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When worlds collide: Academic adjustment of Somali Bantu students with limited formal education in a U.S. elementary school☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a two-year ethnographic study of newly arrived Somali Bantu refugee students in a U.S. elementary school (K-6) in Chicago. These data paint a detailed picture of students' behavioral and academic adjustment to school, and the drivers behind "behavioral incidents" (instances when children's behavior presented a problem for school staff) and their academic engagement or disengagement. Bantu students required a degree of flexibility and accommodation from their teachers, whose attitudes toward acculturation could generally be characterized as "assimilationist" (requiring students to conform to U.S. culture and school rules) or "multicultural" (respecting and accepting the students expressing their heritage culture at the school). This study illustrates the difficulties faced by refugee students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) when adjusting to U.S. schools, and the pressures placed on teachers and other school staff. Strategies used by teachers in working with SLIFE are described. These findings also extend the literature on the academic engagement of immigrants to this group of SLIFE. In this study, SLIFE were disengaged not because of disinterest or resisting adult expectations at school but because they were unfamiliar with the culture of schooling and did not have the academic background necessary to complete school tasks. The study also illustrates the need to provide schools with adequate support to accommodate the needs of SLIFE.

Introduction

Refugee students with interrupted or limited formal education face particular difficulties in adjusting to U.S. schools (SLIFE, DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). Many refugee children resettle in the United States after extended stays in refugee camps with few opportunities for schooling (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). It is estimated that 20% of all English Language Learners (ELLs) in high school and 12% of ELLs in middle school have missed two or more years of schooling (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Such students are at high risk for school failure, particularly if they come from cultures without traditions of literacy and formal schooling (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002). Though students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) represent a growing population in schools in the United States and other countries where refugees resettle, only a few studies to date have documented African refugee

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student's school experiences in detail (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of newly arriving SLIFE from Somalia in a U.S. elementary school and the experience of the school and teachers as they accommodated the needs of these students.

The relatively small but growing literature on SLIFE refugee students describes the array of challenges they face adapting to school. At the most basic level, they may not know the norms of school behavior or how to perform paper-and-pencil tasks (Alsleben, 2006). Even with additional preparation in special newcomer programs, these refugee students may struggle to transition into mainstream schools, as "the knowledge of how to 'be a student…. entails many skills, behaviors, formative experiences, and a great deal of knowledge" (Miller et al., 2005, p. 23). Teachers who work with SLIFE report their difficulties adapting to school and the resulting effects on their behavior: many are withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, anxious, or hyperactive (Miller et al., 2005).

SLIFE may also struggle to handle the academic material in the classroom (Cassity & Gow, 2005). For example, Dooley (2009) observed that much of the homework assigned to African refugees was "not doable," containing concepts and references that were culturally and socially unfamiliar. For SLIFE, adapting to school requires not only mastering a new language, but also learning literacy skills and overcoming gaps in knowledge across academic subjects, all at the same time (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2012). Thus, SLIFE face distinct challenges in adjusting to school—more extreme than those documented for immigrants and even some other refugee students.

Teachers also face difficulties in working with these students. Mainstream teachers may be unfamiliar with—and even have misconceptions about—ELL experiences and bilingualism (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). Generally, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are more informed about these issues and better prepared; yet they too face numerous challenges, including the need to improvise pedagogical processes without adequate instructional materials (Trickett et al., 2012). For example, teaching science to SLIFE requires teachers to address gaps in literacy, English language skills, and science-specific vocabulary (Miller, 2009).

Teachers in U.S. schools with growing ELL populations confront these classroom demands in the context of increased federal and state pressure to raise students' performance, including ELLs, on standardized tests. Standardized tests are not well suited to assess the progress of ELLs, especially that of SLIFE who are at the early developmental stages of literacy. Thus, teacher challenges and pressures are likely to be even more acute when teaching SLIFE coming from "preliterate" societies (i.e., those without written languages), such as Somali Bantus. A study of teachers working with Somali Bantu students at the high school level reported such difficulties and a lack of adequate support (Roxas, 2011).

Somali Bantu refugees

Somali Bantu refugees started arriving in the United States in 2004 (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002). As the descendants of slaves brought to Somalia in the 1800s, they lived as second-class citizens in agricultural regions, with little access to the Somali educational system. After being displaced by the civil war in Somalia in the early 1990s, they fled to refugee camps in Kenya, where they lived for more than a decade until the United States designated the entire community (numbering approximately 12,000) eligible for resettlement as refugees.

Like other refugee groups, the Somali Bantu had suffered a great deal prior to their arrival in the United States. Somali clans forced them from their homes by, and they undertook perilous journeys in their escape to Kenya. Once in refugee camps, they survived nighttime raids from bandits while living on meager food rations (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002).

Unlike other refugee groups with more access to educational systems (McBrien, 2005), few Somali Bantus were literate in any language (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002). The native Somali Bantu languages have no written form, though many adults speak Somali. The first educational opportunities for most Somali Bantus were available in refugee camps; however, many did not attend the makeshift schools located there. Of particular importance to the present study is that their marginalization in Somalia and limited formal educational opportunities in the refugee camps helped to reinforce traditional Somali Bantu traditions of informal learning through modeling in the context of daily family life (cf. Avoseh, 2011).

When Somali Bantu children began arriving in U.S. schools in 2004, the Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) technical assistance providers, Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning and Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) received a particularly large number of requests for technical assistance on Somali Bantu students (Adkins & Dunn, 2009, personal communication; Morland, 2009, personal communication). School districts were requesting orientation to the culture of the group; training in handling mental health issues, behavior, and social adjustment in the classroom; and specific strategies that teachers could use to engage the students academically. The present study was informed by these concerns.

Conceptual Framework: A cultural-historical perspective on schooling

This study was guided by an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Trickett, 1996) and cultural historical (Rogoff, 2003) framework. From an ecological perspective, refugee students are influenced by the cultural context of both the heritage as well as the host culture and society (Birman, 2011) as expressed across all levels of analysis, such as the microsystems of the child's family and school.

Further, Rogoff (2003), building on Lev Vygotsky's (1987) perspective on cognitive development, provides a framework for understanding distinctive ways that children from pre-literate communities have been socialized to learn. She suggests that different societies set different goals for development, or "what is considered mature or desirable" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 18). From this perspective, children from pre-literate backgrounds are viewed not as lacking in a range of skills and understandings, but as coming from a different frame of reference.

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