

EXPLORING INTEGRATION ISSUES FOR AFRICAN YOUTH OF REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS IN UTAH

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ABSTRACT

Utah is one of the principal destinations for refugee resettlement in the United States. Despite the relatively frequent coverage of refugee stories in local news media, very little in the way of scholarly research has been written about these refugees' integration and acculturation. Moreover, no research has yet dealt with the issues facing the youth of these refugee communities. In order to remedy this lack of knowledge about an important component of the populace in the state of Utah, this article uses an ethnographic approach to explore issues of integration and acculturation among African refugee youth. In addition to providing the aforementioned useful data on the status of immigration processes in Utah, it also contributes to the much-publicized international debate surrounding the integration of asylum-seekers from lower- and middle-income countries.

Keywords: refugees, Burundi, Somalia, resettlement, integration, acculturation

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Youth from refugee backgrounds are a sector of the US population about whom service providers and educators need more information. As defined by the 1951 UN, a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group” (UNHCR, 2019). Most often when people think of refugee communities, they see adults. However, over 50% of people from refugee backgrounds are youth under the age of 18. These youth have specific needs for integration in a host community, i.e., access to education and language courses, social skills development for interacting in a new culture, and creating social bonds and bridges with peers (Ager and Strang 2004, 2008).

As noted by Berry (1997), individuals who are able to continue identifying with their heritage and culture as well as with their host culture can integrate into the hosting society and have more positive life experiences as they resettle. Ensuring that systems are in place to support groups during the resettlement process is critical to assist newly arriving individuals and families in creating new and positive life experiences for themselves.

As one of the principal destinations for resettlement in the United States, the state of Utah accepts 1,100 individuals per year, individuals who have had a refugee experience (Canham 2015). Approximately 45,000 currently residing in the state come from twenty different countries. The majority come from Muslim-majority countries (i.e., Iraq, Somalia, and Syria); those from Christian-majority countries (i.e., Burundi, Congo, and South Sudan) are also significant in number (Refugee Services Office 2018). Despite the relatively frequent coverage of refugee experience stories in local news media, little exists in the way of scholarly research (Blair 2000; Geo-Jaja, Mangum 2007; Steimel 2010) to address these individuals’ integration in the US.

Moreover, there is a lack of research dealing with youth from these refugee experience communities, the sector of the population that may most likely be successfully integrating into the US. Only anecdotal evidence exists about how the most recent youth of refugee backgrounds in Utah perceive themselves and their hosts in the context of their new national, linguistic, and civil environments. In

order to remedy the lack of knowledge about an important component of the population in the state of Utah, this research will use an ethnographic approach to explore issues of integration among youth of refugee backgrounds from Burundi and Somalia.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

High school age youth of refugee background experience additional difficulties adapting to cultures of their receiving country, affecting their performance in school as well as their mental health. In addition, other scholars indicate differences in school experiences and socio-cultural values as some of the stumbling blocks for such youth integrating into their new environments (Moskal and North 2017; Ngo, Rossiter and Stewart 2013; Xuemei and Grineva 2016; Heberbrand et al. 2016; Fruja Amthor and Roxas 2016; Colvin 2017; MacNevin 2012; Lincoln et al. 2016). However, according to Rubinstein-Avila, "there are many factors that determine the success of refugee youth integrating in the hosting country such as length of time a student has been in the new environment and integration policies" (Rubinstein-Avila 2016, 80). Current research highlights that the wider the cultural differences the harder it is for youth to integrate in their new environment and the more they suffer. These studies noted that these youth also suffer from discrimination and racism (Fruja Amthor and Roxas 2016; MacNevin 2012; Colvin 2017; Hess et al. 2014; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016). Mental health focused studies examined refugee youth experience before flight, during migration, and when they settle in their host countries (Hess et al. 2014; Heberbrand et al. 2016; McGregor, Melvin and Newman 2015; O'Donnell and Roberts 2015; Lincoln et al. 2016; Betancourt, Frounfelker et al. 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016). Additional factors negatively impacting high school youth are language barriers, issues interacting with peers and teachers, inequalities in the provision of healthcare, and lack of access to other resources (MacNevin 2012; Ngo, Rossiter and Stewart 2013; Lincoln et al. 2016; Xuemei and Grineva 2016; Hastings 2012). Some of these problems lead to the youth performing poorly in school, dropping out of school, joining gangs, being bullied, and increasing risks of mental health issues (O'Donnell and Roberts 2015; Hess et al. 2014; Rubinstein-Avila 2016; Moskal and North 2017; Soennecken 2016; Fruja Amthor and Roxas 2016). In summary, there is a lack of literature about the challenges and successes of youth from refugee backgrounds as they are resettling into a hosting community.

In order to provide the context for our study, we focus on an in-depth consideration of education and school systems, language issues, the impact of racism and discrimination, and mental health service needs of such youth as they resettle in the host country. We also identify how these youth in high schools of a western state perceive their successes in educational settings, in the following sections.

DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS AND CULTURAL VALUES

Those of refugee backgrounds from countries affected by war experience difficulties because of cultural differences, clashes, and societal changes. Culture shock among such youth is very common especially if there are religious differences and wide cultural differences with host country communities (Ngo, Rossiter and Stewart 2013). These differences affect such youth as they spend a lot of time trying to develop an understanding of the new culture and their new peers. Some adapt easily, but others struggle depending on the culture they know and how large a divide there is between youth of refugee background and their hosting peers. The former take time to make sense of issues such as gendered interactions, sexual orientations, body language, dress codes, school discipline, and relationships between teachers and students.

Researchers focus on the need for inclusiveness in education to cater youth from refugee backgrounds, noting that even though some work has been done in this area, some inadequacies exist – including the lack of diversity and discussion about diversity in the curriculum (Moskal and North 2017; Rubinstein-Avila 2016; Xuemei and Grineva 2016; O'Rourke 2015; Fruja Amthor and Roxas 2016; MacNevin 2012). The authors further discuss the academic and social difficulties experienced by such youth in schools of hosting societies. Fruja Amthor and Roxas (2016) emphasized the need to provide multicultural education to meet the needs of these youth in schools. This same study noted that multicultural education, which refers to any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs, and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds, has immensely contributed to equitable education.

Xuemei and Grineva (2016) considered academic and social adjustment of high school youth of refugee background in New-

foundland, Canada. Even though the city itself is not diversified, Newfoundland has experienced an influx of newcomers, most of them with refugee experiences, and the city has been increasing educational services to cater to their needs. The study indicated that respective educational authorities had taken steps to include immigrant students' backgrounds in their policies and curriculum, such as discussions on tolerance and awareness of world religions. However, researchers noted that more still needs to be done, including particular attention paid to the specific identities of the newcomers, as well as the option of alternative study assignments when newcomers feel that their cultural and/or religious values are not respected in the regular curriculum. In addition, this study found that regarding school, work, language barriers, and school culture, student participants experienced difficulties communicating with their peers and teachers since English is their second language. The same authors also argued that students did not understand school culture and the educational system, which slowed their academic progress. Students were also confused by the grading system and considered the school discipline methods too liberal compared to their strict backgrounds (Xuemei and Grineva 2016).

In the early stages of moving to a new environment, students of refugee backgrounds experience fear and loneliness. The students find themselves needing and obtaining help from other students, be it getting directions and/or trying to understand local life (Hastings 2012). The sense of fear is attributed to traumatic experiences they suffered in their own societies and in refugee camps. Hastings (2012) noted that teachers can play an important part in helping integrating youth of refugee background into their new schools. MacNevin (2012) further explored that student participants indicated that teachers made them feel welcomed, acted as mentors, and gave them a sense of belonging.

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Studies on the experiences of refugee youth in hosting societies indicate significant language barriers as a negative factor hindering smooth integration into new environments. Not being able to communicate with peers or being misunderstood by teachers is difficult for the youth who in most cases already have other problems with which to deal (O'Rourke 2015). This issue contributes to high dropout rates and criminal activities, such as loitering with nothing to do and/or joining gangs (Ngo et al. 2017). There are mixed findings

about how and when youth of refugee background use English. In some settings, students avoided speaking in their own languages in an effort to practice English (Hastings 2012). However, Xuemei and Grineva (2016) noted that students of refugee background interacted mainly among themselves and avoided communicating with local youth because they either felt uncomfortable or did not understand their accents. Youth also thought that host country peers spoke too fast.

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Students with refugee experiences endure discrimination and bullying, especially in the early stages of their arrival in the host country. Victimization of such students is common in schools, mainly due to their different appearances, socioeconomic statuses, languages, accents, and religions (Hastings 2012; O'Donnell and Roberts 2015; MacNevin 2012). Discriminatory behavior has a negative effect on the youth's wellbeing, leading to feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, and self-blame. Discrimination also triggers recurring memories of the suffering they may have experienced in their heritage countries. Moskal and North (2017) described how youth of refugee backgrounds deserve a safe place to live, grow, and learn. They mention the right of youth to a fair education but also highlight the educational challenges faced by such youth, their teachers, and the social inclusion and exclusion that occurs.

According to Soenneken (2016), dealing with large numbers in refugee applications at the federal level remains a formidable public policy challenge for many nations to handle in a fair and equitable manner. Talking about integration problems, Betancourt, Frounfelker et al. (2015) stated that those with refugee experiences are discriminated against by their peers with similar experiences and/or by host country peers who are not receptive of and who may be very hostile to them. Although resettlement in the host country was often described as stemming from the motivation to seek safety and better opportunities for one's children, many parents of refugee background conveyed that a vast gap existed between those expectations and the realities they experienced (Betancourt, Abdi et al. 2015). They described resettlement as fleeing a "war from one country" only to face "another war in another country" (Betancourt, Abdi et al. 2015, 118).

