that takes her parents away from school, and from her. On the other hand, this experience instills resilience, maturity and understanding in “they work like really late”. She recognises her parents did not have much of a choice. They came from Cambodia with nothing. They had to work to survive, shaping her resilience.

Nardy’s experiences capture how a physical separation between home and school can create feelings of helplessness and rejection which further reinforces feelings of marginalisation, which can exacerbate already-present barriers to successful schooling (e.g. a lack of accessibility to education, poor integration and exclusion of refugees). Marginalisation seems to be a largely discussed topic amid refugee research (Anderson et al., 2021; Humpage, 2001; Marlowe et al., 2024; McBrien & Hayward, 2022; Moore et. al, 2000; Sampson et al., 2016;The Education Review Office, 2021). However, for students like Nardy and Heng, the same spatial disconnect became a place of transformation. School became a lived space for silent resilience, where responsibility and self-discipline were enacted daily in the absence of their parents.

The school space can play a vital role in cultivating resilience. “The nature of that school environments influences everything from a child’s academic success to the safety they experience, and their capacity for social and emotional well-being” (Ungar, 2012, p.6). By

creating welcoming and safe environments, this provides supportive systems for refugee-background students to prosper in both secondary and tertiary levels (Anderson et al., 2023). However, this did not seem to be the case for the participants of this research. Their experiences of school were often challenging and less ideal, the participants demonstrated resilience in overcoming adversity despite the unsupportive spaces (education) (Ungar, 2012a). Furthermore, consistent with resilience theory because of this their ability to be resilient may have been prolonged due to the absence of these supportive systems.

Lived spatiality, in this study, explored the ways in which the participants experienced their environments to make meaning of their lived reality. Space is transformational, in both the physical sense and the intrinsic sense. Van Manen's (2014) lived spatiality is interested in how space is experienced and what emotions are tied to these lived spaces. Resilience is interested in the availability of resources and individuals being able to negotiate these systems in a meaningful way (Ungar, 2012a).

When applying van Manen's (2014) concept of lived space to research on refugee-background students, physical environments such as schools can be considered spaces that shape, and are shaped by, how students experience feelings of belonging, being seen, and being heard. For participants in this study, lived space was inseparable from the emotional geographies of displacement. Their resilience was not confined to one location but emerged through the movement between past and present places, between Cambodia and Aotearoa, between home and school.

Across participants, spatial experience revealed how resilience was sustained through the negotiation of safety, comfort, and belonging. Taken together, the participants' narratives reveal lived space as a dynamic field through which resilience is enacted. The transition from one geography to another required them to reinterpret what safety and belonging meant in changing contexts (Ungar, 2012a).

Van Manen (2014) reminds us that lived space reflects how one feels at home (or not) in the world. Ungar's (2012a) ecological model further situates resilience as the negotiation of resources within and across environments. The participants' stories illustrate this interplay vividly. In post-compulsory schooling, lived space explores how refugee-background participants experience tertiary education, workplaces, and adulthood. These spaces shape educational identity by affecting how the participants in vision themselves as competent learners throughout secondary school, tertiary education and future employment spaces.

Findings 4: Lived Relationality: The socio-ecological dimensions of resilience

"He obviously discouraged us to become teachers. They were first to be killed, educated people were the first to go." (Nardy)

The fourth key finding highlights the centrality of relationships in fostering resilience among the participants. Supportive relationships were crucial to the four participants' positive experiences of resettlement and integration into Aotearoa, which personifies Ungar's socio-ecological systems model of resilience (Ungar, 2012a). Each of the participants in this study recalled a range of significant and sustaining relationships. These included high school friendships that continued into adulthood, family members (grandparents, parents and siblings), teachers, and staff at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. These relationships were not just familial. Some, such as teachers and schools, offered care that shaped participants' secondary and post-secondary schooling experiences. Collectively, these connections formed a relational ecology (or socioecology) of support that helped participants with their resettlement journeys.

