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Academic and Community Identities: A Study of Kurdish and Somali Refugee High School Students

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Keywords

qualitative research, social integration, identity, academic achievement



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Franco Zengaro, Mohamed Ali, and Sally Zengaro

Abstract

This research examined the experiences of 11 high school students and their academic and social experiences in the U.S. using identity and agency in figured worlds. We collected data through interviews and field notes and analyzed them using constant comparative analysis. The findings revealed two main themes: the importance of continuity in promoting and maintaining a positive academic environment and the importance of support in creating positive identities. In addition, there was a strong awareness between being accepted, recognized, and encouraged at school and feeling accepted as a Muslim student. In the end, the participants experienced two different realities which contributed to form their figured worlds.

Introduction

This research investigated the experiences and challenges facing a small group of Kurdish and Somali students living and studying in the United States. The participants within our study attended two different high schools located within the southeastern United States. Although these schools were not very distant from each other, one school had more resources available to its students and did not experience significant changes or turnover in terms of leadership. Other students attended a school with several challenges.

Davidson County, Tennessee, became a place of integration for many immigrants coming to the United States during the 1990s. From 1990-2000, the percentage of foreign-born residents in Nashville increased 203% (Farris, 2005). As the number of foreign-born residents increased in the county, the county struggled to meet the needs of the adolescents. Several communities, such as those with significant populations from Sudan, Bosnia and Kosovo, have had relatively few reports of gangs or other subcultures springing up from their communities. However, the same is not true for youth with Somali and Kurdish origins, and the media reported acts of violence and gang activity among those adolescents (Hall, 2007). Gold (1992) and McDowell (1996) attributed fragmentation in immigrants to endemic levels of disorganization and higher levels of factionalism within the communities. Community structure is one aspect of adaptation (Dorais, 1991).

This research examines how students engage in and are engaged socially, academically, and culturally in their schools and communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Markhus & Hamedani, 2007; Milner, 2011; Schlosser, 1992). We wanted to find out what contributed to adolescents' successes academically and socially, and while the experiences reported in this study differ between the two groups of participants, the literature indicates that mentoring and support are pivotal aspects as far as student success in school (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Ladson-

Billings, 1994; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Nieto, 2009; Vaux, 1990). Schools that provide support and mentoring to their students contribute to their social and psychological development. Feeling isolated and unconnected when in school often generates in some students a sense of detachment (Valenzuela, 1999).

In a study of immigrant students in the Netherlands, Vedder, Boekaerts, and Seegers (2005) argued that academic support from teachers was significant in keeping foreign-born students in school. Other studies attribute good levels of students' attitudes and adjustments toward school when the quality of the relationships between teachers and students is highly supportive (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994), and students become more engaged academically and feel more accepted in school (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Hughes, Cavall, & Willson, 2001; Midgley, Fedlauffer, & Eccles, 1989). On the opposite side of the pendulum, when the teacher-student relationship is more conflictual, students are likely to drop out from school and experience rejection (Hughes et al., 2001; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995).

This study is important because academic success is often linked to the types and kinds of experiences available to students while in school. For example, students do better in schools where they are encouraged, cared for, and supported (Gambone et al., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Vaux, 1990). Also, it is important for students to be able to interact with their teachers. This interaction is beneficial for students because it can motivate them to do better in school (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). The interactions a teacher has with his/her students have the power to positively shape their social and emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In addition, support and mentoring are extremely important elements because they can contribute to the psychological development of adolescents (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006; Waller, Houchins, & Nomvete, 2010).

However, the mentoring of students must be implemented as a practice not exclusively limited to school personnel. Additional sources of support can come from families. Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, and Fendrich (1999) and Sinclair and Ghory (1987) discussed that family support can become a compelling force for academic achievement, and socio-emotional adjustments in schools by students. Furthermore, parental involvement is associated with positive academic outcomes in minority students (Jeynes, 2003). Nieto (2009) found that mentoring is most effective when schools partner with communities in meeting the needs of students. Moreover, when support and mentoring are lacking in schools, students may believe that nobody cares for them (Valenzuela, 1999) or that they have nothing to contribute (Ogbu, 1983).

Conceptual Framework

This study investigated some of the challenges and experiences facing a small group of Kurdish and Somali adolescents attending two different high schools within the United States. We based this research on the theoretical framework of identity and agency in figured worlds as expressed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998). Agency in schools prevents or affords personal and social spaces from which adolescents form academic identities. In the figured world of schools, students' academic identities connect the personal world of the individual with his/her social world. The artifacts, acts, and interactions which take place within a specific setting create figured worlds, with ramifications for the power and status that people see themselves having or lacking.

