Somali Students' Perceptions of a New Zealand Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity is growing in New Zealand and deserves to be celebrated for the richness and opportunities for understanding it brings to our lives. Culturally-responsive approaches to education accept diversity and enable students to draw on their unique cultural capital as a learning resource. The aim of this study was to contribute to the literature in this area by finding out what Somali students in a New Zealand primary school think about their schooling: the aspects of school which challenge or support their cultural identities. Three nine and ten year-old Somali students attending a primary school in the Greater Wellington region participated in focus groups. Open-ended questions were used to elicit their perspectives on pedagogical approaches and their interactions with their peers and teachers. The students identified numerous positive aspects of their school lives, including strong friendships and autonomy in the classroom, yet revealed that bullying is an on-going issue, for themselves and other students, in and out of school.

Research Paper

Keywords: *Cultural diversity, refugees, schooling, Somali students*

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand, like many other nations, features a multicultural society whose diversity continues to grow with the popularity of migration. This diversity can easily be seen in schools where many children, both born in New Zealand and abroad, are not from the European background from which the school system was originally derived. Educational environments which fail to affirm students' cultures or require them to operate in conflict with values and norms taught at home may prevent students from experiencing academic and social success (Bevan-Brown, 2003; Gay, 2003; Milner, 2010). Culturally-responsive teaching approaches, which tap into students' knowledge of their own cultures (Au, 2009), are increasingly being adopted to improve educational equity across cultures. Hearing from the students themselves can help to assess the responsiveness of our education; as to date there is only a limited amount of research on the perspectives of students from cultural minority backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing studies which collected and analysed the perspectives of students from cultural-minority backgrounds highlighted a need for empirical studies involving smaller but growing populations in New Zealand. Somali students in particular were recognised as facing a large number of challenges due to their refugee backgrounds and cultural differences from most New Zealanders, in addition to challenges common to their age group (Bihi, 1999). As Somalis were both the first African and the first Muslim group to migrate to New Zealand (Beaglehole, 2011) when they arrived in the 1990s, religious support would have been scarce. Poole, Cheema and Thorburn (2011) identify numerous stressors which refugees face including being forced to relocate, having no time to prepare, being unable to bring belongings, farewell friends, or return to their home countries. Traumatic experiences of loss and war are likely to have compounded their difficulties.

While there are many differences between cultural groups, Bishop and Glynn (1999) claim all minorities may experience "enforced assimilation and cultural denial" (p. 52). Due to the scarcity of research involving Somali students, studies which investigated the perceptions of other cultural minority groups were also accessed. In New Zealand, four studies involving the perceptions of students from cultural-minority backgrounds were located. They all involved high school students: two studies with Somali students; one with Māori students; and one with Pasifika students. Burford, Hammonds, Morton and Clark (2008) sought the views of Somali youth with refugee backgrounds living in Wellington, and Humpage (2009) conducted similar work in Christchurch. Both studies found that the students faced many challenges at school

including other students' and teachers' lack of cultural awareness, and school rules which were unresponsive to their cultural needs. In the study by Humpage (2009) Somali students had to choose between sitting important tests on Friday afternoons or attending the mosque for prayers. They were frustrated that the school was described as secular, yet scheduled around the Christian holy days, such as Sundays, Easter and Christmas, whilst inflexible to their religious schedule. The perspectives of Māori students were gathered in the on-going national Te Kotahitanga project, revealing inconsistencies and misinterpretations between teacher, student and whānau perspectives (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003). Siope's (2011) work gathered the perspectives of Pasifika students and compared them to her own experiences as a student in the 1970s. Siope found that, similar to her own experience, Pasifika students' lives outside of school were very separate and disconnected from their classroom learning, in spite of the shift towards culturally-responsive education.

The international research reviewed involved cultural minority participants from primary and secondary schools living in Australia (Dodds et al., 2010), the US (Howard, 2001; Oikonomidoy, 2009; Rodriguez, Ringler, O'Neal & Bunn, 2009), Canada (Zine, 2006), England (Kahin, 1997), Norway (Alhassan & Bawa, 2012) and Finland (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004).

Negative experiences, such as racism and discrimination (Alhassan & Bawa, 2012; Zine, 2006), confusion around school systems (Burford et al., 2008), and unmet educational needs (Alhassan & Bawa, 2012; Humpage, 2009; Kahin, 1997) were reported with greater frequency in all studies involving high school students compared to those with primary school students. This could be due to increased perceptiveness (Sakka, 2009) and self-consciousness of older adolescents, but perhaps more significant, is the reality that more of these students were refugees or first generation migrants, meaning that they had had less time to adjust than second generation migrants or children of refugees.