In this section, I draw on van Manen's (2014) concept of Lived Relationality to explore how these connections were experienced. Lived relationality is grounded in how individuals value and perceive their social relationships, and furthermore, how these relationships influence their lived reality. For van Manen (2014), Lived Relationality is interested in the questions: "How are people or things connected? What is the meaning of community?" (p.303), that is, how people experience and value positive (and even negative) social connections (van Manen, 2014). From a resilience theory lens, these relationships enable individuals to overcome adversity, build a sense of identity and belonging, which in turn helps the individual to return to a balanced state (Ungar, 2012a).

The section explores how resilient relationships emerged across participants' experiences, with discussion focused on two key themes: Unbreakable bonds: textures of resilient relationships and Statements of relational resilience: bonds woven through resettlement.

Unbreakable bonds: textures of resilient relationships

For the Khmer refugee-background people in this study, successful post-school transitions depended on supportive systems and stable relationships that fostered resilience. These mutual relationships supported resilience while enriching culture and identity for the participants. For Ungar (2012a), resilience is fostered through supportive relationships such as family, communities and schools. Lived relationality highlights the central role that human connections have in encouraging refugees to thrive in the face of adversity and the influence relationships have in school and post-schooling lives.

All four participants recall entering Aotearoa New Zealand and spending six weeks at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre upon arrival. Charlie recalled the significant support the centre offered her and her family in their first six weeks in the country, where she and her family shared a common room at the centre: "…at the Mangere Refugee Centre.. you could choose clothes, there was a big sack, we could pick up clothes in bags. There was clothes for me and my brother." This excerpt indicates lived relationality through the connection between Charlie and her brother especially in times of need, uncertainty and resettlement (van Manen, 2014). Upon reflection, Charlie can recall her brother as a central figure in her memory of resettlement. This excerpt also shows the relationality between Charlie and the Centre. The Centre symbolises, care, support and dignity especially when Charlie and her family did not have much. Charlie's experience also gestures her gratitude towards the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre for the support they gave her family throughout this period. By recalling the word "clothes", something essential to daily life, Charlie reveals a texture of appreciation and relief expressed in this recollection.

This study found that the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, along with other supportive systems such as schools, was important in signaling hope, safety, trust and a turning point from past traumas for refugees, a finding which is also evident in other studies (Anderson et al., 2021). Such research highlights how these supportive systems are places where deep human connections are possible. Resilience is not merely based on the individual's ability to be resilient but rather on a social ecology of community, and it is this community that enables a person to be resilient (Ungar, 2012a). The Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre tries to establish strong connections to help facilitate refugees as they transition to life beyond the Centre. The transitional stage from secondary school to life after is not only based on the individuals' characteristics and traits of personal strength and weakness. Resilience relies on supportive systems and foundational relationships to support refugees in resettlement (Ungar, 2012a).

Beyond the Centre and in the school system, Jason speaks of a significant teacher in his secondary school years: “I think he took an interest in me and he offered me a job in the accounting and finance department in school. At the time I didn’t realise it helped me at my schooling.” In his recollection, though not explicitly emotional, there are fragments of gratitude, warmth and friendship. Upon reflection, he realises the support that was given by the teacher. For instance, the teacher could have chosen another student for the job, but he did not. By using the words “he took an interest in me”, Jason realises he is seen by the teacher, even if, at the time, he cannot fully grasp its impact.

Ungar (2012a) acknowledges the vital role teachers have in facilitating resilience. Teachers are often “provocateur and initiated the resilience process” (Ungar, 2012a, p.274). However, resilience can only develop through collaboration and reciprocity, allowing individuals to navigate through systems in a meaningful way (Ungar, 2012a). Jason stated, “he took an interest in me” and “at the time I didn’t realise”, which suggests he was not yet an active participant in cultivating his own resilience. As a result, his capacity for resilience appeared limited during his secondary schooling years. However, Ungar (2012a) mentions that resilience is an ongoing process. Jason reflects, “I didn’t realise it helped me at my schooling”. This statement could be interpreted that his capacity for resilience had strengthened through time. Jason’s experience seems to mirror what has been suggested by Smythe (2022): “…sometimes a simple, almost insignificant gesture on the part of a teacher can have a profound formative effect on the life of a student” (p.143). In alignment with van Manen (2014), Ungar (2012a) argues that an individual’s perception of their relationship with a teacher (specifically whether the teacher is considered caring, kind and approachable) shapes the individual’s capacity to develop resilience (p.274). Resilience is established as individuals navigate and negotiate supportive resources. Although Jason only realised the support he received upon reflection, he was able to strengthen his resilience by finding alternative supportive systems (Ungar, 2012a).