Several researchers discussed the importance of the academic setting in creating the figured worlds of young people. It is often through the perspectives of teachers, peers, and

teacher expectations that adolescents learn to view themselves as successful or unsuccessful learners (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Dagenais, Day, & Toohey, 2006; Hatt-Echevarria, 2005; Howard, 2003; Jurow, 2005). Schools are powerful institutions which shape children's and adolescents' identities (Castells, 1997; Howard, 2003).

Some researchers have indicated that adult mentoring and social support play an important role in how students feel about their school experiences (Gambone et al., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Vaux, 1990). Mentoring students by teachers coupled with teacher concern and caring for students' social and emotional development can help students do better in school (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Komarraju et al., 2010). Howard (2003) wrote, "It is paramount for educators to become aware of factors that can play instrumental roles in the formation of students' academic identity and to a lesser extent school performance" (p. 6). Hatt (2007) suggests that academic identities cannot be separated from the cultural norms which exist in schools. These institutions can shape young people's perceptions of competency and failure. Concepts such as being smart or dumb are social constructions in academic settings, not only through grades but also through the assumptions and expectations of others. For example, children and adolescents may disengage from the academic process when they perceive themselves as not belonging in school (Sconiers & Rosiek, 2000) or when they believe they are treated differently from other students (Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) along with Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson (1987) and Valenzuela (1999) argued that immigrants and students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds often find themselves in schools where faculty have lower expectations for them and accessibility to high quality curriculum is often limited. The experiences young people have both in schools and in their communities provide a window into their world.

We based this research on a qualitative framework because it is through the voices of these young people that we can best capture their experiences. The words these participants used to explain their own attitudes, behaviors, and understanding construct their realities (Lightfoot, 2004). Their experiences define their "real world" (Foucault, 1970). Creswell (1998) argued that knowledge about people is found in the words they use to express themselves, and what we learn of others is found in "people talking about their meanings" (p. 19).

One goal of qualitative research is to bring forward the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2001). The participants' voices have the capacity to lead us to a better understanding of their world. Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that through voices and reflections, students come to know who they are as students in an active way. A qualitative inquiry has the ability to generate a different awareness of schooling coming from the dialectical and experiential understanding of students in a generative and unique way. Having the opportunity to express their voices can also be a liberating tool for participants, helping them translate their experiences into knowledge (Freire, 1970). It is important that we hear students' voices; otherwise, we run the risk of silencing voices as described by Delpit (1998).

This research examines two groups of immigrants who have had different challenges as they try to adjust to living and schooling in the United States. We examined Kurdish and Somali high school students' identities using discourses and interactions that created the environments that influenced their daily lives. Three research questions guided this study:

- (1) Do prior schooling experiences shape or contribute to participants' academic success in school?
- (2) Can prior experiences become reflective lenses used for capturing the lives and struggles of learning experiences in school?
- (3) How does the new environment shape participants' identities?

Method

The participants in this study were eight Somali and three Kurdish adolescents attending two different public high schools in Davidson County, Tennessee. Two participants were female, and nine were male. We chose this location for the research because of the apparent differences some adolescents were having adapting to U.S. society. The participants involved in our research attended two different high schools located within the Metro-Nashville area. We contacted the participants and their parents through a local mosque, and in keeping with IRB protocol of the Office of Research and Sponsored Activities at one university in the southeastern United States, we had participants and their parents sign assent and consent forms before data collection began. Since this was a qualitative study, we collected data through multiple interviews either in private homes or at a location near the local mosque. The participants used false names.

Data Collection

We collected data in the form of group interviews and field notes. A total of three group interviews were conducted throughout the course of four months. We carried out three semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 35 minutes each. The following are some of the protocol questions we used in the course of our data collection: (1) What, in your view, does your local school provide students to help them to be successful? (2) What are, in your opinion, some of the problems students face which may hinder their success in school? Data transcription took place in between interviews so as to provide an immediate guide for further interviews. Merriam (1998) argued that “data analysis is done in conjunction with data collection” (pp. 180-181).

In the process of data collection and analysis, we observed the data constructively (Charmaz, 2006). Data started to emerge from the transcribed interviews taking place individually and collectively, and finally we brought the data back to the participants for further verification and reflection (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2015; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Gardner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Creswell (1998) wrote, “Qualitative researchers strive for ‘understanding,’ that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with informants, spending extensive time on the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings” (p. 193).