In contrast to the many negative experiences of high school students from cultural minority backgrounds, an Australian study (Dodds et al., 2010) found that on average, Somali primary school students rated themselves on a Likert scale as feeling happier about attending high school than non-Somali children. This was in spite of rating their need for various resources ("schoolwork, personal, social and financial"), (p. 523) as higher than non-Somali participants from both socio-economically disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds. Other studies have also found primary school students from cultural

minorities to have positive perceptions of school. Rodriguez and colleagues (2009) compared the perceptions of English Language Learners (ELLs) with those of monolingual students. They found that ELLs' perceptions were just as positive if not more so than monolingual students' perceptions. In Greece, Sakka (2009) compared the perceptions of migrant and non-migrant primary school students and found that perceptions were generally positive but less so for fourth and fifth grade students compared to younger students. Howard's (2001) investigation with African-American students identified themes around students' perceptions of successful classes, including caring teachers, a community feel and entertaining lessons.

The few studies which have investigated Somali students' experiences or perceptions of school in New Zealand focused on high school students. Given the importance of research in a local context and the discrepancies between primary and high school students, a New Zealand-based, qualitative study with Somali primary school students was seen as addressing a gap in the literature.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of Somali students about their experiences of pedagogical approaches, teacher and peer interactions in a primary school in New Zealand?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen to explore this topic due to the lack of previous research conducted with this population. Quantitative methods such as administering questionnaires would have involved framing questions and creating pre-determined responses about the assumed issues for these students. In contrast, asking open-ended questions gave the students the control to raise the issues which they deemed to be more important, which the researcher may not have anticipated (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). Vaughn and colleagues discuss several benefits of focus groups which led to their selection. Participants' thinking and responses can be stimulated by the views shared by other group members. This allows a large amount of rich information to be collected in a short period of time. Furthermore, it was thought that the presence of peers in a group would offer a less intimidating situation than one-to-one interviews; making it more comfortable for the young participants (Vaughn et al., 1996). In addition, collecting spoken language meant that the information offered was not limited by the participants' levels of literacy.

Teachers of Year 4-6 students in the selected school

approached Somali students in their classes to gauge their interest in participating in the study. The parents and caregivers of those interested students were invited to an information afternoon at the school where the research was explained to them orally in English and Somali languages. Written consent from the students' parents or caregivers was also sought and only those students who returned signed consent forms became the participants.

The participants were three female Somali students, aged nine to ten years old in Years 5-6. The students had attended their current contributing primary school since they were five years old. Prior to attending this school, they attended the nearby kindergarten. The students were thought to have been born in New Zealand, however this was not probed due to the potential for such questions to evoke traumatic memories for caregivers or students (Dodds et al., 2010).

Two focus groups were held on the school grounds and the audio was recorded. After each focus group session, the recording was transcribed, and then a 'member checking' session was held to ensure that the points captured reflected how the participants felt. In each session, signed assent was obtained after the participants' rights and the group rules had been explained or revisited. The transcripts were analysed using NVivo 10 software and constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involves coding responses according to underlying themes. Each new piece of text was compared to the existing categories and their contents, which allowed the themes to evolve. Inter-rater reliability was obtained by having a second researcher examine five categories and the references they contained.

As a Pākehā researcher, my research question and investigation were developed through a cultural lens which differed from that of the participants. Consultations with a Somali cross- cultural community worker and academic supervisor were held in an attempt to minimise the risks of making assumptions and being culturally insensitive.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are discussed in relation to the literature under five interrelated categories which arose during thematic analysis: cultural identity and challenges; home-school connection; pedagogical approaches; perceptions of peers and interactions with them, and current and future perceptions of school. Though the research question was specifically around pedagogical approaches and peer interactions, the focus group probes were open-ended which resulted in the above themes.

Cultural Identity and Challenges

The students portrayed their cultural identities by excitedly sharing their cultural knowledge and experiences, for example, describing how they spend time during Eid. Somali students' pride in their culture was also observed by Kahin (1997). The participants in the current study also spoke of other cultures in the school and some of the cultural differences they had noticed. The participants articulated some challenges in identifying with their cultures and carrying out their religious practices within the context of their school. One student said "We don't pray here cos there's, there's nothing, like you need this like a little rug and then you pray … and there's no rugs here so". Another student said "They tease us about our culture, they think, like they say really racist things they even say swear word" [sic]. Zine (2006) and Humpage (2009) have speculated that the visibility of the hijab[1] makes female Muslim students an easy target for bullies, and given that the three participants wore hijabs, this could be a factor in their experiences of being teased. Of the two students who reported being asked to talk about Eid in class, one student relished the experience but the other participant reported that she did not enjoy it as she had been teased about it.