On the contrary, Charlie highlights a negative experience with a teacher within her secondary school years:

> She said to all my friends in textiles that followed me to textiles, don’t follow her around as she is a bad influence on everyone. That made me feel some kind of way, now that made me think I probably didn’t want to go to textiles anymore. She always looked at me like I was naughty, but she didn’t realise they came to textiles class because of me. (Charlie)

This quote may suggest lived relationality through the disconnect between Charlie and her teacher. By Charlie, using the words: "…that made me feel some kind of way", it suggests the relationship is strained, which is shaping her identity and sense of belonging within the school context. Charlie's embarrassment, feelings of being singled out, and feelings of hurt and misundersting are feelings demonstrative of lived relationality (van Manen, 2014). It is felt through her words: "She always looked at me like I was naughty". By Charlie saying, "I probably didn't want to go textiles anymore", it suggests her withdrawal from the relationship, which she deemed not worthy and unsafe. Resilience, for Charlie, has been structured contextually and relationally by her teacher being undermining and unsupportive, which created a fractured unaccommodating relationship within her socioecology (Ungar, 2012a).

This sense of marginalisation from teachers was shared by both Charlie and Heng. Heng explains his experience with secondary school teachers: "I always felt that the teachers kind of, and it was probably my fault, that the teachers weren't really interested in me or any of my friends or anything." Heng, in this excerpt, uses the word "felt", which personifies van Manen's lived relationality, as the experience is not only physical. It is felt through the body. During his interview, Heng stated that he enjoyed school but that he mostly went to hang out with his friends. However, this excerpt echoes an experience of disconnection and isolation; of not being seen and heard by his teachers. There are subtle remnants of a lack of interest or recognition from his teachers. Heng attempts to put the blame on himself by using the words "probably my fault." This shows his capacity for reflection and adaptive meaning-making, exemplifying lived relationality (van Manen, 2014). It also shows that by Heng taking control and putting the blame on himself, he can take control of the situation as if he is ashamed to admit that he felt neglect at the hands of others. That the teachers deemed something wrong with him to neglect him rather than if he put the blame on himself, he is seen to have some control over the situation. Heng cannot control what others think of him, but he can control his thoughts and how he reacts to the situation. The relational neglect from his teachers then goes on to distort his lived reality and the relational ties he has with school and the educational space. On the surface, this excerpt may allude to mere disinterest by the teachers. However, at a deeper level, the text illustrates how relational experiences play a key role in shaping lived realities (Hayward, 2007). Furthermore, this excerpt focuses on how Heng uses his relationship with his friends to escape his pain of being unseen, unheard, and the pain of invisibility. Heng, in this moment of neglect, remembers his friends and takes refuge within their bond, kinship and mutual respect. As van Manen (2014) suggests, lived relationality captures how experiences are deeply influenced by social relationships.

Charlie and Heng's experiences illustrate how they internalised the marginalisation experienced by interactions with their teachers. The feelings of invisibility, isolation and exclusion shaped their lived relationality (van Manen, 2014). Through reflection and time, they have been able to reconstruct a new normalcy. This new norm allows Charlie and Heng to make sense of the injustice portrayed by their teachers to be resilient (Ungar, 2012a). Their capacity to live in the present could indicate the participants' agency in reclaiming this new norm despite the challenges the teachers posed (Ungar, 2012a).

Lived relationality was also evident in the familial relationships. For instance, Nardy and her mother's relationship, which Nardy explains as:

> It's real sad. You know it wasn't just the words, but also physical. Mum had to go to school quite a bit cause I got beaten up. I was like, looking back, imagine that being my kids, and I just hate bullying. Like, I think I don't need that. (Nardy)

By mentioning her mother, Nardy illustrates a relationship built on safety, guidance and comfort (van Manen, 2014). In times of hardship and bullying, Nardy's mother was (and continues to be) a symbol of hope and an ally who helps her get through the pain bullying. There is pain, hurt and sorrow in this recollection for Nardy. She emphasises this through her words "I hate bullying." She situates herself empathetically within her mother's experience by reflecting on this situation happening to her own children. The passage shows a mother's unfailing love, protection and support among adversity (Ungar, 2012a).