Data Analysis

We recorded and transcribed interviews, and the process of data analysis began with reading and coding each transcript. We viewed the initial transcripts individually first and created notes; the notes generated in the early stage of data collection provided important direction for our study. Note-taking is considered an important step in data analysis because it can isolate “the initially most striking, if not ultimately most important, aspects of the data” (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, p. 236). From those notes, we generated categories, or themes, that captured some “recurrent pattern” (Merriam, 1998) that emerged from across “the preponderance” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) of the notes taken. When we identified categories, we clustered them into themes using constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1999; LeCompte, et al., 1993) and grounded theory (Check & Schutt, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) a struggle for continuity and (2) the need for support. Two different realities or figured worlds also emerged for the participants based on their experiences, perceived acceptance, and individual or group successes and struggles.

Results

Kurdish Adolescents

Kurdish participants attended a public high school which, for the most part, met their needs. Their parents worked in the community, and they lived mostly in middle-class communities. The Kurdish participants said that they had a room provided by the school for prayers. They spoke of their school as having great facilities, of teachers who were willing to help, of opportunities to attend honor classes, and of strong and caring administrators. They presented their school in a positive way. The Kurdish participants attended a school where issues of gangs and violence were not present. Therefore, their process of integration, and possibly their identity formation, may have been influenced differently as a result of their learning environment. Having opportunities to attend honor classes and a meeting place where they could share their faith during the school time were important contributors to their overall fitting within their school community.

They were able to fulfill their identity as Kurdish migrants at their public schools without fear of being rejected or alienated from the school culture. Administrators heard their voices and gave them a place to express themselves at their school. They also had a place to congregate and pray during Ramadan. This and many other affordances, such as honors classes and a strong mentoring program from their teachers and counselors, gave them a much different, more grounded experience than their Somali counterparts.

Researchers: If you want to meet as Muslims, do you have a place to go in the schools where you can pray?

M1: the library

Researchers: You are allowed to?

M1: Yeah. I think for them they made it. You can say your prayers.

Researchers: How did you get to do that?

M1: We talked to them.

In addition, the Kurdish students felt more integrated at their schools. They stated that they had all the support they needed from school administrators and teachers to succeed.

Researchers: You said that you are really feeling successful in school. What makes you successful? What are other things that make you very successful in school?

M2: Honor classes.

Researchers: You are in honors classes? Are there like advanced or honors English classes or advanced math classes you can get into?

M2: I'm in advanced classes.

Researchers: How are your teachers? Do they contribute to the success you are talking about? In what ways?

M2: They help with what you need. The teachers help you when you need it.

Researchers: So if you have a question, pretty much they can help you out? But do you know any students who may not be as successful as you guys?

M1: Yeah.

Researchers: And what do you think are some of the problems why they are not successful as you guys?

M1: They play around while the teacher's lecturing.

M2: They don't care.

The Kurdish participants indicated that they fit in very well at their school. They also stated that there was not much of a difference between fitting in at school and in their

neighborhood. Fitting in well with the larger community outside theirs was very important and valued among their members. One father expressed,

We want our kids to feel they are Americans. I am Kurdistan. I have that. My thinking is not like my son's thinking. His thinking is different. I used to be teaching in my country. Still now even if I teach, I have the background of my country. I want my kids to feel different because they are living here. I need them to be part of the community and to belong to this community.

The Kurdish participants had support both from their parents and from their community. Success for the Kurdish participants was connected to their culture and their parents' involvement. The father's expectations for success and belonging for his three children was very clear when he stated, "My oldest son is in college." The Kurdish participants stated that those who did not succeed in school did so because of their own inability to use school-provided resources. They expressed the idea that "we have all we need to succeed." They did not understand those who didn't succeed, and there was an inability to perceive that succeeding or not in school could be due to anything other than effort or ability. When asked about the role of the teacher in a student's success or failure, one participant replied, "It's not because of the teacher or the staff."

Finally, while Kurdish participants felt that their success was due to their ability and effort, they often felt that personal support came from sources also outside their families. One participant discussed that his greatest successes were in academics, and another said that soccer was his greatest success. The participants agreed, "Parents help some, but the coach is very supportive."

Somali Adolescents

The educational experience of the Somali participants was contextually different than that of the Kurdish students. Their school was located in a low-income neighborhood, and while the Kurdish participants had improved facilities and opportunities, the Somali participants had a more pessimistic impression of the overall school environment at their high school. They painstakingly recounted their own school experiences. In their voices, they expressed predominant feelings of fear, anger, frustration, and isolation. They wanted to have a place where they could come together and keep not only their faith alive at their school but also their cultural identities. Instead, meetings after meetings with many different principals produced the same outcome; administrators promised them a place to meet as Muslims, but these promises never materialized.

