

Refugee Students' School Experiences in Florida

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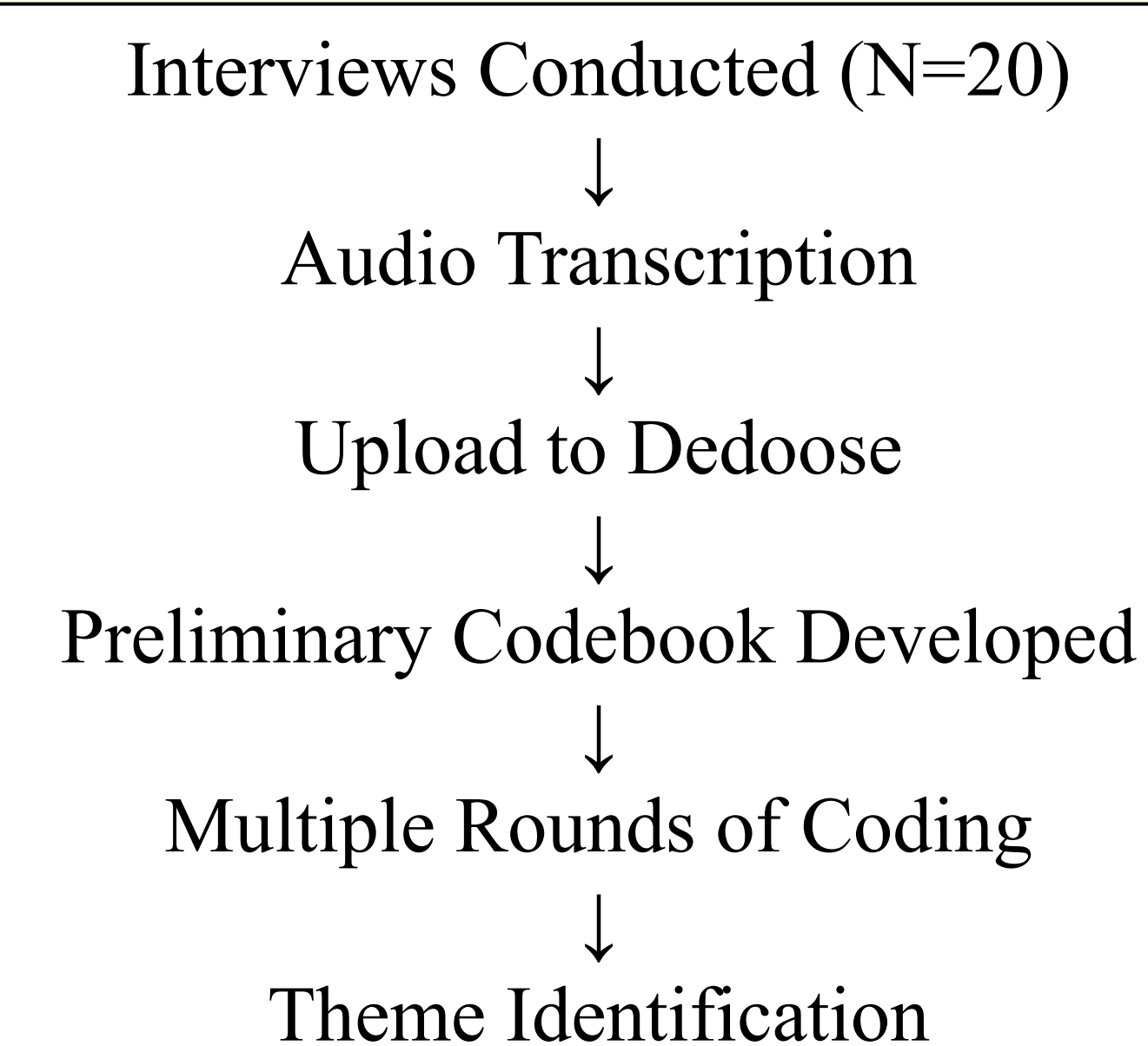
Background & Significance

- Refugee students in U.S. schools face language barriers, cultural adjustment, academic gaps, and social exclusion.
- Research shows higher rates of verbal and identity-based bullying among refugee youth.
- Prior studies often rely on surveys or adult perspectives, with limited qualitative work centering students' voices, especially in a mid-sized city in the American South.
- This study analyzes ~20 qualitative interviews with refugee students in Old Town schools.
- Using qualitative coding, themes of bullying, belonging, friendship, and academic adjustment are identified to inform more supportive and culturally responsive school practices.

Methods

- Approximately 20 refugee students from southern county public schools (elementary, middle, and high school) participated in semi-structured interviews.
- Schools included Smith Elementary, Osler Elementary, Hill Middle, MLK Middle, Herrington High, and Southern High.
- Interviews explored experiences with bullying, friendship, language barriers, academic adjustment, and belonging.
- Recordings were transcribed and uploaded into Dedoose for analysis.
- A preliminary codebook was developed, and multiple rounds of coding were conducted to identify recurring themes.
- Coding discrepancies were reviewed to ensure consistency across participants.