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

For youth, academic and social life is tough on its own; yet many youth suffer from mental health problems emanating from the trauma that began in their own countries during their flight and resettlement in hosting countries (Lincoln et al. 2016; Betancourt, Frounfelker et al. 2015; Heberbrand et al. 2016; McGregor, Melvin and Newman 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016). These problems worsen when youths are resettled in a new cultural and social environments because of the lack of understanding about the needs of those from refugee backgrounds and the disparities in delivering mental health and healthcare services to such youth.

In a study of Somalis who migrated to the United States, Lincoln et al. (2016) noted that Somalis who left their country because of war and persecution were traumatized by atrocities, and when they arrived in their new environment, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression became apparent. Using Acculturation Stress Theory, the same researchers concluded that the youth who remained marginalized and failed to integrate suffered more emotionally than their counterparts who integrated more easily (Lincoln et al. 2016; Berry 1997). The same research indicated that the youth also experienced mental health issues mainly due to past traumatic experiences in their heritage native countries before migrating to new environments.

Heberbrand et al. (2016) also conducted a study using the Acculturative Stress Theory and described the acculturative style to explain the stresses that happen to these youth upon arriving in the hosting country, such as difficulties in fitting in and language barriers. The mental health of these youth deteriorates further upon arrival in hostile hosting countries when host communities are not receptive to resettlement of those from refugee backgrounds. Insecurities of the youth in the hosting countries worsen the state of their mental health as they change schools and relocate with parents who are struggling to find good paying jobs (Colvin 2017; Rubinstein-Avila 2016).

SUMMARY

Published works highlight how youth from refugee backgrounds use avoidance-based mechanisms when dealing with stressors, avoid talking about emotionally uncomfortable topics, and keep everything inside instead of sharing or communicating their emotional needs

(McGregor, Melvin and Newman 2015). Further information is needed about situations where the youth are further exposed to unfair treatment and denied equal opportunities for education and language acquisition. As these issues are studied further, the needed resources can be developed to reach youth and their families (Hess et al. 2014). Cultural and linguistic diversity can be positive for youth in educational settings; however, as Colvin described, it can also be a “double-edged sword [...] having people from different cultures will always cause conflict, because they don’t trust [and understand] each other” (Colvin 2017, 226).

Students from refugee backgrounds experience hardships pre-resettlement and post-resettlement (Rubinstein-Avila 2016). It is incumbent upon researchers to provide more information about these hardships and youth perceptions about these challenges so that appropriate services can be introduced addressing the needs of the youth, easing their academic and social lives and helping them integrate more easily into their hosting communities. This study conducted in 2017 in a western refugee resettlement state considered the perceptions of youth of refugee backgrounds, from two communities, about their experiences in high school settings and their impact on integration into a new society. The research question is: Based on their school experiences, what are Somali and Burundian youth’s challenges and successes in integrating into the hosting society?

METHODS

For this qualitative study, we used an ethnographic approach as described in Creswell and Poth (2018) and Aull Davies (2008) in order to obtain information about the experiences in schools of youth with a refugee background in the US. Specifically, we considered a critical ethnographic lens to ensure that we captured information related to “issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization” (Creswell and Poth 2018, 94). This approach allowed us to understand the needs of youth from refugee backgrounds as they adjusted to life in a new country. We were especially interested in this area because not much work has been published about youth perceptions about the impact of school interactions on integration. In other words, by conducting interviews with youth we were able to identify some of the areas in which they are (1) struggling at school and (2) excelling at integrating into life in the US.

Between February and May 2017, we interviewed 29 youth from the Burundi and Somali communities from refugee background. These individuals had lived in the US less than 24 months, were new to the integration process, were between the ages of 12 and 20 years, and were enrolled in high school. In September and November 2017, we conducted four focus groups (n=23), two with female youth and two with males, from the same communities to augment the information gained from the interviews. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for this study.

A convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit youth for the interviews and focus groups. One of the study team members had access to families from each of these communities and discussed the study with parents to determine if youth could participate. Once parents provided their permission, we conducted interviews with these youth.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participant permission. We asked the youth which language they would prefer to be interviewed in, then conducted the interviews in English, Kirundi, or Somali. Translation was provided at the time of the interview so the audio-recordings had interviews in Kirundi and English or Somali and English. These audio-recordings were sent to a professional agency for transcription. Once the transcripts were returned, two of the study team members checked them for accuracy in English. The four focus groups were conducted in Kirundi and Somali. These discussions were audio-recorded and then transcribed by a community member who spoke English and the other language. Once the transcriptions were obtained, one of the study team members checked them for accuracy.

As transcripts became available, the study team reviewed the interview transcripts using in-vivo coding to identify themes that emerged from these discussions. These themes were used to frame the coding of the final interviews and focus groups. Once all the transcripts were coded, the study team reviewed them to ensure that these themes connected to the overarching concept of the study about how these youth perceived their challenges and successes in integrating into their host communities.