The participants talked about trying to help their fellow Muslims stay away from bad situations, violence, drugs and other dangerous activities. A few teachers took interest in them. There was a sense of urgency in the voices of the Somali adolescents, but the school was not responding to their request for a place to gather. They wanted to be part of their school community, but not at the expense of giving up their own traditions. They talked about behaving and not giving any trouble to their teachers, making good grades in their classes, and hoping to be allowed a place to express their faith.

One of the basic needs of the Somali participants was to be able to express their faith. Unlike the Kurdish participants, the Somali participants did not have a place to pray, and they had to sit in the cafeteria during their fasting time of Ramadan. They did not understand why Christian students could have a place to meet and discuss faith while they could not. The following dialogue illustrated their frustration. One participant explained that he had gathered a petition of students who requested a place for prayers.

Ab2: I got a lot of people, and I was trying to give it to the principal, and the time was not now. So I can see the students were real interested because they want to have the same thing as the Christian [group] going after school. I'm thinking about the next generation; they need a place.

Researcher: So that would be an important thing for you to have a place where you can meet together?

Ab2: Absolutely.

Researcher: The principal has not responded positively?

Ab2:

No, the principal of ours, they really do real good, they really have, but the days of Ramadan, the Muslim fasts, that day they let us pray, a place to pray, and sometimes we ask, in the month of Ramadan, that's when we fast, like we can't eat, so we cannot be with the students that have the cafeteria. We don't have a room to wait till lunch will be over, so we can, when lunch is over, go back to our class. So we don't have a room, that's what I am saying. We want the same as the Christian group so we can have our own room, when the bell rings, so when the students [finished] lunch, we go to class. We tried to talk every year to the principals. Different teachers, but mostly different principals. This year we have changed a lot of principals. And the principal here understands us really well. When he gets to know a lot of students, then they take the principal away. That's . . . It's . . . he's new and we tried to tell him. But he's going to make more time at the end.

In these words, we can see an effort from the Somali participants to continue with their tradition of faith and culture while at school. They attempted to make their needs known, yet they were not having much success. They did not blame their administrators, but they recognized that the constant turnover at their institution meant that they had to express their requests continuously without ever seeing any real progress. There was a sense of frustration captured in their voices.

One participant expressed her frustration over getting her needs met at school.

Fatima: Principals--it's like they believe we only pray at Ramadan. We have to pray every day. It's a requirement. And they let us pray at Ramadan, and after Ramadan is over, all of the sudden we are going from praying regularly to not, and regardless of how much we meet with the principal and the security, they are all standing there waiting for us and it started a whole argument because students wouldn't go to class and they didn't even let us pray, even someone got mad. The fact that we are dedicated to what we believe—they do not understand the importance. To me, my prayer is more important than anything, so they need to understand that.

An additional problem surfaced when the Somali participants discussed the academic challenges they faced at school. One participant described the difficulties that started with high school.

Fatima:

We went to school back in our country, and we didn't have any problems back then. Here we face a lot of problems in education. Actually, I feel school is lower than it is back home because when we came from back home and we came to the U.S., I spoke English and my brother spoke English too, and we took only about 3 years and we were at the head of our classes, and we have been straight "A" students, but when you get into high school, there are some teachers that make you feel uncomfortable and that's why some students dropped out.

There was a sense of frustration and alienation on the part of this participant.

Researcher: What do they do to make you uncomfortable?

Fatima:

Well, like there are some teachers that, you are in the classroom, and they just ask questions out loud that they can ask you outside, and some students don't feel comfortable answering because other people will make them feel different.

As Fatima articulated her current experience at her high school, she could not help but to make a comparison with the past. In forming her identity as a high school student, she was constantly reminded that the reality of schooling here is different from her past schooling experiences. Most of the Somali participants felt that one of the main problems they had to face was how faculty at their school perceived them. Being part of their school was an important aspect of their identity. On many occasions, the participants expressed they felt that they were not accepted for who they were. For these participants, feeling different was something they had to face every day at their school.

Aisha:

Just by entering the classroom, a teacher makes a note of you, like sometimes it's because of the way you are dressed. Students also. I think that they have a belief that Caucasian students are better and actually you can see some of the friends sitting next to you, and you are actually doing your work, and all they are doing is probably talking, but the teacher calls on them because of the race, and that happens.