Statements of relational resilience: Bonds woven through resettlement

Across the four participants' accounts, lived relationality reveals itself as a weaving together of care and recognition amid uncertainty. The participants' relationships (whether family, friends, teachers or institutions), became spaces where resilience was nurtured and also tested. Their stories show that resilience is relational and constructed by a supportive socioecological network (Ungar, 2012a).

Each of the four participants, remembered spending time upon arrival at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. The Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre functions as a vital relationship for refugees upon resettlement. The Centre serves as the initial point of support for refugees resettling into their new lives in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Centre is central in the social ecological system of resilience, allowing refugees to access support, safety and structure from displacement, while supporting individuals in creating a new normalcy to live and strive

among adversity (Ungar, 2012a). Charlie's recollection of the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre appears to reflect relational resilience where resilience is built through supportive relationships. The Centre itself, though a physical place, acts as a relational space of safety. The Centre provided accommodation and clothing, and connection and care during a time of need for the participants and their families. Even the smallest act in choosing clothes can have a profound impact on an individual's life. The memory of "choosing clothes" and "sharing a room with her family" are etched into Charlie's memory of resettlement. For Charlie, the act of selecting clothes together and sharing a room was not only practical; it was relational (van Manen, 2014).

The participants highlighted the role of supportive teachers and schools. For refugee-background students, teachers are important in fostering students in feeling seen, heard, and valued, particularly in areas where they may be overlooked. For the participants, supportive teachers enabled access to resources to develop their resilience. For instance, Jason's experience reveals how the small gesture of kindness, though he did not realise it at the time, created stability and purpose during a period marked by loss and family change. The relationship was not the grandest, however, it could be understood as his lived relationality (van Manen, 2014). Furthermore, some participants mentioned when the support was absent, such in the case of Nardy, unsupportive teachers act as gatekeepers to meaningful educational resources and access to resilience (Ungar, 2012a). The participants together highlighted these experiences emphasised the crucial role of educators and schooling systems as both facilitators and obstacles within the social ecology of refugee students' resettlement in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ungar, 2012a).

Across the participants' narratives, friendship emerged as a key influence in their experiences in both school and life beyond mainstream education. As suggested in refugee research, supportive friendships protect the emotional and behavioural development of minority groups, particularly when familial relations are limited (Andersson & Ledogar, 2008; Werner, 1989; Ungar, 2012a). For the participants, friendships offered a sense of belonging, purpose and community which is lived relationality (van Manen, 2014). Heng, Jason and Nardy continue to have friendships from their secondary schooling years to their present day lives, a testament to their enduring relational bonds (van Manen, 2014). Jason emphasises enduring friendships by saying:

> It almost feels like it was meant to be. You know even though if we don't see each other all the time, but it just feels the same and we go through the same stages in our life and because we are going through the similar shared experiences it works. (Jason)

Research suggests that friendships are more invaluable particularly for minority groups. Collectively, such relationships offer emotional support and behavioural development promoting self-worth and identity (Andersson & Ledogar, 2008; Ungar, 2012a; Werner & Smith, 1982). Within Ungar's socio ecology of resilience, these mutual relationships empower both individual and communal capacity to thrive in the face of adversity (Ungar, 2012a). The participants through their recollections recognised their own school experiences were co-constructed through their timeless friendships, which is lived relationality (van Manen, 2014).