Home/School Connection

When asked to describe the good behaviours expected at home and how they differed from school, all three participants claimed there were no differences apart from sometimes having to speak Somali and Arabic at home. This could indicate that these students' home lives are well-aligned with school. Another possibility is that they are not able to perceive or articulate nuances in expectations. The participants also offered plentiful indications of their families' support and interest in their schooling. They generally portrayed their families as being well-connected with the school and knowledgeable of systems, which is not surprising given they had attended the school since they were five years old. This differs from other research in which the participants had arrived as teenage refugees after disrupted educations or none at all (Humpage, 2009) and felt embarrassed about their poor understanding of the way school worked (Burford et al., 2008). One student in the current study described parental expectations for dressing: "Well it'll be good if you wear a skirt … a long one, but if my Mum, she doesn't force me to do it, but I just like wearing it … and

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[1] *Scarf worn over head to cover hair and shoulders.*

we're not allowed to wear shorts" [sic].

Pedagogical Approaches

All three students clearly described the behavioural expectations of their teacher and the classroom rules. The students were aware of consequences for misbehaving or not doing their work. They referred to the 'violent list', which was their term for the names the teachers wrote on the board as a warning. "Yeah be responsible and not irresponsible because um like they're like on the violent list like naughty like 7 times".

The participants' responses revealed access to and enjoyment of an array of sports; swimming during the warmer months; and life skills through the Life Education Trust. The participants made many positive comments about classroom activities, implying that lessons are engaging: "Sometimes the teacher got some ideas, like, she brings she brings a toy to school, like her old toys. And she puts it in places, like she puts it in a jungle or in a forest … she puts like a dinosaur. And you have to write a story about that" [sic]. "...And then the next day we had to bring our own toys. And like we had to choose a partner and then we had to take pictures and then we had to print them …".

The participants described a few ways that their teachers helped them to learn, such as guiding them through the necessary steps to solve a maths problem, providing the answer and prompting them to work backwards, and encouraging them to sound out words phonetically when reading. Similar to Howard's (2001) theme of entertaining lessons, the students identified the incorporation of games as being important to their engagement in a subject.

The participants claimed 'hard' work, teachers being too busy, and a lack of writing games to be barriers to their learning. It is unclear whether instructional mismatches existed, however the students did not seem disheartened and even appeared to take pride in the fact that they were assigned difficult work. Despite two of the students identifying writing as their least favourite subject, they all declared a love for writing fairy tales.

Aligned with Howard's (2001) theme of caring teachers, all the participants described their teachers in positive terms; expressing admiration for their appearance, kindness, and the way they ran their classrooms. A prominent theme was the decisions their teachers allowed them to make; for example, they proudly reported decision-making power in the planning of a disco, a school trip and scheduling their breaks. This provides a stark contrast against Alhassan

and Bawa's (2012) study in which high school students from cultural minorities reported that their teachers were ineffective against racism; did not help them with their schoolwork; and failed to promote a sense of belonging.

As with Howard's (2001) study, the strategies which students identified as successful were not related specifically to these students' cultures. Instead, in the current study, the students' emphasis on their ability to make decisions regarding their learning activities creates the impression that students could tailor opportunities to their culture if they so desired. This control is likely to have impacted positively on the students' self-esteem, motivation and trust (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2009).

Peer Interactions

The participants' answers to questions about their peers offered a spectrum from bullying at the negative end to strong friendships at the other. The students' reports of bullying portrayed it as a chronic, pervasive and resistant problem, which was not limited to the school grounds: One student told of a violent incident which had occurred in her neighbourhood. It is possible, however, that the students could have over-generalised the meaning of bullying (as they do with 'violent'), or there may have been ambiguity over definitions (Mattioni, 2012). The quote below was given as an example of bullying and being violent: "*Well they umm act like cool they go they walk around and go 'wassup?' and then they go oh then the little kids walk in they swear and go shut up, we weren't even talking to you. Some then they teased a little kid and the little kid just starts to crying*" [sic].

It is also important to note that, while the participants report themselves to be targets of bullying because of their culture, they also identified other differences that attracted teasing. *"About our culture, about our what kind of colour our skin is"*. Another student said, *"They tease how wide you are or skinny"*.

The students contradicted themselves by sometimes claiming they were bullied a lot and other times downplaying it, possibly because of perceived stigma. Their responses align with Verkuyten and Thijs' (2002) finding that members of disadvantaged groups report bullying to occur to other members of their racial group more than themselves.