RESULTS

Based on the breakdown of our qualitative data concerning the participants' sentiments about the integration process and its connection to the high school experience (taken from recurring statements, allusions, and points of emphasis that appeared throughout

the individual interviews and focus group sessions), we identified five central themes that appeared to be fundamentally tied to notions of belonging, from perceptions of experience to sentiments about integration processes and the connections to school experiences. These include: (1) frustration with seemingly ineffective English language-learning frameworks; (2) a need for greater clarity with regard to academic expectations, learning outcomes, basic procedural matters, and student-teacher contact in the American school system; (3) the importance of communal religious connections for mitigating feelings of isolation and vulnerability; (4) the role of extracurricular activities in bolstering the processes of integration and acculturation; and (5) the preponderance of lingering feelings of alterity, even after the attainment of basic scholastic, sociocultural, and/or language-based capacities in the new home environments. In the sections that follow, we highlight what the youth described in the interviews and/or focus groups and provide exemplar quotes to illustrate these themes and findings.

THEME 1: ENGLISH LANGUAGE-LEARNING FRAMEWORKS

Excepting one participant, every person interviewed who did not know English prior to arrival in the United States expressed frustration over the perceived inadequacies of initial English language-learning frameworks. (Several of the youth of Somali origin had lived in refugee camps in Kenya before moving to the United States, where they were able to learn English; these few participants who expressed resentment at being obligated to attend English language-learning classes represent only a small fraction of all persons interviewed.) Participants who knew either little or no English indicated that, in spite of the best intentions of teachers and caseworkers to augment newly-arrived students' language skills, the English language programs did not function successfully. Several youth reported having better luck by picking up English from books and films. One person summed up this main stumbling block in the initial acquisition phase: "The main challenge for every refugee is the language."

According to the interviewees, the primary point of frustration surrounding language difficulty is the school classroom. One respondent, speaking of the difficulty that s/he encountered after being absorbed into the class following initial language instruction elsewhere, lamented, "I felt sad and I felt like I wasn't smart enough and I felt stupid." Another noted that, upon arrival in the school setting, "I didn't know anything and I didn't participate in class because I didn't understand anything because everyone in class kept talking

English and I was the only one sitting down not understanding.” Another concluded, “By the time you know the meaning of what they communicated to you, it will be too late for you to do something.” Several participants expressed frustration at the lack of empathy demonstrated by teaching staff. On the subject of the students’ language difficulties, one person mentioned, “I don’t feel comfortable because I feel embarrassed once I talk and the teacher rolls her eyes.”

Indicating that a lack of English language skills prevents even those students who know some English from performing satisfactorily in class, one participant mentioned: “When the teacher calls on us to answer questions, I just sit there and I don’t say anything because she uses big words that I don’t understand. I just feel awkward because my English level is pretty good but it’s not high enough to speak English to the kids who have been speaking English their whole life.”

Across the board, participants pointed out that the modest amount of language training they receive is not in congruence with the academic tasks expected of them. These language difficulties also extend to the students’ performance on written work assignments, as most of their parents do not know English well enough to assist them with daily homework. Several participants advocated that greater assistance be given to students of refugee backgrounds in this vein. One noted, “Probably just more assistance in school for refugees would make a difference. Refugee youth who don’t speak English well need help to understand homework instructions.” Although several individuals mentioned peer-mentoring programs or after-school assistance programs, it appears that these were carried out on an ad hoc basis. The same individuals expressed regret that these programs only lasted for a short while before they were inexplicably stopped. One person, so aggravated by the lack of assistance, said: “It was very hard sometimes [...] I didn’t even want to go ask the teacher because we couldn’t even communicate so I would write whatever and ended up with an F.”

THEME 2: NAVIGATING US SCHOOL SYSTEM PROCESSES

Recurrent responses from participants point to the need for greater attention to articulating, in the scholastic vein, specific subject-based expectations and intended learning outcomes; improved student-teacher interaction; and, in the larger infrastructural sphere, greater clarity surrounding basic procedural matters.

One person, speaking of the difficulty in learning the ropes of a school system, noted: "I always thought refugees would get more help. That they would get someone who would help them through the school year, show them how to get to their classes and stuff." Another stated: "You don't have any help. The question which comes first in your mind is why they give me this [homework]. I don't understand what they want me to do." Without a support team to assist, participants reported feeling exasperation and confusion regarding assignment directions and expectations. On those points, one participant maintained: "It's stressful, there is a lot of class[es] and some of the work you don't know how to do it, and it's confusing to choose which [assignment] you have to do." Another student echoed this frustration, asserting, "It's hard because I would always wonder why they gave me this homework when I don't even know how to do it." Yet another declared: "Sometime I would ask myself why they gave me this homework when it was just my first day."

On the level of student-teacher interaction, many participants claimed to face either a lack of empathy from their teachers or even a willful discounting of difficulties. One person recounted: "I feel like the teachers are not nice. My teachers yell a lot and I don't feel comfortable asking them to help with homework or anything." Another stated: "My teachers have an attitude and refuse to help me when I ask them." Several participants reported getting a dismissive regard from the teachers after having asked for assistance. That "look," according to one person, "make[s] you feel like you were stupid, and you would feel bad, because it was just a question [that had been asked]." Another noted that her/his teachers' behavior creates such a feeling of disillusionment that "you stop asking questions" in light of the teachers maintaining that "I just told you everything about the homework."

