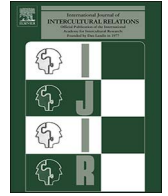


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Sudanese refugee youth and educational success: The role of church and youth group in supporting cultural and academic adjustment and schooling achievement

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ABSTRACT

There is a burgeoning body of research about refugee youth that adopts a deficit approach by focusing on the problems and barriers youth encounter in adjusting culturally and academically to schools. Less research takes an asset approach through an examination of the strengths refugee youth bring to formal schooling and how these assets can be built upon to support academic achievement and cultural adjustment. In this article, we challenge these deficit notions, through examining the everyday spaces inhabited by Sudanese refugee youth living in regional New South Wales, Australia. Our research poses the question: what role do institutions outside school play in supporting Sudanese refugee youth as they move from one culture to another? The question is significant because little research has examined the role played by institutions outside school, e.g., church, youth groups and sporting associations in fostering the social and cultural capital required for refugee youth to integrate within the broader community, and to engage successfully in schooling. Drawing on Bourdieuan concepts of cultural and social capital and habitus, we suggest that religious affiliation enabled the young people to access social capital through “prosocial and proeducational moral directives” (Barrett, 2010; p. 467). Moreover, religious involvement provided refugee youth with access to socially legitimised forms of cultural capital. These forms of capital shaped the students’ habitus and contributed to school adjustment and achievement. We conclude that future research is needed to examine the role that church and other institutions outside school play in contributing to cultural and academic adjustment.

Introduction

The predominantly monocultural face of regional and rural Australia has undergone a major transformation over the past decade. One of the major drivers has been a Federal Government policy to increase humanitarian settlement in regional and rural Australia in order to lessen pressure on services in large urban centres, build a pool of workers to address ongoing labour shortages and contribute to the development of rural and regional Australia (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2005). This policy has been in line with other industrial countries attempting to deal with increasing global flows of refugees and the perception that services in cities are stretched to capacity (Boese, 2010). Settlement of refugees in Australian regions has been discursively framed as meeting refugees’ interests, emphasising the fit between those who come from rural areas or have much-needed skills

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(Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2010, as cited in Boese, 2010; p. 2). Yet, there is evidence of persistent social exclusion of adult refugees in regional Australia (Correa Velez, Spaaij, & Upham, 2013).

The genesis for the study on which this article is based arose from anecdotal observations of the educational implications of this regional refugee resettlement policy as it played out in the country towns in which we lived and worked as researchers and educators. Between 1996 and 2009, the number of refugees settling in regional Australia increased from five to twelve percent (Horin, 2010). Until recently, humanitarian entrants from Sudan represented the majority of refugees settled in regional Australia (Department of Immigration and Community, 2012). As researchers, we observed that despite obvious tensions, difficulties and challenges, a number of refugee youth had begun to emerge as role models and leaders in our regional towns. We witnessed the role that activities and networks outside formal schooling appeared to play in fostering intercultural competence and the necessary social and cultural capital required for these students to integrate in the broader community and experience schooling success (Major, Wilkinson, Santoro, & Langat, 2013).

Yet, when we turned to the literature on refugee education, we noted a disconnect between these achievements and much of the refugee youth research. Deficit discourses frequently position African students of refugee origin as traumatised and needy (Major et al., 2013; Rah, Choi, & Nguyễn, 2009). Moreover, the majority of the research focusses on refugee students' experiences of formal education, and in particular, schooling. Yet our observations and research (Major et al., 2013; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016; Santoro & Wilkinson, 2015) suggest that there is an invisible level of socialisation and capital building occurring outside formal educational settings which may contribute to some refugee youth's emerging achievements.

In this article we draw on research we conducted in regional New South Wales, Australia which investigated how out-of-school networks and practices generated resources contributing to intercultural competence, successful acculturation and educational success for a group of Sudanese refugee youth. The project contributes to the literature on refugee youth because it extends our knowledge of the previously invisible, but potentially crucial role played by institutions outside school in fostering the social and cultural capital necessary for refugee youth to integrate into the broader community, and build schooling engagement and success. Previous research has tended to focus on refugee youth's formal educational experiences. Yet, recent research suggests the need for a dual focus on the interconnections between formal institutions such as schools or workplaces and the sociocultural context, as well as the role that extended family and other informal institutions play in immigrant acculturation (Gonzalez-Loureiro, Kiessling, & Dabic, 2015; Wilkinson & Lloyd, forthcoming). As noted in the subsequent section, research with other groups of disadvantaged students suggests that involvement in extra-curricular activities is crucial in decreasing schooling disengagement and attrition, enhancing educational outcomes, and increasing participation in education and training. Given the distinctive nature of the refugee experience – experiences of trauma and little or interrupted schooling – increasing knowledge of the range of factors outside formal education that lead to enhanced school engagement, participation and outcomes, is crucial. Yet little is known about how such involvement may support refugee youth.

Secondly, much of the research for/with refugee youth has been conducted in large urban settings amongst large ethnic enclaves. The experiences of settling in smaller, regional communities are less well documented. Our study of refugee youth takes as its primary unit of analysis, this little examined refugee experience. In particular, we analyse the role that religious engagement through a church-related youth group played in fostering their “imaginings” (Appadurai, 2004) through building the kinds of educational dispositions, and social and cultural capital conducive to educational achievement. Little is known about how religion and faith may impact on the acculturation experiences and educational outcomes of refugee youth. Yet previous research suggests that religious commitment may be particularly beneficial for some disadvantaged groups' educational achievement, resilience and attainment (Barrett, 2009). We now briefly review the international literature in order to tease out these points.

Literature review

Since the 1990s, countries such as Sweden, Italy, USA, Britain, Australia and Canada have resettled large numbers of children of refugee background and their families (Ferfolja, McCarthy, Vickers, Naidoo, & Brace, 2011; Makwarimba, Stewart, Simich et al., 2013). As a result of this, there has been an emerging body of international research examining the issues faced by students of refugee origin, including those from diverse African nations.

A small body of research with refugee students has shifted attention away from documenting learning problems and barriers to a “productive engagement with student difference” (Keddie & Niesche, 2012; p. 333). These approaches place the resources and capitals of students of refugee origin and their families at the centre of schooling support for student equity (Keddie & Niesche, 2012). For instance, Harris (2011a, p. 729); Harris (2011b, p. 217) has documented the potential of collaborative “alternative pedagogies”, between Sudanese female students and their teachers, to “create community change”. A handful of studies has explored whole-of-school approaches which challenge and change structures and programs designed for dominant groups (e.g., Pugh, Ever, & Hattam, 2012; Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010). Others have examined how schools can model good practice through repositioning refugee students as central to teachers' work (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011; Vickers & McCarthy, 2010), or explored the understandings that schools have about the critical importance of building social capital to promote integration of refugee students (Smyth, MacBride, Paton, & Sheridan, 2010).

The preceding literature takes school as its primary unit of analysis. A number of studies have examined the role that out-of-school activities and networks may play in the generation of social and cultural capital and educational achievement for disadvantaged groups. For instance, building community networks, both social and leisure, has been found to be an important means of overcoming disadvantage and positively impacting on social and educational outcomes (OECD, 2001). Participating in diverse extracurricular activities increases students' engagement with schooling (Fullarton, 2002), aspirations and participation (Khoo & Ainley, 2005). The

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