Researcher: Have you seen that?

Fatima:

I have seen that over and over every period.

While cultural misunderstanding affected teacher-student or student-student relationships, the Somali participants also touched on school violence. They discussed how much violence was a part of their schooling experiences.

Fatima:

The kind of gang people like, black people, they get in a fight with other black people. People see the Somalis, and Somalis end up ganging because of racism.

Researcher: You're talking about racism. Obviously, there are some problems, some activities, fighting. And they believe that especially like the Hispanics and African-Americans that they most likely will not succeed because they associate with gang-related activities, and they are the ones who get in fights more. They too, they are ready to join.

Researcher: How big is the problem of violence at your school?

Fatima:

We have a fight at every pep rally to date. And they still do pep rallies. They know that every day we have a pep rally, there is going to be a fight, and there is like a big place outside where everybody does something in it, and there is one or two policemen and they can't do anything. They just get pushed out of the way, and there's like people screaming. I remember last year, there was a guy who was wearing a white t-shirt and it was completely red from blood.

Ab2:

Right now we've got uniforms. Most students right now try hard. I see a lot of people coming out these days. Somali and Kurdish, they are watching other people, the way they act. You know back home, they are used to doing this. But around other people, they are not used to doing things. But they see what these students are doing and they think they are going to follow the way they dress. But when the uniform appeared and all this stuff

is going on, you think everything's is going great. And then a lot of students I see, they are going down, their grades, they complain. And now they [teachers] help you more because they [students] used to wear the colors of the gangs and everything.

These types of experiences influenced the way these students felt about their school.

Researcher: So what you are saying is that one solution has been to have uniforms to make everybody be the same?

Fatima:

Yeah, because last year, somebody was going to be jumped for wearing blue or red, and now they are all wearing the same color, so nobody knows who is in what gang.

Researcher: So one certain type of clothing would suggest

Fatima:

Yeah, like we had students bring drugs to school, and later you'd hear a rumor that an hour later that kid had a gun or something.

Ab2:

You'd even see a cop coming with a dog searching lockers.

Fatima: And you even see students doing drugs on the floor.

Ab2:

We don't do something like that. With our religion, we don't do something like that.

Fatima:

They're trying to adapt. They're not adapting to the environment; they're adopting it. For the Somali participants, their high school was an ambivalent place where they faced violence from gangs, and they coped by adopting the behavior of others or by becoming invisible. The frequent changes in school personnel meant that students had to constantly explain their needs to each new administrator and wait for decisions that would not be made before the academic year was over. Classroom experiences were not much better because students faced further isolation when teachers did not engage them in class discussions.

However, the Somali participants always found something positive about their experience. They talked about getting help from their school counselors.

One participant explained:

Well, particularly in our school, we have good guidance counselors. They help us in as far as getting our credits done, placement. They don't stand in the way of us going to honors classes and stuff like that. So, and that's pretty good, but they, sometimes, like teachers and principals and stuff, like the principal from last year didn't know we were supposed to pray and stuff like that, so there's always something standing in the way, but at the same time there's always positive feedback.

In addition, the participants said there was usually one teacher who understood and supported them. Even though there were problems and misunderstandings at school, the Somali participants felt they had support from counselors, at least one teacher, and their family. Many Somali participants came from homes where parents did not have steady work; however, their neighborhoods were based on the concept of helping each other. For these participants, the support they needed from their parents was just to be there for them and encourage them to continue.

Fatima explained that she knew many students who were successful and had graduated. Last year a lot of people graduated. I see a lot of students from, for example, the Middle East, and someone is going to graduate and I'm really happy about it. All of them have graduated because they came to class; they kept quiet; they followed directions.

The findings from this study indicated that the participants intricately connected academic success to school support. Unfortunately, not all participants felt equally supported at their schools. Also, community integration was intertwined with the level of engagement parents and students felt they had within their communities.

Discussion

The researchers reported on two groups of immigrant adolescents experiencing different challenges as they tried to adjust to living and attending schools in the United States. The findings revealed two different scenarios for these participants. The Kurdish participants experienced a better level of adjustment in school and in society, while their Somali counterparts experienced high levels of disengagement from school and their adopted community. The Somali participants experienced similar levels of fragmentation found in other communities stemming from a lack of political voice within their school, economic voice, and support (Dorais, 1991; Gold, 1992; McDowell, 1996).