Yet, several students are satisfied with the interaction with their teachers, when comparing that to interaction in the school system in Africa. One said: "Schools here are good [...] when you have a problem, they will help you until the problem gets solved. [...] Back in Africa, there are teachers who [...] will tell you, for example, that 'I am not your Teacher, I don't know you.'" Another expressed satisfaction that there was no "harassment" or "corporal punishment" like in Africa.

Two participants mentioned that after-school tutoring and youth leadership programs have been useful, the latter apparently even helping students with tasks such as "signing up for college." One person, however, maintained, "staying in an after-school program

is not an option for me" because "people are rude there [and] they ignore you all the time."

The lack of knowledge about how to initiate certain procedural functions, such as formal complaints ("I have one class, when I enter in the classroom they insulted me many times, simply because I am black"), is also a problem. For instance, one student reported that the process for registration to public school was cumbersome, claiming that "I was waiting to go to high school for like four months [...] Those people they didn't help us because they needed my mother to come with me [but] my mother needs to take care of the siblings."

THEME 3: RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Participants expressed that maintaining a sense of religious community was helpful for adjusting to life in the United States, even if it did not necessarily mean mingling with those from outside their immediate ethnolinguistic groups. Religious affiliations of the participants interviewed included various Christian denominations (Pentecostal, Adventist, LDS, Catholic) as well as (Sunni) Islam.

When asked about the social effects of attending religious community gatherings, one person said: "I don't have too many friends at church but I'm happy to see people in the church. The only friends I have [are] there." Another expressed contentment that their friends at church "speak the same language." Another person, contrasting the atmosphere in church with that of the school setting, said: "The activities we have at church [such as sports and games] help us forget the things that happen at school. Because at church everyone is so nice and they help you feel like you belong." (One of the activities alluded to involves English language practice, about which one person said: "They help me learn English with their activities on Wednesday [and it] helps you feel comfortable and relax.") Another person, referring to fellow congregants, echoed the aforementioned sentiment concerning the welcoming atmosphere, saying, "At the church, they don't care about your color, they are very sweet people." This same person, referring to the church functions, maintained, "the activities at the church help you calm down."

With regard to any practical help given by community religious bodies that might aid in integration processes, several people indicated that church members were the ones who initially received them from the airport, and who subsequently showed them how to use public transportation and where to do their shopping. Monetarily, several participants report benefitting from the financial assistance

offered by their religious associations. One person said: “If you can’t pay bills, they help you. They give vouchers for D.I. [Deseret Industries, a low-income outlet].” Another agreed, noting, “If you have a bill you can’t pay they will help you. And if you don’t have food they will help you.” This support, however, is not true for all populations, as assistance is sometimes only advice-based. On this point, one person said: “[W]hatever the problem is, you go to the pastor of the church [...] He will help you as much as he can.” Another stated, emphasizing the difference in types of assistance: “The church helps, but it is not material stuff. It is spiritual help.”

Religion also plays a role in the manner through which participants view their identity paradigms in the United States setting. One person, indicating a persistent feeling of otherness, said of the place of religion in their home country: “I miss the fact that there weren’t a lot of questions about religion [because] everyone shared the same religion.” This feeling is especially relevant for female youth of the Muslim faith, as their vestimentary codes frequently come into discussions with peers and teachers as points of contention. One participant, speaking of the same kinds of expectations, stated: “I don’t like wearing pants, and if it’s something that requires me to wear pants, then I just choose not to do it.” Two youth rejected the idea that wearing the hijab (a veil mandated by some schools of Islam) would impede their participation in sports activities. According to one: “I don’t let my hijab hold me back, I do the things I want to do, I play everything I want”; according to the other, “I wear it and it’s not something that will stop me from doing the activities.”

THEME 4: EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Overwhelmingly, participants noted that taking part in extracurricular activities helped to bolster the process of integration. Most such activities were sports-related, and tended to be organized at least in part by the public school system. These activities differ from extracurricular activities organized by ethnic- and/or religious-oriented cohorts, which tend to preclude interaction with peers from dissimilar backgrounds. The extracurricular activity most male participants cited as having been involved with is soccer, followed by weight training and basketball. For female participants, the most common activities included volleyball and basketball, but also extended to weight training, yoga, and non-sport activities, such as acting and singing. One person explained that, in regards to social interaction, “last year I participated in the [school] musical and it helped me a lot.”

When asked about the general importance of extracurricular activities, one interviewee said: "I have a lot of friends because I play in the soccer team. So most of the kids in the soccer team, at lunch we sit together and we talk, we interact with each other [...] I'm kind of the only refugee in the soccer team. But I don't get treated differently, just like one of the team members. And we just talk and talk [...] We talk about American stuff, how it's different from Africa." Being on a team also seems to lead to other out-of-school social activities, which were uncommon for those whose interaction was limited to time on school grounds. For instance, the same person quoted above noted: "[S]ometimes we have team dinners and we go to one of their houses and we hang out sometimes. And sometimes we train as a group so we all go to one of our friend's houses." Another person who shared a similar experience advised other youth of refugee backgrounds to sign up for as many school-based activities as possible, in order "to be involved in [...] every activity that is going on in your school."