In Ungar's (2012a) resilience framework, families are anchors and are pivotal in the development of resilience. Across the four participants, their families proved foundational in reaffirming their resilience. Lived Relationality reflects how these relationships continue to shape refugees' sense of belonging, culture and livelihood throughout their lives (van Manen, 2014). These strong familial relationships are pivotal to Ungar's (2012a) socio ecology, these relationships protect and encourage to endure life's challenges. Family relationships were regularly described by the participants as sources of strength, respect, trust, encouragement and support that shaped their identity and resilience. Collectively, their resilience was fostered through the relationships they held with their families. For example, Nardy reflected on the lifelong effects of bullying and how she still carries the scars of bullying, invisibly etched in her painful past. However, her story is not just about bullying or being the victim. Her story highlights lived relationality. Her mother and her family have been consistent forces of resilience throughout her life and in her schooling experience (Ungar, 2012a). They are constantly encouraging, standing by her side and supporting her in the face of adversity to be resilient (Ungar, 2012a). Nardy's story tells of how resilience is sustained within families similar to the stories of the other participants in this study. Although, some participants illustrated tense familial relationships these experiences resonate with Lived relationality in shaping their resilience.

These findings suggest that supportive relationships, such as The Mangere Refugee Centre, family, friends and school systems, play a central and dynamic role in cultivating resilience for refugee-background students. These supportive systems form Ungar's socio ecological framework of resilience (Ungar, 2012a). For Heng, Jason, Charlie and Jason, greater

exposure to supportive systems, will provide more access to culturally valuable resources, and therefore creating the right environment for resilience to grow (Ungar, 2012a). In relation to lived relationality, such relationships shape the individuals' experiences of belonging, acceptance and culture. How these individuals value the relationships appear as foundational in shaping refugee-background students' achievements in secondary and post-secondary schooling. Consistent with Ungar's resilience theory, the participants describe relationships and environments as sources of strength, adaptation, and overcoming, especially in the face of adversity (Ungar, 2012a). The participants experiences suggest that their secondary and post-secondary outcomes are reliant on positive valued relationships. The research provides a rich, detailed experience of how humans thrive socially with connections to others and how these influence their post-secondary outcomes. Lived relationality draws attention to how teachers, family expectations, friendships and other relationships structure the participants' decisions about schooling, employment, and adulthood. These relationships influenced the way in which the participants saw education, impacting their confidence and belonging in these spaces.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Implications

This research drew on van Manen's (2014) existential phenomenology and Ungar's (2012a) socioecological theory of resilience to explore the lived experiences of Khmer Cambodian refugees who attended secondary school in Aotearoa New Zealand. The four participants, all of whom resettled as children or young people in Aotearoa during the 1980s, were interviewed to answer the question: *How have experiences during secondary school influenced post-secondary school outcomes for Khmer Cambodian refugees?* Their one-on-one interviews were transcribed and analysed through Moustakas' (1994) six-step phenomenological analysis.

The findings suggest that both in school and out of school experiences have significant influence over refugee-background students' post-schooling outcomes. Resilience theory drew attention to refugee-background students' adversity and strength of overcoming, which was made possible with supportive social systems such as schools, family, friends and other organisations (Ungar, 2012a). These systems allow refugees to apply them in a culturally meaningful way, thereby promoting their capacity to live a normal and meaningful life. Further to this, supportive systems set up the individual's agency to be resilient. Resilience is not only about overcoming a single event of adversity. Resilience is a dynamic ongoing process that unfolds throughout time and context. For these participants, resilience has been present from

Cambodia to Aotearoa New Zealand. Ensuring refugees have access to supportive systems will warrant greater opportunities for refugee-background students' outcomes post-schooling lives.

Across van Manen's (2014) four lived existentials (lived body, lived space, lived time and lived relationality), resilience emerged as the essence from the participants' experiences, and that this was both an individual and collective process shaped by their context and social ecology.

Lived Body highlighted how the participants' experiences are felt and carried through the body. Heng's delayed walking, Jason's experience of loss, Charlie's teenage pregnancy and Nardy's experiences of bullying all demonstrate how the body is a site where emotion, history, memory and change intersect (van Manen, 2014). These embodied experiences during their secondary schooling years fostered their capacity for resilience and helped them to navigate their lives beyond compulsory secondary schooling. These experiences equipped the participants with the ability to adapt, in preparation for life beyond secondary school.

Lived space refers to both physical and emotional environments, including supportive schooling structures and home lives that foster belonging. For the participants', lived space was also a daily reminder of displacement. Their resilience moved across their past and their present, between Cambodia and Aotearoa, between home and school. Charlie described a series of family deaths, Heng and Jason both recollected their families' influence on their schooling, Heng's mum struggled to learn English, while Jason's family were busy running the family business. For Nardy, school was both a lonely and harrowing experience. Lived space continued to shape their sense of identity and resilience across different locations and contexts (van Manen, 2014).