This disconnect was more prominent among the Somali participants, while the Kurdish participants spoke of more cohesive community ties. As these immigrant groups struggled for autonomy, independence and integration, their school system faced an influx of new adolescents needing to be schooled. The challenges were many, and the task for these communities was seemingly overwhelming. The results from the data analysis showed two predominant themes which highlighted the struggles for the adolescents: (1) a struggle for continuity and (2) the need for support. The findings revealed an ongoing struggle for continuity in the school attended by the Somali participants. They attended a school with a high degree of staff and administrative turnovers. The participants cited the frequent changing of personnel as a major limitation in getting their needs understood and eventually met. They expressed frustration at not being able to negotiate successfully the fundamental challenges and obstacles they faced at their school. They felt that supporting staff and administrators were scarcely available at their school. As a result they felt a sense of disconnect with their school. However, the Kurdish participants attended a different type of school with a lower turnover in personnel. They felt that their school offered them a level of support sufficient for their academic progress; these young people spoke of a sense of connection to their schools and their communities.

Next, the participants felt that much of their success as students in school and in society was attributed to the level of support they received. Support through teachers, counselors, principals, parents and their communities became important elements to their ongoing development as young people. All participants expressed the importance of having someone to support them in their activities and goals. Receiving support and encouragement in school was extremely important for these participants. Support from family in the form of parental involvement and community support and opportunities to be enrolled in honors classes were described as key components for having success in school and the community. This supports previous findings by Izzo et al. (1999), Jeynes (2003), and Sinclair and Ghory (1987) that family support can become a compelling force for academic achievement, and socio-emotional adjustments in schools by students.

In addition to the struggles, two different pictures emerged from our data. On one side, the Kurdish participants felt that their school helped them with their academic and social needs; they spoke in terms of support and a sense of belonging. On the other side, the Somali participants felt a different experience, a school reality where support was meager. The Somali participants were not able to get the right support at their school. The Kurdish participants were given a place at their school where they could profess the tenets of their religion and were

encouraged to enroll in honors classes. The Somali participants were not given a place to congregate as Muslims. They had fewer opportunities to participate in class discussions. They were not prohibited from enrolling in honors classes, but they had to request these opportunities. Finally, they had to deal with threats from violence at their school. There was a strong connection between being recognized and encouraged in school and feeling accepted as Muslim students.

One Somali participant stated that some of their peers realized how hard it was to succeed in school and in life. In spite of violence and a high level of dropouts, the Somali participants still continued to work hard. They made good grades and tried to stay out of trouble. Some of them even tried to reach out to other students in an effort to influence them in a positive way and steer them away from gangs and violence. They relied on families and other Somali students for modeling good success. Their voices are a reminder of the importance of support.

For all the participants, the word support meant help through teachers, counselors, and administrators. These variables were key factors for our participants and were perceived as very important elements in their identity as students. Having their needs met was an important aspect of their academic development. For them, success in schools was nurtured in relationships with their teachers, administrators, peers, and family. For the Somali participants, the issue of faith and being able to express it freely at school was highly significant to their sense of belonging in school.

Another Somali student in particular, Fatima, constructed her own idea of what it meant to be a student in U.S. Looking back at her experiences in her home country, she experienced a sense of disconnect between what she knew of schooling in her own country and her current school. Academically, socially and culturally, things were different. Even teachers behaved differently from what she remembered back home. Traditional values such as faith and family were integral aspects of the lives of the participants. The Somali and to a lesser extent the Kurdish participants felt that their faith was an important aspect in their lives as students. They filtered their current experiences at school through their own personal worlds. For the Somali participants in particular, praying at school was very important. They could not understand why it was so difficult for the administration to provide them with a room to pray every day, and not just during Ramadan. The Somali participants expressed resentment in some of their responses to our questions. They expressed a sense of detachment and disengagement from the school environment. One Somali participant expressed her own reason as to why she felt disengaged from her school. In her perception of the situation, this new culture was very different from her own culture back home.

Valenzuela (1999) discussed the sense of distance among high school students as a response to the perception of uncaring relationships arising in the school environment. She wrote, "The view that students do not care about school stems from several sources, including social and cultural distance in student-adult relationships and the school culture itself" (p. 63). There was a nostalgic feeling some of these students expressed who looked back at their countries of origin with a sense of sadness. One participant said, "We have seen that when a Somali moves in the rest come on, so ... it's like back home."