Several interviewees seemed to concur with this logic, expressing a desire to participate in such activities, but reported having either inadequate information about sign-up procedures and deadlines, or intimated that they were kept away from these activities for reasons that appear to be discriminatory in nature. For instance, one person said, in regard to signing up for the weight training team, that he missed the deadline; that person also asked if the interviewers could help to navigate the process for entering the soccer club. Another person wished to play soccer on the school team, but remained confused about why certain credits he was lacking were an impediment to that end. And yet another had hesitated to join due to racial discomfort because, as she said, "When I look at the soccer team at my school it's mostly White girl[s], and I would like some who has the same skin color as me to be there so they could pass the ball back to me. Sometime people assume just because you're black you can't play or you're not smart."

Several female interviewees of the Muslim faith expressed frustration that they were expected to wear pants during sports activities because, as one noted, "I don't like wearing pants, and if it's something that requires me to wear pants, then I just choose not to do it." Yet another stated that, although she saw wearing pants as an imposition, it is "not something that will stop me from doing the activities." Another stated, "the days I have volleyball games I [dress] different[ly] from other days." With regard to the wearing of the Muslim hijab (head covering) and its possible impeding on partici-

pation in such activities, another person said that she refused to let it “hold me back [from doing] the things I want to do.”

THEME 5: NOTIONS OF ALTERITY

The final common recurring theme worthy of noting is the preponderance of lingering feelings of alterity, even after the attainment of basic scholastic, sociocultural, and/or language-based capacities in the new home environments. These sentiments are often linked to the suspicion that their exclusion stems from preconceived xenophobic notions held by Americans, whether those are religion- or race-based.

One person, when asked to describe impressions of the United States, said: “I don’t like anything about it because people are racist,” going on to describe an incident in which a man with a dog told this interviewee and a Muslim friend (both of whom were wearing hijabs) that “we are not allowed to touch the dog [because] he didn’t agree with our religion.” Another Muslim youth reported an incident in which she got on the bus “and the bus driver asked me to leave my bag under his [seat], as if I had a bomb.” This person chose instead to exit the bus.

Several youth feel branded by their racial and “outsider” status, even when they possess an advanced level of linguistic or cultural awareness. They reported that their American peers and teachers do not think them intellectually capable of performing in class, and that questions the youth pose are answered in such a way that “it makes you feel stupid.” One person said: “Everywhere I go, they are always calling me ‘refugee’ and it doesn’t always make you feel good [...] you could just say my name or something.”

Finally, many youth expressed general disappointment at the reluctance of American peers to engage them socially. For instance, one person complained, “If you stay after school there would be no point because no one will even talk to you, you would rather go home to your sibling than stay when no one will talk to you. And it’s really hard eating lunch by yourself or sitting alone.” Another commiserated: “When you don’t have friends at school, it is hard because you have no one, and then you go home sad and that makes it so you won’t want to come back. And I feel like no one likes me so I go home after school.” And yet another lamented that, because many American peers are rude to those who look different, “You’re always trying to make friends with the people who have your race.” This same person noted that she would, in principle, “like [to be] friends with everybody,” a sentiment that nevertheless proved

difficult when so many peers do not, in this person's words, "appreciate my race."

DISCUSSION

Across the interviews and focus groups with students from Africa, students' senses of belonging in school settings are deterred by issues of language, lack of information regarding navigating school systems, religious affiliations, predetermined representations of individuals of refugee backgrounds, and a sense of isolation and exclusion. For students who joined the schools with relatively lower English-speaking capabilities in particular, inability to express their ideas in the classroom was responded to with acts that created sentiments of disregard, exclusion, and silencing from both teachers and classmates. The lack of understanding of what was going on in the classroom, on one hand; and the gestures, looks, eye rolling, tones, and lack of support and information, on the other hand, led to these youth asking themselves, "Why are we here?" instead of interrogating the school system. Subtle and blatant silencing messages in schools are more often than not the main triggers students of color experience leading them to confusion, isolation, and dropping out from school or finding alternatives to schooling. Waters (2000, 1994) asserts that students strongly affiliated with their ethnic communities gain confidence and graduate from high school at higher rates compared to those who are not associated with any support systems in their community. Likewise, discussing classroom climates and the condition of newly arriving foreign students, Castagno (2014) argues that the ways in which systems and students manifest the subtlety of racism include focusing on and joking about language and accent, mimicking pronunciations, making faces, and forcing the students to repeat themselves.

