Adult South Sudanese students in Australia:
A systemic approach to the investigation of
participation in cross-cultural learning

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B.A. (Hons.) Dip. Ed.

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

....................................

Marianne Turner
Abstract

This thesis explores major influences on adult South Sudanese student participation in Australian learning environments. Between 2000 and 2006 Australia’s offshore humanitarian program accepted an increasing number of South Sudanese refugees (DIAC, 2007). Research related to this new group was minimal at the time of this study, and a theoretical framework was generated as a way of exploring the South Sudanese students’ everyday participation in cross-cultural learning.

The theoretical framework mainly draws on perspectives from sociocultural theory, cultural schema theory, research on expectations in cross-cultural learning, and sociological theories of agency. First, sociocultural perspectives provide a way of conceptualising students’ participation in cross-cultural learning as ‘here and now’ but significantly affected by engagement in past practices. The perspectives, with their focus on participation, also allow a conceptualisation of identity as situated in students’ experience of themselves in specific practices. This notion of identity was used in the study to explore the extent to which students’ past forms of participation were changed or negotiated. Next, research on expectations in cross-cultural learning and cultural schema theory offer a conceptualisation of how students’ participation may have been affected by past experiences. In the study, cultural schemas were taken to underpin expectations shared by all of the students, and these cultural schemas were positioned as aspects of the students’ identity. Finally, sociological theories of agency explore agency as co-regulated, transformative, and generating
both intentional and unintentional outcomes. The dynamics of teacher-student and student-student interactions were taken to be a major influence on student participation, and these interactions were conceptualised as teacher-student agency. The theoretical framework is proposed to be systemic because the influence of students’ past practices and the influence of current social interactions interrelate.

The research was designed as an abductive study. Abduction, with its blend of induction and deduction, allows a ‘bottom up’ approach where hypotheses are formed as much as possible from the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). This approach allowed observation of everyday classroom practices, and then subsequent engagement with theory in order to interpret these practices. Ethnographic participant observation was used during initial data collection. Then further participant observation, a focus group and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate significant emerging themes. Over a nine month period, 36 students and 10 teachers were observed across three groups and learning environments: a women’s community group, a university group, and a technical college group. 25 students and 11 teachers were interviewed.

The findings reveal that students had firm expectations in terms of displaying deference to the teacher, receiving very close monitoring from the teacher for both learning and behaviour, and competing against other students. The first expectation was found to apply across the learning environments, while the second two were found to apply only in formal learning environments. Teachers’ expectations were found to vary according to the learning environment. When there was a lack of
congruence between students’ and teachers’ expectations, students appeared to differ in their attachment to cultural schemas proposed to underlie their expectations. The findings also reveal that students had a strong cultural schema of interdependence which was negotiated differently depending on the student, and depending on the incentive provided by the learning environment. Furthermore, the findings reveal that teachers and students were able to modify teaching and learning practices to differing degrees according to the learning environments, and the opportunity to modify teaching and learning practices did not always lead to desired learning outcomes.

This research provides insight into the everyday participation of adult South Sudanese students across different Australian learning environments. The relationship between students’ past experiences and current social interactions with teachers and other students is highlighted through the systemic approach of the study. The research also provides a theoretical framework which may have applications in teacher education in the field of cross-cultural learning.
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Short Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. i

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................... iv

PART 1: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................ 2

CHAPTER TWO: FROM SOUTH SUDAN TO AUSTRALIA ........................................ 19

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES USED IN THE STUDY ............. 52

CHAPTER FOUR: A SYSTEMIC MODEL OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ................................................. 92

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY ......................................................................... 113

PART 2: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY ....................................................................... 172

CHAPTER SIX: EXPECTATIONS AS INDICATORS OF IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE .......... 173

CHAPTER SEVEN: SELF CONSTRUAL AS AN ASPECT OF IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE .......................................................... 226

CHAPTER EIGHT: OPPORTUNITY AND TEACHER-STUDENT AGENCY ................. 283

PART 3: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS ............................................................... 340

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION .............................................................................. 341

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 393

APPENDIXES .......................................................................................................... 422
## Expanded Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART 1: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADULT SOUTH SUDANESE STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REASONS FOR UNDERTAKING THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFILE OF THE RESEARCHER</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL MODEL USED IN THE STUDY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEATURES OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THESIS STRUCTURE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER TWO: FROM SOUTH SUDAN TO AUSTRALIA</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFUGEE MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMMIGRANT SELECTION</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HISTORIC TRENDS IN REFUGEE MIGRATION</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFUGEE MIGRATION POLICY CURRENT TO 2007</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUDAN AND THE FIRST COUNTRY OF ASYLUM</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF SUDAN</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNTRY OF ASYLUM AND EDUCATION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEOPLE OF SOUTH SUDAN</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT ISSUES AND SERVICE PROVISION IN AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULTURAL DISTANCE</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISSUES RELATED TO GENDER AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VISIBLE DIFFERENCE AND DISCRIMINATION</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEALTH ISSUES</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION FOR ADULT REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE COLLEGES AND THE AMEP</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY GROUPS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERTIARY EDUCATION</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES USED IN THE STUDY