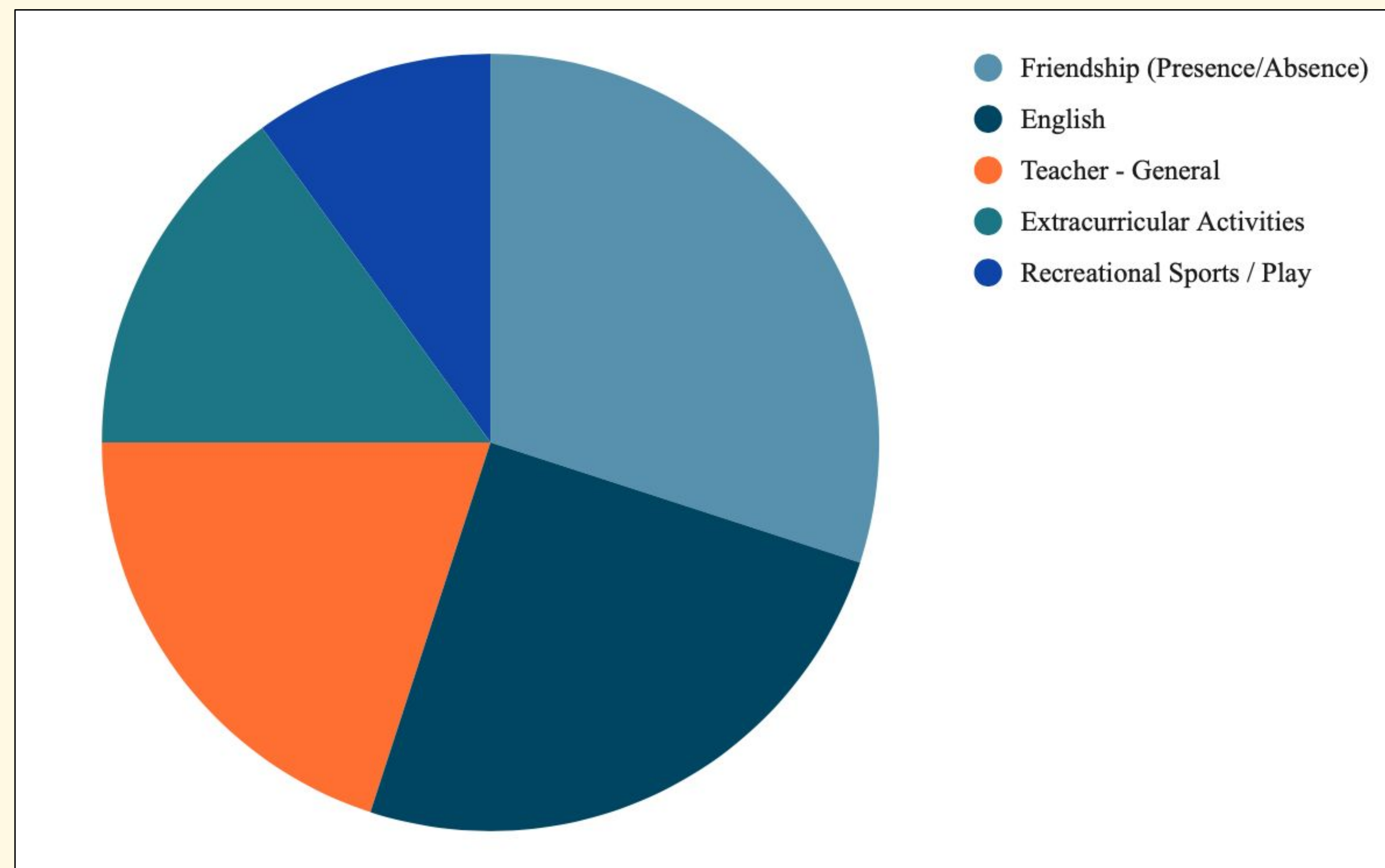
Figure 1. Qualitative Coding Process



Emerging Themes from Qualitative Coding

- Theme 1: Friendship (Presence/Absence)** - Friendship was the most frequently mentioned theme, with many students emphasizing the importance of supportive peer relationships for feeling comfortable at school.
- Theme 2: English** - Language barriers affected classroom participation, communication with peers, and overall academic adjustment.
- Theme 3: General Teacher** - Teacher interactions influenced students' academic experiences, with supportive teachers helping students navigate language and learning challenges.
- Theme 4: Extracurriculars Activities** - Participation in school activities helped students form friendships and feel more connected to their school community.
- Theme 5: Recreational Sports/Play** - Sports, especially soccer, and informal play created opportunities for social interaction and helped students build peer relationships.

Figure 2. Major Themes Identified in Refugee Student Interviews



Conclusion and Future

Preliminary findings suggest that refugee students' school experiences are shaped by friendship, belonging, language barriers, and varied bullying experiences. While students describe both challenges and supportive peer relationships, early patterns highlight the importance of inclusive school environments and strong friendships for adjustment and confidence. Results are still in progress, and ongoing qualitative coding will complete analysis of all interviews and further refine emerging themes.

Figure 3. Map of Zambia



Figure 4. Map of Afghanistan



References