The participants defied the gravitational pull of marginalization and engaged in positive behavior. These participants did not fit the stereotype of the uncaring students described by Valenzuela (1999). Valenzuela argued that students who are marginal to the mainstream values of the school overwhelmingly conform to the uncaring student' prototype. They engaged in such deviant behaviors as skipping class and hanging out (lounging in the cafeteria through all three lunch periods is a favorite pastime)" (p. 77). Sconiers and Rosiek (2000) argued that students

disengage from full participation in their academics because they perceive that the system does not care for them. The “nobody cares” idea is lamented by some teenagers when they perceive that adults do not care or care enough for them (Valenzuela, 1999).

Defying marginalization came in many forms for the participants. Some articulated a view of academic success which was often built around the success of other fellow students. However, they all felt that they were struggling despite making good grades. Ogbu (1983) wrote that students with a different culture from the mainstream experience a lack of continuity because teachers disregard what the students know, or their prior knowledge. Ogbu argued that such action led to hindrance of cognitive and motivational skill development.

In their experiences, the participants felt that having a support system was very important to them. They discussed the importance of family, friends, and faith as significant components of their identities. Obviously, not all students felt adequately supported or encouraged in their quest for academic success. Particularly troubling was the fact that some faculty looked down upon them because of how they looked or dressed. Being accepted as Muslim students was very important to them. The words of Fatima echoed the struggle for visibility and recognition for who she was, a student who wanted to be seen for what she could bring to her classroom rather than what she looked like or dressed like. This supports previous findings by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Alexander et al. (1987), and Valenzuela (1999) that students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds often find themselves in schools where there are lower expectations of their performance. The words expressed by Fatima and acknowledged by the rest of the Somali participants are powerful reminders of how the sociocultural milieu of their schools shaped their academic identities.

The participants linked identity formation to the way they belonged at school. They felt lack of cultural responsiveness was the problem. They used comments such as “singled out” to explain their cultural identity and their perception of how the other members of their school community viewed them. The Somali participants felt that their school community misconstrued their cultural identities. They did not feel accepted for who they were. They felt most of the teachers seemed uninterested in them, and in turn the participants felt they were not accepted in school.

Research Questions

In addressing specifically the three research questions, we can see that in the first question on how prior schooling experiences shaped or contributed to participants’ level of academic success in their school, the Somali participants felt that their past preparation exceeded their current level of schooling, and they were excelling in their current classes. They also stated that they often felt their teachers did not acknowledge their prior knowledge. The second research question asked how their prior experiences reflected on their struggles of learning experiences in school. Both groups defined their successes and failures through the lens of their current experiences. One Somali participant, in particular, expressed a sense of nostalgia in remembering how her past scholastic experiences had been in her home country. The Somali participants experienced more disconnect between their past and their present school situations than the Kurdish participants.

The third research question asked how their new environment shaped their identities. Based on their responses, they felt they found support for an interpretation of their identities. Their principal environment was their academic world, and many times they were not always accepted or supported, and it affected their sense of belonging. The survival mechanism many Somali participants adopted was to be less involved and visible at their school.

However, both groups showed their resiliency by the fact that they actively looked for support for their successes. Some found support at home through their parents, while others were able to find significant adults at school or through sports who encouraged them to succeed. Both groups looked for a sense of continuity in pursuing their goals.

The participants in this study regarded success in different perspectives. For the Kurdish participants, success came from individual effort without much help from others. The male students expressed that as long as they stayed “quiet” and out of trouble, success would be possible. For the female participants, they felt it was important to maintain traditional values while coping with teachers who did not validate them. Gender roles learned from their culture provided cues to negotiate difficulties both at home and at school. The female participants’ insights to balancing social expectation roles from parents and community seemed to work for them.

Implications

While having more resources is an important commodity for schools in order to implement quality educational programs for all students, we know that not all schools offer the same opportunities when it comes to education. The fact is that adolescence is a very difficult time in the lives of many students, including those who come from different countries to live, work, and learn in the US. Schools, families, and community leaders should pay closer attention to what goes on in the lives of this population of students. It is extremely important that society becomes an active participant in the growth of these young minds. Schools can play an important role by becoming more responsive to the needs of students, especially international students. Changes happen when individuals become genuinely concerned and care about the success of all students. This responsiveness can come from a teacher who models a genuine and mature interest in the growth and development of her students. The “I care about you as a human being” attitude should be an important aspect of a caring teacher or school personnel.