The participants' most common responses to bullying were withdrawing and telling their teacher or parents. However, one student was adamant that she did not report bullying to the teachers because it meant she was 'tattle tale'. Consistent with other research (Crozier & Dimmock, 1999; Larochette, Murphy &

Craig, 2010), the students' answers suggested that they would retaliate on some occasions. *"Like if someone, if someone makes fun of my um um that boy's culture [pointing to a boy outside] he um [what boy?] the guy outside umm [name withheld], you'd make fun of their culture".*

The classroom was reported to be free of bullying because of the presence of the teacher. Drawing on Verkuyten and Thijs' (2002) finding that bullying was reduced when students saw that teachers took action against it, this may suggest that the teachers handle bullying effectively when they are aware of it.

One student offered a reason why the bullying occurred and what might be done to stop it: *"I know what, [needs to happen for bullying to stop] maybe, maybe, they're bullying just because they feel bad about themselves, and they wanna just umm put it on other people. They're getting their anger out on other people ... like sort the problems out with that person".*

The participants had plenty of positive comments about their peers too. Despite the talk of bullies, they all described the other children at school as 'nice' and depicted school as a very social place, with friendships being one of their favourite things about school. This is similar to Oikonomidoy's (2009) discussion of a 'sisterhood', except in her study, the group of friends consisted exclusively of Somalis, whereas in the current study, the participants' friends included students from other cultural backgrounds. They were portrayed as allies against bullies, entertaining, and helpful with school work. The participants discussed a range of variations between themselves and their friends, such as race, ancestral heritages, looks, and styles, with an easy-going acceptance: *"Yeah I got a friend, she's punk [..] and another friend who's goth. Her name's [name withheld]. And [name withheld], she's just normal". "Well she's Samoan and I'm Somalia ... and ... she's a tomboy so she acts she's like a tomboy".*

Perceptions of Schooling: Current and Future

When asked, the participants voiced some negative aspects of school, such as crowdedness, boredom and bullying. Comments about their older siblings' experiences suggested that the participants perceived bullying to be a concern at every school. Despite this, aligned with research by Oikonomidoy (2009), Dodds et al. (2010) and Rodriguez et al. (2009), the students expressed positive feelings for school throughout the focus groups, frequently talking of friends and their enjoyment of sport, expressing pride in their school and work, and conveying a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students. As in Howard's (2001)

study, there was a sense of community, gained through observations such as the students addressing teachers by their first names, talk of community members taking care of each other, student reports of 'working together' to plan events and seeing their friends at the mosque.

When asked about attending intermediate school, the students voiced some apprehension about physical education, highlighting a palpable discrepancy between their enthusiasm for sport now and in the future. This uneasiness could be a result of uncertainty about how they will handle conflicting ideals and expectations, particularly around dress and interacting with the opposite sex, as they get older and Islamic protocol gets stricter (Humpage, 2009). The Somali high school students in Humpage's study (2009) reported that playing co-educational sport was uncomfortable for them, as they would not normally socialise with the opposite sex, unless family, from 15 years of age.

Having relatives at intermediate and knowledge about how intermediate works gave these students reassurance about attending a new school. The expectation of new friendships was also cited as appealing. As with the students in Dodds et al. (2010) study, these students had high self-efficacy for succeeding at school in the future.

Limitations of the Study

The perceptions shared in this article belonged to three female Somali primary school students who had spent the majority, or all of their lives, in New Zealand. Limitations include the absence of perspectives from male students, students who had themselves arrived as refugees in New Zealand, other students and teachers. It is also important to acknowledge that students and parents who had had positive experiences at school may have been more inclined to participate.

Future research could address these limitations by including data collection from alternative perspectives and sources to gain a more complete picture. Longitudinal research to investigate the changes in Somali students' perceptions over time could shed light on how acculturation and development occur concurrently and this information could assist teachers in delivering culturally-responsive education.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature on culturally-responsive education by identifying aspects of school that challenge or support the cultural identities of Somali primary school

students. The positive aspects of responsive pedagogy identified in this study were the teachers' abilities to communicate clear expectations and approachability, prepare and present appealing lessons and provide opportunities to develop independence. In terms of peers, strong friendships were perceived to be a significant support to these students. The most challenging aspect of school was perceived to be bullying, in the form of verbal teasing. Sakka (2009) suggests that such problems require an open forum for discussion about diversity, with the goal of increasing understanding and fostering tolerance for the psychological wellbeing of all students.

Somali students may need to navigate situations at school in which the norms are in conflict with their cultural beliefs and practices, particularly as they enter adolescence. Ensuring all students are provided with adequate information about the schools they are transitioning to could allow them to prepare for such challenges. Further research could be useful for identifying ways to support Somali students in maintaining their values without compromising social and educational opportunities.

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