Moreover, lack of information and support, even in extracurricular activities that could have engaged the students further, distances them because it is hard for the students to navigate the school system. The common approach of "culture clash" should be interrogated so that students are not victimized based on their origin, as if lacking (Ngo 2008). Instead, the students find their places of worship – churches and mosques – to be spaces of comfort more than extracurricular activities. As Waters asserted (2000, 1994), engaging with people who look like them, understand them, and embrace the young students in their faith-based communities creates the hope students aspire to experience in this country, and in their

schools. Studies have also shown that Muslim students are forbidden from wearing the hijab in school, which stems from xenophobia (Windle 2004). Dress codes and host country fears have become issues for schools who deny students' identities and cultures. As other scholars have indicated (Stenvig et. al. 2018; Betancourt, Abdi et al. 2015), gaps exist between the expectations and the realities as students and parents transition to a new life in hosting countries. The question is: What does it mean when students are forbidden to freely share and practice who they are in a country that claims freedom of expression within its diversity? How can schools and host communities create a sense of belonging, and the assumed integration, when isolationist talks and images seem to be the everyday practice in schools? What can be done about it?

In response to such isolationist practices, the Burundian and Somali students tend to associate with students from other countries. The students try to replenish the void they experience in school by looking for students who look like them because non-black students do not "appreciate their race" regardless of how friendly they try to be with fellow students. Typical to what Tatum (2003) asks in her seminal book on manifestations of racism in schools, African students seeking acceptance look for students who are going through the same experiences. While these students worry about how their lack of communication with teachers might be misinterpreted as disrespectful, what they fail to capture is the power that underlies the denial of support from teachers, students, and the schoolsystem. These include Whiteness and the privilege to talk back, talk with foreign students, and react in ways that are belittling, ignorant, and dehumanizing toward foreign students. Such reactions are unwelcoming, racist, exclusionary, and dismembering, creating unfriendly classrooms and school environments.

Such acts are part of the implicit curriculum rarely talked about. Yet, implicit curriculum is only a piece of the puzzle. Historically, constructed images about those from refugee backgrounds hailing from Africa and the Middle East already exist (Said 1979) – based on their place of origin, religion, race, gender, and cultural practices – which predetermine those individuals' lives in the US. The representation of such individuals as backward, poor, deviant, and savage, disseminated through media and public institutions such as schools, perpetuates stories about the "Other's" deficiency as if natural, on one hand, and fears of the exotic in hosting societies, on the other. As the current supremacist events against Americans, Jews, African Americans, and Muslims in particular demonstrate, such constructed stories also apply to people who were born and/or raised

in the US for over half a century. Current students from Africa are facing similar but subtle atrocities based on stories constructed from neocolonial and racial lenses. As noted earlier, real-time discriminatory acts continue daily for students of such backgrounds (“I have one class, when I enter in the classroom they insulted me many times, simply because I am black”). Teachers and students manifest and repeat the stories in schools to the detriment of recently arriving students.

White students’ reluctance to engage with students of color in social activities is also associated with English language proficiency. For White students and teachers, “other” students’ lack of expressing their ideas is already associated with their physical and cultural traits that become the identifiers of difference and deviation. Taken as natural, the focus then becomes the need for students of color to catch up; and designing language skills programs becomes the priority thus centering students of color as the problem rather than structural and systemic factors. When diversity is perceived as cultural difference relative to an assumed centered/normative culture, diversity is portrayed as and equated with deficiency, thus necessitating interventions to “fix” the Other. In such cases, Whiteness is the assumed point of reference – an inherently privileged position that marks other cultures as deviant and/or deficit. Such an approach toward diverse students is applied not only to race, but also to students’ intelligence, behavior, appearance, performance, and other abilities and creativities.

Overall, African students socialize in schools whereby White students and teachers dominate. What students in this study are indicating is that White students’ and teachers’ perceptions and acts are part of the society’s fabric and therefore normalized because no one questions their attitudes and behaviors be it in classrooms, extracurricular activities, or other school environments. Neither students nor teachers seem to question their attitudes toward students of color because those attitudes seem natural. What’s more, they may respond that any perceived harm resulting from such attitudes is “unintentional” when interrogated. Teachers’ complacency in teaching, and blindness to color and power is not the answer to such a politically charged domain. Rather, what is needed is a critical reflection of the power and privilege teachers and students embody just because they are White (and/or members of other dominant social groups), and the power that informs their practice. Connecting individual experiences to structural and systemic analysis is key to better understanding students from refugee backgrounds. Acknowledging racial difference should also be connected to structural analysis.

Students of color need extracurricular activities, support systems, and socially engaging activities. However, the approach should be socially engaging, informative, and engaging in critical conversations with their fellow White students so that both sides are aware of African students' experiences. Schools need to open up, recognize, and acknowledge what is happening in classrooms and school compounds; address the power embedded in language and language proficiency; and dilute dominance among students so that education can lead them to better possibilities.