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND SOURCES OF INFLUENCE
WENGER
MCCASLIN
ROGOFF
SUMMARY

CULTURAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL SOURCES OF INFLUENCES ON PARTICIPATION
D’ANDRADE
MARKUS AND KITAYAMA
VOLET
SUMMARY

SOCIAL SOURCE OF INFLUENCE ON PARTICIPATION
GIDDENS
RUBINSTEIN
SUMMARY

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER FOUR: A SYSTEMIC MODEL OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

MCCASLIN’S MODEL

THE SYSTEMIC MODEL OF PARTICIPATION
AN OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL
PARTICIPATION AND SOURCES OF INFLUENCE
THE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MODEL

CONCLUSION

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN
RESEARCHING ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
QUALITATIVE METHODS

PARTICIPANTS
OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS
SAMPLING CHOICES
COLLECTING THE DATA
OBSERVATIONS 131
THE EXPLORATORY FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEWS 140
GENERATION OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 145
THE USE OF INTERPRETERS IN INTERVIEWS 148
VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY ISSUES IN DATA COLLECTION 155
TELLING THE ‘TRUTH’ 157

ETHICS ISSUES
AN ETHICS ISSUES CHECKLIST 159
STUDENT PARTICIPANTS’ CAPACITY FOR AUTONOMY 160
RESEARCHING THE ‘OTHER’ 166

CONCLUSION 170

PART 2: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY 172
CHAPTER SIX: EXPECTATIONS AS INDICATORS OF
IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE 173

DETERENCE TO THE TEACHER 174
STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS 174
TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS 179
DEGREE OF CONGRUENCE 185

TEACHER GUIDANCE 186
STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS 186
TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS 196
DEGREE OF CONGRUENCE 202

COMPETITION 204
STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS 204
TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS 211
DEGREE OF CONGRUENCE 216

DISCUSSION 217
STUDENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ EXPECTATIONS 218
CULTURAL SCHEMAS AS ASPECTS OF IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE 219
DEGREE OF ATTACHMENT TO CULTURAL SCHEMAS 223

CONCLUSION 224
CHAPTER SEVEN: INTERDEPENDENT SELF CONSTRUAL AS AN ASPECT OF IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE

COMMITTING TO COMMUNITY
INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITIES
ASSIGNED COMMUNITY

HELP SEEKING OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY
SEEKING HELP FROM TEACHERS
SEEKING HELP FROM PEERS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND HELP SEEKING

REACTING TO CHALLENGES IN LEARNING
A FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS IN REACTING TO CHALLENGES
PERSISTENCE AS A REACTION TO CHALLENGES

DISCUSSION
IDENTITY-IN-PRACTICE
RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERDEPENDENT SELF CONSTRUAL
THE NEGOTIATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER EIGHT: OPPORTUNITIES AND TEACHER-STUDENT AGENCY

PROGRAM OF STUDY AND TEACHER ORIENTATION
WOMEN’S COMMUNITY GROUP
TAFE GROUP
UNIVERSITY GROUP

CLASSROOM ROUTINES
WOMEN’S COMMUNITY GROUP
TAFE GROUP
UNIVERSITY GROUP

CLASS COMPOSITION
WOMEN’S COMMUNITY GROUP
TAFE GROUP
UNIVERSITY GROUP

DISCUSSION
TEACHER-STUDENT AGENCY
STUDENT AGENCY
TEACHER AGENCY
# CONCLUSION

PART 3: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

CROSS-CULTURAL SOURCE OF INFLUENCE

CULTURAL SOURCE OF INFLUENCE

SOCIAL SOURCE OF INFLUENCE

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

THE SYSTEMIC MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

STRENGTHS OF THE MODEL

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF THE MODEL

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES AND LIMITATIONS

USE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

SAMPLING DECISIONS

LENGTH OF TIME THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

DIRECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

CONCLUSION

REFERENCES

APPENDIXES
List of Tables, Figures, Maps and Graphs

List of Tables
Table 1: Offshore Resettlement Programme, Grants by Region, 1999-00 to 2005-06 ................................................................. 19
Table 2: Offshore Visa Grants by Top Ten Countries of Birth (2005-06) ...... 20
Table 3: Models of Agency ................................................................. 58
Table 4: International Students from Confucian Heritage Culture at University in Australia: Sociocultural Appropriateness of Transfer of Learning from Home to Host Cultural-Educational Context ...................... 62
Table 5: Participant Overview ............................................................. 99
Table 6: An Overview of the Data Collection ...................................... 105
Table 7: Organizational Affordances of the Three Learning Environments ................................................................. 225

List of Figures
Figure 1: McCaslin’s Co-Regulation Model of Emergent Identity .................. 75
Figure 2: A Systemic Model of Student Participation in Cross-Cultural Learning Environments ................................................................. 79
Figure 3: The Systemic Model of Participation in Cross-Cultural Learning Environments ................................................................. 271
Figure 4: Mapping the Major Findings of the Study onto the Systemic Model of Participation in Cross-Cultural Learning Environments .............. 271

List of Maps and Graphs
Map 1: Geographical Locations in Sudan of the Ethnic Groups of South Sudanese Students Participating in the Present Study ...................... 27
Graph 1: Volunteer Rate in Australia – Type of Organisation (2006) .............. 37