While money in the form of resources is an important variable when it comes to services offered, often it is a caring and concerned act of behavior from a teacher, principal, community leader, or parent which makes the difference. The catalyst for changes starts often with the simple act of being actively interested in the lives of young people. We need to be proactively engaged in the process of helping young people feel connected to their schools, their community, and their neighborhood. And the best ingredient still remains the human act of care. I care about you as an individual. Without minimizing the issues these young people face or the lacking of opportunities, we feel that in the absence of resources, and some insurmountable obstacles facing these students, one factor must remain constant. Students should feel and know that their schools, teachers, parents, and community all work together because they want to help students become successful.

Conclusion

In this qualitative study, we sought to portray the identities and figured worlds of students from two different ethnic groups having problems with identity adjustments at their schools. The participants explained factors they thought shaped their identities as students and community members. Through their words, we were able to describe the struggles in some participants in finding adequate support at their school. Overwhelmingly, this qualitative research pinpoints to the importance of adult support in the lives of these young students. Success in school is feeling connected, supported and valued as an individual. Students want to know that there are cared

for, encouraged, and supported by others (Gambone et al., 2002; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Vaux, 1990).

One group, the Somali participants, felt they had a more difficult time expressing themselves as Muslim students because they thought their school did not respect their faith. Because they were forced to remain in the cafeteria during fasting and because they were not provided a place for prayer outside of Ramadan, they felt misunderstood by their school. Their religious identities were an important part of their self-concepts. The Kurdish participants from the other school did not have these obstacles, and therefore, they felt more accepted and integrated overall. Because of the school they attended, the Kurdish participants were encouraged to take advanced classes and to participate actively during classes. The Somali participants felt more accepted by their neighborhoods and by the Somali community; they attributed their academic successes to their support from their homes. However, they did not feel fully accepted or integrated at their school.

The participants' opinions over issues of integration, faith and race are an umbrella of experiences which underpin important aspects of their academic and social lives. The Somali participants realized that their voices did not have the power to change things at their school because ultimately they remained only voices which did not transform their actual situations. In the experiences of both Somali and Kurdish participants, we heard words such as struggle for continuity, support, and a sense of belonging. In this struggle for continuity and sense of belonging, they attributed success to having adults who supported them, having opportunities to enroll in honors classes, and feeling appreciated at school. The Somali participants' struggle for integration at their school was a constant reminder of how difficult and challenging academic and social life can be when people's voices have no consequences. The Somali participants were unable to find a place to observe the tenets of their religion at their school.

Through experiences expressed in struggles, different realities emerged which separated the experiences of these two groups of adolescents. Frustration in the voices of the Somali participants was the acknowledgement of not being accepted. Frustrated by a system which failed to recognize their needs, they felt abandoned by their school. This "nobody cares" attitude was previously reported by Valenzuela (1999) in her research with Mexican and Mexican American high school students.

There was a common theme, however. To succeed in school all participants agreed that they needed a strong social support system. They expressed dreams for success, integration, and stability in what Ladson-Billings (1994) called the "active participants in the construction of a dream" (p. 167). The differences in the experiences of the two groups highlight the complexity of the academic world. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to all problems.

While qualitative research is sometimes pushed aside in favor of quantitative research for finding solutions to academic problems, it is important to ask questions and listen to the voices of the participants. The participants themselves may come up with ideas and concepts important to them which had not been previously observed. Although the opinions expressed by the participants were not necessarily representative of everyone, even in their own group, they highlight the importance of the contribution of qualitative research to our collective understanding of academic and community growth among young people.

Additional research should be carried out with the auspice of qualitative case studies. The framework of our research did not include the voices and experiences of principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders. We believe that including the aforementioned people's perspectives could offer a more holistic picture of the experiences of adolescents in the United States. Ideally, all students regardless of where they live should receive a quality public

education. Obviously, this is not always the case, but additional qualitative case studies may unravel the problem surrounding some school experiences, such as those of students like the Somali participants within our study. Students need to have quality mentoring and supportive programs while in school. Changes are predicated on adults' taking an active interest in the lives of students. This involves a commitment on the part of each adult working with young people. Our study suggests that what is needed in order to solve some of the issues facing students is the care and genuine concern from the adults involved in their lives. Teaching is meeting students where they are in their development.

Teachers have an important role when it comes to shaping the socioemotional development of students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). We think that this is an important factor that emerged from the voices of the Somali students. However, the work of mentoring young people does not depend only on one entity. Schools need to partner with their communities if they want to implement quality mentoring programs aimed at helping adolescents succeed (Nieto, 2009). One important point that we should draw from this research is the need for schools to acknowledge and identify early on students in need of positive adult mentoring and support. It would have benefited tremendously the Somali students in our study if they had been provided with mentoring opportunities (Waller et al., 2010).

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