LIMITATIONS

For this study, we would like to acknowledge a few limitations: population focus, language issues, and sampling strategies. Since we focused on refugee youth whose origins are in Africa, the study findings may not represent the experiences of refugee youth from Latin and South America, the Middle East, and/or Eastern Europe. In addition, we did not interview youth from other countries in Africa. As a consequence, the information will be pertinent for youth from Burundi and Somalia. Language is another area that is a limitation in our study. We had anticipated that these youth would speak enough English to participate actively in an interview and/or a focus group. However, what we found was that many of these youth did not have language skills that allowed them to fully participate in the discussions. Thus, we have missed some nuances inherent in the interviews and focus groups about the experiences of these youth. A third limitation was that the sampling strategy was a convenience sample, which provided opportunities for those youth known to some of the researchers to participate. Some youth who might have had different experiences did not have the opportunity to share their views, so their voices were not heard in this study.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

African students, transitioning for a better life in the new environment of their hosting country, socialize in schools where White students and teachers dominate. Students in this study shared that White students and teachers' perceptions and acts toward these students are part of the society's fabric and therefore normalized. No one questions the majority attitudes and behaviors in classrooms, extracurricular activities, or the overall school environment. Nor do White

students and teachers question their attitudes toward students of color because inclinations seem natural. English language programs designed for newly arriving students could be technically supportive, yet authorities do not question what goes on in school environments that facilitate and/or deter students' learning be it in language or the sciences. For teachers to be complacent and blind to color and power is not the answer amid such a politically charged domain. Rather, what is needed is a critical reflection of the privilege teachers and students embody just because they are White (and/or members of other dominant social groups), as well as the power that informs their practice. Connecting individual experiences to structural and systemic analysis is key to better understanding students from refugee backgrounds and supporting them in their learning process. Acknowledging racial difference and engaging in conversations with the students is key to diluting the power embedded in school systems, classrooms, and student bodies.

There is a need to consider pre- and post-resettlement experiences of newly arrived students, their resilience, interrupted schooling due to forced displacements, acculturation and racism. Teachers and students need to learn about the historical and political conditions that forced students to migrate, as well as their cultural differences, so that students from Africa feel that they belong to the school, that they are members of the student body and the hosting society.

Students of refugee background need extracurricular activities, support systems, and engaging activities. However, the approach should be informative, constructive, and socially engaging in critical conversations about newly resettled students' experiences with their fellow White students and teachers so that both sides become aware of African students' experiences. Schools and teachers need to recognize and discuss what is happening on campuses and in classrooms, i.e., the implicit curriculum; address the power embedded in language and language proficiency; and dilute unequal power relations among students in order to enhance learning experiences.

The wealth of cultural knowledge, values, and experiences that students of refugee backgrounds bring to the school must be acknowledged, respected, and integrated in the curriculum. Existing efforts in multicultural education should not only entail recognition of cultural differences but also center and engage with the values new students bring to the community. In order to broaden their perceptions, students and teachers need to learn about refugee students' historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. Such new communal knowledge would also help African students experience healthy growth and progress in their education. Teachers' complacency could

be addressed through critical conversations and training that helps them realize their privilege and power, then engage with students, parents, and respective communities in order to learn the meanings of difference and to include what they have learned into practice – i.e., lesson plans.

As students in the study shared, gaps exist between students' and parents' expectations from hosting societies and their daily realities. As the newly resettled students reflected – noting their parents' engagement in minimum wage jobs and the barriers they encounter accessing healthcare and other services – the power and wealth of the host country has not materialized to change their lives as expected. Professionals with years of experience in their country of origin are denied jobs relative to their profession mostly because higher education institutions in the US do not recognize credentials from some countries in the global south. Parents are thus trapped in poverty, which directly impacts their children's academic performance. Nevertheless, they are resilient. The resilience that keeps them going stems from their traditional knowledge, harsh living conditions in displacement, and forced migration experiences, which rarely are recognized by schools and social science research. Refugees escaped harsh environments to face and engage in another struggle in the US to obtain quality education and jobs.

Lack of understanding and stigma to mental health is another barrier to accessing services. Often students and their parents do not talk about their mental health conditions that stem from harsh experiences amid migration and during resettlement. Such avoidance leads to internalizing the illness rather than seeking services. There is a need to explore how these families cope with odd environments, behaviors, and mental health issues traditionally and build upon their knowledge and practices to educate students and communities of refugee backgrounds so that they can formulate with new ways of addressing mental health issues and/or benefit from existing services that consider their values.

In cases whereby students find their respective religious practices to be spaces of comfort, religious institutions should be supported to cultivate the youth toward claiming their identities and cultural practices. Religious institutions can also introduce them to better ways of understanding hosting societies. Youth programs that mesh diverse cultural values must be designed and supported in line with youth interests and curiosities so that the students keep track of, and strategize, skills for their studies and daily lives. Deeper and critical discussions on cultural practices and values – including discussions about racism and ethnic differences – should be held in classrooms

to help students and teachers better understand each other. Students need to feel comfortable talking about who they are and discussing the challenges they face.

Sports and after-school activities allow students to mingle with students outside their ethnic group, and students of refugee background should be encouraged to participate in existing activities based on mutual and reciprocal respect, friendship, and collegiality. Community-based sports and activities should be introduced to schools so that students' perceptions and outlook toward non-traditional sports – and therefore the communities – could be enlightened.

Overall, broadening the schools', students', and teachers' views toward newly resettling students requires engaging in critical, open dialogues about what it means to be different – be it through art, sports, or conversation – so that all involved develop collective perspectives and responsibilities.

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