Lived time considers the influence of experiences through time: past, present and future. This study explored how the past shaped the future for the refugee-background participants, which came alive through intergenerational stories and narratives. Temporality is explored through Heng's memories of his teacher and his mother, through Nardy's father's stories, through Charlie's recollection of her family making the death-defying march to Khao I Dang and through Jason's memories of his father. Each participant started their journey in the past (in Cambodia) and continued through navigation and negotiation, and then using personal agency and contextual support to experience growth, regain a sense of normalcy, and resettle in Aotearoa New Zealand, which is their present and future. Lived temporality is an ever-present discipline where the past continues to shape refugee participants' futures and aspirations for what is to come (van Manen, 2014).

Lived relationality emphasises the importance of participants' relationships with their friends, teachers, family, school and the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in cultivating strong identity and building resilience. These supportive systems build the foundation for Ungar's (2012a) socioecological resilience framework. According to Ungar (2012a), , the systems the individual is exposed to, the more access to culturally valuable information the individual will have in creating the right environment for resilience to grow (Ungar, 2012a). In relation to lived relationality, these relationships shaped the individuals' experiences of belonging, acceptance and culture, which were fundamental in shaping their secondary school experiences and post-secondary school outcomes.

In understanding resilience through van Manen's lived existentials framework reveals it as a dynamic, continuing process that continuously shapes the experiences of refugee-background people. For the participants of this study, resilience was an embodied experience moulded by context and personal history. By understanding this, we can recognise that schools are not simply spaces for education but spaces where identity, agency and belonging are formed, exchanged and challenged. Supportive school and community environments are required to foster these lived dimensions and to strengthen resilience. This understanding will help refugee-background people and their families to be better positioned to adapt, persevere and succeed in their post-schooling lives. In recognising resilience as the essence of their lived experiences, this study honours the journey of these four Khmer Cambodian participants and reinforces the need to ensure fair access to tertiary education and meaningful futures.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study contributes to a limited body of research about resettlement for Khmer Cambodian refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand. Refugee-background participants are frequently challenging to include in research due to their trauma backgrounds and cultural hesitations around disclosure therefore, this results in small sample sizes. The four participants in this research all lived in Auckland, which might limit representativeness for the larger Khmer diaspora. As a retrospective qualitative study, recollections were shaped by time and memory; experiences may be reconstructed with distance. However, phenomenological enquiry values reflection and meaning making, recognising that narratives evolve as participants try to build their understanding (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

This research highlights further significant research required in the field of refugees. Additionally, research should investigate longitudinal experiences of Khmer and other Southeast Asian refugee populations to appreciate how resilience develops across different stages of life.

Further, studies could focus on women and children, whose experiences of schooling and adaptation may differ significantly. Investigate intergenerational resilience, particularly, between children of refugees born in Aotearoa, who live among inherited trauma and local belonging. While encompassing the use of phenomenological and socio-ecological frameworks to examine how embodied experience and structural environments overlap in education for refugees. Such work would strengthen understanding of how lived experience, cultural identity, and institutional structures interrelate to shape wellbeing and educational outcomes for resettled societies.

Final Reflection

When I commenced this project, the aim was to explore the experiences of Khmer refugee-background students as they navigated post-secondary school transitions. What emerged was not only a deeper understanding of the challenges they face, but also deeper insight into the strength and resilience they carry often unknowingly. Each of the four participants' lives is deeply shaped through resilience. By engaging closely with these stories, it was not only an honour and a profoundly moving experience, at times emotionally demanding, yet this reflects the need and the importance of listening with care and representing participants with respect. This journey has shaped me as a Khmer New Zealander researcher and allowed me to connect with my people. It has given a voice to a community that is often seldomly heard and people that are too often overlooked in society and in research. I am reminded of my grandad, someone who has taken so many untold and unheard stories with him in death. He spent over 30 years in Aotearoa and did not speak a word of English.

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